



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on November 22, 2011

Oxford, England Taxicabs to Have Surveillance Cameras

Like their American counterparts, British officials are increasingly opting for so-called “security” rather than ensuring the privacy of their citizens. In Oxford, England, security officials have announced a plan to install surveillance cameras in private taxicabs.



The Daily Mail [reports](#):

All taxis licensed for the first time by Oxford City Council must have the equipment installed from April 6 next year. Cabs which are already registered will have until April 2015 to get the camera fitted, the council said.

Oxford security agents have mandated that 650 taxicabs implement the use of surveillance cameras in their vehicles, which are to be paid for by the taxpayers. The camera will be recording the voice of the driver and the conversations of the passengers. Likewise, after a passenger has left the vehicle, the camera will continue to record, even when the cab driver is no longer in the vehicle and the cab’s ignition has been turned off. The camera will record for up to 30 minutes after the car is turned off, and the images and recordings will remain in the camera for up to 28 days.

As per the Oxford City Council, every taxicab in Oxford will have at least one CCTV (closed-circuit television) camera, at a cost of €260,000 to taxpayers, or approximately €400 per vehicle.

According to the [Daily Caller](#), cameras have been a widely utilized method of security in England:

Our friends across the pond are well-known for their love of closed-circuit television.... In London alone there are more than 1 million cameras recording the every move of many millions of residents and visitors alike. Despite the less-than-stellar record this camera system enjoys at preventing or solving crime, the number of cameras continues to grow. The wide-reaching arms of Big Brother are now moving into private taxi cabs.

The *Daily Mail* writes that city officials are already defending the use of these cameras by asserting that they will help ensure the safety of cab drivers, and also protect passengers from being overcharged.

An Oxford City Council spokeswoman stated:

Oxford City Council considers that so long as clear notices are provided in vehicles which inform passengers that video and audio recording may be taking place, the risk of intrusion is acceptable compared to public safety records.

The council has an overall responsibility to promote the safety of the travelling public. The law allows the council to impose any conditions on hackney carriage and private hire licenses that it considers reasonably necessary.

In any event, the level of privacy reasonably to be expected in a licensed vehicle is far lower than that expected in the privacy of one’s home or own car.

She added that the film footage is not routinely reviewed.



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While the surveillance system appears to be in direct contrast to the code of practice issued by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for the use of CCTV — which reads, "CCTV must not be used to record conversations between members of the public as this is highly intrusive and unlikely to be justified" — an ICO spokesman asserted that council applications to place the cameras in the vehicles are excepted because of the increase in crimes in taxis. He added that audio could be used only as a "proportionate and reasonable response to tackling and preventing crime and ensuring public safety." He continued, "As well as assessing the impact on privacy, we have accepted that] they [councils] can take into account factors such as the likelihood of crimes being committed against drivers and passengers; the vulnerable one-to-one situation; the fact that taxis are travelling all over the area at different times of day; and CCTV can protect both the driver and passengers."

Unsurprisingly, civil liberties groups in England have strongly assailed the plan.

Nick Pickles of Big Brother Watch, declared:

This is a staggering invasion of privacy, being done with no evidence, no consultation and a total disregard for civil liberties. Big Brother now has big ears, and they are eavesdropping on your conversations with absolutely no justification.

Given that one rail route to Witney [PM David Cameron's constituency] is through Oxford, we'll be letting the Prime Minister know that his staff might want to avoid using Oxford cabs.

James Welch, the legal director of Liberty, a civil liberties campaign organization, echoed the sentiments of Pickles, adding, "Local authorities have fallen foul of public anger and the law in relation to CCTV before — we urge anybody concerned about the legal position to get in touch with Liberty."

Big Brother Watch published a formal statement on the new surveillance system on its [website](#):

While claiming the scheme is essential to tackle incidents of assaults on drivers, the Council was unable to provide any figures to the paper and the police said it would take up to a month to compile them. Oxford Bus Company do publish their [Conditions of Carriage](#) online — but they do not include any reference to CCTV or audio recording.

Thus far, Big Brother Watch has complained to the ICO about the new policy, and written to the two Oxford Members of Parliament to ask for their assistance in opposing the "scheme."

Not everyone is opposed to the measure, however. Alan Woodward, secretary of the City of Oxford Licensed Taxi Cab Association, insists that the new system will ensure the safety of cab drivers:

Cab drivers have been beat unconscious, we [have] had cabs smashed up, we have had complaints against drivers. Surely they would feel safer if they knew everything in the car was being recorded?

Oxford is not the only municipality in the United Kingdom to implement the cab surveillance cameras. In 2009, Southampton instituted a similar plan; however, it was short-lived. The *Daily Caller* explains,

As a result of a lawsuit filed by the owner of an affected cab company, the audio-visual camera mandate has been at least temporarily stymied. Judge Anthony Callaway noted that the inside-the-cab snooping requirement showed "insufficient regard to the respective rights of both passengers and drivers."

The *Daily Echo* observed at the time, "Big brother is always watching and never switches off. I think there is no difference in them installing them in taxis and their council houses."



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The *Daily Caller* made this observation:

Considering the degree to which many American government officials — notably New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg — fawn over the advances in government surveillance by their British colleagues, it is likely that similar mandated efforts will not be long in coming to the New World.



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