

NETHERLANDS

Groningen makes "listening cameras" permanent

The unique aspect of this concept is not only that several (prisoners) can be housed in one cell, but that with the help of the most modern technology, surveillance is supported. All prisoners are furnished with tags, for example, which enables the determination of their exact position within the space they are allowed inhabit.

(Sound Intelligence Systems, microphone technology company)

After a 12-month test phase, the northern Dutch city of Groningen has officially introduced new surveillance technology, the observation of public space with "listening videos", as a regular feature. On 15 November, 11 cameras with microphones were installed which, according to Sound Intelligence Systems, the company producing them, is the first installation of its kind. A pilot project last year resulted in 67 recordings at which no direct police assistance was needed. It is not known if the sound was saved.

Sound Intelligence Systems and the issuing authorities say that the system reacts to "aggressive sounds" such as screams, which trigger the camera to switch itself on and send a signal to the relevant control office or police station receiving the pictures. The microphone is therefore always switched on whilst the camera is not. This is the argument used to justify the new system: that privacy is improved in comparison to the old system in which the cameras were constantly recording. *The College Bescherming Persoonsgegevens*, the Dutch equivalent of the Privacy Commissioner, did not oppose the new technology.

Sound Intelligence Systems believes the new technology has a bright future. According to the newsletter of the privacy-watchdog, *Bits Of Freedom*, (1 February 2006), which recently ceased publication, the firm announced that "camera projects started in museums in order to nip in the bud aggression related to long waiting periods". The company has also said that the cameras will be tested this year in swimming pools and "places of bad news". Further, the company has told the public that the Ministry of Justice is planning to use the microphones (without cameras) for "prisoners with short-term sentences in group cells". The authorities thereby want to "detect aggression, fear and serious forms of distress in the cell". Moreover, this system can be used to "create a file on unmasking troublemakers in the cells".

The technology has already been used in "private" locations. The company says on its website that "in the first weekend after coming into operation" there was one arrest in Rotterdam city square in October 2006. According to *Bits of Freedom*, the cameras are installed by the Dutch national railway company *NS Spoorwegen* on the international train between Amsterdam-Brussels.

"Unlike the Privacy Commission, Bits of Freedom is seriously concerned about the civil liberties implications of this new step in surveillance technology: "If listening cameras are implemented on a large scale, it is only a small step to turn on the microphones at all times and possibly intercept and record conversations. The use of microphones in closed spaces such as trains increases this possibility even more".

Website Sound Intelligence: <http://www.soundintel.com/>

Citations: <http://www.soundintel.com/nieuws-overig.html>

Bits Of Freedom: http://www.bof.nl/nieuwsbrief/nieuwsbrief_2006_3.html

CPB on the technology: http://www.cbpreb.nl/documenten/uit_z2005-0481.shtml

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