Editorial

Understanding the Sociotechnical Networks of Surveillance Practices in Latin America

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The current issue of *Surveillance & Society* is dedicated to analyzing the growth and development of surveillance devices in Latin America, a theme that little by little is consolidated into the academic agenda of the region for different reasons. Maybe because an important number of citizens and social groups ask about the effects of surveillance in the redefinition of public and private spaces, the management of personal data, as well as the forms of social classification and the access to citizenship. There is also concern because surveillance devices introduce themes that do not appear in the traditional framework of analysis on democracy, the process of social and state modernization, as well as the administration and governing of society in the Latin-American region – such as identity cards, the use of video surveillance systems, personal databases, and radio-frequency systems, among others. This has brought about new categories of analysis and analytic frameworks, dataveillance, digital identity, devices, digital borders, to mention only a few, forming what is complementary to those which traditionally are used for understanding the dynamics of Latin American society – such as the theory of dependency, modernization, as well as post-colonial studies. Finally, different disciplines, among them sociology, urbanism, political science, law and history, as well as those esthetic studies, have found in the expansion of surveillance in contemporary societies, an important vein of study.

However, the growing speed of surveillance studies in Latin America is variable, depending on the particular conditions of each country, which does not only have to do with economic development, different cultural contexts, or the ways in which public and private spaces are defined, but also with forms of access to citizenship and the organization of local political institutions. In this aspect it can be seen that countries such as Jamaica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Paraguay have begun to push a series of important transformations in their police and judicial organizations, although the penetration of surveillance devices has not been done in the same proportion. In contrast, the large expansion in the latter is found well ahead of the transformation and reform of the organizations in charge of guaranteeing public security and application of the law, in other countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela.

It is worth pointing out that those countries with an important growth in surveillance devices, one can observe heterogeneity in their distribution and usage. There are on one hand, hyper-watched spaces and everyday life activities in the case of protecting social sectors with large economic and material resources with the goal of maintaining in line social groups considered to be new “dangerous classes”. On the other hand, spaces and activities which are under-supervised can be found, with the presence of traditional

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forms of social control, that go from those of a communal character to those where the authoritarian exercising of the police and the army are combined. Other spaces are left invisible: the conditions in which certain social sectors are outside of any watch, their access to the network is practically non-existent, they are found living on the margins of governmental and private databases (usually with no access to basic public services), living in a situation of almost non-existence to public records, databases and, thus, services and minimum status of citizenry (Dandeker 1990; Murakami Wood and Firmino 2010). In this sense, as pointed out by Giddens (1990), surveillance is found firmly linked to the development of modernity. This relationship between surveillance and modernity, however, does not happen homogeneously across time and place. As we will see, this relationship respects some particularities in the context of Latin America.

This volume of *Surveillance & Society* presents works that explore different expressions of surveillance in Latin-American societies, and that show in some way the recent processes of modernization that have been presented in the region. There are, among the contributions that make the present issue, an evident concentration of studies about Brazil and Mexico. Recently, these two countries have, undoubtedly, been experiencing a large growth in surveillance strategies and devices with almost no debate or opposing voices, what can, to a certain extent, explain the unbalanced presence of these countries in the articles that follows. However, they cannot be taken as representatives of the practices and studies about surveillance in the whole of Latin America, which certainly displays a much broader diversity than the one showed here. Nevertheless, the focus in these two countries is neither a limitation. This is also a positive result of the efforts made by teams of scholars in Brazil and Mexico for the creation and improvement of the Latin American Network of Studies about Surveillance, Technology and Society,¹ during the last three years. This started during the preparation of what has been called the first international symposium about surveillance ever organized in Latin America, which took place in Curitiba, Brazil, in March, 2009.² In the following year, a second event was organized in Toluca, Mexico.³ Both events were coordinated by researchers from Brazil and Mexico, with a close support by members of the Surveillance Studies Network from UK and Canada.

The article by Nelson Arteaga Botello, *Surveillance Studies: An Agenda for Latin America*, opens this discussion showing that studies of surveillance in Latin America could not have been consolidated in the region, since studies on public security consider surveillance as a technical aspect needed to tackle the expansion of criminal violence in the region in the last fifteen years. His proposal points out the consolidation of surveillance studies that result fundamentally in understanding the processes of social construction that studies on public security cannot cover, and that are found describing the dynamics of modernization of the region.

If surveillance in modern societies is defined initially from the identification of its citizens, the work of Marta Kanashiro and Danilo Doneda, *The Brazilian Identification System: Unique Features of a General Transformation*, is important. It analyzes the conditions of the implementation of a new type of ID Card in Brazil, the RIC (Civil Identity Registry). Their aim is to show the particularities of this new ID Card in the context of the recent development of Brazil, but above all, the implications and singularities that are implicated in the definition of the relationship between the State and its citizens.

