Technical solutions to social problems: On digital participatory surveillance and the threat of the homeless

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"*A bed with a mattress and clothes … belonging to a tramp,*" wrote a resident of Brussels in Dutch as he reported an 'illegal trash dump' through FixMyStreet, a mobile application that allows city residents to report incidents of disorder in urban public spaces to local authorities. He attached a photo (see Figure 1 below) to the report of the modest belongings he was asking the local municipality to remove, along with a short explanation: "*This concerns the homeless. Please contact the police.*"

Figure 1: *Photo affixed to an anonymous FixMyStreet report, Brussels OpenDataStore, January 2021 (Bruxelles Mobilite Open License)*

In a different case, a resident of a central Brussels' nightlife district filed a report on malfunctioning street light fixtures, explaining its urgency by reporting that:

> Every day the homeless people from the park do their physiological needs in our street. Yesterday a car with a broken window ... today a stollen purse ... When will someone fix the lights on this street? Are you waiting for a lady to be rape(d) or kill(ed)?

As part of the research project PUL-MOBIL (Producing Urban Legibility: Mobile City Applications and the Governance of Minor Offenses), which is funded by the Brussels' regional research agency Innoviris, I've examined the open-data FixMyStreet Brussels platform where many other reports refer explicitly or implicitly to the city's sheltered and unsheltered homeless. Using the open-source data in the Brussels-area version of FixMyStreet, I conducted a search of over 105,000 unique reports of urban disorder and minor offences, coupled with over 289,000 textual and visual communications between citizens and local authorities, to identify incidents relating to homelessness using relevant keywords in French, Dutch, and English. In this essay, I examine these reports, together with a small number of interviews conducted with municipal personnel in the Brussels region.

The growing presence I detected of reports relating to homelessness corresponds to the rise in the number of the city's homeless, which exceeded 3,800 in 2016 (de Wolf, 2019). Some FixMyStreet reports include detailed reports and imagery, while others affix no words to their request to remove the belongings of the homeless from public spaces; others benevolently ask their local authorities to find a solution to help the unhoused. In one case, a resident reported a cache of cartons and clothes, succinctly decrying it as a "*sleeping spot of the homeless and other filth.*"

Mobile City Applications and the Homeless

Anti-homeless sentiment is nothing new: it finds expression in laws and ordinances (Mitchell, 1997), in the architecture and design of public space (Petty, 2016), in differential policing (Cooper, 2017), and in the imagination of a normative and "cultural" public space (Goldfischer, 2018). It is thus not surprising that anti-homeless sentiment finds its way into new digital state-citizen interfaces such as

FixMyStreet. However, these reports are indicative of a larger process at hand, one in which social problems such as homelessness are reconstructed and handled not as social problems but as technical issues.

This short essay argues that urban digital participatory surveillance schemes (Reeves, 2012), in the form of Mobile City Applications (Walravens, 2015), can lead to the designation of social woes as incidents of crime and disorder, requiring technical enforcement measures instead of social and welfare interventions. I propose that the Mobile City Application entails a new "smart city" interface of legibility through participatory surveillance, one which prompts residents to misconstrue societal failings, such as homelessness or youth truancy, as decontextualised, easily solvable, geo-taggable isolated incidents.

State actors seeking "technological fixes" as societal cure-alls are nothing new and instead reflect a long-standing element of modernity (Johnston, 2018). This perspective today can be found in smart city "solutions," which are often adopted as utopic, nominally depoliticised positivist progress with local authorities working to reconstruct citizens as consumers or clients rather than political actors (Grossi & Pianezzi, 2017). Gibbs, Krueger, & MacLeod (2013) argue that the "smart city" agenda "means to discipline cities and their populations, reducing … the urban question to a technical discourse" (Gibbs et al., 2013: 2156). Such a move, I posit, can bring forth unintended social and political implications. In the case of Mobile City Applications, the vague boundaries between the "technical" reports of minor offences via applications such as FixMyStreet and the complaints that require social interventions can be blurred. The presence of homeless persons' belongings in public spaces can be reported as littering, substance abuse or youth truancy can be reported as vandalism or damage to infrastructure, etc. The unclear border between these two can cause confusion among the residents of the city and disrupt the work of the local authorities who may, as a result, design inappropriate or unsuccessful interventions.

