Camera Phone Bans Expected

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Critics who deride cell phones as intrusive might soon view the annoyance of a ringing phone as the good old days. A new worry has arisen with the growing popularity of camera phones.

Camera phone sales are expected to surge. Gartner, an IT research and advisory firm, predicts that sales will nearly double this year, from 80 million in 2003 to 150 million in 2004. The Zelos Group of Oyster Bay, N.Y., predicts that one-third of cell phone users will have camera phones in 2008. Most users will have phone cameras with VGA resolution clarity or less, according to Zelos Group. But many will eventually have megapixel cameras that match a common digital camera's capabilities.

With their proliferation, camera phones are expected to intrude in new ways, from taking embarrassing photos to being used in identity theft. The temptation to use them in locker rooms and elsewhere might increase, and the ease of sending photos likely won't help the problem.

"The temptation will be much greater when everyone has a camera phone. There will certainly be embarrassing scenes on the Internet," says Ken Dulaney, vice president for mobile computing at Gartner's San Jose, Calif., office.

PRIVACY IN HEALTH CLUBS

In parts of Asia—where they're more prevalent—camera phones have been banned from locker rooms. Several US health clubs have followed suit to prevent patrons from taking photos of undressed people. In some US cities, legislators have passed laws against taking photos in areas where people have the right to privacy, such as public restrooms.
In gyms, health clubs, and other areas where undressing is common, rules against taking photos are expected to be enforced. Even in this era of litigation, these rulings will likely hold up.

"I think health clubs and gyms can get away with these rules. Members of the club already agree to abide by certain rules, so there isn't a chance they will take legal action about these rules," says Cedric Laurant, policy counsel at the Electronic Privacy Information Center.

Observers point out that these violating photos can be taken with any camera, digital or otherwise. But they also agree that camera phones pose problems because of their size and unobtrusiveness in a society where people carrying cell phones go unnoticed.

"What's happening today is that things that were James Bond devices costing thousands of dollars are now very affordable," Dulaney says.

AN IDENTITY THEFT TOOL?

A greater problem could arise if thieves use cameras to photograph credit cards or driver's licenses when people open their wallets. Thieves could also use camera phones in social security offices or other locations where people enter private information on forms.

"You can facilitate identity theft with any camera. These are just a bit smaller and less obvious," Dulaney says.

Although identity theft with camera phones could happen, most predict it will be rare because identity thieves have other techniques with better results and less risk.

"The potential to use them for that exists, but it's one of the least likely tools [to] result in any financial gain through financial fraud," says James Hurley, vice president of risk and security research at the Aberdeen Group.

ROLE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

The big question is, what can society do to minimize the negative impact of camera phones' expected proliferation?
Service providers aren't expected to play a significant role in stifling the distribution of photos some deem inappropriate.

"Think of just about any product commercially available today, and there is probably someone who has figured out a way to abuse or use it for something other than its intended purpose," says Brenda Boyd Raney, executive spokesperson at Verizon Wireless. Others add that the technology offers many benefits. "There will be lives saved and criminals caught because of these phones," Dulaney says.

SECURITY IN COMPANIES

Some companies that fear these cameras might be used for espionage are also setting up camera phone bans. But enforcing these rules will be difficult. "In a corporate setting, that's unenforceable," Dulaney says.

Instead, he suggests that companies with sensitive information should isolate it in secure areas. In these secure zones, people can be checked for items such as cameras or USB drives that could quickly be plugged into computers to copy critical files.

CONCLUSION

Around the US, many so-called Peeping Tom laws are being written to penalize camera phone users who take unwanted photos. But many feel that the laws will have negligible impact. "I think they'll rate right up there with speeding laws. People ignore them unless they feel there's a good chance they're going to get caught," Dulaney says.