


Surveillance in the COVID-19 Normal: Tracking, Tracing, and Snooping – Trade- Offs in Safety and Autonomy in the E-City

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of surveillance technologies in cities around the world. The new surveillance systems are unfolding at unprecedented speed and scale in response to the fears of COVID-19, yet with little discussion about long-term consequences or implications. The authors approach the drivers and procedures for COVID-19 surveillance, addressing a particular focus to close-circuit television (CCTV) and tracking apps. This paper describes the technologies, how they are used, what they are capable of, the reasons why one should be concerned, and how citizens may respond. No commentary should downplay the seriousness of the current pandemic crisis, but one must consider the immediate and longer-term threats of insinuated enhanced surveillance, and look to how surveillance could be managed in a more cooperative social future.

KEYWORDS

Citizen Response, Confidentiality, COVID-19, Phone Apps, Security, Surveillance, Tracing, Tracking, Urban Monitoring

INTRODUCTION

Surveillance technologies are being deployed at an unprecedented pace in cities throughout the world, amid the fears of COVID-19 and with little discussion about the long-term consequences. In the current situation, surveillance is necessary to track infections and the spread of the virus. However, the core issues in any surveillance, beyond specifically for COVID-19, are existential in that surveillance provokes basic human dilemmas and contradictions. Surveillance policies generate tensions between safety and risk at all levels - that of the individual, that of the state, and of all levels of society in-between; and politically to this, the struggles between the individual and society and thus between social / community cooperation and individual self-reliance.

In reviewing these tensions, in no way do we downplay or diminish the seriousness of the current crisis as expressed in the awful numbers of deaths around the world, especially those courageous

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health workers who die aiding us, and the millions of frontline workers who are facing the public in the streets and in “essential services”, - not comfortably working safely from home. Nor do we underestimate the devastation of people’s livelihoods, especially the daily earners, the street and gig workers. All these remind us to take the crisis deadly seriously and not fall into a facile critique (from Left or Right) of how governments and leaders and the public are getting it wrong. The profound question that political leaders are now facing is: ‘stay (relatively) safe at home’, or, ‘go out and work, earn and spend’ to keep the economy going. This dilemma faces the leadership of every economic ideology, from the US and the EU to India, South Africa, Mexico, Russia, to China and North Korea. Into this vicious political, economic, ethical, moral question, comes surveillance and questions about its intensity and its extent.

The article addresses structures and mechanisms used for COVID-19 surveillance. It describes what they do, how they are used, what they might do, our reasons to worry, and how citizens may respond. In Section 2 we consider key elements of surveillance in the COVID-19 era, especially referencing its functioning in the Smart City. In Section 3 we outline the salient technologies in this era, which are CCTV, phone apps and wearables. Section 4 considers the obvious and less obvious concerns raised by these, by the public in general and by social critics. The next section 5 suggests commentaries on elements of our “future normal” under enhanced surveillance – risk and its responsibilities, trust and truth. Finally, in Section 6 we re-visit the discourses of surveillance, and how it is resisted and re-imagined.

SURVEILLANCE FOR COVID-19: SETTING AND CONDITIONS

The spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, hereafter COVID-19) has particular characteristics which raise new challenges for surveillance (WHO, 2020). Urban structures and urban life are more friendly environments for the COVID-19 virus. Cities concentrate larger human populations (virus hosts), higher densities of people who are highly mobile with multiple opportunities for person-to-person contacts (transmission), and most cities have deep pockets of poverty (vulnerability). COVID-19 needs intense tracking, it is virtually unprecedented in global epidemiology in infection rates and hidden, asymptomatic transmission. Testing is essential and is intrinsically connected to tracing, yet there are continuing critiques of the state of COVID-19 testing in many countries, including the availability and reliability of the kits, the frequency of tests, and delays in getting results, but testing is not the focus of this article and it is not addressed further here.

Tracking means watching people – monitoring movements, locations, interactive behaviour with contacts. Tracking COVID-19 on a Big Data scale in the Smart City needs more than just counting people who present symptoms (WHO, 2005). But, building Big Data pictures from watching people is easily extendable to many other intentions of surveillance and control. The conflict is between strengthening the levels of surveillance for protection, and the fears of where else that could lead. The effort to increase health monitoring sets a precedent for other forms of surveillance.

The scientific literature distinguishes various forms of “surveillance” that are reflected in several sub-concepts (French & Monahan, 2020; Lyon, 2018). “Lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic, 2004) in everyday language means people critically watching each other. This is seen now in the COVID-19 pandemic, in social media trolling, denouncing, and snatched photos of bad behaviour like no masks or no distancing. We used to call this grassing, or snitching and it presents a moral dilemma. There is a common human reluctance to snitch on family, friends, or community. However, such behavior seems easier on anonymous social media platforms, and so it overlaps with what is called “social media surveillance” or ‘digital eavesdropping’ (Cheng et al., 2020; Zhiyuan Hou et al., 2020). Much of what is termed “participatory surveillance” is not very participatory because it depends on “volunteered geographic information” (VGI) or human sensors (Paolotti et al., 2014). VGI requires a willingness to give up accountability and responsibility and participation in return for gains in speed, efficiency, and reducing innate fears (McCall et al., 2015). The focus in this paper however is

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