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ID Scanners in the Night Time Economy

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Abstract

ID scanners are quickly emerging as a new technological fix to long-standing problems of security and safety within licensed venues. Yet at this point in time detailed research of this rapidly expanding security technology is remarkably limited. To address this analytical deficit we are currently examining the uptake of ID scanners in licensed venues operating in the night-time economy. We have found significant interest in the implementation of ID scanners in other Australian cities. However, the introduction of ID scanners in late-night licensed venues has occurred with little public awareness, no policy consideration and questionable claims concerning their effectiveness in enhancing safety and reducing crime. This article explores the factors shaping the introduction if ID scanners and the underlying beliefs concerning their utility as a crime prevention technology. The article then considers some broader implications to be explored in future analyses.

1. Introduction

The recent introduction of ID scanners is fertile ground for exploring a range of themes concerning 'technology and society'. These include their contribution to increased surveillance, the interface between private and public forms of surveillance, the capacity for data sharing, concerns about the protection of privacy and the capacity or utility of existing theoretical models dealing with human surveillance, harm prevention, individual freedoms and the role of technology in promoting social order.

More specifically, a series of questions arise from this technological ‘fix’ to disorder in the night-time economy. There are significant issues surrounding why licensed venues are currently moving towards use of ID scanners rather than improving conventional methods for monitoring the identity and behaviour of patrons. There are also questions surrounding the key factors shaping the adoption or rejection of ID scanners in different locations with similar problems of disorder associated with alcohol and its consumption. Further, there is scant research on how ID scanners promote good order in the night-time economy and how their effectiveness can be evaluated. More broadly, the inter-relationships between these privately deployed technologies and the role of the public police also warrants close examination, given concerns that these technologies are promoting new forms of social exclusion, threats to personal privacy and identity protection, and have emerged in the contemporary governance landscape with little or no regulatory oversight in most jurisdictions [1].

We are currently undertaking research examining these questions. Section two provides a general overview of the contextual backdrop behind the implementation of ID scanners in one Australian regional centre to address problems associated with excessive alcohol consumption, maintaining social order, and reducing violence in the night-time economy. Section three provides an overview of how ID scanners work in practice in the context of several broader theoretical developments in the policing and security fields. Section four outlines the research design and methodology adopted in this study. Section five presents some preliminary findings from our research to date. Our concluding remarks point to issues for further theoretical and practical examination regarding this contentious surveillance technology.

2. Alcohol and violence in and around licensed premises

While alcohol consumption can be a part of convivial social activities, alcohol-related problems are a major cause of social disorder and illness in Australia. In particular, problems associated with the night-time economies of urban and regional centers generate substantial public concern and are a considerable drain on community, police, local government and health resources [2-8].

Previous research has identified a number of issues that contribute to the harms associated with risky alcohol consumption. These include promotions at licensed premises that encourage binge drinking, consuming
alcohol in unsupervised public areas and the inadequate provision of transport or human security in entertainment precincts [9, 10]. Alcohol-related violence can also emerge due to poor venue management practices, lax police surveillance and inappropriate bureaucratic or legislative controls [10]. There is also a correlation between later trading hours and increased levels of violence [11] though more recent evaluation research in the UK challenges this relationship [12].

Within this backdrop, the use of ID scanners has emerged as a means of reducing violence in the night-time economy in the city of Geelong. Located approximately 70 kilometers south-west of Melbourne, Geelong is a city of approximately 205,000 people with a growth rate of 1.1% per annum. Significant restructuring in the local economy, involving a shift away from industrial production after a major economic downturn during the 1970s, and the $1.3 billion dollar collapse of the Geelong-based Pyramid Building Society in 1990, has seen a raft of social problems emerge over the past three decades. Risky levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related violence continue to feature prominently on the social landscape, despite the implementation of several community-based initiatives aimed at combating these problems over the past decade.

