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Big Brother is shouting at you

Last updated at 21:02pm on 16th September 2006

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Big Brother is not only watching you - now he's barking orders too. Britain's first 'talking' CCTV cameras have arrived, publicly berating bad behaviour and shaming offenders into acting more responsibly.

The system allows control room operators who spot any anti-social acts - from dropping litter to late-night brawls - to send out a verbal warning: 'We are watching you'.

Middlesbrough has fitted loudspeakers on seven of its 158 cameras in an experiment already being hailed as a success. Jack Bonner, who manages the system, said: 'It is one hell of a deterrent. It's one thing to know that there are CCTV cameras about, but it's quite another when they loudly point out what you have just done wrong.'

'Most people are so ashamed and embarrassed at being caught they quickly slink off without further trouble.'

'There was one incident when two men started fighting outside a nightclub. One of the control room operators warned them over the loudspeakers and they looked up, startled, stopped fighting and scarpered in opposite directions.'

'This isn't about keeping tabs on people, it's about making the streets safer for the law-abiding majority and helping to change the attitudes of those who cause trouble. It challenges unacceptable behaviour and makes people think twice.'

The Mail on Sunday watched as a cyclist riding through a pedestrian area was ordered to stop.

'Would the young man on the bike please get off and walk as he is riding in a pedestrian area,' came the command.

The surprised youth stopped, and looked about. A look of horror spread across his face as he realised the voice was referring to him.

He dismounted and wheeled his bike through the crowded streets, as instructed.

Law-abiding shopper Karen Margery, 40, was shocked to hear the speakers spring into action as she walked past them.

Afterwards she said: 'It's quite scary to realise that your every move could be monitored - it really is like Big Brother.'

'But Middlesbrough does have a big problem with anti-social behaviour, so it is very reassuring.'

The scheme has been introduced by Middlesbrough mayor Ray Mallon, a former police superintendent who was dubbed Robocop for pioneering the zero-tolerance approach to crime.

He believes the talking cameras will dramatically cut not just anti-social behaviour, but violent crime, too.

And if the city centre scheme proves a success, it will be extended into residential areas.

The control room operators have been given strict guidelines about what commands they can give. Yelling 'Oi you, stop that', is not permitted.

Instead, their instructions make the following suggestions: 'Warning - you are being monitored by CCTV - Warning - you are in an alcohol-free zone, please refrain from drinking'; and Warning - your behaviour is being monitored by CCTV. It is being recorded and the police are attending.'

Mr Bonner said: 'We always make the requests polite, and if the offender obeys, the operator adds 'thank you'. We think that's a nice finishing touch.'

'It would appear that the offenders are the only ones who find the audio cameras intrusive. The vast majority of people welcome these cameras.'

'Put it this way, we never have requests to remove them.'

But civil rights campaigners argued that the talking cameras are no 'magic bullet', in the fight against crime.

Liberty spokesman Doug Jewell said: 'None of us likes litterbugs or yobs playing up on a Saturday night, but talking CCTV cameras are no substitute for police officers on the beat.'

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It's not about what the adults think. Consider this "generation zero" for the infants and toddlers who will grow up not knowing a time when the Government wasn't watching and correcting. Sad.

- R, Rhode Island, USA

Orwell's 1984 was a dire warning to ward off the totalitarianism of public monitoring authorities. This camera/speaker system is not 'like' Big Brother, it 'is' Big Brother incarnate. Monitoring public behavior, except for emergency services, is completely unacceptable in any free society and should be received with outrage by responsible citizens. It's a slippery slope to dictatorship and reminiscent of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Don't let this situation prevail.

- Mike, Boston, USA

I don't think this would work in Atlanta. Nobody cares. They would steal the cameras.

- David, Atlanta, USA

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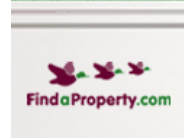
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