Surveillance Regulation in Mexico City - Cameras and Urban Segregation: New Challenges for Urban E-Planning

Nelson Arteaga Botello, Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, Mexico City, Mexico

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the law regulating the use of technology for public security in Mexico City and its relevance for urban e-planning. The law establishes a legal framework for the installation of video surveillance systems and equipment, in particular surveillance cameras, with the goal of preventing, inhibiting and combating illegal behavior, as well as guaranteeing order and tranquility of the population. This article explores the relationship between some aspects about video cameras, law, media and urban social control in Mexico City. The idea is to show how the law governing the installation and use of surveillance cameras in the city defines security and safety within a large urban renewal project, while opening the possibility of legitimizing a particular type of city government.

Keywords: Media, Mexico City, Surveillance Cameras, Urban Policing, Urban Segregation

INTRODUCTION

The first surveillance cameras appeared in the seventies, in American and European urban spaces which functioned as summer tourist destinations, and in which authorities were worried about protecting visitors who were generally young alcoholics, smalltime street hustlers, illegal business people, as well as dissuading “deviant” behavior which could affect public order (Hempel & Töpfer, 2009). Its presence faded in the urban landscape until the United Kingdom suffered a wave of attempted terrorist attacks during the second half of the eighties and in particular between 1990 and 1993. A significant event which reinforced and legitimized the presence of the surveillance cameras in British cities was the murder of a child, James Bulger. From these events, the United Kingdom has been converted into an example of a country watched over by cameras, particularly London, which has exported on a global scale the idea that surveillance cameras can improve governments intervention in distinct spheres of the social life, the prevention and combat of terrorism and other forms of political violence,
making it possible to fight crime, organizing traffic in avenues and streets while optimizing the distribution of public services.

In this way, little by little, surveillance cameras have been turned into a fundamental piece in the way cities function on a global scale. Their presence has allowed the creation of a sensation that urban spaces could be a favorable place for investment, consumption and commerce. Real-estate development in major cities across the world have been accompanied by surveillance cameras, in particular when these cities function as financial nodes in the global economy or are the place of massive sporting events, such as the Olympics or world football championships (Coleman, 2004a). The introduction of surveillance cameras has been backed up by the discussion about the need of building secure cities for investment, consumption, leisure and economic development.

In the previous decade, surveillance cameras have been increasing and amplifying their reach and capacity of visual resolution considerably, and for that reason now have a greater capacity for computer data storage, guaranteeing that images collected could be stored for their subsequent manipulation and processing. On the other hand, the coupling of surveillance cameras with information technologies makes possible their programming for facial, sound and voice recognition, as well as expanding their capacity to monitor citizens. Other important innovations are the increasing automation of the camera’s movements, which allows programmed visual trips, and in some cases, the detection of “risky” movements by people and groups.

These technological innovations applied to urban policing have forced the adoption of laws and norms regulating the use of surveillance cameras and the information collected in such a way that the boundaries between the public and private sphere are modified, involving the management of personal data, at the same time playing a central role as possible evidence in the judicial sphere. However, the cameras do not operate in a vacuum “…sits alongside and complements other regulatory and policing initiatives that contribute to local order” (Coleman, 2004b). On the contrary, they work following specific governance principals, connected to urban policing strategies and legal regulations. All of this expresses normative models that seek to define how the city should work and how citizens should live within it. This article explores precisely this connection, particularly some elements of the relationship between video cameras, law, media and urban social control in Mexico City. The idea is to show how the law governing the installation and use of surveillance cameras defines a security and safety project within a large urban renewal project, while opening the possibility of legitimizing a particular type of city government.

A LATINO AMERICAN CITY UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Mexico, as well as other countries, has lived with an increased expansion of surveillance cameras in its distinct urban spaces, but it is Mexico City where the largest concentration of cameras can be seen: a little more than 8 thousand, made possible through the “Bicentennial Project: Secure City” which started in the year 2008. At the same time, it has developed a legal mechanism for its regulation, the Law Regulating the Use of Technology for Public Security, published in 2008. This law establishes a framework for the installation of surveillance equipment and the management of the information that is derived from their use. Even though the idea is to guarantee the protection of personal data, the law makes sure that the information seeks to serve a public policy design, defining strategies against crime, at the same time acting as a tool for supporting police work in real time. If the introduction of statistical criteria pertaining to the installation of cameras is a positive step forward, it must be emphasized that sometimes it is mixed with traditional social sorting criteria based on some prejudices on the part of the police. In this way the cameras help to reproduce the historical logic of urban policing and generate new ones in which, as
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