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Algorithmic Olympics: exploring the ethical and social implications of AI surveillance through the case of Paris 2024

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ABSTRACT

By connecting with contemporary debates on security, surveillance, sport mega-events and their social consequences, this article critically examines emerging issues related to the use of algorithmic video surveillance (AVS) – particularly real-time video analytics used to monitor public spaces and detect crowd behaviours – during the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games and highlights how these issues extend to other areas of social life. In the lead-up to Paris 2024, the proposed deployment and subsequent legalisation of AI surveillance have been subjected to heavy contestations. However, limited research has examined this case within the Olympics' wider political history or its connection to broader security and mega-event trends. This article addresses this gap by adopting a conceptual approach and focusing on relevant (1) ethical issues, (2) modes of activism, and (3) the potential security legacies that surface in parallel with this politically unique Olympic event and the attempts to secure it. We argue that Paris 2024 highlights several pressing AI and security concerns likely to emerge in other social contexts beyond those of Paris 2024 speaking to the contestation and inaccuracies of security technologies.

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Over the past four decades, scholarly interest in surveillance technologies and their social consequences has grown rapidly (Amoore and De Goede 2005, 2008, Lyon 2007, 2022, Smith 2008, Amoore 2017, 2020, Amoore and Raley 2017, Aradau 2017, 2023, Klauser 2017, Lally 2017, Murphy 2017, Aradau and Blanke 2017, 2021). One key issue that has consistently drawn academic attention is the tension between surveillance and civil liberties, which mirrors the broader security-versus-freedom debates (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008, Bauman and Lyon 2013). These debates have notably emerged in response to surveillance trends at contemporary sport mega-events like the Olympics (Sugden 2012), and more broadly, in reaction to the everyday implementation of invasive technologies used by state and private actors to monitor and manage individuals, populations, and social groups (Zuboff 2022). However, the advent of new artificial intelligence-powered (AI) systems has reconfigured and layered these debates further, particularly through technologies such as facial recognition (FR), which enable authorities to identify

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individuals in real time by matching live images to biometric databases. For Saheb (2023, p. 369), the use of AI to enhance surveillance and monitoring – be it through forms including algorithms, FR, machine learning models, and autonomous systems – composes ‘one of the most critical uses of artificial intelligence’, and this, in turn, renders surveillance an extremely ethically challenging process and issue within the AI continuum. To compound matters, when it comes to AI-driven technologies such as FR, a prescribed system for transparency and accountability in Europe is still in its infancy (Almeida *et al.* 2022, p. 382).

This article contributes to academic debates on security, surveillance, and its social consequences by focusing on the linkages between AI, surveillance, and security in one important domain of society characterised by its globalised, commercialised, urban, and transient nature. Specifically, we examine the implementation of, and contested discourses surrounding the use of AI-powered surveillance, also referred to as algorithmic video surveillance (AVS), in a controversial case – namely, the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereon: the Olympics) in Paris, France. AVS adds an AI layer to conventional CCTV systems, enabling both real-time and post-factum analysis of camera footage. It is designed to detect anomalies or unusual behaviour, such as crowd surges, abandoned objects, sudden movements, or deviations from expected flow patterns among spectators and the wider public near Olympic venues (Laursen 2023). As contended here, the existence of ‘spectacular security’ at mega-events – designed to foster public reassurance through visible displays of control (Boyle and Haggerty 2009) – now co-exists with what can be understood as ‘algorithmic security’. This latter form emerges through ‘mundane practices that have entangled datafication, machine learning algorithms and security practices’ (Aradau 2023, p. 191). Rather than identifying clear-cut enemies or predefined threats, algorithmic security focuses on detecting anomalies within the data. Anomalies, in this context, are identified through algorithmic analysis of data patterns, which highlights behaviours or events that deviate from established norms (Aradau and Blanke 2017). This marks a new era in the securitisation of sport mega-events, where automation, data analytics, and predictive capabilities start taking centre stage. In making this argument, we also suggest that many of the issues raised by this case are likely to arise in other contexts where such technologies are deployed.

