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Published in:
Surveillance & Society

DOI:
[10.24908/ss.v19i2.14321](https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i2.14321)

Publication date:
2021

License:
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Document Version:
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Melgaço, L., & Van Brakel, R. E. (2021). Smart Cities as Surveillance Theatre. *Surveillance & Society*, 19(2), 244-249. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i2.14321>

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Opinion | Smart Cities as Surveillance Theatre

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, we challenge the dominating view that surveillance in smart cities is driven by surveillance capitalism alone. Whilst this literature unpicks important factors and trends, we argue that a focus on surveillance capitalism as a sole driver risks ignoring the more intricate realities of surveillance assemblages. They are often propelled by many different desires and power relations (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). We argue for a more nuanced analysis of the drivers instead, taking into account practices in other countries beyond the United States and the United Kingdom. We argue that much of the existent research skews the picture due to inherent bias, and seldom observed drivers are revealed when smart city developments in different countries such as Belgium and Brazil are considered. We suggest that what we call “surveillance theatre,” the performative uses of surveillance that characterize security discourses, is an overlooked yet important driver of smart city development. Such a driver is particularly evident when it comes to security discourses.

Introduction

In this opinion piece, we challenge the dominating view that surveillance in smart cities is driven by surveillance capitalism alone. Instead, we argue for a more nuanced analysis of the drivers, taking into account practices in other countries beyond the United States and the United Kingdom.

Notwithstanding current euphoria around notions of “smart cities,” the term itself is not exactly new. It was used for over two decades within the context of variant forms of urban connectivity, which is illustrated by its prominence in the title of the 1997 World Forum on Smart Cities (Hollands 2008). However, according to Kitchin in an interview with *Strelka Mag*, the term “really entered the main lexicon in 2009-2010, which is when IBM started to use it as a part of their advertising campaign and when they were trying to promote new products on that basis” (qtd. in Lvova 2016: para. 10).

There is no single definition of what makes a city particularly “smart.” The term has been employed as a neologism for various urban environments that may be *inter alia*: intelligent, wired, connected, efficient, sustainable, participatory, cyber, and digital. These multiple interpretations of the term are also reflective of the political and commercial appeal behind it: when included in the discourses of authorities, politicians, technology companies, and local law enforcement agents, it is designed to portray ideas of modernity, boldness, uniqueness, efficiency, and professionalism.

Several critiques of the discourse around smart cities have been made by different authors attentive to a range of concerns. Sterling (2018), for example, highlights how the label “smart” may be used as a form of political propaganda to attract investments, often with no compromise of effectiveness. Kitchin and Dodge (2019: 47) underline the ways in which smart city initiatives have the potential to create “new vulnerabilities and threats, including making city infrastructure and services insecure, brittle, and open to extended forms

of criminal activity.” In focussing on the ideology of the smart city, Sadowski and Pasquale (2015) have highlighted the dangers of automated policing and how these have the capacity for the authoritarian repression of dissent. Privacy has also been flagged by Löfgren and Webster (2020) as a critical concern for those sceptical of how big data may be used in smart city programmes. Murakami Wood (2014) similarly argues that smart cities are, by definition, surveillance cities; their smartness is necessarily built upon the vast collection of data they elicit from ordinary citizens.

Following these latter two themes, surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) has recently been presented as the main driver for emerging surveillance technologies in smart cities (Kitchin et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019). Whilst this literature unpicks important factors and trends, we argue in this opinion piece that a focus on surveillance capitalism as a sole driver risks ignoring the more intricate realities of surveillance assemblages that are often propelled by many different desires and power relations (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Looking specifically at smart cities, case studies in the literature are often situated in North America and the United Kingdom. Empirical case studies from mainland Europe, and especially the Global South, have received much less attention in either media or academic fora. We argue that much of the existing research skews the picture due to inherent bias, but when smart city developments in different countries, such as Belgium and Brazil, are considered, seldom observed drivers are revealed. Here, we suggest that what we term “surveillance theatre” is an overlooked and important driver of smart city development.

Surveillance in the Smart City: Belgium and Brazil

In recent decades, new and emergent forms of surveillance have been deployed, or experimented with, in smart cities: dash cams, body-worn cameras, drones with cameras, and different types of “smart” video surveillance such as cameras with facial recognition software, behavioural detection software, automatic number plate recognition (ANPR), mobile phone tracking, predictive policing, and so on. These sensors, often associated with the idea and discourse of making a city smart, are commonly presented as cutting-edge crime control technologies whose effectiveness is rarely questioned. For example, where traditional analogue video surveillance may have proven costly and inefficient with, amongst other things, too many screens for a single monitoring agent to follow, the new generation of smart cameras promise to solve such issues with algorithmic layers capable of automatically detecting and identifying faces, number plates, and suspicious objects, behaviours, or even attitudes in video footage.