The following article by Alejandro Vélez, *Insecure Identities: The Approval of a Biometric ID Card in Mexico*, is also focused in systems of identification, but presents the debate in the sense of who and how information is controlled, during the first attempt to establish an ID Card in this country. It shows the tensions in the debate between the parties involved in this controversy, which is a reflection of the

¹ www.labjor.unicamp.br/vigilancia

² <http://www2.pucpr.br/ssscia>

³ <http://sites.google.com/site/idsurveillancemexico/home/>

conditions of institutional mistrust in which the country lives in. Above all, the debate that is sketched out in this work highlights the problem that represents not only the collection of biometric information, but also its administration. The history of corruption, in particular the forgery of identities, as well as the sale of voter card registry databases, established the parameter for the discussion of the implementation of an ID Card in Mexico.

The work of Rodrigo José Firmino and Elisa Trevisan, *Eyes of Glass: Watching the Watchers in the Monitoring of Public Places in Curitiba, Brazil*, shows another type of surveillance: the behaviors and procedures of those operating the cameras on a public CCTV facility. This piece analyzes how those that monitor the public spaces in Curitiba establish their protocols and routines for watching. The lens is focused on having information to define how the spaces and common citizens of a modern city in Brazil are interpreted by those who are behind the cameras.

The work behind the cameras is also the central theme in the article by Bruno Vasconcelos Cardoso, *The Paradox of Caught-in-the-act Surveillance Scenes: Dilemmas of Police Video Surveillance in Rio de Janeiro*. The author analyzes some of the issues raised by field research conducted in the official video surveillance system in public spaces that is operated by the Military Police on behalf of the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Public Security. Cardoso describes this system as a sociotechnical network, exploring its human and non-human actors, taken into account the issue of human and/or technical overdetermination. The paper also highlights, based on the fieldwork, the tensions between efficiency and visibility, and between surveillance work and the aesthetics of surveillance.

The weight and role of who looks into the dynamics of surveillance is evident in the article by Maurício Lisovsky and Teresa Bastos, *Images of Suspicion: Surveillance Photos in the Brazilian Political Police Archives*. Thanks to historic work about the photographs in the political police archives (from the dictatorial regime back in the 1970s and 1980s), the authors try to show that despite the ample time period considered, the political police maintained without much modification, its objects of surveillance: records about trade union, political parties, cultural associations, women's movements, student movements, anarchists, communists and terrorists, as well as foreigners, diplomats and any other person that could be considered a danger to the political "stability" of the country or an attack against the sovereignty of Brazil. Unlike existing mechanisms of surveillance, such as video cameras, that always show their images in a depersonalized way, the photographs analyzed show the personalized signature of the photographer, who has developed the abilities to spy, constructing the moment and the situation in order to trap in his lenses what "needed" be put under surveillance. What these images unveil is not only the performance of the observer, but a series of duels and tactics that involve and constitute both the watcher and the watched.

Finally, the curatorship work by Fernanda Bruno, Paola Barreto and Milena Szafir, *Surveillance Aesthetics in Latin America: Work in Progress*, presents an online art exhibition about surveillance. It is shown how some Latin-American artists explore technologies linked to surveillance and processes of social control. By this, the authors understand surveillance aesthetics as a compound of artistic practices, which include the appropriation of *dispositifs* such as CCTV, webcams, satellite images, algorithms and computer vision among others, placing them within new visibility, attention and experience regimes.

How and to what extent do the destinies of surveillance devices reverberate or are subverted by the market, security and media logics in our societies? If, in Europe and in the USA, surveillance is a subject related to the war against terror and border control, what can be said about Latin America? What forces and conflicts are involved? How have artistic practices been creating and acting in relation to these forces and conflicts?

These are some of the questions raised by this curatorship work, which to some extent, is taken into consideration by all of the above-mentioned articles with the goal of defining the place of surveillance in a region, further than a mere social process.

From all possible interactions between the articles that complete the present issue, there may be a special one. In the majority of studies presented here, the dynamics of surveillance finds its focus not in the protocols of efficiency that might involve the technologies in use, but rather in the dysfunctions, flaws, hesitations, and noises that are part of the subject, of the looking, the work, the procedures, the technologies, and the institutions that make the studied *dispositifs* of surveillance. Obviously, this does not mean that surveillance systems are inefficient in the context of Latin America. Differently, though, this indicates that their functioning is less revealed by the places where these devices are planned to operate under criteria of quality and efficiency, but more by the heterogeneous networks in which the practices of surveillance are constructed and whose human and non-human elements “in action” never operate as expected. In this way, the articles of this issue allow us to have a singular perspective on the processes of surveillance in different spheres of social life in Latin America: the role that these processes play in the formation of the State, citizen identity, the protection of urban spaces, classification and social control, practices and regimes of visibility.

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