



Erasmus Research Centre for Media,
Communication and Culture

Citizens, safety and the precariousness of digital community initiatives

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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)



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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

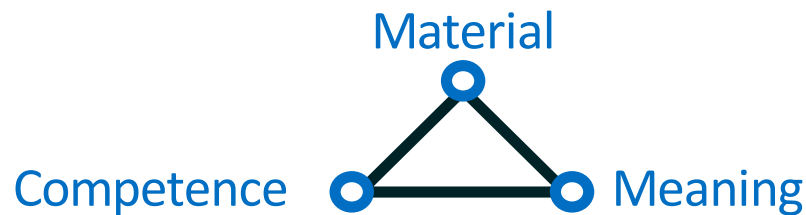
Existing public reports (grey literature) address benefits & pitfalls

- + 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)



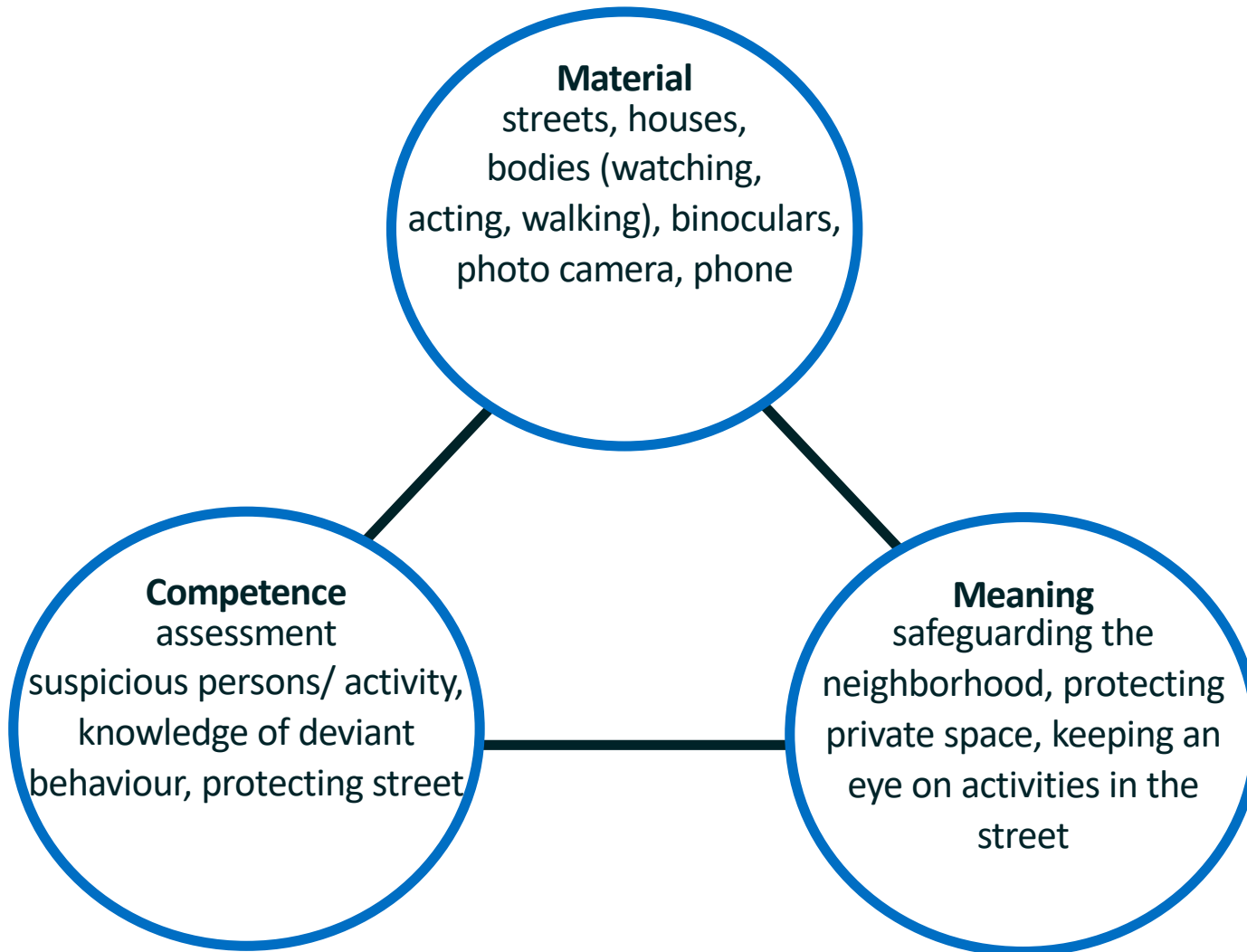
Practice theory

- “A ‘practice’ is a **routinized type of behavior** which consists of **several elements, interconnected to one other**: 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