Geelong was one of the first cities in Australia to implement a Liquor Accord [13, 14]. Now sanctioned under Victorian legislation, an Accord enables two or more liquor industry representatives, local councilors, police and concerned citizens to regularly meet and establish base standards for the provision of alcohol subject to existing licensing requirements, and develop agreed methods for ‘minimizing harm arising from the misuse and abuse of alcohol’ [15]. The Geelong Accord is widely recognised as a highly successful collaboration between local police, licensees and council representatives, by generating proactive methods to enhance community safety in and around licensed premises [14]. However, the overall impact of Accords in reducing anti-social behaviour and violence in the night-time economy has been seldom examined [16]. Comparisons of data in Geelong and other Victorian metropolitan areas demonstrate that prior to the original Accord intervention in 1991, Geelong’s serious assault rate was 52 per cent higher than the comparison rate for the other areas. After the intervention, Geelong’s serious assault rate declined to 63 per cent of the comparison rate for the other areas [14].

While the Accord may have been successful in the early years following its introduction, in recent years there have been renewed concerns about violence in the night-time economy. Geelong’s daily newspaper has been at the forefront of a campaign for tougher policing, based on what it views to be unacceptably high levels of alcohol-related street violence [17]. This was fuelled in late 2006

by a serious rape in the inner city area. The outrage over this incident was immediate with the headline ‘ANIMALS: Brutal inner city rape’ appearing on the front page of the Geelong Advertiser the next day [18]. Five days later a ‘WANTED’ headline and poster was produced containing a reproduction of closed circuit television (CCTV) images taken from the crime scene [19]. This was followed by proposals for a ‘Parents Patrol’ [20] and a campaign with a public petition for more ‘cops on the street’ [21]. Subsequently, the Advertiser moved to a broader campaign seeking to have police ‘reclaiming the streets’ [22] and licensed premises going beyond their current ‘Half-hearted peace and order’ [23] to aggressively ‘Crack down’ on alcohol abuse [24]. These concerted discourses continued throughout 2007 with additional headlines such as:

**NIGHTCLUB BRAWL A BAGHDAD WAR ZONE** [25];

‘Ghetto blast: Shock jock sinks the slipper into Geelong’ [26];

**BOOZY STREET BRAWLS BLITZ** [27].

The then local Federal Member of Parliament also claimed that ‘Geelong Nightclubs [were] as bad as Londonderry’ [28].

In this heated environment, the local Nightlife Association, together with the Victoria Police and the Geelong Local Safety Committee deliberated on additional methods to address these concerns. A new Accord was developed and released in November 2007 containing a range of targeted initiatives to combat alcohol-related violence, including agreed principles of trade and actions on the part of all stakeholders. More specific measures included a banned patron list to be shared by licensed venues and the police, agreed levels of electronic surveillance in and around licensed premises, the voluntary use of a two-way radio system by security personnel at different late-night venues, and agreement by each venue that police be contacted immediately upon the identification of problem patrons. Most significantly, any licensed premises trading after 1 a.m. is automatically classified as a ‘high-risk’ venue and must agree to implement ID scanners. This initiative is the principal focus of this study.

### 3. ID Scanners: Their operation and some theoretical interpretations

Although electronic ID scanners have been used to regulate the supply of tobacco and alcohol to minors in some United States regions for almost a decade [1, 29],
there is a distinct lack of empirical research into their effectiveness in preventing alcohol-related harm. Regular advances in developing ID scanning technologies, the considerable lack of legislative guidance on their use in most jurisdictions and the ad hoc nature of their uptake all contribute to the lack of research on this issue.

