

MOVING VIOLATIONS: DATA PRIVACY IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

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ABSTRACT. This article draws from the foundation provided by the ongoing debate about geosurveillance to frame a discussion of the use of tracking technologies in public transit. Specifically, it uses the case of public transit to illustrate the uncomfortable debate about compromises that come with increased surveillance to enhance public safety and security. The article begins with a discussion of the evolution of the debate about geosurveillance, casting the use of surveillance technologies in public transit within this framework. Next, it describes and discusses the implementation of automatic vehicle locators and closed-circuit television in public transit. The following sections focus on the risks to individual privacy that accompany implementation of these technologies, then describe an unusual effort to draw attention to the prevalence of increased surveillance in public spaces in an effort to expose the risks. The article concludes by making the case that public transit is a place where surveillance provides clear benefits but where the humans who review the surveillance data must interpret and use them responsibly to minimize the risks to individual privacy. *Keywords:* geosurveillance, public transit, spatial data privacy.

The introduction of the term “geoslavery” is both the most recent and the most pointed cautionary warning against the rising use of GIS and cognate technologies as tools for individual surveillance. Jerome Dobson and Peter Fisher describe geoslavery as a “new form of human bondage based on location control” (2006, 1), a form of control that is alluring because it promises benefits to the very individuals who are under its watchful eye. It is this dualistic nature of geosurveillance that has stimulated significant debate among geographers over the years, with most debaters agreeing with Dobson and Fisher that “benefits do not negate risks” (p. 5).

The ongoing debate regarding geosurveillance provides a valuable framework for the discussion of the use of geotracking technologies in public transit. In turn, the use of geotracking technologies in transit sheds valuable light on the role of surveillance in enhancing public safety and security. More than most such debates about the loss of privacy in our increasingly surveillant society, this one is based on a reality that includes actual terrorist assaults on innocent citizens going about their daily routines and riding public transit, rather than on overhyped speculation and fearmongering. It is therefore more difficult to dismiss the benefits of transit surveillance as merely a hot-button political issue designed to win the votes of “security moms and dads” while marginalizing “intellectually and morally confused appeasers” (Klein 2003; Nichols 2006).

Nor, however, can we dismiss the risks, as Dobson and Fisher describe them (2006). Automatic vehicle locators (AVLS) are designed to track vehicles, rather than focus on individuals who just happen to be along for the ride. Closed-circuit television (CCTV) for transit surveillance is also on the rise. CCTV, more than an AVL, records the movements of people in the same public spaces in which transit vehicles travel.

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