Chapter 7
Citizen Participation in Community Surveillance:
Mapping the Dynamics of WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Practices

Anouk Mols

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0355-9849

Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Despite their recent emergence, WhatsApp neighbourhood crime prevention (WNCP) groups are an already pervasive phenomenon in the Netherlands. This study draws on interviews and focus groups to provide an in-depth analysis of the watchfulness and surveillance activities within these groups. The conceptualisation of WNCP through the lens of practice theory shows that the use of ICTs in the form of WhatsApp amplified all three dimensions of neighbourhood watchfulness practices. It examines how friction at the intersections of materialities, competencies, and meanings affect neighbourhood dynamics as well as the personal lives and experiences of people involved. While voluntary citizen participation in crime prevention leads to an increase in social support, feelings of safety, and active prevention of break-ins, it also defaults to forms of lateral surveillance which transcend digital monitoring practices. Pressing issues related to social media use, participatory policing, surveillance, and the normalisation of distrust and intolerance have an impact beyond its localised Dutch context.

INTRODUCTION

"When there are cars in the neighbourhood we're not familiar with, or when we are not sure about people we have never seen before, we'll take a picture and send it: Do we know anything about this?" (Pauline, moderator of a WNCP group in City C)

Pauline is the moderator of a WhatsApp neighbourhood crime prevention (WNCP) group in a city in the Netherlands. This study examines surveillance practices within WNCP groups which have gained popularity in the Netherlands since 2013. Neighbours are connected via a WhatsApp group in order to exchange warnings, concerns, information about incidents, and suspicious situations in their street. As illustrated above, Pauline and her neighbours immediately materialise their suspicions into pictures of unfamiliar vehicles or persons. Her quote provides a preview into how voluntary citizen participation in crime prevention practices has inherently ambivalent consequences. This study explores how ICTs in the form of WhatsApp-equipped smartphones amplify neighbourhood watchfulness practices and how this defaults to precarious forms of surveillance.

WNCP groups have a low participation threshold because citizens can easily join a WhatsApp group (Bervoets, 2014) in order to participate in safeguarding practices. This often creates a positive feeling about being aware of neighbourhood activities, as well as feelings of safety (Lub & De Leeuw, 2017; Pridmore et al., 2018; Smeets et al., 2019). Moreover, the existence of WNCP groups can increase social cohesion in the neighbourhood (Van der Land et al., 2014). However, WNCP groups can also cause feelings of unsafety and distrust, discriminatory practices, risky vigilant behaviour, and privacy infringement (de Vries, 2016; Lub, 2018; Lub & De Leeuw, 2017, 2019; Mehlbaum & van Steden, 2018; Mols & Pridmore, 2019; Pridmore et al., 2018). Needless to say, these WNCP practices impact the experiences of neighbours as well as passers-by. For neighbours, participants and non-participants, an active WNCP group can change the neighbourhood dynamic into a watchful, and at times distrustful, atmosphere. And even if there are street signs signalling the existence of a WNCP group, passers-by are often unaware of the fact that they are actively being monitored by citizens. It is important to note that surveillance practices existed in neighbourhoods long before WNCP initiatives emerged. Alert neighbours who keep an eye out on the street and who contact neighbours or police in case of trouble are not a new phenomenon. However, the use of WhatsApp, a cross-platform smartphone-based instant messaging application (Church & de Oliveira, 2013) or a similar messaging app has changed neighbour-hood interactions and practices. ICTs are known for creating new forms of interaction (Hampton, 2007) and the emerging use of WhatsApp groups within existing surveillance practices is currently changing neighbourhood dynamics and personal experiences, which makes this a pressing issue.

WNCP practices are a form of informal surveillance, the "casual, but vigilant, observation of activity occurring on the street and active safeguarding of property"(Bellair, 2000, p. 140). Notably, these prac-tices can also be seen as forms of lateral, or interpersonal surveillance (Andrejevic, 2005; Trottier, 2012), whereby people actively monitor their peers, or in this case, their neighbours. The goal of this study is to understand mobile technology-driven informal surveillance activities through the lens of practice theory. Practice theory aims to explain society, culture, and social life through practices, practices are bundles of activities existing of material elements, competences, and meaning. Practices are not static because they change over time (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). This makes practice theory particularly suitable to study societal developments such as the impact of the emergence of WNCP groups.

This study maps the consequences of a citizen initiative aimed at improving safety, and shows that surveillance practices in WNCP groups have emerged in different forms and shapes. By highlighting the diversity in WNCP practices and the fact that this phenomenon is still developing, we found that neighbours are improvising on a daily basis in their self-organised WNCP groups. Interviews and focus groups revealed how friction in the conjunction of dimensions in WhatsApp neighbourhood watch-fulness practices affects the personal lives and experiences of people (often unknowingly) involved. This study offers an in-depth account of the socio-material elements assembled together in everyday

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