ID scanners collect data on a person’s name and address, date of birth, driver license number or equivalent details from other identification documents such as passports. They can also scan and store photographic identification within in a computer database, which can be accessed and matched with existing records for future reference. There are generally three forms of ID scanner. The most basic is a simple scanning device linked to a laptop computer, which copies a drivers license, passport or industry ID card. The information from the scan is then stored on the computer. A more sophisticated version takes an additional photo of the individual, with computer software linking the image of the patron to the one displayed on the scanned ID. Finally, the same scanning process can occur through biometric fingerprinting, which is linked to other personal information contained in the relevant document. Once a person has a fingerprint recorded into this system, they must re-enter their fingerprint for subsequent entries, with the system matching the biometric details with the stored record obtained from the original scanned document. Information about people banned from one licensed venue can be shared with other venues across a networked computer system in real time. There is also the capacity to have additional information ‘shared’ over the network such as police or court bans from late-night entertainment districts, with the potential for other court-ordered restrictions to be entered into these systems, such as control orders, intervention orders or late-night curfews. Each of these ‘pre-crime’ [30] methods of controlling or preventing undesirable behaviour in or around licensed premises can be or is currently mandated under various Australian state liquor licensing laws, however ID scanners are currently unregulated as a method to enforce any of these court orders.

There are several ways of interpreting the role of ID scanners as a social ordering initiative in conjunction with various other methods adopted in the Geelong region to control alcohol-related violence. Haggerty and Ericson [31] provide a useful analysis of the convergence of previously discrete surveillance systems through improved networked information technologies. Briefly, the convergence of surveillance systems allows data to be abstracted from specific territorial settings and re-assembled elsewhere, to produce a ‘surveillant assemblage’ about seemingly undesirable individuals or groups. This new ‘surveillant assemblage’ constitutes an independent surveillance hierarchy, which transforms the very purposes of surveillance in the immediate settings where any personal data is gathered. From the initial collection of the data, to its storage, transmission to other agencies, re-storage and the abstracted reconstruction of an individual’s movements or actions, a “progressive ‘disappearance of disappearance’” ensues, where “it is increasingly difficult for individuals to maintain their anonymity, or to escape the monitoring of social institutions” [31]. In this sense, technologies of surveillance, data storage and retrieval become the means for reconstructing the idea and process of maintaining social order, in the hope that their use will lead to a new era of ‘perfect enforcement’ [32]. However, they also simultaneously produce concerns that ‘policing through the lens’ disconnects police from their communities [33].

The relationship between ID scanners, increased regulatory control of liquor supply through tighter legislative requirements and the Liquor Accord, along with the persistent moral outrage accompanying incidents of violence in the Geelong night-time economy, suggest the success of this novel technological solution to a problem with many complex dimensions could be overstated. We fear that within an increasingly complex array of ‘networked governance’ arrangements [34], ID scanners will be promoted as ‘the’ solution to undesirable behaviour in the Geelong night-time economy, with little evidence to support their effectiveness or capacity to reduce alcohol-related harm. To date there is a considerable lack of empirical data outlining the motives for implementing ID scanning technologies in Australia or internationally, and importantly, in assessing their impact on reducing interpersonal violence in and around licensed premises. This article addresses these issues by examining the underlying explanations behind the implementation of ID scanners in the Geelong region and perceptions of their impact on the problem of alcohol-related violence in and around licensed premises.

4. Research design and methodology

The research method involves the triangulation of extended interviews, observations and statistical data to produce both process and impact measures relating to the introduction, use and effectiveness of ID scanners in reducing violence in the Geelong night-time economy. Process data has been generated from interviews with key stakeholders in the liquor industry, local police and local government workers participating in Geelong Liquor Accord and Local Safety Committee initiatives, nightclub security personnel and consultants who have been instrumental in establishing ID scanning systems in Geelong and other nightclub precincts throughout Australia. Impact measures relating to the social ordering effects and effectiveness of ID scanners derive from all three data sets.
To date we have conducted 23 interviews with key stakeholders with further interviews currently taking place. In addition, we are currently undertaking a series of patron interviews and observations in venues using ID scanners in the Geelong Central Business District (CBD) [10, 35, 36, 37].

Finally, we are undertaking an extensive analysis of available statistics provided by the Victoria Police, local ambulance and hospital services and the City of Greater Geelong. Victoria Police data includes relevant crime statistics, allowing us to measure reported offences occurring in and around licensed premises, as well as calls for service both before and after the introduction of the ID scanners. Health data from local ambulance services and the Emergency Department of the Geelong Hospital consolidates information on alcohol-related injuries leading to medical treatment. The City of Greater Geelong records information on the extent of property damage in the Geelong CBD precinct, and has provided access to data from regular ratepayer surveys, which examine a range of issues including perceptions of community safety.

