

Cities rejecting surveillance

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The city of the future I see in promotional videos¹ for systems of mass surveillance and mass control seems to be subsumed in a permanent state of normalcy. It is a city with no traffic, no protests, no visible disasters, no spontaneous mobilisations, no surprises. Spontaneous events, as if they were system errors, are suppressed before they occur. Movement analysis and decision-making happens in a control room that looks like a spaceship, where technicians work in real-time, watching all of us, without us being able to see them. There is no citizen access. To the contrary, these are closed systems, difficult to monitor. Where actions are regulated by a system, designed elsewhere, that pretends it is not political. But technology is political.

Cities where everything is controlled by invisible technology, almost imperceptible in daily life. Those surveillance cameras now visible on street corners are replaced by systems of constant monitoring integrated into the landscape. Cities of sensors collecting our data all day long, where each movement is registered and stored, where decisions are automated and dehumanized, monetised to optimise consumption, to predict behavior, control people. And where the benefits of not knowing who decides and why, stand to be gained by the same conglomerate who bets on this vision. A few companies developing software, hardware and capacities in countries that can be counted on one hand. A market of 8 billion US dollars, which is expected to grow tenfold by the year 2020. Fed with meagre public funds in a world where austerity is the default.

1 | For example SMART CITY – The interconnected city: improving the quality of life of citizens. September 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvGuw2zZ3qc>)

Although discourses keep feeding the imaginary, descriptions of cameras detecting pickpockets, this is something radically different. Matrices that combine lots of data in real-time. This vision for the city of the future, promoted by a small group of technology conglomerates (Environmental Leader 2013), is one where quality of life is directly proportional to the predictability and homogeneity of its inhabitants, clashing with the struggle for diversity and diverse behaviours. To achieve this vision, much more is sacrificed than privacy. We pawn off our security to those in the sealed-off control room. It is to sacrifice the purest form of democracy we have, our right to protest freely and anonymously in the town square.

Local surveillance systems are rapidly expanding everywhere, much earlier and faster than the regulatory frameworks for adequate protection of privacy and personal data, without democratic mechanisms, community or neighbourhood consultations to determine their necessity or appropriateness. They are sophisticated and ephemeral systems that require updates and costly maintenance and show vague results. In Tegucigalpa, Honduras, for example, the city could not maintain the surveillance system due to a lack of budget to maintain the cameras (Pachico, 2013).

The contracts that are signed tie the hands of more than one public institution, borrowing from future municipal budgets, with a coordinated marketing and data machinery that does not offer solid evidence to prove effectiveness. Public authorities assure us that cameras, scenario modelling and mass surveillance will eliminate the problem of insecurity, advancing these over other public policies meant to attack extreme poverty and inequality of access to basic services, as well as the recovery of public space. The studies that vouch for the effectiveness of surveillance as a crime reduction measure are incomplete; they do not take local internal and external factors into account, and cannot be applied to different contexts (Murakami Wood, D. and Webster, C.W.R. 2009: pp. 259-273).

Cities of the future, promoted by the technology industry and real estate developers benefitting from them, allow for events to be pre-empted, for preventive decisions to be made to control the masses, block protests, predict civic mobilisations for more and better rights. To discriminate by algorithm. To exclude by patterns of behaviour.

Do we want a future without surveillance? A future where diversity, and not uniformity of behaviour, is the rule? Let's start by eradicating (the now invisible) vigilante culture of the neighbourhood and the city. Let's start by participating in all public spaces and if they do not exist, let's open them. Before the final bastion of democracy becomes a memory erased by someone behind a screen. Among the steps we can all take, here are three I will elaborate on:

Prevent the arrival of surveillance

If mass surveillance is still at the exploratory stage as a security measure, it is important to organise neighbours against it, asking if municipal goods or services will be sacrificed in favour of surveillance, and question the impact that prioritising it will have on community and neighbourhood life. Moreover, it is important to ask about the long-term sustainability and viability of such projects, the conditions by which the municipality is acquiring them and the time frames. It is important to quantify what is being sacrificed to invest in surveillance. For example, indicating how many programmes for children and youth at risk could be started for the same price, offering more complete and long-term solutions. Once a mass surveillance system is installed, privacy and intimacy are only for those who can afford them (Alwin 2014).²

Question mass surveillance already installed and the costs of maintenance and updates

Decisions to improve security and quality of life of neighbourhoods and cities should be participatory. The benefits of installing mass and continuous surveillance mechanisms in public space should be weighed against analogue, social alternatives. Technological surveillance is expensive because for every camera installed there are not just related fixed costs for maintenance and updates, there is also a sacrifice in terms of public spending on social programmes. Moreover, almost all

2 | Pic Six Ltd. is based in Israel and provides authorised law enforcement forces and governmental agencies with a selection of interception products, standard off-the shelf or custom tailored solutions.(http://www.pic-six.com/?module=catalog&item_id=3&c_id=12)

the technology providers are not domestic companies. Mostly closed technology, running on proprietary software, makes effective citizen oversight impossible. Contracts with camera providers and services are generally in the millions of dollars, and are binding long beyond the term of the signing government, without considering the realities of a municipality.

Only making the cost of surveillance in the city visible, we could aim at its reduction: the cost of surveillance is paid by cuts in the budget of the neglected community hospital, sacrificing the youth and arts programme for marginal areas.

Connect with other rebel cities and collectives

To free ourselves from surveillance and other repressive and authoritarian forms of power that this opens, we must immediately activate the mechanisms of law that allow us to oversee the functions of mass surveillance systems in our cities. And do this collectively, in coordination with other cities affected by the problem. Just as there are Smart Cities networks we should form our own Rebel Cities networks where surveillance is rejected and participatory democracy is affirmed, a democracy framed in respect for human rights and diversity, focused on collective solutions, which is the true path to safer cities. Not cameras.

We can then simultaneously activate collaborative mechanisms to prevent their expansion, and the actions could start regionally.

Given the robust access to information institutions and laws and the current political moment, Europe is the perfect region to start with. As cities are aggressively securitising every corner to combat terrorism and manage crises, it is important to start a coordinated watch dog to be vigilant on the approval and deployment of surveillance technologies.

An idea will be to use the current initiatives facilitating access to information, such as Frag den Staat³ or My Society's What do they Know?⁴ to simultaneously file standardised freedom of information requests in different cities across Europe, revealing the cost of surveillance, providers, vendors and who is benefiting from it. Data could also reveal in a given

3 | Official website (<https://fragdenstaat.de/>)

4 | Official website (<https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/>)

geographical area which social inclusion programmes were left out of budget, where cameras are now installed instead.

Furthermore, a coalition of concerned citizens, supported by local parliamentarians or even the European Parliament could demand studies on the results of such technologies deployed. A coalition of European Rebel cities could also take serious legal action in face of possible illegal uses of surveillance for the adoption of discriminatory policies and practices. After a proactive series of actions in Europe, a second region could be added, ideally Asia or Latin America, where the expansion of Smart Cities is in its golden age. Only with facts and data on the harm of surveillance we could effectively demand from authorities' protection of personal data where it exists, and where it does not, demand that human rights authorities undertake feasibility studies before surveillance is deployed, weighing the impact on individual guarantees before installing such systems. Democracy begins and ends there. In its exercise.

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