Oscillating through discourses on surveillance, privacy, and the ‘screens in the ...

Every Addition to Technology has a Subtraction from Reality: Oscillating through Discourses on Surveillance, Privacy, and the ‘ Screens in the City’

On the 8 th of March 2019, a surveillance camera was spotted in a public bathroom of a popular mall’s food court in Montreal (MTL Blog, 11 March 2019). This sparked a lot of online debates and is an example of the extant controversy around the tensions between surveillance, privacy and the proliferation of technology “ screens” in both public and private spaces. With the proliferation of surveillance cameras in both public and private spaces today, it has become imperative to ask how these “ eyes”, especially installed by state governments (and even private businesses too) are affecting the privacy rights of individuals. In the current digitized era that we live in, have these surveillance cameras installed by governments (and the surveillance activities therefrom), caused any accidents or produced any risks? Have these technologies in our city produced any “ augmentation” or “ entanglement” of space involving the physical and the digital? These are discourses I hope to engage in the course of this paper. My ultimate proposition is that with every new innovation or addition to technology, there is a corresponding subtraction from our physical reality.

For the purpose of this work, I will employ the definition of surveillance propounded by Professor David Lyon who is the Professor of Sociology and Queen’s Research Chair in the Faculty of Law at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. In his 2014 paper, he describes surveillance to mean “ operations and experiences of gathering and analyzing personal data for influence, entitlement or management.” (Lyon). I will limit my scope to surveillance activities carried out by governments especially through the

use of cameras. However, considering that cameras today are not just stand alone devices with lenses, but are also attached to phones, laptops and other hardware; and also, considering that there are cameras that are visible as well as invisible to the naked human eye (including software which captures and collects data from people, online and offline, just like a camera would), my definition of surveillance will extend to the use of other devises other than cameras which governments use to carry our surveillance.

To define privacy, I will like to assert the definition of this right as contained in the Canadian Constitution which provides that everyone in Canada has protection against unreasonable search and seizure. This right provides Canadians with a primary source of constitutionally protected privacy rights against unreasonable intrusion from the state (Section 8, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Constitution of Canada). Beyond the Canadian state, under international human rights law, the right to privacy protects individuals from unjustified state intrusion. This domain of human rights in regard to an individual's private (and even public life) is fundamental. (Article 17, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

On the concept of " screens in the city" as suggested in my title, I align my views with Hoezl & Marie (2016) whose work focused on " images" and " screens" as implicatory to our data-space where both the physical and the digital data connect through wireless networks and mobile devices (Hozel & Marie, 2016, p 371). Whilst Hozel & Marie's work is premised on the pictorial or filmic – by ascribing the screen as the access point to networks and infinite data exchanges, my use of " screens" here will extend to security cameras and public screens that constantly engage with data.

As the merits of technological innovations escalate, so do the demerits inflate. Every single machinery innovation has been linked with a risk. There have been various consequences of progress in the modern culture. A basic example of this, is the invention of electricity, which has led to the discovery of electrocution (Virilio, 2007). Technology’s impact on culture is polarized. It has both progressive wins (e. g. towards development), as well as diminishing factors (towards humanity). Whilst some people may prioritise the use of technology to boost security concerns over privacy rights, some others do the opposite by preferring to protect privacy rights over state surveillance through cameras. Whilst there are “ risks” to be considered in both sides of the argument, today’s urbanism is ultimately defined as a data-space where bodies and signals commute and connect via “ screens” and wireless networks (Hozel & Marie). This trajectory of technological advancement is affecting the positioning of “ self” (the basic unit of society), within the city (or urban space), especially how people can express themselves in the midst of several security cameras and screens without feeling a sense of being objectified, and even how this affects their freedom of expression and wellbeing. Hozel & Marie see the individual “ self” as being exposed, without consent, to a range of wireless networks. (p 378). Lasen gives a more descriptive notion of “ self” and the role of the “ self” in the city. For Lasen, the “ spatial self” is related to the augmented sonic presence in public and that the territory of the self is temporary, situated, and personal (Lasen, p 100). Lasen sees the individual as having a choice and a role to play in situating self within the public sphere whilst for Hozel & Marie, whether the individual likes it or not, he is a “ continual target” (p 373). These camera “ eyes” and screens mounted in public and private

spaces by the state should not be prying and spying into the private affairs of individuals. It is not enough that the state has a legal and moral justification to surveillance. This is critical discourse to both social and academic concern. It is a current issue. It is ongoing, and central to the study of popular technologies and cultural practices.

