Dialogue Series No 4

Theme of the Dialogue: The Rise of Chinese Surveillance Technology in Africa: Implications in Civil Liberties in Africa.

Presentation title: "The Political Economy of Surveillance in Africa"

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My talk will be on the following:

- The growth of a surveillance culture
- technologies around the region
- The main actors – supplying surveillance technologies in the region.
- Their interests
- The powers they have in this practice

The growth of FRTs:

- The region: South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique; Botswana, Malawi

- Increase in facial recognition technologies deployed everyday.

- Public cameras; hidden cameras

- Public places – for example public parks; malls; around strategic buildings.

- FRTs have also followed the biometrification of borders.

- Both have worked hand in hand.

General state of surveillance in the region

- The works of the Media Policy and Democracy Project (MPDP) have shown how pervasive and quotidian digital surveillance has become.

https://www.mediaanddemocracy.com/

- In the southern African region, where much of this work has been produced, there is a palpable fear that this practice is increasing.

Justification in public discourses

- Crime-fighting; the discourse of crime displacement is often backgrounded in these public discourses.

- Terror and terrorism- In Mozambique – the Cabo Delgado province, the recent violent uprising has justified deployment of FRTs even in provinces remotely affected by the uprising.

- Safeguarding private enterprises: Private actors have increasingly become major actors in the deployment of FRTs.
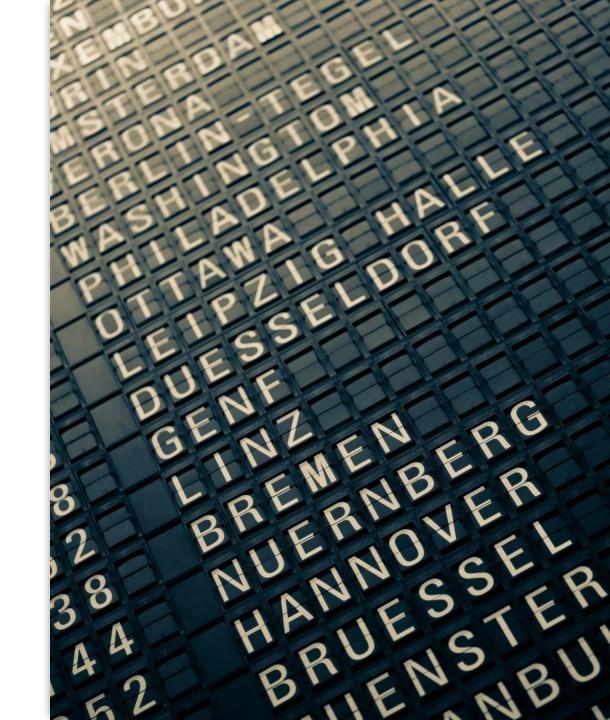
"Sinofication" of surveillance.

- Chinese start-up companies are increasingly emerging as the major actors in the supply of FRTs.
- Huawei;
- CloudWalk Technology
- Dahua Technology
- Baidu AI Cloud
- Hikvision
- CCN Tech

- No end user questions asked.

- Flexible terms of services- extended loans and Chinese government guarantees

- Part of Smart city projects that are burgeoning in the southern African region.

- There is a regulatory vacuum in terms of   end-user responsibility and accountability in southern Africa: weak and/or hazy regulation (except for South Africa).

Politics of surveillance technologies

- Weak enforcement of regulation that govern FRTs data

- Lack of civic activism on these issues. In South Africa, opposition to unfettered usage of surveillance has been raised by organisations like Intelwatch, and its predecessor Media Policy and Democracy Project.

- No such corresponding efforts in other countries. Lack of civic activism translate to lack of awareness of important issues like: data protection and disposal; responsibilities of data holders etc.

Politics (cont)

- Reluctance by actors including the state to support awareness programmes

- Collusion between elite actors and Chinese start up techs – in other countries, suppliers go through middlemen. These middlemen are closely linked to political power.

- This makes accountability difficult to achieve.

- Lack of a concerted regional response to expose misuse, and international drivers of these technologies.

- Weak parliamentary oversight

Consequences

- Perpetuation of a system that lacks check and balance, and does not balance security and human rights

- Growth of private actors in the surveillance supply and consumption chain, accountable to no other institutions.

- Weaponization of surveillance- when used by ruling elites against the opposition, especially in Semi-authoritarian contexts.

- Perpetuation of a culture of 'fearpolicy'- promoting FRTs through discourses of fear, normalized by pro-regime news media.

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