The case of Paris remains politically and sociologically important, and the AI technology has been publicly contested and opposed by civil society actors, who argue that it constitutes a threat to civic freedoms and to the democracy itself (Amnesty International 2023). Furthermore, as Boykoff (2023) writes, the French National Assembly’s approval of this technology could be interpreted as another example where the Olympics have ‘turned into a way to bolster state power through the procurement of special equipment and laws not normally allowed’. While controversies concerning security and surveillance policies and technologies at mega-events are not new and can be traced back to the 1980s, they have continued to the extent where it was recently predicted that ‘artificial intelligence is the *next wave* coming for Olympic security’ (Duckworth and Krieger 2021, p. 275, emphasis added). Crucially, in line with technological innovations, so have these controversies matured and taken up new forms. As such, sport mega-events are not only historically, politically, and socially significant for scholarly studies of security and surveillance but, as Klauser (2017, p. 21) argues, they are ‘ideal for

investigating how, today, people and objects on the move are monitored, filtered and protected' in diverse ways. Indeed, the 'Olympics are important moments in the development and dispersal of surveillance' (Clavel 2013, p. 214) and they matter politically as 'testing grounds' where surveillance technologies are piloted and, in many cases, transferred onto other societal spheres (Giulianotti and Klausner 2010, Lee Ludvigsen 2022).

At the time of writing, it is over a decade since the London 2012 Olympics was characterised by a range of new surveillance technologies that supplemented the city's already extant security assemblages (Coaffee *et al.* 2011). Since then, concerns about surveillance emerged before the Tokyo 2021 Olympics, particularly regarding the planned use of FR technologies during the event amid the COVID-19 (Hutchins and Andrejevcic 2021). In the case of Paris – where AI surveillance was reportedly used to detect 'suspicious activity' in Olympic crowds by scanning real-time images (O'Carroll 2023) – the deployment of this technology once again raises the question of whether, in fact, 'rather than us watching the Games, for the foreseeable future, it is more a case of the Games watching us' (Sugden 2012, p. 426).

Drawing on Boyle and Haggerty's (2009) notion of 'spectacular security' and using the Olympics as a key site for critically examining broader security trends, this paper engages with two overarching research questions. First, what are the potential social implications of the use of AI-powered surveillance during, and beyond, Paris 2024? Second, which contestations and counter-discourses have emerged in opposition to this technology's approval? To engage with these questions, this article adopts a conceptual approach, and draws upon frames from sociology, critical security studies (CSS), science and technology studies (STS), and international relations (IR) literatures, which are supplemented with media and other secondary sources. The article argues, overall, that the case of Paris is revealing of the discourses and, crucially, *counter-discourses* that emerge around contested security and surveillance technologies (see Jeffries 2011, Boykoff 2020). Meanwhile, the case illuminates numerous issues concerning the AI/surveillance nexus that may outlive the event itself and persist as 'security legacies', with significant consequences for civil liberties and privacy rights. These concerns extend beyond Paris and apply to future sport mega-events – particularly if similar technologies are adopted at future Olympics, football World Cups, and other large-scale events. Given the history of security technology emulation across Olympic hosts, this is far from unthinkable (Duckworth and Krieger 2021). As such, the questions raised here hold relevance for future events where similar surveillance practices and their contested legacies may re-emerge. Thus, the article seeks to contribute to the theoretical and conceptual debates surrounding AI surveillance at mega-events. By examining the Paris 2024 Olympics, we provide a critical analysis of how AI surveillance technologies intersect with established concerns about security, civil liberties, and social control.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we unpack and conceptualise 'surveillance', its application to mega-events, and the AI/surveillance nexus. Second, we proceed to contextualise the Paris Olympics before zooming in on specific contestations *vis-à-vis* the turn towards AI surveillance. These include the anti-Olympic struggles and the prospects of 'security legacies'.

Conceptualising surveillance and its applications

This section conceptualises surveillance and advances sport mega-events as an applied frame for associated analyses. We remain primarily concerned with the sociological and political consequences of surveillance and its techniques. To date, these have been tackled in the inter-disciplinary literature focused on, *inter alia*, the ways in which surveillance feeds into the production of (non-)knowledge assemblages (Aradau 2017); surveillance's impact on spatial geographies (Klauser 2017); surveillance culture that encapsulates the engagement and interplay between surveilling and surveilled (Lyon 2017); and its role in the production of social order in neoliberal spaces (Coleman and Sim 2000).

