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Facial Recognition in Cities: A Catalyst for Political Polarization and Local Media Dynamics

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Extended abstract

In 2019, during carnival season, the city of Nice in France transformed into an unprecedented technological laboratory: the municipal authority of the city decided to pilot a facial recognition system, which was installed at one of the entrances of the carnival. The images collected were processed in real-time by the Israeli software AnyVision, with the aim of testing whether they could recognize specific faces. While other cities like Marseille and the small town of Moirans implement as well biometric surveillance applications to enhance security in the city, many reactions were manifested in the public sphere concerning the potential perils of this technology. This involved activists, citizens, stakeholders related to the regulation of artificial intelligence (AI), as well as political parties. In reality, the implementation of facial recognition technologies in cities was the first application of artificial intelligence to cause political polarization in the French public sphere.

In our study, we analyzed 27.530 articles from national and local press, as well as 3.599.000 tweets discussing AI. In the national press, we observed a political polarization, with the entry of new actors criticizing facial recognition. This criticism was mainly linked to the Global Security Law, voted in 2021, which allowed police live-feed access to body cameras and drone footage. The concern focused on the possibility of the collected images being processed using facial recognition software. On Twitter, this criticism involved left-wing and far-right actors and political parties, who heavily criticized biometric surveillance applications, as well as conspiracy theorists. In contrast, in the local press we did not observe political polarization regarding this issue. Our analysis indicates that in the local press, the discourse around artificial intelligence -even after the installation of facial recognition software in some cities- focused on the practical applications of this technology, on innovation, on events related to artificial intelligence, and on funds allocated to local businesses and research centers for further AI technology development. The local press avoided to set on the agenda the political implications of the application of facial recognition in cities, as well as the stakes posed by such applications for the protection of citizens' data, the preservation of their rights, and the maintenance of city public space as a foundation for democracy.

The local media provide the informational backbone of what people know about social life in their city, ensuring social cohesion and contributing to "imagining the city". At the same time, discourses around Smart Cities, including applications of artificial intelligence, become more prevalent in the public sphere. However, the implementation of such applications may foster political polarization and raise ethical questions. The role of local press could be pivotal in intermediating city infrastructure planners and citizens, aiming not only to reduce polarization but also to spotlight concerns such as the protection of citizens' personal data and rights, which should be considered by city planners and local authorities.

Keywords: *facial recognition; artificial intelligence; cities; local press; France*