This article draws primarily on data from the extended key informant interviews. The interviews used a standard question schedule, which was adapted to cater for the different roles of each class of stakeholder. Interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes duration and were transcribed in full. The transcripts were then coded and narratives clustered under prominent headings dealing with the motivations for using ID scanners, their operation in practice, their benefits, their problems and their overall effectiveness in light of other initiatives aimed at reducing violent behaviour in the Geelong night-time economy.

5. Preliminary research findings

The most salient finding is that the overwhelming majority of all classes of respondents favour of the use of ID scanners as an add-on or supplement to a raft of additional measures aimed at reducing alcohol-related violence in the Geelong CBD. These include increased public and private CCTV surveillance, reconfiguring social movement by implementing a safe taxi rank and Night Bus, enhanced communication between police and private security through the introduction of a shared radio network, environmental changes such as urban renewal and improved street lighting and opportunity reduction through the use of plastic rather than glass drinking receptacles. The main benefit appears to be the widely held belief that ID scanners promote the idea amongst patrons that a venue is safer than it would be without such technology.

It just helps I think with managing trouble. It promotes a safe venue. Even if it wasn’t to work, you’ve got to get ID scanned to get in, therefore if nothing else it’s a good way of promoting a safe venue.

Some respondents went so far as to suggest that the use of scanners had led to substantive behavioural change amongst patrons. As the following licensee of a prominent Geelong nightclub indicates:

I was apprehensive at first but since I implemented them over two years ago it’s probably been one of the biggest tools that I believe has changed the behaviour of the patrons in our venues.

In practice, it was considered that ID scanners used by individual venues would have little impact in reducing ‘bar-hopping’ and associated violence in the Geelong CBD region. Rather, the effectiveness of the scanners rested with their capacity to be networked to other Liquor Accord participants, including licensed venue operators and the local police. This can assist in enforcing banning orders or relaying the movements of troublesome patrons evicted from a participating venue. The ability to share the scanned data generated the view amongst most interview respondents that there should be uniform or even mandatory use of this technology to promote safety in the Geelong CBD.

If you can get it implemented on a grand scale in the CBD at least it has some sort of impact because if they were to be banned from [one venue] … they [unruly patrons] used to be able to walk into any other venue they can. But now it impacts on all the CBD venues so if they’re banned they’re banned everywhere just about.

By deterring those who might engage in undesirable behaviour from attempting to enter any licensed premises, interview respondents indicated that richer mix of patrons is attracted to venues using the ID scanners, which in turn promotes greater levels of safety. As the following licensee indicated, the scanners have had ‘a huge impact’ in changing the dynamics of venue patronage.

I have to say it did impact on our business. At the start a lot of so called idiots wouldn’t go into the venue, but after 3 months I saw a quick change in our clientele and a lot of people felt safer, particularly girls and women …

A strong deterrence discourse reinforces the view that technical surveillance both enhances and supplements conventional methods of human surveillance, particularly in crowded venues. The capacity to store and review the
personal details of those entering a venue is, however, equated with the concept of deterrence at a very general level. For the following respondent from the hotel industry, improved personal data storage and retrospective review after an incident has occurred are the main deterrent benefits of ID scanners. However, the potential problems associated with inauthentic documentation or implementing other necessary spatial and human responses to undesirable behaviour when they occur remain less clear.

If they want to come in here and start a fight or get involved in trouble and it gets taken to a further step, then we can just go back and check out data and match up the faces to it. It’s another safety tool.

Liquor licensees felt ID scanners need to be promoted by the police to enhance community perceptions that this is a viable, legitimate and effective deterrence measure. The authoritative impact of police endorsement helps to offset any concerns by patrons about the possibility their personal data will be misused once it is scanned and digitally stored. As the following respondent indicated, police support provides the necessary legitimacy for the use of ID scanning technology, which in turn heightens their value as a seemingly effective means of promoting good order.

