

Self(ie)-governance: Technologies of intimate surveillance in India under COVID-19

Ayona Datta

University College London, UK

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Abstract

This commentary examines the role of the ‘selfie’ as central to the teleological management of the COVID-19 crisis in India. It suggests that the incorporation of the self(ie) within the technologies of quarantine apps is a simulacrum of intimate surveillance that seeks to experiment in the present in order to extend its reach into the visual governance of intimate domesticity in the future.

Keywords

COVID-19, governance, India, pandemic, selfie, smart cities

On a ‘war-footing’

In late-March 2020, the Indian state announced a complete lockdown to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) virus. All flights to India would be discontinued, all public places would be closed, and there would be strict quarantine and containment measures put in place for social distancing. An integral part of the management and monitoring of the quarantined and infected persons was the repurposing of a range of ‘smart technologies’ that were already in development under the national Digital India and Smart Cities programmes. In total, 45 out of 100 smart cities in India renamed their Integrated Command and Control Centres into ‘COVID-19 war rooms’ to monitor and track the spread of infected bodies and their encounters. State and urban departments began monitoring crowds through CCTV and drones as well as contact tracing and quarantining apps.

The metaphor of war to fight the spread of the virus is not surprising. The enhancement of speed or ‘dromology’ (Virilio, 2006) is essential to managing the spread of the virus with a view towards containment and elimination. The war metaphor evokes the familiar association between the use of technology and the elimination of an enemy within as well as the ‘shock and awe’ of its visualisations produced in maps, graphs, charts and animations. The emergence of this new form of ‘real-time’ visualisation of the spread of the virus in humans – and the subsequent recoveries and deaths from it – produces a teleological objectivity framing both the visual

Corresponding author:

Ayona Datta, Department of Geography, University College London, 26 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AP, UK.
Email: a.datta@ucl.ac.uk

‘trajectography’ (Virilio, 2012) of the pandemic as well as how the state is ‘seen’ to act in the crisis.

Self(ie)-governance as simulation of surveillance

Since their repurposing, the COVID-19 war rooms have been focused on contact tracing and quarantine apps that have seen the reduction of civil liberties and data privacy (Kitchin, 2020). One of these apps, ‘Quarantine Watch’ (Revenue Department, 2020), has been pushed into use in Karnataka, one of India’s southern regional states with its capital city, Bangalore, as a hotspot of pandemic surveillance. A quarantined individual downloads the app from Google Play Store onto their mobile phone, completes a registration form and through the app uploads their GPS tagged selfie once every hour, with a break from 10 pm to 7 am for sleep. Authorities claim that these selfies are then checked using facial recognition software. If a person fails to upload on time, or the software deems that the selfie does not belong to the quarantined individual, there is a capability within the app to directly call the individual on their mobile phone or officials may even visit their home to conduct further checks (Ananth, 2020). Further, it is not clear who has access to these data apart from the Health Department officials who are monitoring the uploads, and whether defaulters’ names will be released to the police.

The use of pixelated data like the selfie comes on the back of several decades of using analogue facial recognition systems for everyday governance. The passport photo has long contributed to this form of facial governance. Indians paid a visit to the neighbourhood photo studio each time a piece of bureaucracy had to be completed – passport application, food subsidies, welfare benefits, births, deaths, marriage registrations, pensions, all of these were located within the materiality of photo studios with their flashing lights and white background. The attendant would tell their customers to look up or down, remove hair from face, not show their teeth, and would be the first layer of checks that would conduct how faces should supplement official documents. Aadhar, the biometric identification

scheme launched in 2016, has since expanded the use of card centres providing a much larger remit of facial governance by recording biometric details of citizens – photos, fingerprints and iris scans as well as socio-geographic data verified through layers of local analogue checks in the physical space of Aadhar centres. Even before the pandemic, there have been calls to use Aadhar’s visual database to train AI and facial recognition software. The introduction of the selfie in the quarantine app is an aspiration to extend the reach of state surveillance into intimate governance.

Although facial recognition systems are often used in public places particularly during crowd control, selfies have always occupied a somewhat tangential relationship to this form of mass surveillance (Shah, 2018). Seen diversely as art or corporate capture by digital platforms or even as a democratic fix to surveillance from above, selfies are somewhat ambiguous in the sociopolitical terrain (Senft and Baym, 2015). Selfies also evoke a performative politics of working-class youth subcultures to visually reclaim public spaces (Datta, 2019), but they are rarely examined as part of the technologies of facial recognition. Limited scholarship on the selfie in urban governance entices us to move beyond examinations of ‘work in the selfie to work of the selfie’ (Shah, 2018: 180) that complicates its role in the era of digital and mass surveillance in India.

