

ON A HOT AUGUST WEEKEND last year in New York City's Tompkins Square Park, a patch of green where indigents and eccentrics summer, a riot broke out. The original issue was night noise and the ensuing insomnia. There was a police threat to empty the park for curfew violations. The cops showed up in force on a Saturday night, and all hell broke loose. On his way to videotape a nightclub performance, artist and hatmaker Clayton Patterson changed his mind and decided to shoot the melee instead.

Patterson taped scenes that, in the words of a *New York Times* account, "outraged many New Yorkers and forced disciplinary actions" against cops by the police commissioner. "Officers who wore no badges," said the *Times* story, "clubbed and kicked bystanders for no apparent reason and rushed in uncontrolled waves into crowds that had gathered to watch the confrontation."

What Patterson got from the authorities for immortalizing this event was a brief hiatus in jail for refusing to turn the video over to them. He balked, because he feared that the cassette would fall into that evidential coal hole at whose bottom lie all the proofs of the worst suspicions of our age, from John F. Kennedy's brain to the register tapes for Col. North's dainties.

But thanks to Patterson's cam work, some putatively nasty cops got haled up on charges, and the basis was laid for lawsuits and exposés that in future might encourage the police to behave in ways that will not leave the citizenry with the lingering notion that, given a choice of living under the regime of cops or crooks, the odds might be slightly better with the latter.

This February in the Los Angeles suburb of Cerritos, a bridal shower at the home of the Dole family, natives of Samoa, apparently attained a level of festivity that provoked the interest of the sheriff's department. In all, according to accounts in the *Los Angeles Times*, about 100 officers from three law enforcement agencies showed up for the event, bringing with them a helicopter whose noise and blinding searchlights reportedly added to the confusion.

The whole world is watching: The police said that they were pelted with rocks and beer bottles. Neighbors and party guests said the cops initiated the violence in which 34 persons were arrested and an undetermined number injured.

A cam-equipped neighbor decided to unobtrusively tape what he could of the scene. He got shots of an officer beating people on the ground who, it appeared, were already restrained. Dismissing the images on the tape, the sheriff said, "It would be unusual to use a baton if they were handcuffed."

Unusual or not, local newscasts gave their viewers a picture of the law in action somewhat different from the one the police would prefer to project.

Back before the information age got its chips together, libertarians, civil and otherwise, worried a lot about Big Brother. The fear was that the emerging computer and video technologies would permit the corporate state to maintain cradle-to-grave surveillance over its subject consumers. We would be monitored, like parts on an assembly line, with built-in mechanisms programmed to reject the misfits and refractories.

By Peter Karman

Wei Wei Ai, NYT Pictures



LITTLE BROTHER IS WATCHING TOO

**Consumer video technology helps
turns the tables on the
powers that be.**

This wave of apprehension faded perceptibly in 1984, when the West's pundits looked around to discover that we were not living in George Orwell's prophetic nightmare, but only in the same old messy world with a few more gizmos. Before that, it had become apparent that, owing to the treasonous nature of modern capitalism, the same corporations selling the tools of social control to Big Brother were happily adding to their profits by selling their antidotes to little brother.

The commonest example of this marketing Janus is the radar detector. Truckers, sales reps and others who spend too much time on the interstates know that whatever technical means the cops acquire to nail speeders will be almost instantly available in their obverse form—i.e., to detect the police detections.

Computer hacking is, of course, nerdish America's great riposte to the looming specter of a database state in which citizens are mere iron fillings dancing to electronic pulses transmitted through magnetic media. In fact, for every horror story about corporate or governmental computers snooping into our personal and political affairs, there is at least an equivalent tale or two about hackers invading Big Brother's mainframes for purposes of mischief, ideology, venality or some combination thereof.

Cheap obsessions: Hackers are able to take these forbidden bytes not simply because they spent their adolescent years stroking their escape keys instead of practicing social skills, but also because a vast and greedy communications industry, including purveyors of hardware, software, network systems and transmission circuits, enables them to cheaply and easily ply their obsession.

The socially beneficial result has been that Big Brother has had to spend time and effort protecting his own privacy that would otherwise have been available for violating ours.

The videocams with which Patterson and the Cerritos resident caught the police at their worst first began to bloom years ago in parking lots, lobbies, workplaces and, surreptitiously, in the ceilings of those blank motel rooms to which undercover cops bring the subjects of stings. Banks of monitors showing bare corridors and newscasts of time-signed scenes of politicians stuffing money into briefcases became commonplace of our visual landscape. We also knew, of course, that we were being watched on the job—but knew, too, that we would probably bore our surveillors to death before giving their tape machines anything to pop their heads about.

Commercially speaking, there were only so many hallways, washrooms and cops that could be mounted with videos. Real profit lay in putting a videocam to the eyeball of every tourist, nostalgist or artist—in short, just about everyone. Once that happened, the technological tables were yet again turned on Big Brother.

There's no doubt that the citizens of the free world are more intrusively scrutinized with every advance of the information revolution. Big Brother can instantaneously call the raw data of our lives to his screens. Like Santa, he can know whether we've been naughty or nice.

But, at least, it appears that the more Big Brother knows, the less he seems to understand. And, in fact, the more he may begin worrying that little brother is watching him. ■