LAVITS and the challenges of building a Latin American agenda for studies on surveillance, technology and society

Rodrigo Firmino and Fernanda Bruno

LAVITS (The Latin American Network of Surveillance, Technology and Society Studies) was founded in 2009, and since then has been largely organised by Brazilians with important contributions from Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica. One of the network's most significant challenges is precisely to foster integration between countries of Latin America, respecting their different histories, with limited financial support but valuing deep similarities in the regional technopolitical context. In addition to research and actions at different periods, LAVITS has organised six international symposiums since its foundation, with the following agendas and host cities:

- Surveillance, security and social control (Curitiba, 2009);
- Identification, identity and surveillance (Toluca, 2010);
- Surveillance, technopolitics and territories (Rio de Janeiro, 2015);
- New paradigms of surveillance: Latin American perspectives (Buenos Aires; 2016);
- Surveillance, democracy and privacy: vulnerabilities and resistances (Santiago, 2017);
- Asymmetries, and (in)visibilities: surveillance, gender and race (Salvador, 2019).

The defining topics of each symposium demonstrate changes of focus and an increasing concern for issues closer to the realities of Latin America and the Global South

The network's main objective is to be a means for interchange between Latin American researchers, activists and artists interested in the connections between surveillance, technology and society. It is important to emphasize that the network's wider scope extends beyond the issue of surveillance, directs research and social-action concerns towards broader relationships between digital technologies, technopolitics and the singularities of Brazilian and Latin American societies.

The network involves researchers from different fields (including communication, sociology, anthropology, psychology, computer science, law, architecture and urban studies) and for more than a decade has generated a diverse range of activities, publications, research, reports and civic action arising out of discussions between research and activism groups in Latin America, and in cooperation with countries in Europe and North America, particularly with colleagues from the Surveillance Studies Network — namely in close collaboration with David Lyon and David Murakami Wood. LAVITS and the laboratories that comprise it are today a reference point for forming connections between academic research and civil society in terms of the relationships between surveillance, technology and society in Brazil and Latin America.

Since its foundation, one important aspect of LAVITS activity has been the qualification of researchers (at various academic levels) in topics of interest to the network and activities in the region, together with engagement with groups and laboratories associated with LAVITS and other non-governmental partners. Hundreds of researchers have qualified during this 13-year history, which has also involved the establishment of numerous laboratories, such as MediaLab.UFRJ; Pimentalab/UNIFESP; LabJor/Unicamp; LED/UFRJ; and Jararaca: urban technopolitics laboratory/PUCPR, to mention just a few.

It is fundamental for LAVITS to stimulate collective production of research and knowledge in the context of Latin American countries, considering their differences and similarities, but also to establish strategies for the creation of joint multidisciplinary activities; to encourage exploration of common methodologies between the network's researchers; to give visibility to and influence public policies related to the topics studied by the network's members; and to intensify dialogue and collaboration with social and art movements addressing surveillance technologies and processes in our societies, connecting new ideas, partnerships and initiatives.

A fertile and interdisciplinary field of research and social action can safely be said to have been established in Brazil and Latin America concerning the intersections between surveillance, technology and society, to which LAVITS has made a decisive contribution.

Towards a decolonial agenda

The relationship between technology, surveillance and colonialism is not just historical but also recursive. Far from being a thing of the past and the innovations of Modernity, colonialism is re-inscribed in different ways into the technological solutions and surveillance and security mechanisms that are today part of the neoliberal agenda of governments and corporations in many parts of the world. In Brazil and Latin America particularly, the colonial condition of being a testbed for extraction of resources, the trial and diffusion of technologies without due legal, economic, social, technopolitical and environmental protections, etc. is being constructed by actors operating in the widest range of sectors today: entertainment, services, health, education, work, urban mobility, sanitation, security, etc.

This colonial recursiveness also applies to processes of violence, discrimination, exploitation and expropriation that operate particularly among vulnerable populations and territories, especially black and indigenous communities and women (Figure 1). At the same time, the history and multiple re-inscriptions of colonialism in Brazil and Latin America is full of frictions, confrontations, resistance and insurgencies.

Figure 1: Rio de Janeiro's deadliest police raid at Jacarezinho (May 2020), with 28 people killed, under the Brazilian supreme court ruling for police to drastically restrict raids.

To understand and engage with rearranged relationships between technology, surveillance and colonialism in Brazilian and Latin American contexts therefore implies consideration of the dynamics that involve both expropriation and appropriation, both exploitation and insurgency, even if under asymmetrical conditions.

As the network has matured in recent years, LAVITS has contributed to the construction of a decolonial agenda for research, education and social action concerning the impact of extractive operations of surveillance and control technologies on rights, fundamental freedoms and ways of life in the region. We have also been discussing the limits of the modern and liberal notion of "subjects with rights" in face of the conflicts being produced by technological mediation, shifting and expanding the boundaries of extractivism and requiring us to consider "new subjects with rights, rights of diffuse ownership, related rights, rights of nature", to quote some of the examples appearing in the legal context (Parra, 2022). This agenda therefore also aims to foster technopolitical practices and knowledge that operate as resistance to extractivist rationales. By extractivist we mean broadly the technologies and practices developed by large corporations and states, focused on extraction of data, value and knowledge about individuals, territories and populations on different levels: behavioural, cognitive, psychic, emotional, biometric, health, labour, social and environmental (Mezzadra, 2020; Gago, 2019; Mbembe, 2018; Quijano, 2007; B.S. Santos & Meneses, 2010).