However, surveillance remains a contested process in the contemporary age, and its omnipresence and associated technologies are also resisted 'from below' through protest, collective action, and public opposition against surveillance and its political aims (Jeffries 2011). Given the prevalence of surveillance as a core, defining feature of public life, some scholars have proposed, or diagnosed, that present-day societies are defined by surveillance and accordingly represent 'surveillance societies' (Marx 1985, Lyon 2007). Though, naturally, the increased *prevalence* of surveillance technologies (e.g. CCTV cameras, GPS tracking devices, licence plate recognition systems) from the 1980s onwards should not distract us from the fact that the basic *act* of surveillance – for the purpose of governing individuals and populations – is historically significant and can be traced back several centuries, as Foucault famously demonstrated in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

In contemporary social scientific analyses of surveillance, the concept is often defined as the 'focused, systematic and routine practices and techniques of attention, for purposes of influence, management, protection and direction' (Lyon 2007, p. 14). However, in this context, surveillance extends beyond the practices of the (nation-)state (e.g. Zuboff 2022), and it is not solely 'set in relation to the fields of risk and security' (Klauser 2017, p. 22). Nonetheless, as Klauser (2017) writes, such a conceptualisation prompts us to inquire about 'power'. This is because surveillance typically reveals wider power relations in societies (Coleman and Sim 2000). As elucidated by Aradau and Blanke (2017, p. 6), contemporary surveillance practices 'produce categories of "undesirables" and risky selves to be monitored, corrected, or excluded based on the anticipation of future behavior, while "normal" citizens are integrated within the flows of capital'.

Here, Foucault's (1977) theoretical repertoire becomes analytically useful, as it scaffolds and guides our understanding of how surveillance and its related technologies represent *techniques of government* through which institutions seek to control populations and ultimately exercise their disciplinary power. Hence, in Foucault's view, surveillance is tightly connected to the notions of power and discipline, and hence a Foucauldian-driven approach towards surveillance is one that situates surveillance as a 'technique of power' that – given the decentralised nature of power (Klauser 2017) – interacts with other informal and formal techniques. These techniques may include discourses, historical or scientific knowledge, architectures, and laws (Bigo 2006), and fused with surveillance, these collectively underpin the networks of power relations (Frost 2019, Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2024) that Foucault (2008) called security *dispositif* – these are assemblages which regulate populations, but that also are mirrored by resistive acts of 'counter-conduct'.

As unpacked here, mega-events – as an empirical and applied context – continue to offer profound insights for critical applications of the themes discussed above. One key reason for this is that sport mega-event securitisation represents ‘a particularly useful frame not only for identifying particular surveillance logics, practices and trends [...] but also for investigating how exemplified surveillance solutions are transferred from one place to another’ (Klauser 2017, p. 8).

The literature on the relationships between sport mega-events, surveillance, and security emerged, partly, as a response to the renewed security complexes at mega-events post-9/11 (Bennett and Haggerty 2011). The literature also highlights how the 7/7 attacks in London (in July 2005), which occurred the day after London was confirmed as the host city for the 2012 Olympics, reaffirmed significant security concerns surrounding the Games, particularly in relation to crowded places, and highlighted the need to respond to them (Coaffee *et al.* 2011, Houlihan and Giulianotti 2012). Though, security had of course been a central part of the Olympic organisation since 1972, following the terrorist attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics (Duckworth and Krieger 2021). As symbolically and politically significant events (Houlihan and Giulianotti 2012) visited by mass crowds of spectators, the *need* to secure the Olympics remains clear – still, the question ‘security for whom’ should be postulated by academics (Lee Ludvigsen 2022, Pauschinger 2024).

Due to the increasingly standardised (Duckworth and Krieger 2021), but concurrently localised and exceptional nature of mega-event security (Pauschinger 2024), taking place in transient, commercialised, and urban spheres, sport mega-events were quickly afforded critical attention from scholars analysing them as significant occasions both reflecting and driving wider security and surveillance trends (Boyle and Haggerty 2009, Bulley and Lisle 2012). As Giulianotti and Klauser (2010, p. 56) argued: ‘for social scientists, the contemporary security processes at SMEs [sport mega-events] have very strong social, political, and geographical dimensions, as reflected through social relationships, the everyday politics of the “war on terror”, and urban redevelopment’.

Thus far, various case studies of the mega-event securitisation have focused on the performative elements of ‘spectacular security’, seeking to display a show of force (Boyle and Haggerty 2009), the global nomadic nature of security policy transfer moving across spaces/times to future events (Lee Ludvigsen 2022), and the press and media discourses surrounding Olympic threat and (in)securities (Tsoukala 2006). Others examine the micro-politics of Olympic security and how it enables a ‘hierarchy of welcome’, whereby groups and individuals are categorised and their category, in turn, determines their exclusion or inclusion in the Olympic festival (Bulley and Lisle 2012).

