Mapping cameras that watch us

Citizens say we don't know how many there are, who owns them, or data policy

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How many cameras are trained on us on the streets of Bengaluru? Some say the number could run into thousands, and these are limited to cameras installed by enforcement agencies alone.

The absence of a clear answer and the lack of transparency on the part of agencies have given an impetus to data activists who have started crowdsourcing information on all cameras installed in public spaces. The data will be uploaded on Open StreetMap, a collaborative project to create a free and editable map.
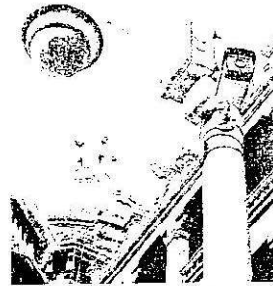
Thejesh G.N., chairman of DataMeet Trust – the largest community of open data enthusiasts in India, is spearheading the initiative in Bengaluru as part of a global open data initiative 'Surveillance under Surveillance' started in Germany a few years ago.

He and a few other enthusiasts have already mapped 340 CCTVs. These include 150+ traffic cameras and others put up by various agencies, including police and civic bodies.

"We find them at every corner. But we don't know how many of them there are, who own them and what the data policy is. While some are owned by government agencies, others have been installed by private players," he said adding they have sought data under the Right to Information Act (RTI), but are yet to get a reply.

"The idea of the initiative is not against surveillance, but seeking accountability of surveillance," Thejesh said

A CCTV camera outside Vidhana Soudha. ▪FILE PHOTO

pointing out that a disclosure of a particular area being under camera surveillance is now an accepted protocol across the world, but rarely followed in India. Except for a few cameras put up by traffic police, this disclosure is not done for any area under surveillance in Bengaluru.

The initiative argues for evolving a data security protocol for these cameras.

Privacy concerns
"Recently, a clip of a boy and girl kissing on a metro train in Delhi captured by CCTV cameras was leaked, and the clip ended up in porn websites," said Thejesh.

"In Bengaluru, as one walks on M.G. Road, at least 15 pictures are captured by a string of cameras. I have a right to know how that data is handled. We need to evolve policy and processes around data retention, sharing, privacy and security of cameras, data and metadata captured," he said.

DataMeet is planning to organise map-athons by the year end to bring in more enthusiasts to crowdsource data and map cameras watching the city streets.

6