The global discourses of politicians, the police, and companies when presenting their latest smart city surveillance and security gadgets have a specific quality in common: the advertising tone. Smart city, in these discourses, becomes a term linked to competition and to the display of cities as an appealing product. However, just being smart is not enough; it is crucial that they look smarter (Gaffney and Robertson 2016). This became clear when some of these discourses in Belgium and Brazil were analysed more closely. When showcasing Rio as a smart city, for example, the former mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes, repeated many times that the city possessed the largest monitoring screen in Latin America. In an interview for the documentary *Urbanized* (2011) by Gary Hustwit, the mayor proudly compared Rio’s monitoring screen, better described as a projection wall, to NASA’s: “You got all that on a big screen, bigger than NASA, that’s what I like.” The sixty-five-square meter projection wall with 104 full, HD monitors can be found in the Integrated Command and Control Centre (CICC), one of the two control centres in operation in the city. Together with the Rio Operation Centre (COR), developed by IBM, they are part of Rio’s smart city programme established in preparation for the city to host two mega sport events: the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games.

Similar celebrations of the technology and the sheer size of video projection walls, as seen in Rio, were also apparent when the new dispatching and telecommand centre of Antwerp, Belgium, was launched in 2012. According to Barco (2012: para. 1), one of the companies involved in the consortium behind this initiative, the centre “features the latest solutions of visualization expert Barco: six video walls, including an impressive 4,65 by 1,74 m LED-lit projection wall, and eight LED backlit LCD displays.” It is interesting to note that the discourse around smartness not only references highly technological features, such as

algorithms and artificial intelligence, but also simplistic discourses that highlight basic aspects of technology, such as physical size.

In these two countries, we not only see advertising discourses but also examples where the announcement of new technologies is often followed by unrealistic promises. In early 2017, the former mayor of the City of São Paulo, João Doria Jr., launched an initiative called “City Cameras: Integrated Actions and Cutting-Edge Technology for a Safer São Paulo.” This was a very mediatized plan that promised, amongst other things, to implement a system of ten thousand integrated cameras in the city by 2020. With cameras to be installed by the municipality, as well as by citizens and shop owners, the programme, in the mayor’s words, intended to allow the police to “monitor crime in real-time.” The goal of City Cameras was to involve the population in the monitoring process, which meant that the platform would be gathering images collected by residential and private systems alongside the police. By November 2019, almost three years after the launch, 2,940 cameras had been added to the system, less than 30 percent of what had been promised. The municipality had launched campaigns amongst shop owners and gated community associations in order to convince them to join the programme. This attempt, however, has not been as successful as expected (Folha 2019).

In Belgium, the recent developments towards making Brussels a smart city have aimed to improve the sharing of images from more than 3,500 cameras between all involved authorities. Surveillance cameras are regarded by Smart City Brussels, an initiative of the government in the Brussels-Capital Region, as the key link in a chain of prevention, safety, and emergency response. In 2015, this led to the launch of plans to develop a video safety platform to share video images with several Brussels agencies, including the public transport agencies STIB-MIVB and NMBS and the local and federal police (Lemmens 2019). The project accelerated in the aftermath of the terror attacks that hit Brussels in 2016. However, five years later, the platform remains inoperative as a result of disagreements between the six different Brussels police zones and Prevention and Security, the regional body that oversee the images (Galindo 2020).

In contrast to Brussels, Kortrijk, a Belgian city in the Flemish province of West Flanders, is considerably more advanced in launching surveillance technologies as part of its smart city initiative. The smart city toolbox contains data analysis of mobile phone signals to track the number of visitors, ANPR cameras with facial recognition capability, GPS trackers for cleaning and environmental services, and drone investigations for burglaries and fires (City of Kortrijk 2020). The discourse of Kortrijk, and other smart cities in Belgium such as Antwerp, Ghent, and Brussels, are redolent with the promise of technology, without any mention of the social and ethical risks that might accompany it. In Kortrijk, this led to questions from the Belgian Data Protection Commission and civil society organisations about the lawfulness of the surveillance (Dobbelaere-Welvaert 2019).

Despite the clear lack of governance in the implementation of these programmes, and the apparent ineffectiveness of some of them, they should not be interpreted as pointless. In the case of São Paulo, for example, the inflammatory discourse of the former mayor around his initiatives to make the city safer and more modern helped his later campaign for governor of the State of São Paulo. Similarly, despite some technologies being scrapped as a result of data protection laws, the mayor of Kortrijk demonstrated that he was doing something. His performance may well have influenced his popularity during the council elections of 2018 in which he was re-elected as mayor. All of these examples connect with an idea introduced by Edelman (1964): that of constructing the political spectacle with a “symbolic policy,” which he defined as decisions that were never intended to be fully implemented. Edelman’s (1964) early ideas usefully highlight the performative and theatrical aspect of politics that consists more of discourses than tangible outcomes.