Crucially, in this article’s context, a significant section of the extant literature has focused on surveillance technologies, practices, or logics (Samatas 2007, Boyle and Haggerty 2009, Sugden 2012, Klauser 2017). As demonstrated across several, transnational contexts, mega-events typically constitute opportunities for host countries and cities to pilot new surveillance technologies that, later – and depending on their ‘successes’ – may be transferred to other areas of society (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010). Beyond this, mega-events also provide authorities with the opportunity to ‘assess the level of public acceptance’ within periods of enhanced surveillance (Houlihan and Giulianotti 2012, p. 717). Moreover, it is frequently highlighted how mega-event

'surveillant assemblages' (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) rely on various converging systems through which the distinction between public and private becomes blurry. For example, writing on the Athens 2004 Olympics, Samatas (2007, p. 224) noted how this event brought about a 'super-panopticon' relying upon assemblages consisting of:

an electronic nexus of cameras, vehicle tracking devices, blimps, AWACS [Airborne Warning and Control System] airplanes, and satellites with continuous online linking by common databases and communications to provide real-time images and updates of available resources to a central command.

Whilst such *nexuses* of technology and practices have become increasingly standardised before the Olympics (Bennett and Haggerty 2011), they must also be viewed as *glocalised* given their specific local embeddedness and meanings (Pauschinger 2024), as evident by the more recent Olympics in, *inter alia*, Beijing 2008 (Sugden 2012), London 2012 (Coaffee *et al.* 2011), and most recently, Tokyo 2020 (staged in 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic), the latter which represented the first time FR technology as a security measure was utilised at an Olympic event (Duckworth and Krieger 2021). The adoption of this technology reflected growing interest in AI-driven identification systems that enhance access control and pre-empt security threats through rapid identity verification. While framed as an efficiency and safety measure, FR has also raised concerns around privacy, surveillance creep, and racial bias, making it a key flashpoint in broader debates around AI and civil liberties (Almeida *et al.* 2022, p. 379). Significantly, while surveillance is now an expected, ubiquitous, and normalised aspect of contemporary sport mega-events, each edition features certain variations that often reflect technological advancements. We argue that these differences warrant ongoing critical analysis.

Yet, one common thread within the pre-existing work on Olympic surveillance is the potential of privacy violations and their impacts upon civil liberties, both temporarily and more permanently. Especially if, or when, invasive technologies and systems remain in place post-event as 'security legacies' (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010) where they may be intentionally 're-rationalised for other uses' in the absence of the high-profiled Olympic backdrop (Boyle and Haggerty 2009, p. 266). In the short term, Giulianotti and Klauser (2010, p. 54) write, this may intersect with the 'clearing of specific "undesirable" or "unloved" populations from SME spaces', yet more long-term, such technologies may intersect with wider urban developments including, for instance, slum clearance and rebuilding projects, including attempts to commodify inner-city localities. Indeed, as the cases of Vancouver (2009) and London (2012) Olympics revealed, the mega-event-related securitisation and sanitisation of public spaces that enabled the respective cities to 'look their best' before global audiences, simultaneously served to exclude homeless and street-involved young people within the host cities (Kennelly and Watt 2011).

We argue that the deployment of AI surveillance at the Paris 2024 Olympics marks a significant political and sociological moment, not only in Olympic history but also in shaping broader understandings of security, social control, and surveillance practices. This case highlights how surveillance technologies are increasingly embedded in public life, influencing societal power dynamics and the regulation of urban spaces. While the adoption of AI surveillance at the Paris 2024 Olympics was perhaps predictable – given the forecast that AI represents the 'next wave' of Olympic securitisation (Duckworth and Krieger 2021) – it remains notable that this technology, its implications, and the broader

case of Paris 2024 have received relatively little academic attention thus far. This oversight is significant, as the case presents an opportunity to explore broader issues and raise critical questions about the challenges posed by AI-powered surveillance and the shift towards new security technologies tested in mega-event contexts.

The AI/surveillance nexus

While the conceptualisation of technology falling within the ambit of AI can be traced back to the late 1940s, it was not until the 2010s that we witnessed a substantial surge in both the pace of development and the broad utilisation and integration of AI into various domains, catalysed primarily by monumental strides in developing deep learning algorithms (Russell and Norvig 2022, p. 44). Here, the advancements in speech recognition and visual object recognition are of particular importance. AI-driven technologies are now ubiquitous and extend from online recommendation systems to autonomous vehicles and personalised healthcare applications. Furthermore, governments, military officials, and law enforcement agencies worldwide increasingly rely on such technologies to bolster their security practices on national and international scales (Feldstein 2019, p. 5). Considered one of the hallmark advancements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, AI harnesses machine learning algorithms to analyse very large data sets ('Big Data'), thereby augmenting surveillance, analysis, and response capabilities within security operations (Csernatonni and Mavrona 2022). Given the widespread deployment and burgeoning reliance on AI-powered technologies, especially within governmental apparatuses, balancing individual rights and democratic principles with security practices becomes imperative. The AI/surveillance nexus largely reflects these concerns and magnifies the already existing issues associated with 'surveillance societies' discussed previously.

