General

Check In / Check Out
The Public Space as an Internet of Things

Lonneke van der Velden

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Christian van 't Hof, Floortje Daemen and Rinie van Est, *Check In / Check Out: The Public Space as an Internet of Things*, Rotterdam, NAi Publishers (in collaboration with the Rathenau Institute), ISBN 9789056628086, 272 pages

Public space and the Internet are becoming increasingly interwoven. *Check In / Check Out* argues that contemporary (digital) devices herald a new phase in our information society. The book investigates these technical developments through six research projects conducted at the Rathenau Institute, while focusing on two discourses: that of the need for a safeguard of personal privacy and that of empowerment, described as 'the enablement of individual and collective action'. The authors evaluate these discourses by looking case-by-case at the possibilities for identity management that citizens can employ to help reconfigure their identity.

Thanks to a detailed examination of public debates in the Netherlands about the RFID Smart Card and dynamic road pricing, the book gives insight into the many social actors and interests that play a role in technological development as well as into how companies introduce anonymizing techniques in response to social criticism. Each chapter pays attention to the specificity of the device. The chapter on Near Field Communication, for instance, shows that the place where data is stored – the external chip card, SIM, or the mobile device itself – leads to different property issues between service providers and telephone producers. Similarly, the case of the RFID Smart Card exemplifies how new spaces and boundaries are demarcated by introducing new technologies: a train station can suddenly turn into a closed area for people who do not possess such a card. To illustrate its theme, the book playfully provides access to additional information through 'tags' – readable for readers with a Smartphone.

The book is accessible to a broad public and formulates clear suggestions for policymakers. It concludes with 12 design principles based on the views it presents on privacy and empowerment. A surprising idea is a separate 'identity protector', an agency that guards the connection between your physical and digital identities in an encrypted form. In this scenario, police officials are only allowed to have the code for de-encryption when a person is under criminal investigation. The authors also call for participation of the public in the early stages of development of technological systems.

The aim of the book is to reconsider the notions of privacy and empowerment in the light of contemporary developments. The book is mildly critical regarding current dominant notions of privacy: its protective connotation cannot compete with a trend in which citizens increasingly want to make their life public through social media. This is one of the reasons the authors emphasize the notion of empowerment. Sometimes empowerment means financial gain for the user, in the case of the RFID Smart Card, other times it indicates the possibility for self-realization, such as in the case of Google Earth. In one

other example, empowerment refers to a form of counter surveillance: instead of assuming that the central storage of street images in databases only leads to a 'panopticon', a behaviour-regulating system, the authors point out that citizens themselves, aware of being under surveillance, also expose police brutality online. Despite the relevance of this topic (take for instance the 'police violence' playlists on YouTube), the power of the panopticon is not just about watching and being watched: it also involves the*art* of watching, those practices that have the power to turn people into subjects of investigation. And although the book does criticize the 'politics of knowledge', for example by examining problems associated with the categorization of deviant behaviour (p. 92), it is unclear whether empowerment can also be situated on an aggregated level. How can we understand empowerment in the context of social profiling? After all, the database remains in the hands of a limited number of parties, and the question is whether things such as individual management, financial advantage and criticism of authorities are powerful enough to operate on a broader social level.

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Tags

Control, Design, Media Society, Privacy, Public Space

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