Rearranging Urban Space

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates what happens to urban space once an open-street CCTV system is implemented, framing the analysis in terms of the wider struggle that unfolds between different urban stakeholders for the definition of acceptability in public space. It is argued that, while the use of surveillance cameras was initially seen as functional to the enforcement of tighter control and to the de-complexification of urban space so as to make policing easier, a shift has now taken place in the articulation of this goal. As a result, it has slowly progressed to affect the wider field of sociability, with troubling consequences for the public character of public space. In light of this development, the article concludes by making the case for a normative stance to be taken in order to increase fairness and diversity in the city.

Keywords: Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV), De-Complexification, Mapping, Policing, Public Space, Thresholds of Acceptability

INTRODUCTION

This article considers the physical distribution of surveillance cameras throughout the city as an independent variable that can be used to investigate what happens to urban space once an open-street CCTV system is implemented, both on a spatial and social level. This specific perspective is adopted to gauge how the wider struggle between different urban stakeholders for the definition of acceptability in public space unfolds, and what its consequences are.

After detailing how the activation of surveillance cameras creates a new risk-based geography through which to read and control urban space, the point is made that the map that results from this charts the distribution of crime and risk, thus reflecting the dangerousness of each area in the eyes of the police, while also, crucially, tracking social marginality. Under this light, the article goes on to argue that a specific configuration of the relationship between those that govern and those that are governed, and of how power is exercised in the city, is stabilised in the arrangement of cameras. In turn, this opens the door to the introduction of the notion of surveillant spatialities to account for the emergence of new hierarchical and unequal social and spatial arrangements in urban space after the implementation of CCTV.

This wider perspective paves the way to the central point the article wishes to make. Essentially, it is argued that a shift has taken place in the understanding of the notion of de-complexification. What initially was a goal to be pursued in terms of policing, so that the use of surveillance cameras was seen as functional to the enforcement of tighter control over urban
space, has progressively affected the wider field of sociability, where the reduction of complexity is part and parcel of a wider movement focused on the limitation of the range of acceptable practices and behaviours in public space. As it goes against the democratic foundations of society, this is a troubling development and the article concludes by making the case for a normative stance to be taken in order to protect the rights of disadvantaged urban constituencies and increase fairness and diversity of public space.

**MAPPING URBAN SPACE THROUGH CCTV**

The overall aim of the implementation of a CCTV system is to reduce the complexity of both public encounters and urban space so as to make policing easier. First, the presence of surveillance cameras changes the way police interact with the public. Rather than patrolling officers having face-to-face interactions with people, their street level gaze taking in the wealth of information arising from the scene, CCTV establishes an asymmetrical, and technologically-mediated, relationship, where the police can watch, while not being subject to the gaze of people, but cannot access contextual information other than the visual cues picked up by the cameras. The elimination of four out of five senses forces CCTV operators to rely almost exclusively on their practical knowledge and their assumptions on what constitutes ordinary behaviour in public, in a given place, at a given time. The main assumption behind any form of visual control is that deviance is visible and can, therefore, be spotted if we know what to look for. In this regard, police officers use what Sacks (1972) called the “incongruity procedure” and its idea that things that look out of place in a given context are those that call for further scrutiny. Video surveillance works exactly in the same way; however, empirical studies (among them: Norris & Armstrong, 1999) have demonstrated how potentially open to abuse this technology is because of its over-reliance on the sense of sight. We now know that visible minorities are disproportionately targeted, and that most cases of targeted surveillances are not to do with crime or related offences:

*The problem is the operative does not have prior knowledge which would enable them to determine which persons are going to engage in criminal activity. It is therefore an occupational necessity that they develop a set of working rules and procedures which seeks to maximize their chances of selecting those most likely to be involved. (...) [W]hen assessing who is worthy of a second glance, CCTV operators bring with them taken-for-granted assumptions about the distribution of criminality within the population (Norris & Armstrong, 1999, pp. 117-118).*

Second, spatially the simplification is achieved thanks to the identification of problem spots within the urban fabric of the city where cameras are, then, installed. As a result of the implementation, these locations are singled out from their surroundings and become interconnected through a network that brings isolated fragments of urban space into the control room, before the eyes of CCTV operators. The reduction of complexity, thus, proceeds by decreasing the amount of bare information that police officers are faced with, with the assumption that viewing these snapshots will put the operators in the condition to decide whether or not something untoward is happening in the city. Under this light, what become central are the activities and the processes through which the images projected by the monitors are invested with meaning, and consequently used as a basis for decision-making and problem-solving. In order to make sense of what they see through the cameras, operators must then possess a deep, localised understanding of the environment, without which the views afforded would be useless and, more importantly, meaningless. Thus, cameras are inseparable from the practical knowledge of the life and rhythm of the city, and, as such, are used according to a geography of risk that provides police officers “with ways of configuring the environment to perceive,
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