When applied to surveillance, AI serves as a tool for analysing data and recognising patterns (Ly 2023). The AI-driven surveillance systems, also referred to as 'algorithmic surveillance', significantly enhance existing capabilities, as they allow for quicker collection and analysis of even larger volumes of data in real time. Machine learning algorithms, facial recognition (FR) systems, and predictive analytics have all contributed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of surveillance operations, thus enabling proactive threat detection and response (Fontes *et al.* 2022).

AI surveillance technologies are increasingly adopted because they promise to enhance efficiency, scale, and responsiveness in public security management. In contrast to traditional CCTV systems, which require constant human monitoring and retrospective footage analysis, AI systems can process live video streams, detect predefined 'abnormal' events (e.g. unattended baggage, crowd surges, loitering), and automatically alert authorities (Laursen 2023). For example, FR has been promoted as a tool for identifying known threats in real time by matching live images against watchlists (Almeida *et al.* 2022, p. 382). This enables pre-emptive intervention, allowing authorities to act not only on what people are doing but who they are understood to be. In this logic, AI does not simply record what is happening – it becomes a decision-support system that evaluates, categorises, and sometimes predicts risk (Fontes *et al.* 2022, p. 2). This automation introduces profound shifts in both the scale of surveillance and its political implications, particularly in how suspicion and security are constructed and acted upon.

According to the AI Global Surveillance (AIGS) Index, in 2019, at least 75 out of 176 countries globally were actively using AI technologies for surveillance purposes via means such as smart city/safe city platforms, FR systems, and smart policing (Feldstein 2019, p. 7). In 2022, this number increased to 97 countries out of 179 with liberal democracies identified as major users, while China emerged as the leading supplier of AI surveillance (OECD. AI 2023). Feldstein (2019, p. 24) notes that even advanced democracies with strong rule of law traditions struggle to navigate legal and ethical dilemmas associated with the use of AI. Indeed, AI still represents a 'grey area' within the international law. The rapid advancements in AI technology have outpaced the development of legal frameworks to govern its use, leading to ambiguity and uncertainty regarding its ethical and legal implications. The EU 2016 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets standards for the protection of personal data but may not fully address the complex issues raised by AI. For example, Article 23 of the GDPR leaves personal data management for law enforcement purposes for determination at EU Member State level, resulting in inconsistent practices across the Union (Almeida *et al.* 2022, p. 380). In addition, AI's issues go beyond ethical conundrums related to privacy and transparency, requiring broader considerations of equality and wider human rights issues (Rodrigues 2020). To rectify this, following years of negotiations, the European Parliament passed its landmark AI Act in March 2024, which aims to regulate AI systems' development and deployment, including those used for surveillance (Krasodonski and Buchser 2024). This constitutes the first-ever comprehensive legal framework on AI (European Commission 2024). However, the international community has yet to reach consensus on global standards and regulations for the ethical development and deployment of AI systems. The global impact of this regulation remains to be seen (Engler 2022). Furthermore, various provisions related to specific AI technologies will not be fully implemented for 24–36 months (European Parliament 2024). This delay raises additional concerns about potential human rights violations, privacy infringements, and discriminatory practices associated with the use of AVS at the Paris 2024 Olympics.

To build on the above, the three key pitfalls of AI revolve around issues of privacy, explainability, and algorithmic bias (Tsamados *et al.* 2022). While the right to privacy and rules around managing personal data are to some extent covered by the GDPR and further legislated through the European Convention on Human Rights, the issues of explainability and algorithmic bias remain inadequately addressed and pose significant challenges in the context of AI surveillance, particularly concerning its implementation at mega-events. The issue of explainability or AI's so-called 'black box problem' refers to the obscured and inscrutable ways in which AI algorithms reach their decisions (Matulionyte and Hanif 2021, p. 75). Without clear explanations of how algorithms analyse data and make judgements, it becomes difficult to hold these systems accountable for their actions.

