Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 25: From welfare to watchful care: digital surveillance and state-citizen relations

Organizer: Laura Louise Heinsen, Nete Schwennesen, Mikkel Kenni Bruun

Abstract: Digital surveillance technologies (DSTs) are increasingly embedded in infrastructures and delivery mechanisms of welfare state care services across the Global North. DSTs have catalyzed both optimism and skepticism, and their moral implications and entangled relationship with practices of care have been discussed in the public and among researchers. This panel seeks to critically explore new empirical and conceptual avenues for the societal transformations prompted by DSTs, shedding light on their role in reconfiguring the dynamic relationships between welfare states, care practices, and citizens. Existing critical analyses of DSTs often operate within technological or social determinist frameworks, portraying DSTs as neutral tools for optimizing welfare care, instruments of panoptic control, or mechanisms for the commodification of data within capitalist economies. While such perspectives offer important critiques, they may obscure the nuanced and relational dynamics at play in the integration of DSTs into care practices. This panel invites theoretical and empirical contributions that adopt a relational ontology, foregrounding the co-constitutive agency of human and non-human actors without presupposing transformative capabilities as inherently tied to specific entities. We are particularly interested in situated accounts that illuminate how DSTs work—and are made to work—as emergent assemblages and socio-technical accomplishments within healthcare and care provision. We encourage reflections on the methodological contributions of anthropology and science and technology studies (STS) in unpacking the situated effects of DSTs. Contributions may focus on the development, implementation, or use of DSTs within diverse healthcare and care sectors, such as prenatal care, family care, hospital care, and eldercare.

SESSION SCHEDULE

19.09.2025 | Slot 2| 2 - 0 - 1

Nilufer Akalin: From Care to Control: The Hidden Surveillance Network in Immigrant

Healthcare

Kristina Grünenberg, Line Hillersdal: Surveillance care: techno-care arrangements in South Korean eldercare

Laura Louise Heinsen, Nete Schwennesen: From Surveillance to Distributed Attention: Reframing Digital Surveillance in Dementia Care

Astrid Meyer, Stinne Aaløkke Ballegaard, Anders Albrechtslund, Virginie Behar, Polina Velyka: Responsibility and Intentionality in Socio-Material Assemblages: Data-Intensive Surveillance in Dementia Care

SESSION PAPERS

From Care to Control: The Hidden Surveillance Network in Immigrant Healthcare

Nilufer Akalin

This paper examines how the healthcare access process for immigrants functions as a surveillance mechanism, focusing on the role of safety net organizations in state-driven healthcare delivery models. While scholars have explored healthcare surveillance through documentation and immigration enforcement, little attention has been given to how surveillance is embedded within the structure of care itself. Drawing on ethnographic observations at an immigrant organization and in-depth interviews with 28 care professionals in a city in Upstate New York (2019–2021), I demonstrate that as safety net organizations become partners in state-led health collaborations, their financial and operational priorities increasingly align with state surveillance. I argue that through various health-related screenings and interactions with providers, a data network is established between the state and safety net organizations that collect and share personal and health information. This research contributes to scholarship on healthcare surveillance, immigrant health, and data governance by revealing how these institutions create a collective data pool that shapes immigrant healthcare experiences while raising ethical concerns about data-driven monitoring. Amid growing state scrutiny and advancements in AI-driven data collection, these dynamics have urgent implications for immigrant rights and healthcare accessibility.

Surveillance care: techno-care arrangements in South Korean eldercare

Kristina Grünenberg, Line Hillersdal

As ageing populations and declining birth rates present challenges to welfare systems across OECD countries, digital technologies are increasingly mobilized as cost-efficient solutions to reduce reliance on human caregivers and formal institutions. This presentation explores how such technologies—particularly AI-assisted alarm systems and social robots—reshape care practices for older adults in South Korea, a country navigating profound demographic and cultural shifts.
Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in South Korea and comparative insights from fieldwork on screen visits in Denmark, we analyse how these technologies both supplement and subtly supplant traditional caregiving roles, often revealing latent

expectations around filial piety, autonomy, and/or responsibility. In the presentation we ask, how the relationship between older adults and a specific set of monitoring technologies unfold, what care and control becomes in this context? and not least how technologies (re-)configure care and care-assemblages, that also enfold the family and the state.
We argue that while monitoring technologies may provide a sense of safety or reduce feelings of isolation, they also potentially introduce new forms of control as well as care, vulnerability and dependency embedded within these techno-care arrangements. We end by proposing the concept of surveillance-care to capture this ambivalent configuration.

From Surveillance to Distributed Attention: Reframing Digital Surveillance in Dementia Care

Laura Louise Heinsen, Nete Schwennesen

Digital surveillance technologies (DSTs) are increasingly implemented in dementia care in Denmark, often framed as welfare-optimizing tools for managing demographic pressures and labor shortages. Anthropological and STS scholarship has critically examined how these technologies mediate tensions between care and control (Cozza et al., 2021; Meyer, 2024). Building on this work, we engage recent anthropological perspectives on surveillance (Peacock et al., 2023), which attend to how digital infrastructures produce both new conditions of visibility, but also includes a perpetual relation to what is not seen. Drawing on Pedersen et al. (2021), we propose understanding DSTs as attentional technologies, asking how a focus on (in)visibility and attention can open new analytical pathways for understanding the politics and effects of surveillance technologies in eldercare? Based on an ongoing ethnographic study of Teton One—an AI-based fall detection system used in a Danish nursing home—we examine how this system reorganizes attentional capacities across human and nonhuman actors. We show how Teton One reconfigures care as a socio-material practice by generating new rhythms of watching, responding and evaluating through both ‘technologies of attention’ (eg alerts, sleep data) and ‘techniques of attention’ (eg how staff interpret data). These shifts enable new forms of presence and judgment, while simultaneously sidelining other modes of knowing and caring. Rather than treating attention as a cognitive capacity, we approach it as a distributed and contested field, foregrounding it as a critical analytic for understanding the politics and ethics of surveillance in elder care.

Responsibility and Intentionality in Socio-Material Assemblages: Data-Intensive Surveillance in Dementia Care

Astrid Meyer, Stinne Aaløkke Ballegaard, Anders Albrechtslund, Virginie Behar, Polina Velyka

Data-intensive surveillance technologies are increasingly common in health and care practices in many welfare states. Examples of these technologies, such as GPS trackers, door alarms and motion sensors, are often used in dementia care where people, due to their illness, may have difficulties asking for help or providing the information

necessary to get assistance.
Drawing on insights from STS, we argue for a socio-material understanding of data-intensive surveillance in dementia care. To make this argument, we illustrate how surveillance technologies rely on continuous efforts involving people, things, and processes to work according to plan. In dementia care, surveillance technologies make it possible for people with dementia to request assistance intentionally or unintentionally. Furthermore, the technologies facilitate reactive windows in which it is possible for a care worker or relative to act and take responsibility. This means that surveillance in dementia care is a case in which humans and non-humans co-construct and share agency (in this context, understood as the capacity to act). Meanwhile, it is also a case in which questions about intentionality and responsibility remain central.
Reflecting on fieldwork with surveillance practices at a Danish nursing home, we examine the notions of intentionality and responsibility and how to approach them while foregrounding agency as co-constructed and shared. We ask how responsibility and intentionality are navigated and made sense of in relation to surveillance technologies. Engaging with these questions, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about responsibility, intentionality, socio-material assemblages, and shared agency within medical anthropology and STS.