... [T]he police thought it was a good idea. We agreed with them ... We are not using it for promotional purposes or anything like that. We don’t want to know where they [the patrons] live ... it’s for security. We just say it’s the law.

The primary rationale for adopting ID scanners documented in the scant overseas literature relates to controlling the supply of alcohol and tobacco to minors [29]. In this respect, ID scanning is considered an important method of deterring underage drinkers from attempting to enter licensed premises or obtaining alcohol or tobacco from take-away outlets. They also assist to absolve licensees from heavy fines and other liabilities under relevant liquor control legislation. However, despite these benefits, and the assurances provided by consultants advocating the introduction of ID scanners that minors with fake identification documents will be detected by the system, at a minimum this requires constant software updates.

More importantly, it is also necessary to understand how ID scanners are used at each venue. As the following quote highlights, the discriminatory targeting of young people can drive the perception that some ‘creative’ minors are determined to circumvent the system and therefore warrant additional surveillance. Notably, the selective use of the technology is equally circumventing the intention of the system, which ideally requires all patrons seeking to enter ‘high-risk’ venues to have their driver’s license or equivalent documents scanned.

There are a lot of creative 16 and 17 year olds who think they can circumvent the system ... They’d love it in here if they could get in! We tend to target them more. We’ll judge it. The majority of, say 90% of our customers get scanned. If there is a group we will say just stand next to your mate, so we know he’s come with you.

The disproportionate targeting of young people as a ‘pre-crime’ mechanism [30], which can only be validated through retrospective data examination or a ‘surveillant assemblage’, underpins another concern about the limitations of this technology in promoting greater and more effective social control in licensed venues. As the following quote illustrates, regardless of the benefits of ID scanners, the mere fact this screening is done through technical rather than interpersonal means, suggests that those determined to engage in unruly activity will simply not be affected by the deterrence value of this initiative.

If they are out for trouble, they are not worried about an ID scanner, they are not worried about the camera. They are just out to achieve whatever goal they’ve set for the night. I don’t understand the mentality of some of the people that come out and do what they do.

While the deterrent effects of ID scanners are debatable, it is clear that the data storage mechanism can assist in the positive identification of individual patrons for further police action. In this respect, it seems the value of the system lies in its capacity to enhance the identification of troublesome patrons for formal and retrospective processing by the police either under the criminal law or the banning orders requirements of the Victorian Liquor Licensing Act [38]. As such, ID scanners supplement other ‘pre-crime’ measures, with some discernible impact on deterring would-be undesirables from entering licensed premises. However, it appears their main value in law enforcement terms emerges after an incident has occurred, the data is analysed and later forwarded to police for further investigative action.

... [W]e were able to identify them [a suspect] through our ID scanners and give that information to police that resulted in an individual being arrested. So it’s fantastic. And also an incident in the venue, we are able to quickly identify them, ban them, and if they come to the venue, “Sorry mate! You’re banned! You were involved in an incident”.

...
In other words, the effectiveness of the ID scanners has shifted from an emphasis on their effectiveness in reducing alcohol-related violence to their effectiveness as a law enforcement tool to enhance the detection of unruly patrons already in the system.

A further issue that weighs heavily in the background concerns the potential problem of privacy. This appears to have produced few concerns amongst patrons and liquor licensees. This very lack of concern can be interpreted in three ways. First, issues involving data security do not appear to be of direct concern to licensees, but are more a question for the manufacturers and security consultants who administer the technology ‘behind the scenes’. Second, the lack of substantial public resistance to having personal data scanned and stored suggests patrons endorse the technology, its effectiveness in promoting greater levels of safety and trust those accessing and maintaining personal data stored within the system. Third, this issue could equally mean patrons are unaware of the potential implications of data misuse, or are simply willing to accept this additional control as a pre-condition for engaging in the Geelong night-time economy now that it has been implemented in the CBD area.

