

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Rui Gomes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerability of institutions was revealed in the attacks on the democracy pillar. The war metaphor prepared the mentality that was needed for measures such as the state of emergency, submission to a single command of experts and politicians, the limitation of criticism and attacks on those in command of the crisis, and the acceptance of collateral damage like digital surveillance.

Systems to monitor those infected and track all their movements and potential contacts have become commonplace in Europe. Either single-handedly or in collaboration with the State, digital capitalism moved quickly to participate in developing these systems, which already existed for the purposes of tracking consumer behaviour, advertising, creating mobility profiles, anticipating behaviour and promoting lifestyles. The synchronisation of mobile phones allows for the permanent control of the profile and movements of each individual and the real-time transfer of this data to analysis centres capable of triggering offers of goods and services within microseconds. The synchronisation, monitoring and availability routine for receiving commercial stimuli, either through smartphone location systems or GPS, was already part of socially accepted behaviour.

In Portugal, the persuasive surveillance model, based on the seductive power of the new technologies and on geolocation applications commonly used in search-and-seizure games

of “dangerous monsters” (PokémonGo), is currently dominant. In this case, the measure is being trivialised thanks to game mentality, now also part of the sociability of a portion of the population.

This is a global phenomenon and it needs global and continental regulation. National regulations are necessary, but they will have little capacity to prevent abuse if issued in isolation.

Governments should ensure that digital devices are designed and used in a way that is compatible with privacy and non-discrimination standards. Electronic health surveillance devices should not be allowed. Voluntary use, even if agreed to and informed, would open the door to their mainstreaming, especially if the health situation continues and repeats itself.

Laws authorising States to collect, use and store personal data must be strictly compatible with the right to privacy or otherwise repealed.

Government and market initiatives must be urgently subjected to independent scrutiny. Temporary acceptance of intrusive measures where the strategy based on fear of contracting COVID-19 has worked should be subject to rigorous supervision by independent bodies, judicial supervision, monitoring by Parliament and monitoring by international human rights institutions.