According to Amoores and De Goede (2008, p. 180, emphasis in the original), 'In the dispersed practices of the contemporary security apparatus, we may never know if a decision *is* a decision ... or if it has been "controlled by previous knowledge" and "programmed"'. The opacity surrounding AI algorithms in surveillance systems not only exacerbates concerns about accountability but also presents broader ethical and societal implications, particularly in the context of mega-events. The lack of explainability hinders transparency and oversight, making it challenging to ensure that AI surveillance systems

operate in a manner consistent with ethical principles and human rights standards, which is echoed in the growing concern among the civil society about the use of AVS in Paris Olympics (Morrow 2023, Pouré 2023). To make matters worse, in April 2024, the then French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced that secret service surveillance would increase by 20% during the Olympics, thereby loosening ‘the reins on the surveillance sources available to French spies’ (Follorou 2024). This expansion of surveillance capabilities raises questions about the scope of data collection and processing, the extent of government oversight, and the potential for abuse or misuse of surveillance powers.

The lack of transparency in machine learning algorithms and neural networks that power surveillance systems is further complicated by the inherent biases that exist in the data that is fed into them. For example, controversies surrounding predictive policing illustrate that the human element in the data used to train algorithms put the neutrality of AI-powered systems into question and emphasise the potential for replicating and amplifying social prejudices (Hao 2019, Shapiro 2019). The deployment of AVS at the Paris Olympics presents identical concerns with Amnesty International (2023) claiming that this technology will reinforce ‘racist policing’ and disproportionately target ethnic minorities and migrants. Indeed, according to Aradau and Blanke (2017, p. 19), algorithmic practices focused on detecting ‘anomalies’ reconfigure existing binary oppositions of ‘normality/abnormality, identity/difference, or friend/enemy’. The inner workings of the algorithms enable them to enact the relations of ‘selves to selves, and selves to others’ (Amoore 2020, p. 8).

AI surveillance systems, like those at the Paris Olympics, embody what Foucault describes as biopower – the management of populations through technological means. These systems produce self-regulating subjects, who conform to norms out of the constant awareness of being watched (Schwarz 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, AI-driven surveillance intersects with biopolitical regimes, which according to Dillon and Lobo-Guerro (2008, p. 267) manage and govern populations based on statistical analyses and risk assessments. This fusion of biopower and surveillance technologies gives rise to new forms of social control and exclusion. As such, the deployment of AVS at the Paris Olympics does not only mean that ‘the Games are watching us’ (cf. Sugden 2012, p. 426) but also that the Games are watching *some of us* more closely than others, including those social groups seen as potentially ‘disruptive’ or ‘undesirable’ to the Olympic festival (Kennelly and Watt 2011), as Olympic cities, including Paris, typically utilise ‘clean-up’ strategies of social control to remove, for example, homeless people or sex workers (Willsher 2024).

Moreover, given that sport mega-events are considered by scholars as testing sites for the implementation of new security technologies (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010), and that AI is considered as the ‘next wave’ of Olympic securitisation (Duckworth and Krieger 2021), this section argues these trends, when brought together, have implications for future sport mega-events in diverse political and geographical contexts, and widely, cultures of surveillance in sport. This raises important questions about whether similar technologies will be adopted at upcoming mega-events, such as the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milano-Cortina or the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Games. Concurrently, if AI-driven surveillance is abandoned in this context, this would also be significant, as it raises questions about the reasons behind its rejection and the regulatory or civil society pressures that may have limited its deployment.

The first algorithmic Olympics

Debord's (1983) notion of *the spectacle* is never far away in academic analyses of the Olympics for various reasons. As Boyle and Haggerty (2009, p. 271, emphasis in the original) write, the Olympics represent contemporary 'security spectacles': at the Olympics, security 'must not only be done, it must be *seen* to be done'. Yet, the Olympics' sporting and symbolic elements are also spectacular and Wolfe (2023, p. 257) argues that '[m]ega-events like the Olympics are famous for their sport and spectacle, but they have serious impacts on the cities and societies that host them'. The Paris 2024 Summer Olympics was no exception, having temporarily and spatially reconfigured the city's urban spaces. However, given trends which have seen several democratic countries increasingly aware of these serious impacts, and increasingly risk averse and reluctant *vis-à-vis* bidding for mega-event hosting rights, Paris and Los Angeles were, in fact, the only remaining candidate cities for the 2024 Olympics. Thus, the event owner, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in order 'to avoid negative press regarding the lack of bids [...] broke with precedent and awarded two Games at once, simultaneously granting the rights for 2024 to Paris and 2028 to Los Angeles' (Wolfe 2023, p. 260).

