

Community-based security - time for a seachange

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Community-community-community: an over-extended word that perpetually takes up vital discussion space in the political, social and economic worlds. At base it evokes images of a lively pedestrian village core populated by elderly gents and ladies and of children chasing a large hula hoop. At another extreme it evokes an image of a deteriorating core that has few residents, rampant vandalism, broken windows and a rising crime rate. Both visualizations intermingle into our collective perception with very predictable results: fight or flight.

Post-NIMBY

With a perceptual shrinkage of one's personal space moving from a socially-cohesive arena where everyone has a social role in a community, today's structure is leading to an anomic society. With the exponential increase of high-density residential areas, the mind-set has moved away from a social-role one to a more hedonistic structure: the personal space within a dwelling unit has become really personal and there is little time for social activity. This situation has resulted in residents becoming totally alienated from their surroundings inclusive of who the next door neighbours are, even worse than a NIMBY scenario where at least the backyard is known... This does not point to a return of a stifling past governed by strict political, religious and community mores, but it is a reality that has fuelled the rearing of the dark-side head of social interactionism. Crimes committed in residential areas, in social and community facilities, in commercial areas as well as in the streets have taken an other-worldly reality. Why should one bother to report an offence or even to protect oneself from a potential offence when there is little time to interact with the immediate vicinity and its goings'-on? Don't we live in a rat race governed by work and virtual lives?

The Ghost in the Machine

Ghosts are everywhere and the sense of security has been abused to the extent that people choose not to believe anymore: in turn we have become selective on what to accept as reality. And there are so many ghosts that have given us a false sense of security that we have become immune to the fact that crime is real. Case I: Neighbourhood watches have not taken off, though one can still see street signs warning passers-by that they are being watched: case in point G'Mangia! The communities' civic sense needs to be rekindled in order to prove successful. Case II: Speed cameras are perceived as both friends and fiends where it is common knowledge that some are mere husks with the soul migrating from one to the next: a bingo-effect second-guessing where the real camera is located. The UK had to revamp their systems since most cameras had given up the ghost and were never manned with a camera! Case III: Cameras in commercial areas – when are we going to hear of

an actual case where retail/home owners are requested to help in an investigation only to find that the lens was too dirty, the tape was worn, the disk was disabled: the reasons given boggle the mind! Case IV: the local councils in their piazza cameras initiatives (where the system actually works) are realizing that though the social implications are positive the cost is abhorrent and they must budget for such a service, which is not always available. Case IV: *'Omerta'* – though many state that Malta is immune for such a scourge try to get a witness to testify...

A Way Forward

Communities cannot live without individuals and vice versa. In a growing anomic society, individuals are too busy to look after the locality before it tips and becomes too stigmatized to come back to normality – ask anyone which is the 'worst' town in Malta and nine out of ten you hit the same town... It is here that the administrative units locally termed local councils need to put their due share. They are doing their utmost within the confines of the current legislation but need to involve the individual to participate in a neural-network styled interaction with continuous feedback that ensures that vandals and potential offenders are thwarted beforehand. We cannot leave this role to the Zebbug 'Batman' who was indescribably lucky but to a wider network that also involves private-public partnerships that includes the councils, the commercial entities, security agencies and the general public. A real-time socio-technic monitoring system is required that balances the protection of an individual's privacy whilst ensuring that the social and community areas are given a vibrant comeback.