This agenda also involves appreciation of the power of discriminated, stigmatized and subaltern populations (Roy, 2017; Mendoza, 2018; M. Santos, 1987; Spivak, 1988; McFarlane, 2019), particularly through building modes of resistance and survival that offer subversive and counter-oppressive appropriation of digital technologies, data and narratives in the urban peripheries of Latin America. This means rethinking processes that normally value the informalities of the elite while criminalising informalities of the subaltern, and on different scales – from the global, between countries of the "North" and the "South", to the local, between the "centres" and "peripheries" of Latin American cities. Our geographical focus has therefore increasingly

prioritised territories stigmatised by "absences" – where the hegemonic narrative involves a supposed absence of civility, of infrastructure, quality of life, decent living conditions etc. – and by the deliberate erasure of "potentials and presences" – where the most visible presences are generally crime, violence and confrontations with the police.

This agenda is in turn connected to the search for experiments, practices and ways of life that enhance technodiversity, not just through questioning the universal nature of technology but also through affirmation and construction of a "new technological imagination that allows new forms of social, political and aesthetic life and new relationships with non-humans, the earth and the cosmos" (Hui, 2020, p.95). Brazil and Latin America are historically fertile not just in biodiversity but also in technodiversity (Figure 2). Native peoples, feminist collectives, Afrofuturists, urban technoactivists and a series of local and everyday sociotechnical practices have been establishing dissident and counter-hegemonic use of technologies, together with ways of life mediated by technologies that operate in contraflow to the patriarchal, colonial and extractivist model of major modern and contemporary technological projects.

Figure 2: "Gambiarra" (Kludging) Favela.Tech Workshop at Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro (2015).

As we have mentioned, in recent years LAVITS has been concerned with constructing this decolonial agenda from a Latin American viewpoint. Since 2015, the network has relied on support from the Ford Foundation, which has enabled formation of two research and action projects focused on the one hand on the "asymmetries and (in)visibilities of surveillance in Latin America", and more recently on "extractivism, technopolitics and decolonial agendas in the post-Covid-19 pandemic context". The pandemic context helped to broaden our concerns about the rationales and practices of the actors of surveillance capitalism and the extractivism of data inherent to digital platforms.

There has also been increased involvement of major technology corporations in the provision of solutions to a series of crises associated with the pandemic. Reapplying a colonial rationale to the strategic superimposition of disaster capitalism with surveillance capitalism, such corporations have been increasingly occupying more space in the "modernisation" of Latin American governmental infrastructures for the management, processing and analysis of data, not infrequently under the brand of smart cities (plainly in crisis in the Global North, but still popular in Latin America). Meanwhile, these same corporations have become central players in the provision of technological solutions involving artificial intelligence, machine learning and automation of decision-making processes in the public sector, with access to important databases on a national scale and the production of knowledge aimed at the formulation of public policies.

The pandemic has also resized the scale of the problems involved in technologies and policies of extraction and processing of data, highlighting their connections with socio-environmental problems. It has then become urgent to reposition debate and research into a zone of intersection between technology, culture and nature, together with interpenetration between digital networks and existential physical territories and the tensions between the supposedly unlimited power of machine data extraction, the limits of natural resources, and the environmental and social costs involved.

Projects and actions

Several research projects and events have developed out of the main points of the LAVITS actions agenda. Some of the more recent cases are mentioned below.

One illustrative example of the network's actions in activities involving negligent and predatory use of data, artificial intelligence and automation of social classification involves the growing adoption of facial recognition systems by public services and equipment and in the public space. With 54% of the Brazilian population classified as black – 85% of people approached by police in Brazilian cities and two thirds of those incarcerated are black – the country appears as a fragile territory for implementation of a form of technology that is admittedly racist and discriminatory. So one axis of the LAVITS action and agenda concerning this topic has been to connect with activists, social movements and members of parliament on three levels (municipal, statal and federal) to construct legislation for banning facial recognition technologies (Figure 3). Bills have already been initiated or presented in the municipalities of Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Curitiba, and in the states of Rio de Janeiro and Paraná. LAVITS aims to expand discussions and legislative projects throughout the country, with the ambitious goal of including the ban in federal legislation, which overrides all others.

The project for banning facial recognition provides a good example of the network's various spheres of action:
- In the academic and scientific arena, based on the production of critical material and studies;

- In education, through master's and PhD qualifications for research onto the topic (together with financial support);
- In activism, through necessary connections with social movements and organisations fighting for rights;
- In legislation, through the fundamental work of legal professionals and politicians in the drafting of bills;
- In public debate, through public hearings and insertions in the media and social networks.

Figure 3: Targeting the black population (almapreta.com).