While Paris 2024 has been a focal point for analysis in some emerging studies (Gignon 2023, Bourbilleres 2024), it remains remarkable that one of *the* most controversial aspects of this Olympic edition is yet to feature centrally in this work with the exception of Ferrari (2022). In the event's build-up, several media reports have surfaced, reporting on the French authorities' intention to use the Olympics as a window to introduce and test 'unprecedented levels of technological surveillance across the city' (Guerrini 2023). In March 2023, the French National Assembly passed the bill (dubbed the 'Olympics Security Law') to allow for the experimental use of AVS, claiming that the technology could detect 'predetermined events' (Laursen 2023) and identify abnormal behaviours and crowd surges with the aim to enhance the security of Olympic spectators. In May 2023, France's top constitutional court has sanctioned the use of AVS at the Olympics despite privacy concerns from campaigner groups (O'Carroll 2023). Consequently, France became the first EU country to legalise AI surveillance (Foroudi 2023, O'Carroll 2023). To mitigate pushback from privacy and civil rights advocates, the French authorities stated that the processing of AVS data will not implement any FR technologies nor use any biometric identification system (McConvey 2023). However, critics maintain that this does not resolve the issue. For instance, the main French organisation for the defence of data privacy *La Quadrature du Net* stated that AVS poses 'the same risks for public liberties and the same possibilities of abuse by the police, whose racist practices have been widely documented' (cited in Pouré 2023).

We argue that this renders the Paris Olympics politically significant both in the EU and global security contexts. In Olympic history, meanwhile, it represents (yet) another reference point whereby the Games have mirrored or initiated new surveillance developments (Sugden 2012). In this respect, Zirin and Boykoff (2023) have used Paris 2024 as another example of the Olympic 'state of exception', whilst maintaining that '[t]he Olympics don't make authoritarian countries more democratic; they make democratic countries more authoritarian'. Others have, more directly, called for further work and efforts to 'surveil surveillance' considering the case of Paris 2024 (Ferrari 2023, p. 90). However, there is also a triadic and wider security-related backdrop here. First, issues, and

the politicisation, of security at recent French sporting events have been significant talking points. In 2016, France (including the host city Paris) hosted the European Football Championship while the country was in a state of emergency. A few months earlier, in November 2015, *Stade De France* in Paris had been targeted in a terrorist attack during a football fixture (Coaffee 2024). Second, after the Champions League final in May 2022, staged at *Stade De France*, French authorities and police were also criticised for causing insecurity among spectators due to their heavy-handed policing of spectators including the use of tear-gas and pepper spray (Lee Ludvigsen 2024). Third, the efforts to secure the Paris Olympics relied upon international coalitions and collaborations, as it was reported in March 2024 that Polish troops would be deployed in Paris for the Olympics (Reuters 2024). Therefore, the Paris case in distinctive ways reignites the powerful assertion that ‘the Olympics provide a glimpse into the most painstaking security planning outside of warfare’ (Boyle *et al.* 2015, p. 122) and invites critical security-oriented analyses to capture emerging issues, as unpacked next.

Celebration capitalism and the ‘anti-Olympic’ struggle: the framing of surveillance

Another crucial question that emerges in line with Paris 2024 relates to the centralised position of surveillance in the wider anti-Olympic struggles in Paris and beyond. Specifically, how Olympics-related surveillance is incorporated even further into anti-Olympic campaigns and positioned against broader, similar processes in other host cities and global contexts (Wolfe 2024). The Olympics (and Games’ build-up periods), historically, have frequently been a site of political expression and protest. In recent years, too, the Olympic movement has been paralleled by a series of transnational movements whose message and demand remain that no Olympics should take place anywhere (Boykoff 2019, 2020). Activism at, or around, the Olympics still exists despite the IOC’s insistence and regulations holding that politics and the Olympics should not mix (Boykoff 2019, Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2024).

Throughout the past decades, Boykoff and Fussey (2014, 2019, 2020), Lenskyj (2020), and Wolfe (2024) have all demonstrated how activists and diverse social justice movements have come together as a ‘*movement of movements*’ (Boykoff and Fussey 2014) and employed the Olympics as a focal point. Typically, these movements resist relevant cities’ Olympic bidding and housing and critically question several elements of the Olympic impact upon public spaces and cities broadly. Anti-Olympic movements thus typically frame themselves as opposed to the processes induced by the Olympic hosting rights (or the pursuit of these rights) including gentrification, human rights violations, environmental destructions and, crucially in this paper’s context, the militarisation and securitisation of public space (see Boykoff 2020). These processes, however, are often muted, or justified under the banner of Olympic festivities encapsulating what Boykoff and Fussey (2014) calls ‘celebration capitalism’ – as characterised by state of exception, hyper-commercialism, and the repression of dissent.