In self(ie)-governance, the passport photo is transformed into a citizen selfie, thus extending its reach in a way that social distancing itself is now governed through the selfie. Consequently, the selfie becomes a pixelated version of the analogue passport photo that is created by the citizen in their home, as a legitimate rite of passage from quarantined to immune bodies, from lockdown in the home to social distancing in public spaces. It becomes a supplement to the technologies of COVID-19 war rooms, necessary yet distinct from the geolocated real-timeliness of maps and graphs of viral spread and containment. The selfie simulates the fantasy of speed with which the virus is seen to be contained within the home, as a digital ‘imprint’ of infected and quarantined bodies created through an affective visualisation. Like the passport photo, it becomes a universalising tool of repetition, standardisation and

composition, compelling the everyday rhythms of bodily rituals to fall in its hourly timeline of clicking and uploading. The use of a personal mobile phone with its front-facing camera within the ‘privacy’ of one’s home evokes the selfie as an affirmative visuality that performs the function of a ‘camera obscura of panoptic surveillance’ (Virilio, 2012: 36) during quarantine.

More significantly, self(ie)-governance moves facial recognition from intimate contact in the passport photo studios and Aadhar card centres to the sentient machine at home. The selfie bears the ‘testimonial weight’ (Shah, 2018: 177) of an intimate domesticity yielding to a new kind of socially networked governance of the ‘state-at-home’. Intimate domesticity is now for the first time brought under the direct visual gaze of the state. The temporality both experienced and performed at home overlays the temporality of the COVID-19 war rooms as well as that of the life cycle of the virus itself within quarantined human bodies. The self(ie) as governance becomes a governance of bodies in the home, its circulation based on a tactile intimate contract of trust, visibility and privacy between citizens and the state at large.

Quarantine Watch, which has so far seen over 10,000 downloads, has received very low ratings from users with several complaints. Of particular significance is the registration of users. Shortly after the app became available, it emerged that the app can only be used by registered subjects (i.e. when their mobile number is recorded on a list by the authorities as formally quarantined). It was not possible to self-quarantine with this app. It was also apparent that there is a time-lag between quarantine start date and the date that persons were registered by authorities, often after their 14-day quarantine period was over. Further, ‘date of arrival’ was a mandatory field in the app, which suggested that the app built its quarantine measures to address the international movement of the pathogen, rather than the domestic migration of citizens. The Health Department responded to some of the complaints online requesting users to call the helpline number, but feedback noted that this did not always work or the staff in the call centre were unable to resolve the issue.

Self(ie)-governance, then, is also a simulacra – a mimicry of surveillance enacted by the COVID-19

war rooms. Through the selfie, earlier technologies of the smart city ‘have made it possible for citizens to contribute to the expansion of infectious disease surveillance as both a concrete practice and a compelling fantasy’ (Caduff, 2014: 32). The building of this fantasy is key to pandemic surveillance as the state needs to be continuously ‘seen’ to act, and what better way to act than through self(ie)-governance performed by/with compliant citizens. As a simulacra of surveillance, the Quarantine Watch app claims to replace the physical infrastructures of containment, asserting its power and authority instead through mimetic infrastructures of clicking and uploading with a smartphone. As a supplement and enhancement of this mimicry, the selfie unravels with the impossibility of machinic visual surveillance even with citizens as its willing participants. And that is when it becomes clear that the machine cannot be an arbiter unless it is leveraged by human reasoning.

Simulacra as a testing ground for the selfie

Governance from the COVID-19 war rooms has produced the selfie as simulacra, where the ‘signifiers are increasingly detached and remote from the signified’ (Shah, 2018: 224). Selfies are no longer just a signifier of subcultures; rather, in its pixelated database, the selfie can be stored remotely as visual big data. In this form, the selfie becomes valuable to the digitising state. Like other forms of data, the passport photo can now be detached from its spaces of production (as negatives or photo studios), endlessly repeated, copied, manipulated and measured as a selfie. As a product of the digital age, the selfie can now become the subject of the digital state.

The teleological control of pandemics through quarantine apps has much to do with the simultaneous absence of physical infrastructures of viral containment – mass quarantine centres, basic urban services, physical tracking and tracing, health infrastructures and so on. In their absence, the state prioritises the infrastructures of big tech, cloud servers, mobile phone towers, miles of cables and the smartphone. In this context, the selfie as simulation becomes the only ‘real’ proof of self-discipline under quarantine, triggering a chain of new power

relationships between data, citizens and the state. However, actually existing self(ie)-governance implodes as the machinic algorithms cannot supplant human reasoning and calculability. It is not just the difficulty of using the app; it is also the parameters and limitations of the algorithms in responding in real-time to the temporality of quarantined bodies that unravels the technological fix. That it engages citizens within its performative temporality, even though it never really engages in an intimate governance of quarantine, suggests that the real objective of the selfie is not pandemic governance in the present. Rather its goal is to perform a simulacra of 'seeing' in order to experiment with mass surveillance creep in the future. Its afterlife, much like that of plague cartography in India at the turn of the 20th century (Evans, 2019), will be more than just visualising the spread and containment of diseases. The COVID-19 war rooms have offered a testing ground for the selfie. Its incorporation within various smart technologies seeks to extend a tactile and compliant self(ie)-governance towards the surveillance of intimate life in the future.

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