Policing by another name and entity: BIAs, delegation, and public and private technologies

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> …the intent is not to replace police. [Business Improvement Area (BIA) Ambassadors] are not enforcement, they know their bounds. They are eyes and ears. They are recording data. They are tracking hotspots. They are cleaning. They are referral agencies. They are calling police when they see something that needs police support. They are doing a range of things that deal with safety and security issues without being police, and that's an issue.

Following a Human Rights Tribunal case[1] concerning the policing and banishment of indigenous people by Downtown Vancouver BIA Ambassadors,[2] the above City of Vancouver official attempted to clarify the role and nature of BIA[3] work by saying that it was not policing if it was not carried out by

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1   For more information on this case, see Burgmann (2015) and Mackinnon (2019, 2022).

2   Ambassadors are patrol officers hired by a BIA. These staff are generally responsible for providing people in their areas with information and directions, as well as conducting a range of other services including garbage and needle collection, private security, and the reporting of damage to street assets (e.g., garbage bins, benches, mailboxes, lamp posts, utility covers). As argued by Lippert (2012) ambassadors promote "clean and safe rationalities" in these areas, allowing the passage of consumers and the removal of undesired populations.

3   BIAs, also known as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and Urban Place Management Organiza-

police. Policing practices, such as data collection concerning violent and property crime, hotspot tracking, and referrals to health, community and social services, were described by the City as "supplementary" things BIA staff could do, but they were not considered to be policing (see Mackinnon, 2022).

To "influence conduct or maintain order in urban spaces" (Lippert & Walby, 2013: 1) or, in short, to *police*, BIAs across North America and Europe are increasingly adopting smart(er) technologies in order to surveil, account for, and report *objects, places and people* in their areas (Mackinnon, 2019a). Focused on value creation and "improvement", these public and private mobile applications and digital platforms are used by BIAs to: count and file maintenance requests concerning the built environment and street assets, report minor offences to the city, and, in some cases, tag unhoused people and record antisocial behaviour.

At one end of this spectrum are private, proprietary, and internal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) applications,[4] such as Block by Block, GeoPal, and Cube84. Distinguished from "all-in platforms" or backend systems, these mid-range "smart" technologies offer partial and targeted solutions, allowing BIAs with large budgets to improve workflow and to address safety, beautification, hospitality, and planning needs (see Mackinnon 2019; Murakami Wood & Mackinnon, 2019). At the other end of the spectrum are public, city-based smart or digital solutions for citizen to government (C2G) communication. These apps – such as See-Click-Fix, FixMyStreet, City Sourced, and mobile versions of 311[5] – enable the production of public information and open data, public reporting, and (un)solicited comments. Invoking the logics of the "citizen-user", the "citizen as sensor", and the "citizen scientist", these apps require an engaged and *deviced* public to volunteer data (Baykurt, 2011). Because they are unable to afford private technology, or there is insufficient interoperability between city and private systems, or this work is deemed to be the responsibility of the municipality, BIAs have become key daily active users of 311. For instance, in Vancouver, BIAs are the second largest user group (+36%) of the 311 app behind citizens (40%) (Mackinnon, 2022).

As self-described "convenors", BIAs have assembled a range of public, private, human and non-human actors in order to accomplish their "clean and safe" mandates. Specifically, I contend that these apps and platforms allow BIAs to police, through other means or *at-a-distance* (see Bigo & Guild, 2005), by delegating work and agency to technologies and other entities (see Latour, 1988).

While seemingly mundane, BIAs' app-based practices of monitoring and maintenance ascribe value(s) to the materials, people and places in their areas (see also Akrich, 1992; Latour, 2005; Woolgar & Neyland, 2013). When delegated to and rendered by apps, (ac)counting for aspects of public space in this way not only makes these data seem impartial, but also justifies classification, exclusion and ordering (see Bowker & Star, 1999). For Callon, Méadel and Rabeharisoa (2002), quantification renders qualities countable, which stabilize the product, and transform it temporarily. In other words, the use of apps serves to render BIAs and their assets (ac)countable, and classifications of quantity and *quality* are inscribed in the infrastructure. Qualities of the space, and the practical condition of mun-

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tions (UMPOs), are privately governed, publicly sanctioned and specially funded geographic areas in which private tax practices (e.g., district levies) are implemented to extend municipal services (Hoyt & Gopal-Agge, 2007).

4   See Mackinnon (2019) for a detailed walk-through of a CRM application.

5   311 in the North American context is a special phone number for reporting non-emergency issues to the municipality. Established as a means of "talking to the city", 311 lines have been in operation in major Canadian cities since the late 2000s.

dane objects, have implications for governance and accountability. (Ac)counting and the resulting maintenance – presented as traditional accountability – *do* far more.

These apps and platforms, by determining, assigning, and circulating ontological attributes of assets, transform *matters of concern* into *matters of fact*, as well as *matters of care* (Latour, 2004; Mol, 2003; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Technologies *and entities,* as Woolgar and Neyland (2013) and others argue, are politics by other means. BIAs, and the apps they use for monitoring and reporting, assign ontological attributes, which are political, moral and often dangerous. Similar to *brandscapes of control* (Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013) or *policing by branding* (Bookman & Woolford, 2013), the qualities of assets come to shape the area. This elevates ascribed qualities of public assets – the cleanliness of the sidewalks, the lamp posts being free of graffiti, and the garbage bins being empty – to desirable characteristics of these newly important non-human actors. Their only action, "to keep clean" or "to be clean" is both countable and accountable, enabling an alternative means of policing and enforcing clean and safe practices, something that also necessarily reconfigures people and the way in which they interact with these public assets.

In order to secure *clean and safe passage* (Lippert, 2012), BIAs and apps facilitate the policing and *displacement* of objects, places and people – a practice of placemaking but also of *world making* (Gill, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). But who is this world for? Instead of accounting for the human beings, who are nevertheless affected by the business and the BIA practices, through counting and ontological politics, BIAs determine who belongs – and who is (ac)countable. Rather than serving all users and uses of the spaces, *accountability* is concerned with the ontological and physical security over assets, and (in)directly governing and policing what BIAs consider to be the proper conduct of public and private agencies.

As I have argued elsewhere, public services subsidise the clean and safe practices of BIAs (see Mackinnon 2019, 2021, 2022 also Sleiman & Lippert, 2010); municipalities therefore can and should ensure accountable, transparent, equitable, and inclusive access to resources, as well as the greater protection of all community members. Adding to the growing body of critical criminology informed by science and technology studies (see Benjamin, 2016; Brown, 2006; Luscombe & Walby, 2017; Robert & Dufresne, 2016; Shelby, 2020), more nuanced understandings of sociotechnical arrangements, as well as the role and power of non-humans, are needed. Often black boxed or cast aside as mundane, technologies that govern and police *matter*. As we mete the convergence of public and private policing through 311 apps and data-driven platforms, more attention needs to be paid to the creation of data and the ordering practices, spatial boundaries, exclusionary logics, and knowledge politics they reify.

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