The possibility of anonymous reporting using the FixMyStreet application only serves to exacerbate matters: at the same time that it may protect the privacy of the reporting citizen, it further highlights the potential misuses of the application. Since the vast majority of 80–90% of the (visible or reported) homeless in Brussels are male (Lelubre, 2012), many of which with a migration background, anonymous reporting may provide a platform for racial or gendered complaints. It may thus encourage discriminatory practices in reporting minor offences by publicly airing complaints that would not have been published by identifiable, registered users, or it may serve as an instrument of vigilantism and fuel neighbours' feuds, thereby placing strenuous demands on local authorities with no possible communication with the reporting citizen.

Social Possibilities and Technical Interventions

Homelessness brings forth a myriad of (local) state interventions. Punitive measures, such as street sweeps and anti-vagrancy laws, have proved popular, yet often fail due to their reductionist nature (DeVerteuil, May, & Von Mahs, 2009) or result in mere temporary displacement. In Brussels, local authorities have turned instead to a wide range of municipal and third-sector social interventions to assist the homeless both in their daily needs and towards finding accommodation. On a map produced by Bruss'Help, a Brussels-region development centre, dozens of organizations and initiatives to support the homeless are marked, ranging from temporary shelters to medical aid clinics, and from free locker rentals to shower facilities (Bruss'Help, 2021). Street agents, including police officers, social workers, and street safety and prevention officers (*Gardiens de la Paix/Gemeenschapswachten)*, are well versed in how to reach these contact points that provide support to the homeless.

However, this array of support and prevention and the social outcomes they promote have no place

within the existing confines of FixMyStreet and similar Mobile City Applications. When a report is made on the FixMyStreet platform, it goes through an initial screening by the Brussels-region agency for mobility, which assesses whether the report is suitable for publication (e.g., that it refers to a new incident and does not use hate language or infringe privacy rights) before forwarding it to the regional service or the local municipality it finds responsible. Reports aimed at the local municipalities (the Brussels region is comprised of 19 municipalities) are electronically sent to a contact person within each municipality. In many municipalities, the contact person is a part of the roadworks service since FixMyStreet was initially focused on tackling potholes. If the report concerns an illegal trash dump, as some of the report quoted above do, the report would be forwarded to the relevant department where it will be manually added to the existing work platform of the department. Its details are then made legible to all sanitation workers and assigned to a specific team. The sanitation team, working on a tight schedule, is unlikely to engage with the homeless other than in clearing abandoned waste. Once their task is completed, the team updates their department, which at a later time will confirm with the municipal contact person that the issue was handled. The reporting citizens can then be informed that the case was closed. At no point in this work process is there the possibility of devising or enacting a social intervention to support the homeless involved nor an oversight of repeated incidents, but rather only a scope for technical interventions that can quickly "solve" each individual report.

Conclusion

Technological design is never devoid of ideological considerations. The possibility of rapid, mobile, unmediated, geotagged, and trackable reporting of urban incidents to local authorities carries a heavy, though largely unacknowledged, ideological baggage: one that recasts citizens as individual consumers and local authorities as service providers. The expectations of citizens for a quick handling of their technical complaints contrasts with the patience required for social interventions to take place. When citizens denounce their unhoused neighbours, there is little scope within the semi-automated municipal work process to offer support rather than displacement. This is not a given. Mobile city Applications could be developed differently to include the possibility of mobilising municipal prevention teams and social workers to engage vulnerable people, such as the homeless, to find solutions and offer advice. This would require addressing ethical reflections and practical considerations in how reports on urban disorder and received and will likely bring forth dilemmas as to how beneficial a further "datafictation" of prevention and social services would be. A different option would be to instruct citizens on best practices for reporting urban incidents, to encourage them to distinguish physical malfunctions from social disorder, and to help direct their concerns through the most appropriate channel. The current uses of Mobile City Applications risk bringing forth consternation among urban residents and municipal personnel while alienating vulnerable populations. Tapping one's phone does not make social woes disappear: to find ways to bring the social dimension into municipal handling of urban disorder, future reflection and engaged research are sorely needed.

Funding

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