The research project "Mapping advances of surveillance capitalism on public universities in South America" developed within the sphere of "Education Under Surveillance" (Figure 4), is another significant example of LAVITS action in studies into the involvement of major corporations in provision of public services in the region. This research mapped data from 335 public higher education institutions, revealing how institutional communications in public universities are increasingly dominated by Google and Microsoft. Around 80% of public institutions in the region were found to have agreements with the so-called big techs, most of which were sought during the pandemic.

Influencing public debate about security, technology and rights, the repercussions of the project called "Territories of Exception: violation of rights and the use of police helicopters in Rio de Janeiro" (Figure 5), carried out in partnership with many local organisations, aimed to reveal the human-rights violations caused by the state's public security policy aimed at escalation of police operations with the use of military helicopters as mobile shooting platforms in the overpopulated areas of the city's favelas and peripheral regions. The report resulting from this investigation, together with other civil actions, influenced the Federal Supreme Court's ruling to prohibit police operations in the favelas during the pandemic. The report was developed on a digital platform for georeferenced narratives about human, territorial and environmental rights, and received several awards and commendations in the investigative journalism category from Brazilian and Ibero-American bodies.

Figure 4: Mapping surveillance capitalism in education.

Figure 5: Territories of Exception: the architecture of state violence in Rio de Janeiro.

Data- and digital-technology activism in urban peripheries was the focus of another research project involving LAVITS-affiliated laboratories. Titled "Digital peripheries and subaltern urbanism: urban technopolitics and digital activism in the Global South", the project considers creative and political engagements with infrastructure, data and digital technologies in the city as ways in which vulnerable populations can recover territory as an everyday space and place

of emancipation (Figure 6). It aims mainly to address the contribution of emergent digital practices in the urban margins for understanding manifestations of an "urbanism of the South". The research began through a partnership between Rodrigo Firmino (Jararaca/PUCPR), Andres Luque-Ayala (Durham University) and digital activists in Rio de Janeiro's biggest favelas (funded by the British Academy), and expanded to other projects to study similar movements in Latin America. This is also another relevant case in which research and social advocacy intersect, since peripheral digital actors began to develop their own master's degree and doctoral research in a LAVITS laboratory (Jararaca: urban technopolitics laboratory/PUCPR) during the study, with financial support from the network.
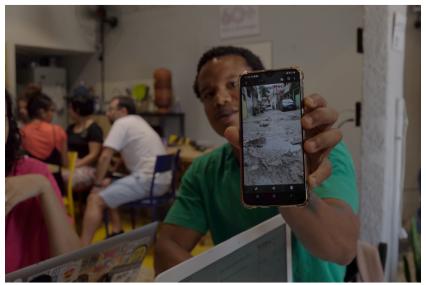

Figure 6: CocoZap hackathon - data_labe, 2019.

Two recent international events unrelated to LAVITS symposia also show the consolidation of a decolonial agenda for the network. The first, "War of Worlds and Extractivist Fractures in Latin America", arose out of a partnership between LAVITS member laboratories (Pimentalab/UNIFESP) and other Latin American research groups. The event discussed the incidence of neoextractivism in Latin America, bringing together researchers, activists and leaders of indigenous peoples in the region. The second, the "#FAIL | technology and politics: considering and making worlds based on their failures and ruins" symposium, was an interdisciplinary initiative for exploring three major current failures (neoliberal, technological and climatic) as opportunities for questioning structures that seemed non-negotiable or unshakeable. The event also involved broad partnerships between LAVITS members and partners (MediaLab.UFRJ and Derechos Digitales).

LAVITS' technopolitical position

Among LAVITS guiding principles it is important to reinforce some of the shared standpoints of the researchers, activists and artists comprising the network. We consider it fundamental to understand that the consequences of increased use of surveillance practices and technologies tend to deepen socioeconomic inequalities and asymmetries in contemporary society, hindering debates for social justice, environmental justice and data justice, which is particularly serious in countries of the Global South. From this perspective the contemporary centrality of information technologies, materialised in surveillance policies as practices of control, requires critical reflection that can question and subvert their epistemological foundations and commonly alleged neutrality.

This standpoint expands the importance of consolidating decolonial and situated perspectives in Latin America for research and social actions concerning technology, surveillance and society. On the one hand this involves contesting/confronting the re-inscription of colonial and extractive operations on territories, bodies, epistemologies, ecosystems and ways of life. On the other hand, it is about creating means of strengthening technopolitical arrangements that resume and expand Latin American cosmotechnical diversity and the historical diversity of practices, meanings and uses of technology in the region.

The democratisation of scientific and technological production is thus reinforced by means of a dialogue between knowledges and practices that exist in different communities, cosmovisions and ways of life, recognising the technodiversity and creation of other sociotechnical practices and imaginaries. LAVITS is based on the construction of inclusive, anti-capitalist, democratic and egalitarian collectives and networks capable of resisting and combating racial, sexist, ableist and anthropocentric forms of oppression. These principles ultimately enable LAVITS to foster interdisciplinary and critical development that values politically committed research and experience, together with the free circulation and appropriation of knowledge.