Neighbourhood before/without WhatsApp neighbourhood watch

Ezafun

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

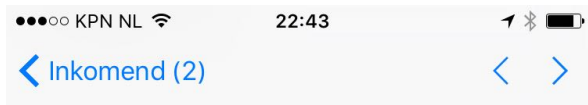
- 14 In-depth interviews with group moderators
- 2 Focus groups with group members
 - Audio-recorded, transcribed
 - Constructive grounded theory analysis (inspired by Charmaz 2014)
- Inductive qualitative content analysis (using *Atlas.ti*)

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)

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The material dimension: shared images

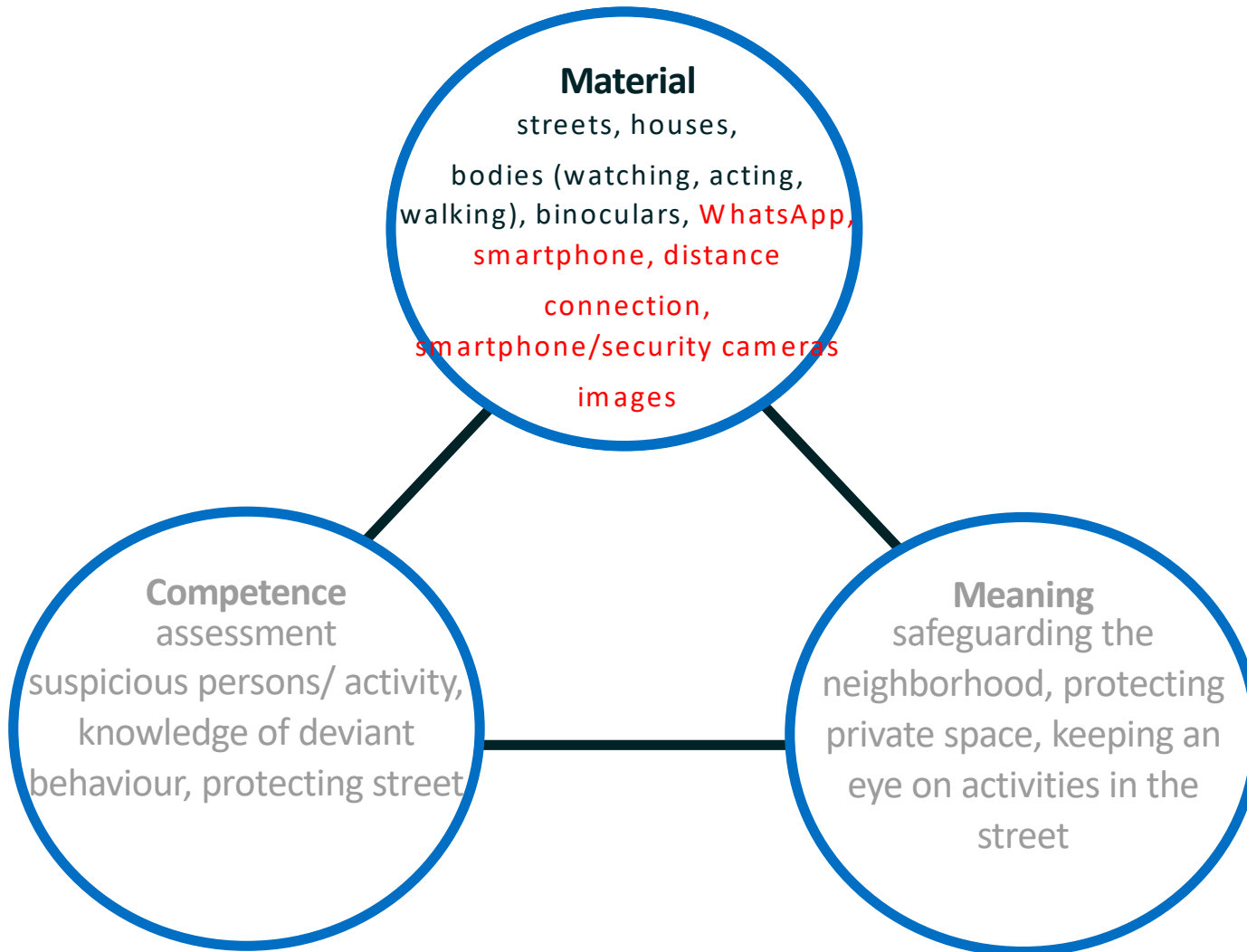


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WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices



Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch

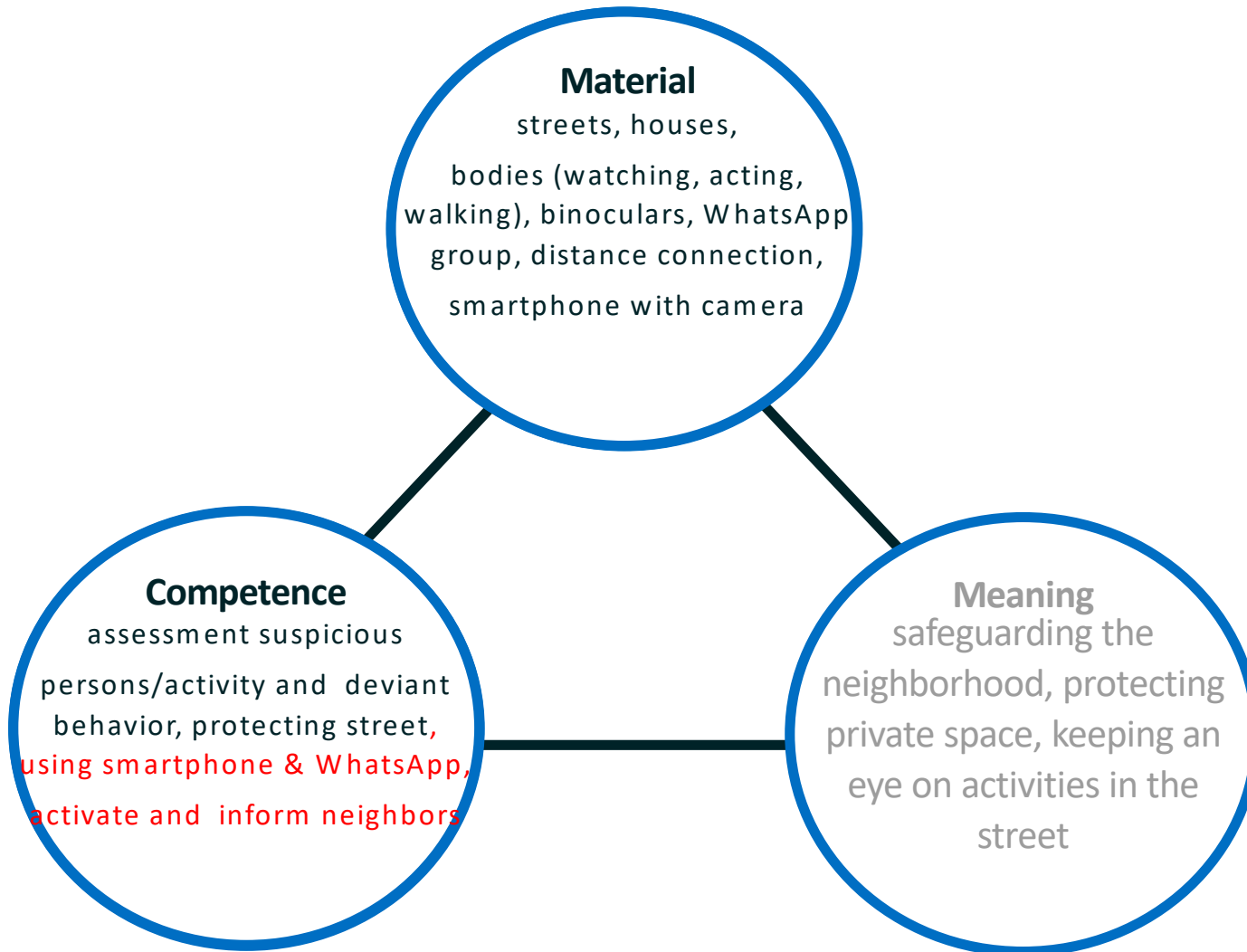
Ezra

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)

A stylized, handwritten-style logo for Erasmus, featuring a large, flowing 'E' followed by the word 'Erasmus' in a cursive script.

WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices



Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch

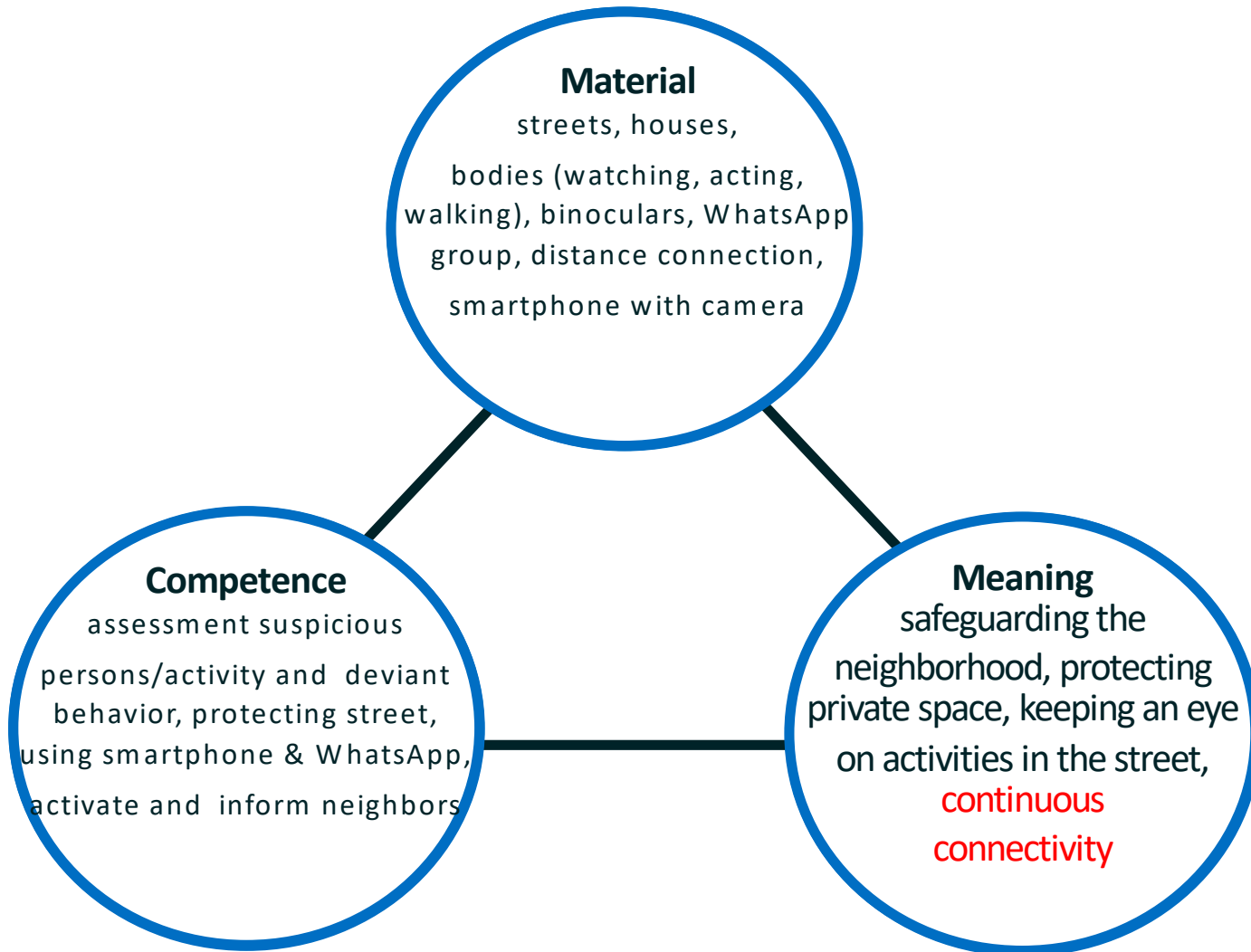
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Meaning: emotions & motivational knowledge

- “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)

A stylized, handwritten-style logo of the word "Erasmus" in a dark blue or black color.

WhatsApp Neighborhood watch practices



Neighbourhood with WhatsApp neighbourhood watch

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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

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NSF Early Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER)