The first week we had a couple of people ring up complaining about where it [the scanned data] is going to be used, but there are only 2 people at both ends that have got access to the scanner information, so we don’t use it for any marketing purposes and we were told quite specifically from [the security consultants].

The overall assessment of licensees using the system is that it is a positive and cost-effective deterrent against problematic behaviour within late-night venues. Here, the effectiveness of the technology is assessed in terms of its ability to engineer a new form of patronage, regardless of the financial or technological costs involved.

I think the pros far outweigh the cons. The expense wasn’t much and everyone feels safe. There are a group of people, particularly the Melbourne crowds [who come from outside the Geelong area], you can identify them straight away and if someone is banned it comes up with an alert.

However, a minority of venue owners are highly sceptical of this innovation and question its capacity to reduce violent or anti-social behaviour per se. For the following licensee this initiative has obvious limitations.

They [violent patrons] don’t care. The people who cause violence, how do I put it? It is such a spur of the moment [thing]. It’s almost that flight or fight type mentality that wild animals have. It’s that instant – “You’ve dissed me in some way, bumped my shoulder, chatted up my girlfriend so I’m going to have to beat you to a pulp and when you are down, glass you and kick you”, which I don’t know, is a little bit of an overreaction perhaps ... I’d liken it to the death penalty. How many crimes has it stopped? This is exactly the same thing. It’s a great way the police can feel warm and fuzzy, but it’s doing nothing, and not to mention creating lines [of people] in pouring rain ... I hate lines here.

6. Conclusion

The ready acceptance of ID scanners as an effective method of promoting orderly behaviour in the Geelong night-time economy mirrors the attitude towards another technological response to public disorder that has emerged the past decade. The empirical and policy parallels between ID scanners and the technological merits of CCTV are telling. In their early development concerns over individual privacy associated with CCTV were countered by compelling arguments about their effectiveness in controlling undesirable or anti-social behaviour. However, critical evaluations of CCTV have been far from positive about their impact as a crime prevention device, and suggest that at best, CCTV systems simply displace undesirable behaviour to locations that can’t be detected by the camera’s rotating gaze [39, 40, 41]. Indeed, even after spending considerable funds on introducing CCTV systems, many city centres continue to experience unacceptable levels of anti-social behaviour, leading stakeholders to search for new means of enhancing social order. ID scanners risk replicating this trend.

While the bulk of our interview data to date provides a glowing assessment of the effectiveness of ID scanners in reducing alcohol-related violence in and around Geelong’s licensed premises, this belief is not supported by hospital admission data. Indeed, our analysis to date demonstrates an overall rise of alcohol-related emergency department admissions of at least 100% since the ID scanners were first introduced, with over double this increase during the November and January 2009 summer holiday period [42]. Therefore, despite the introduction of ID scanners and the perceived effectiveness of this technology in reducing anti-social behaviour within licensed premises, alcohol-related injuries remain prominent in the Geelong region. This is consistent with an overall increase in alcohol-related hospital admissions during Friday and Saturday evenings throughout the state of Victoria [43].

Thus, while interviewees believe ID scanners might make people feel safer within licensed premises, current
evidence suggests that their direct impact in reducing violence in the Geelong night-time economy is minimal. More problematically, this ‘pre-crime’ initiative is arguably displacing undesirable behaviour from the venue environment to public streets, while simultaneously raising concerns over individual privacy and data security that remain to be challenged by patrons. How ID scanners are impacting on the nature of social interactions within and in the immediate vicinity of licensed premises is subject to further observational research, statistical analysis and theoretical interpretation. Nevertheless, the near unanimous approval of this system by licensees and other stakeholders should be viewed extremely cautiously, while the more problematic issues surrounding the concept of privacy and how it is perceived by venue patrons, and preserved by those deploying this technology [44], remain subject to further empirical analysis.

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8. References


[38] Liquor Licensing Act (Victoria), Part 8A Divisions 1-2.


