

Video Surveillance: Design and control of public space in Mexico City

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Abstract

Video surveillance represents a privileged instrument in the development of security policies and the creation of scenarios of power legitimacy, social order and the efficiency of government's action. The use of video surveillance systems faces problems derived from the design criteria for the processing of information that is recorded, and those that arise from the social impact on the redefinition of the boundaries between the public and the private spaces and the fundamental rights of citizens.

This paper presents some elements that help to understand how the use of video surveillance, in the context of violence prevailing in Mexico, is placed within the framework of the development of the economic policy, that since the 90's, has been privileged in Mexico's neoliberal model. In this context, policies that support surveillance technology can be understood as a strategy that, under the discourse of technological efficiency, conceals the inability of the government to guarantee the conditions of security to which citizens are entitled.

In Mexico City there are more than 15,000 video surveillance cameras. For the government of the city the technology deployment is considered a strategic response to the rise of criminality and for the last six years it has been a priority of security policies.

Starting point

To understand that video surveillance is a component of the institutional development of modern society enables us to have a broader view of its ongoing expansion. As Lyon (2008) states, the perspectives of conspiracy and technological efficiency are not sufficient to comprehensively address security issues and develop actions that ensure equality in accessing social development and the design of alternative methods to ensure the security of citizens. Therefore the central purpose of this paper is to address the problem of social and political uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), with a particular interest in understanding the use of video surveillance systems in the context of the violence that exists in Mexico.

The increase of technological systems for the control of public space that has occurred in the last decade in Mexico, especially in Mexico City, has economic, political and social implications that require special attention. On one hand, the security policies of the City government, defined as a priority the acquisition of high-tech equipment to ensure the safety of the population and on the other, the perception of violence in Mexico City is among the highest in the country.

The development of digital technologies applied to the design of technological systems for surveillance requires decision-making processes at different levels: to define the geographical coverage which means to choose safety zones against what has been called the blind zones; the institutional design responsible for the development of criteria for the organization and processing of the information that is recorded, as well as protocols for actions of the state security forces, in addition to those derived from the social impact it has in order to preserve fundamental rights and the redefinition of the boundaries between public and private space.

In this context, we present some elements that help to understand how the use of video surveillance in the context of violence prevailing in the country, is inscribed within the framework of the development of the economic and political project, that since the 90's, favors the neoliberal model in Mexico, which in turn results in the

development of policies that encourage the growth of video surveillance systems as a strategy that, under the cover of technological efficiency, masks the inability of the government to ensure the security to which citizens are entitled.

Mexico is experiencing a complex scenario of violence that has disrupted the boundaries of institutional order at all levels, this situation has led the State and the Public authority to develop security policies that often do not contribute to solve the problems in their origin and sometimes disrupt social order through the massive visibility of violence and impunity. In this regard, Mattelart (2009) states that registration methods deployed to monitor or to maintain control, act on behalf of the management of power and its reproduction, and while control systems do not ensure better forms of security, they reconfigure forms of governance.

Video surveillance systems as a recording instrument are part of a large-scale deployment of technical devices that intervene public and private space, and whose expansion started in the middle of the 20th century as a result of policies that globally seek to ensure stability geopolitics through the massive use of technical devices to record and to implement social control. Thus, the political use of imaging technologies as instruments of control is justified in the security discourse based on the arguments of technological efficacy by reducing risk and management of the public space.

On the scenario of expansion of video surveillance systems, designing new forms of security management involves changes in institutional structures and in consequence on policies that generate a growing transference of responsibilities to all levels of the social structure. "To more security, more technology: managing security risk is becoming a matter of techniques" (Mattelart, 2009:11).

From this point of view, security no longer remains a problem of specialized bodies of the State and becomes a problem of mutual monitoring between subjects and their environment where video devices and record systems are key players based on the overvaluation of neutrality and technological efficiency that is imposed on top of the exercise of freedom and establishes new links for the exchange of

information. Hence, as noted by Lyon (2006), it is necessary, in the early 21st century, to move towards a vision that would lead us beyond the limits of the panopticon. This entails to pay attention to the implications that video surveillance has within the context in which it occurs.

The experience of safety and urban design

The threat of global terrorism has been one of the key factors for large-scale expansion of tech surveillance. It is a fact that in developed countries, this growth is associated with the national security policies that characterize the geopolitical organization since the second half of the twentieth century (Arteaga, 2009). Tech surveillance, in response to the global threat, has an uneven development that fits both: the development of security policies and the provision of the available resources.

For example, some reports indicate that the UK is the country with the highest number of cameras installed with more than four million. (Waiton, 2010: 68) However, a report by the Liberal Party in 2007 on the effectiveness of using cameras indicates that there is no evidence that relates a high number of cameras with a decrease in the crime rate.

A report from the New York Civil Liberties Union, 2006, notes that although the crime rate fell in 1997 when it launched the VIPER program, the decrease is not directly linked to the installation of the cameras, but the implementation of a computerized system, at the beginning of the 21st century, promoting a more effective use of police resources. The report also notes that the rights of privacy, freedom of expression and association are compromised due to the possibility of considering certain individuals as targets based on physical characteristics or social behaviors. Consequently, certain individuals are more susceptible of being identified as potential transgressors of the social order. The report warns about the need for legislation, recognizing that video surveillance affects fundamental rights and freedoms. Therefore we need a balance between the interest of protection, public safety and individual privacy.

