

Justice Is Blind, but a Court Surveillance System Sees All

By SETH SCHIESEL

In a fluorescent-lit, slightly dingy room on the ground floor of the hulking courthouse at 111 Centre Street in downtown Manhattan, Sheng Guo was showing off. And for good reason. There were no windows in the room, but Mr. Guo, chief technology officer of the New York State court system, could see for miles.

On one of the six flat-screen monitors connected to the PC beside him last Thursday, Mr. Guo opened a Web browser to a colorful map of New York City. He clicked on Brooklyn and revealed a diagram of most of the courthouses in the borough. As the cursor rolled over each building, its name and address was revealed.

At a visitor's prompt, Mr. Guo clicked on Brooklyn Civil Court at 141 Livingston Street, and up popped detailed floor plans, highlighting the location of surveillance cameras throughout and around the building. With one click on a camera icon, the screen filled almost instantly with images of oblivious civilians walking along the sidewalk outside.

Just a few more clicks and Mr. Guo was checking out a stairwell at the state court system's data center at the Rensselaer Technology Park, 150 miles to the north. A few feet to Mr. Guo's right, a security officer turned to his own version of the system, opened a drop-down menu and selected "RNCarraignment." Up came vivid images of an entrance to a separate Manhattan courthouse where protesters arrested during the Republican National Convention were scheduled to be processed.

The images Mr. Guo was calling up were the first fruits of a two-year effort. Using the court system's high-speed data network, a new breed of Internet-enabled digital cameras and a lot of home-brewed software, Mr. Guo and his team have created an innovative and cost-effective surveillance system.

Matthew O'Reilly, the court system's chief for public safety — referred to by other officers strictly and simply as Chief —



Marjlynn K. Yee/The New York Times



141 Livingston Street

CLICK TO WATCH Sheng Guo, far left, and Matthew O'Reilly of the New York State court system look at surveillance photos. Above, a view from a court building in Brooklyn.

A network pulls in images from cameras in buildings across New York State.

looked on with an expression that was half proud father and half wide-eyed child on Christmas morning. "We have been looking for ways to improve our security, and one way of doing that has been to enlist technology," he said. "I have seen a lot of camera systems, and this is the best I have seen. This will really help."

Some state court buildings, representing two-thirds of overall court business, have been equipped with cameras for years. But in the past, the systems were haphazard at best.

"The monitors might only be viewable in a basement of the building," Mr. Guo said. "There was no integration."

Now, more than 30 of the most sensitive and heavily trafficked court buildings in New York State are bristling with digital cameras that are linked into Mr. Guo's system and can be monitored throughout the state, even from home computers. Who exactly will do the monitoring has yet to be determined, but officials say they hope to ex-

hardware and installation, Mr. Guo said.

Mr. Guo said that the best cameras for the system came from a Swedish company called Axis Communications, but when it came to the software, "the off-the-shelf products didn't have all the features we want to see."

Even as such network-based systems aid in surveillance, they raise the fear that hackers will figure out how to watch the watchers. With the New York system, officials emphasize that the images from courthouses are transmitted over the court system's private high-speed network, not the public Internet. A home user must use special software to log on to the court network. "We are confident in the measures we have put in place," Mr. Guo said.

Fredrik Nilsson, general manager for the Americas at Axis, the camera company, said that the New York team needed an especially advanced permissions system, so that different tiers of users could gain access only to certain tiers of cameras.

So Mr. Guo's in-house team developed the software they needed using Linux, the open-source operating system. Now, the images can be viewed from just about any Web browser (by the few people who have permission).

"We saved perhaps \$250,000 doing it in-house," Mr. Guo said.

New York's setup may in some ways be the most sophisticated court surveillance system in the nation.

"They are the first that I have even heard of to use their network to be able to serve their security requirements," said James McMillan, principal court technology consultant at the National Center for State Courts, based in Williamsburg, Va. "Courts have long had video surveillance built into local court sites. But it's a really great idea to be able to distribute that work over a network."

"Of course," he added, "the problem is that there are never enough people to watch all of the cameras."