Paul Virilio encourages the formation of " Museology" and " Museography" to help bring to light the accidents or wrecks created by the invention of new machinery. Paul seeks to publicize the hazards caused by advancements in technology in the modern culture. He, however, also attempts to enlighten people of the theory of advancement in technology (Virilio 2007). Every technological creation brings about a unique type of disaster. This actually is known as " Accidentology." Some examples can help prove the existence of Accidentology such as: the invention of " Aeroplanes" leading to " Plane crashes"; the invention of " Computers" leading to " Computer Virus"; the invention of " Trains" leading to " Train wrecks" (Virilio, 2007). Here I dare add that the invention of cameras has led to the cultural invention of surveillance and the abuse on the right of privacy. I argue that is in itself is an accident: a " crash" and an erosion on the private life and the culture of respecting privacy and confidentiality. According to Paul, there are three individual forms of accidents. Which consist of the following: 1) Natural vs Artificial Accidents (Man-Made); 2) Industrial vs Post-Industrial Accidents; 3) Local vs Global Accidents (Virilio, 2007). The impact of cameras as a tool for perpetuating surveillance into the public lives of people is what I can consider as artificial, post-industrial and " glo-cal" (a combination of global and local).

Government in several countries around the world have expanded surveillance through the use of cameras in public and private spaces and even go as far as restricting privacy tools that citizens use (on their computers) (PoKempner, 2014). Internet freedom is reported to be broadly declining while the number of surveillance activities have multiplied (Transparent Lives, 2015). Often framed as a necessary trade-off between individual privacy rights for national security – this justification of surveillance is prone to abuse (Flaherty, 2014). As Lyon notes, digital tools of mass surveillance are not only used for national security, but also diplomatic manipulation, economic espionage, and more broadly, social control. (Lyon, 2014). In many instances this trade-off framing puts forward an irrationally narrow definition of security by sacrificing people's right to enjoy their private life and exposing them to having their actions recorded by security agents who may not be doing so with good intent or goodwill. (Flaherty, 2014). These humans become " actors" who are recorded and policed even without their consent. Such an emancipatory potential of using camera surveillance for safeguarding evidence is being jeopardized by states using these same technologies to extend their reach and power. (Greer, 2014 p. 11). Rather than making governments more accountable to their citizens and to protecting their rights, such digital technology may perversely be making citizens less free and more subject to giving governments aspects of their lives that are not meant for the state's knowledge. (PoKempner). Through facial-recognition systems, camera surveillance enables authorities to identify people against a database of tens of millions of faces. (McMullan, 2018, para 2). Dictatorships may use this to target innocent individuals who are pursuing just causes or trying to flee for their lives. (PoKempner). Finally,

the ethical concerns are the most urgent critique for Lyon. For him, modernism’s new penchant for certain definitions of privacy betrays the subjects of surveillance who, so far from kowtowing to the abstract, incorporeal image of both computing and legal practices, are engaged and exemplified users-in-relation whose activities both fuel and foreclose surveillance. (Lyon, 2014, pp. 1, 4, 8, 9). Lyon cites the theory of “ destituent power” in recourse to the emerging configurations of power and influence as political, economic and socio-technological circumstances change, so surveillance also undergoes alteration, sometimes transformation. (p. 2). Castells description of this alteration of power is by how surveillance shifts power relations institutionalized in society and affecting the control over private and public. He calls the relationship between “ power and counter-power” (pp. 239, 240, 244).

At this juncture it is important to relate this topic to two of the popular theories that attempt to explain the relationship between surveillance cameras and how they affect society today. One relevant theory is that of technological determinism which regards technology as the prime agent of social and organizational change (Pavri 2017). The proliferation of cameras everywhere can be said to be limiting people from their freedom to act in their freewill and can even extend to causing panic from the feeling of being watched. This can produce what Claude Fischer calls the “ billiard ball” of exerting a force upon society which produces a series of chain or ricochet events. (Pavri). One can argue then that state security cameras placed in private and public spaces, affects the social and cultural patterns of human coexistence. A theme that is related to this subject is that of management

and control. In this instance it will be how these surveillance cameras are used as tools for control by states to the extent that they prevent citizens from owning their own privacy. Who is at the backend of these camera lenses watching these videos? On whose database are these videos recorded into? The controllers and owners of the data from these surveillance cameras are not only in technological control of people but also sociopolitical and sociological control (Lyon 2014, p. 2).

For the state’s use of surveillance cameras to be fairly and effectively appreciated by the public at large, there must be a baseline of transparency. When Edward Snowden made his revelations in 2013, a cybersecurity industrial complex was revealed, and some security analysts that worked with the government were found to be specifically abusing these technologies to spy on their spouses (Lyon 2014). This means that the argument that surveillance cameras are for the state to protect and act as “ watchdog” for citizens, if true, is not devoid of abuse. Surveillance could also amount to an infringement of the rights to privacy and even basic freedoms because the government puts on a “ red button” over everything that we do. Without basic transparency and openness about their activities, States can violate human rights in the dark and with impunity. This highlights the importance of whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning in providing a level of transparency which in a free and democratic society should already be in place.

These technological “ eyes” and screens in the city is not predestined by any kind of historical fate or technological inevitability. It is basically the “ result

of the new age of the oldest struggle in humankind: the struggle to free our minds” (Castells, 2007, p. 238)

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