In Spain, the number of surveillance cameras in the country more than tripled (from 5000 to 15000) between 2007 and 2008. By 2010 the figure grew to 21 thousand cameras. It is important to note that Spain has a legal system that regulates their use in order to protect and guarantee the right of individuals to retain their right to privacy. In 2006, the Spanish Agency for Data Protection (AEPD), issued a resolution concerning the processing of personal data for surveillance through video surveillance systems.

Moreover, a study by the University of Malaga to assess the effectiveness of legal regulation and surveillance video system installed in the historic center of the city, indicates that there is insufficient empirical research on the subject but, at least during the 2006-2008 evaluation period, it could be concluded that the crime rate has not been reduced significantly and that there is a phenomenon called displacement towards the blind zones (Diéz-Ripoll and Cherry, 2009).

Perhaps due to the rapid increase in video surveillance systems in such a short period of time, the reactions in the neighborhood of Lavapiés in Madrid, Spain, caused a conflict between citizens and government. In 2010, these reactions included assemblies, graffiti on the streets and a poster competition against the installation of surveillance cameras.

A study by Sara Löfberg (2009) on the system called "Eagle Eyes" which started operations in 2002 with eight cameras installed in different areas of Quito, Ecuador, also notes that it was possible to establish a significant on the commission of crimes and points to the difficulties caused by not having comprehensive care strategies aimed to the safety of citizens. As with the assessment in the Malaga report, the results also show a displacement of violence towards blind zones.

In Mexico, a study in 2006 in Huixquilucan, a suburban municipality, states that: "... the system of surveillance cameras will result largely on a product geared more to the social control of certain sectors. Where it was possible to perceive its use for

protection, it was due more as an answer to the needs of the social sectors best positioned in the social hierarchy of the municipality"(Arteaga, 2006: 50)

In Mexico City, the development of the system was a key part of the security policies of the government of Marcelo Ebrard (2006-2012). The installation of the Command and Control Centers and the increment of security cameras appear as the most important actions in his latest report of activities. The issue of modernization of security was so important in his working agenda that it represented one of the factors that contributed that two months before the end of his administration, he was appointed President of the Global Network of Safer Cities in September 2012.

Even as the results of the National Survey on Insecurity in 2010, indicate that Mexico City is perceived as more violent than actual crime figures indicate, the answer based on technology deployment has become extremely important for local government and is clearly placed within the framework of a modernizing discourse.

The expansion and intensification of the use of digital technologies in the discourse of city government presents itself as an important factor for development in various fields. In particular, the installation of video surveillance cameras to be carried out within the framework of the programs *Safe City* and *Bicentennial Security*, states that by the end of 2012 there will be more than 8000 cameras. In terms of economic investment for the acquisition of the system, the tender for 459.8 million dollars: "... was won by the corporate alliance between Telmex and Thales Group ..." (Gaytan, 2010: 21). To this is added the more than five thousand cameras that are located in the Metro system.

Among the most important consequences of the importance of digital management of surveillance and social control for the present government, is the fact that the security industry has had in recent years an exponential growth. In this regard, some studies indicate that in 2004 more than ten thousand companies involved in security were operating in the country, and over 20 percent were located in Mexico City (Wondratschke, 2005: 9). It is clear that the increase in the allocation of

resources of all kinds to the deployment of technologies and the development of video recording systems is explained by the overflow of the security issues that affect Mexico's institutional order.

Just as with other systems, in the case of Mexico City, the installation of video surveillance cameras responds to a geography defined by the need to establish boundaries between what should be protected and what should not, between what is conceived as the potential offender and its counterpart. Thus the design of these programs refers to a rationality that, as noted, deposits or transfers to technology the power to control and deter those actions that pose risks to safety management. Consequently, the protected areas are those in urban geography that have a higher value than those suffering from conditions of social exclusion and marginalization.

Since there is insufficient empirical evidence on the effectiveness of surveillance technological systems, government discourse deals with the constant information regarding criminal acts that are recorded by security cameras. The existence of the cameras is also advertised with graphic materials that are part of urban iconography. And, according to the officials in charge of the Command Centers, all information that is recorded is used as evidence in police investigation.

In the 2013 the budget assigned to security issues will allow to launch a program that aims to install seven thousand cameras, this would double the system in less than six years. According to the local congress, the role model is the one that operates in countries such as Israel, England, Singapore, France, the United States and Colombia.

Final considerations

The design of social environment and its security conditions is not confined to the implementation of technological systems. The modernization of security requires a strategic vision to combine technical, human and regulatory frameworks in order to

give it sense. It is required an ethic of surveillance (Arteaga, 2006: 51), that allows institutions to act effectively in critical situations.

For as long as the importance on the government's discourse is placed on the modernizing character of the surveillance and the problems associated to the origins of violence don't have an integral answer, the distrust and incapacity to operate the systems will prevent an efficient use of technological potential. The professionalization of human resources that are part of the security forces and the design of the criteria to use the information collected have to go together with the investment that the government allocates to expand the network of video surveillance.

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