Citizens, safety and the precariousness of digital community initiatives

4S 2017
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“When there are cars in the neighbourhood we’re not familiar with, or when we are not sure about people we have never seen before, we’ll make a picture and send it: ‘Do we know anything about this?’”

(Pauline, moderator of WhatsApp neighbourhood watch group)
WhatsApp Neighborhood Watch (WNW)

WhatsApp Buurtpreventie

- WhatsApp group chats created by neighbors
- Main goal: prevent break-ins, making a safer community
- Police and municipality sometimes involved
- 6943 NL-based groups registered on www.wabp.nl (May 15, 2017)
- Supplement and supplant ‘physical’ neighborhood watch groups

Existing public reports (grey literature) address benefits & pitfalls

+ Decreased break-ins (Akkermans & Vollaard, 2015)
+ Low participation threshold (Bervoets, 2014)
+ Increased social cohesion (Van der Land et al., 2014)
- Stereotyping & racist behaviour (Lub, 2016)
- Increased feelings of unsafety (Lub, 2016)
- Privacy issues members (De Vries, 2016)
Practice theory

• “A ‘practice’ is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249)

• Elements of practices - Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012)

• “Practices are intrinsically connected to and interwoven with objects” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 106)
Neighborhood watchfulness practices

**Material**
- streets, houses, bodies (watching, acting, walking), binoculars, photo camera, phone

**Competence**
- assessment
  - suspicious persons/ activity,
  - knowledge of deviant behaviour, protecting street

**Meaning**
- safeguarding the neighborhood, protecting private space, keeping an eye on activities in the street

Neighbourhood before/without WhatsApp neighbourhood watch
Providing a multidimensional understanding

Sample: 14 WhatsApp neighbourhood watch groups, differing in:
- Size
- Level of professionalization
- Involvement of third parties (police, municipality, etc.)
- Neighbourhoods: Degree of urbanity

Method
- 14 In-depth interviews with group moderators
- 2 Focus groups with group members
  - Audio-recorded, transcribed
  - Constructive grounded theory analysis (inspired by Charmaz 2014)
  - Inductive qualitative content analysis (using Atlas.ti)
The amplified material dimension

• Dave: “There a couple of Polish people living in the village, so there are quite some cars with a Polish license plate. And I believe that there was a message in the WhatsApp neighborhood watch group about a couple of men sitting in their car.”

Henry: “Yes, sitting in their car, or in a van. And then immediately someone replied: Yes, they belong here, they live here.”

Dave: “They were only waiting for someone to get in the car.”

(members during focus group discussion)

• “At work, I received messages: ‘They are now here’ (...) And they went to another street. And it felt rather inconvenient to not be home at that moment. Because, a couple more streets and they would have entered our property” (Rick, member)
The material dimension: shared images

Your IPCamera detected motion alarm at 2017-3-11 13:46:13
WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices

**Material**
- streets, houses,
- bodies (watching, acting, walking), binoculars, WhatsApp,
- smartphone, distance connection,
- smartphone/security cameras, images

**Competence**
- assessment
- suspicious persons/ activity,
- knowledge of deviant behaviour, protecting street

**Meaning**
- safeguarding the neighborhood, protecting private space, keeping an eye on activities in the street

Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch
Competence: skills, know-how & understanding

- “There are also members, and this is where it goes wrong, who will post things like: ‘Hey Harry, how is the weather?’ There are these ignorant people who do not get the purpose of this [WNW group].” (Kai, moderator)

- “As neighbours we can see the difference between a resident and a stranger. For them [police] everyone is unfamiliar, they have to use their intuition while we have the facts (...) that’s why you can play a much bigger role as a resident.” (Ron, moderator)

- “We’ve had a situation with a dark skinned man who was reported [in the WNW group], and everyone went out to look for him. Even though someone reported: ‘the police is informed’, they started searching for him anyway.” (Emma, member)
WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices

Material
- streets, houses, bodies (watching, acting, walking), binoculars, WhatsApp group, distance connection, smartphone with camera

Competence
- assessment suspicious persons/activity and deviant behavior, protecting street, using smartphone & WhatsApp, activate and inform neighbors

Meaning
- safeguarding the neighborhood, protecting private space, keeping an eye on activities in the street

Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch
Meaning: emotions & motivational knowledge

• “I believe that it also provides sort of a sense of security”
  (Kai, moderator)

• Chrissy: “Sometimes I experience it creates unrest.”
  Lucia: “Yes, I understand that remark, because at a certain point, you become nervous.”

  Interviewer: “So how do you feel when you receive a WNW group message?”
  Lucia: “Well, if it is as close by as last time...”
  Vera: “Yes, that was really close.”
  Lucia: “Yes, then I am really terrified. And then, I always sleep with the windows open, we sleep at ground floor level with the windows open, well, then I close the windows.”
  (members during focus group discussion)
WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices

**Material**
- streets, houses, bodies (watching, acting, walking), binoculars, WhatsApp group, distance connection, smartphone with camera

**Competence**
- assessment suspicious persons/activity and deviant behavior, protecting street, using smartphone & WhatsApp, activate and inform neighbors

**Meaning**
- safeguarding the neighborhood, protecting private space, keeping an eye on activities in the street, continuous connectivity

Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch
Conclusions

- WhatsApp neighborhood watch increasingly popular phenomenon
  - Ambivalent nature & precarious consequences
  - Significant issues for communities, police and municipalities
  - Form of participatory policing (Reeves, 2017; Larsson 2017)
    - If you see something, WhatsApp something.
    - Limited actual police involvement, citizen mobilization

- Amplified communities in the making
  - Normalization process
  - Understanding of reconfiguration of elements within practices is required
Thank you for listening!

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Mapping Privacy and Surveillance Dynamics in Emerging Mobile Ecosystems project  
NWO Privacy Research in Cyber Environment grant (PRICE)  
NSF Early Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER)