

Big Brother is watching you!

Millions of us tuned in to watch Big Brother when it was on the television. But have you ever thought Big Brother may be watching you?

It's something sociologists call a 'surveillance society'. It means we're all being watched or monitored, in one way or another. One of the most controversial types of surveillance is closed circuit television (CCTV).

Some people say it's good - it helps catch criminals, or prevents them from committing crime in the first place. Others say it's an invasion of privacy. The chances are you've all been filmed at some stage of

your lives and have known nothing about it. Maybe there's a camera in your cash machine, or in the town centre. There might even be security cameras around your school.

But whatever you think, CCTV is in use all over Britain. And to make sure it's used ethically - to prevent crime, not to spy on people - there's a British Standard Code of Practice.

The Code of Practice is similar to parts of the Data Protection Act. It's now against the law to record people in a public or private place using an unregistered, non-domestic CCTV system.

Where there's smoke

Alarms aren't always there to warn us of intruders. One of the most common ones found in homes is a smoke alarm.

Smoke alarms are life savers. When you're sleeping peacefully in your bed, the shrill beeping wakes you up and gives you valuable time to get out. If you stayed sleeping and the house filled with smoke the consequences could be tragic.

Because of their importance, smoke alarms should be built to British Standards. In fact, it's against the law for a landlord to let a property without a fully-functional, British Standard-approved smoke alarm.

Is the baby awake?

Another common use of surveillance is the baby monitor. These use a simple telecommunications system so parents can sit in a separate room and still hear their baby sleeping (or waking, as the case may be!).

They don't have cameras like CCTV, but use a sound receiver and speaker.



Hands off my cabbages

While the most common use of CCTV is to prevent crime, cameras can be used for many other reasons. Perhaps a keen gardener could rig a device to keep an eye on the vegetables while they're inside the house.

The different design and manufacture considerations change depending on the use. Different types of lens are often needed. A camera in a town centre that needs to scan a large area needs a wider-angle lens than the aforementioned vegetable watcher. If the camera has to record action in the distance, it needs a longer focal length.

And then you have to think about the purpose of the pictures. For example, pictures must be of a good enough quality if they're to be used for identification purposes.

Raising the alarm

Closed circuit television can be used by people who want to keep their homes secure. The systems run alongside all sorts of other alarms and security devices. All should meet British Standards.

This helps to make sure your top-of-the-range intruder alarm doesn't damage your ears every time someone walks past the front door. And you don't want it to fail you when someone's stealing your stereo.

You would also be annoyed if your next door neighbour rigged his own alarm system to play Kylie at high volume whenever he left his house.

Holding onto your identity

One aspect of the surveillance society is the idea that numerous organisations have information about us. It's why we get so much junk mail. You may get many leaflets and letters from a company you've never heard of. The chances are you filled out a form for something completely different (perhaps a competition in a magazine) and your details were sold to this other company. Plenty of market research is conducted this way.



We also carry items that contain information on a small magnetic strip - a credit card or library card, for example. And there are issues about whether or not we should have a national identification card that contains all our personal details.

Some cards that carry information have to be made within British Standard guidelines. The standards control what information is allowed to be held, and the methods by which it's held.

You've probably also noticed that cards, such as credit cards, are all the same size - they all fit into the same slot in a wallet, and they all fit into cash machines. They're also made from hard wearing and non-toxic plastic.

What about the weather?

An outdoor camera needs to be resistant to the Great British weather. Waterproofing is a number one priority.

Wind is another factor - a camera mounted high on top of a pole is bound to be blown about a bit. It mustn't come crashing down on your head when you're enjoying a leisurely stroll through town.

Vandalism is an issue. Some people don't want to be watched. The best way to not be filmed, some think, is to smash the camera. So some CCTV systems must be very strong. It's possible to get bullet-proof casing made from an impact resistant polycarbonate.