Surveillance as Performance, as Theatre

Our research on smart city development in Belgium and Brazil reveals a significant driver other than the oft-cited surveillance capitalism. We show an additional driver that we term “surveillance theatre.” The notion of a surveillance theatre calls attention to how discourses around surveillance technologies play a

performative role in smart cities. The term, whilst our own, was inspired by writings from scholarship within critical security studies and criminology. Schneier (2008), for example, was one of the first to talk about security theatre. In his work, he claims that many security initiatives are more concerned with reducing “fear of crime” than crime itself (Schneier 2008). Similarly, Murakami Wood and Coaffee (2007) conceived the term “stage-set security” to highlight the competitive aspect of security as a form of propaganda for cities willing to host sport mega-events.

Related ideas about performative policy are also found in criminology. Garland (2001) argues that governments turn to so-called non-adaptive responses to crime when confronted with pressures, such as public outrage, media criticism, and electoral challenges. The essential and enduring attractiveness of this response is that it gives the impression that something is being done, representing an immediate, authoritative intervention. The implementation of surveillance technologies can then be regarded as a non-adaptive response to crime (van Brakel and De Hert 2011). In this sense, Griffin and Miller (2008) used the term “crime control theatre” in the context of police studies. They thereby emphasized the limits of police work in crime control and how officers often “act” as a means of showing that something is being done, even if it is ineffective against crime. Coomber, Moyle, and Mahoney (2019), inspired by the ideas of Edelman (1964), also showed the performative aspect of politics in what they called “symbolic policing.” According to the authors, “‘symbolic policing’ relates to activity that is principally about achieving symbolic aims—being seen to be doing something’ rather than preventing or solving crime” (Coomber, Moyle, and Mahoney 2019: 1).

Similar claims have arisen with the emergence of contact-tracing apps developed as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Macdonald (2020) argues that “technology theatre” occurs when public conversations about major policy initiatives focus on technological components whilst simultaneously evading more sensitive questions about power and equity. This becomes particularly visible when expert debate, amplified through media and digital platforms, creates the appearance of public debate while doing very little to meaningfully engage the public. As Macdonald (2020: para. 5) succinctly puts it, “When the public is focusing on a technology instead of a holistic solution to address complex policy issues, technology theatre is working.” Employing a similar logic, Jefferson (2020) uses the term technofetishism to highlight the praise of technology in police circles. Whilst “technology theatre” highlights the appeal behind technology-based policies even if they are entirely ineffective, technofetishism is more concerned with the exaggerated reach and impact of such policies and gadgets. However, they both relate to the idea of technological reassurance, the idea that technology can be trusted to find the best solution.

Hitherto, these ideas of security and technology theatre have been so successful because they have benefited from an all-pervasive fear, as well as from an obsession with risk assessments and risk control. It is this illusion of control that brings surveillance into the equation. Surveillance technologies are loaded with symbolism. With specific reference to surveillance in an urban context, Svenonius (2018) suggests that video surveillance has become part of a policy discourse that takes peoples’ affects as the main objective for security governance, and one in which security measures are evaluated in terms of their reassurance function. Despite its potential totalitarian character to many, surveillance acts as a reassuring comfort blanket for many others.

For the reasons presented above, we believe that the concept of surveillance theatre, which intrinsically relates to the ideas implicit in notions of security theatre, technology theatre, and technofetishism, can make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing conversations around smart cities. Moreover, surveillance theatre is a concept that has an application beyond discussions of smart cities, as it can more broadly be extended to surveillance studies.

The concept embodies four main claims:

- Surveillance technologies are used by policy makers to show that they are “doing something” about issues such as crime, the fear of crime, and security. It is irrelevant whether these technologies do or do not work: their importance lies in the performance and visibility of the technologies.
- Surveillance technologies are deployed by cities and/or countries as a form of propaganda and competition to elicit investments, for example, when cities wish to host mega-events like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup.
- Discussions in media and policy circles about the implementation of new surveillance technologies tend to be overly concerned with the technology and its promises, whilst meaningful engagements with the public to discuss power, equity, human rights, and complex policy issues are conspicuous in their absence. It is a performance that conjures the appearance of public debate and bottom-up participation that, in reality, seldom happens.
- The discourse of policy makers and technology companies about new surveillance technologies is primarily performative. These actors make exaggerated promises of control, omnipresence, and real-time monitoring, and pretend surveillance technology is always the best solution to the policy problem.

Conclusion: Smart Cities as Surveillance Theatre

Prior to anything else, the smart city, as well as the surveillance technologies included in smart packages, is a form of discourse. Its messages are comprised of performances that convey illusions of omnipresent control, of security, of bottom-up participation, and of effectiveness. The examples from cities in Brazil and Belgium show that smart surveillance technologies are not enough to make smart cities work, they also need smart governance. The smart city surveillance assemblages are characterised by many different actors, power relations, and drivers. Amongst these drivers, there is not only surveillance capitalism but also, as argued in this piece, surveillance theatre.

Our argument speaks to the clear need for more comparative research on smart cities, especially for studies that have a focus beyond the Global North. We recognise that the concept itself needs greater refinement, which we would argue will emerge alongside wider and deeper empirical evidence.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Stephanie Garaglia for her insightful comments on the first draft of this text.

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