

Discrepancies between technology and legitimacy assumptions in the practice of public mobility surveillance

Paper proposal

The European Group for Public Administration (EGPA) Study Group on Information and Communications Technologies in Public Administration,
26 to 28 August 2015, IEP, Toulouse, France

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Keywords:

Surveillance – Mobility – Legitimacy – Risk – Government – Citizens

Mobile citizens attract the attention of government in various policy domains, such as traffic management, tourism, emergency services and policing. Government increasingly uses surveillance technologies, like GPS, mobile phones and automatic number plate recognition to collect geographical, temporal and personal data about citizens, in order to monitor and control this mobility.

This paper addresses the question to what extent the legitimation of this public mobility surveillance is in line with the technological perceptions in its policy practice. In order to analyse the legitimacy and technology issues in the practice of public mobility surveillance, three theoretical perspectives on surveillance are distinguished, based on surveillance studies literature: control, interaction and precaution. Each of these surveillance perspectives contains both assumptions about technology (policy possibilities) and legitimacy (evaluation criteria in terms of legality, normative justification and social acceptability). These three surveillance perspectives reveal different logics behind surveillance activities in the government-citizen relationship.

Consequently, two policy practices of public mobility surveillance in the Netherlands are analysed regarding their underlying technology and legitimacy assumptions. The first case study focuses on the application of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) by one of the Dutch regional police forces. The second case study involves innovation in the collection and processing of mobility data by the National Data Warehouse (NDW), which is part of Rijkswaterstaat, the Dutch executive agency for infrastructure and mobility policy.

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The results of the empirical study show that technology and legitimacy assumptions from all three surveillance perspectives can be found in the practice of public mobility surveillance. However, the theoretical assumptions manifested themselves in varying extent, revealing discrepancies between technology and legitimacy assumptions. The analysis suggests that a mere focus on privacy provides government agencies with insufficient means to collect and process mobility information about citizens in a legitimate way. Government should rather focus their attention on the grounds and procedures for the selection and definition of risks and groups of risk citizens.