Measuring the impacts or outcomes of these movements remains challenging (Boykoff and Fussey 2014). Still, it is observable that anti-Olympic movements and their critiques have matured and increasingly targeted cities and their authorities *before* securing the Olympic hosting rights or even bidding for them. Reflecting the ways in which urban policy mobilities are increasingly contested by the alternative and counter-hegemonic

visions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists (McCann 2011), Lauermaun and Vogelpohl (2019, p. 1232) draw attention to the fact that:

In recent years, however, anti-Olympic critique has evolved into more politically coherent campaigns that have successfully challenged numerous projects. Anti-Olympic critique has evolved with the rise of protest campaigns by targeting cities' bids to host the Games. From 2013 to 2018, 13 cities cancelled their Olympic bids after unfavourable referendums (Calgary, Davos/St Moritz, Graz, Hamburg, Innsbruck, Munich, Sion) or when local officials withdrew support in response to opposition campaigns. (Boston, Budapest, Krakow, Rome, Oslo, Stockholm)

In line with these trends, Paris 2024 has been heavily criticised by activist groups in the event's build-up. These criticisms speak directly to the general concerns associated with AI-driven surveillance, namely algorithmic bias, data privacy, systemic discrimination, and normalisation of mass surveillance (McConvey 2023). Yet, they also focus on other 'top-down' expressions of celebration capitalism.

Less than 12 months before the commencement of the Olympics, it was reported that activists had protested against Paris' Organising Committee, fronting posters that read 'the other side of the medal'. This was part of a wider effort to raise concerns about the Olympics' contribution to the 'social cleansing' of homeless people in the *Île-de-France* region (Berkely 2023). Moreover, throughout the event's preparation phase, the heterogeneous anti-Olympic collective called '*NON aux JO2024*' has also engaged in online meetings with similar groups located in past or future Olympic cities including Tokyo and Los Angeles, in order to 'share resources', 'coordinate action', and facilitate the transnational circulation of Olympic counter-discourses (Wolfe 2023, p. 267). In Los Angeles and Paris, campaigns thus seek to draw attention to the fact that residents in the two cities occupying the spaces 'near the sites of intervention – [who are] generally poorer and majority-minority – risk ending up worse than they were before Olympic hosting rights were won' (Wolfe 2024, p. 10).

As argued here, these examples of anti-Olympic campaigns must be approached as empirically valuable cases for political, sociological, and social movement-focused understandings of activism *against* surveillance and security policies. Indeed, from a critical theory perspective, the 'anti-Olympic struggle' – which at its very core resists overlapping processes of securitisation, militarisation, and human rights violations – must be understood as a 'movement of movements' (Boykoff and Fussey 2014) that fundamentally promotes emancipatory change (see Wyn Jones 1999). As such, and beyond the Olympics, this is revealing of the contestation over the definition of 'security' in modern societies, whereby the legitimacy and proportionality of security measures are contested among, in this case, city planners, law enforcers, organising committees, the IOC, and activists with a stake in the definition of security. Given that the powerful actors here (e.g. the IOC, security professionals, or organising committee) are often assumed to be the 'dominant agents' within an imagined, Bourdieusian *mega-event field* (de Oliveira 2020), we argue that the extent to which anti-Olympic actors with less power operate and counter the Parisian 'surveillant assemblage' (cf. Haggerty and Ericson 2000) and the future, similar technologies that preserve or expand the Olympic surveillance trajectory (Duckworth and Krieger 2021), will tell us something more broadly about how social movements contest intertwining security-related and neoliberal policies (Jeffries 2011)

which, the Olympics – as expressions of ‘celebration capitalism’ (Boykoff and Fussey 2014) – has come to epitomise. Essentially, the potential centralisation of surveillance into local activists and residents’ Olympic struggle can be particularly revealing of how these groups try to ‘bring local issues into conversation with broader processes in other host cities around the globe’ (Wolfe 2024, p. 11). Yet, as explained next, Paris 2024 also maps the contours of how mega-event securitisation has now become a central issue on the agenda of wider civil liberty campaign groups who mainly are concerned with wider issues *beyond* sports or the Olympics.

Security legacies and civil liberties

This section argues that the Paris Olympics enable a set of new, inter-linked questions speaking to (1) security legacies; (2) resistance towards surveillance ‘from below’; and (3) the connection between security measures and the political economy of the Olympics and sport, more broadly. Olympic host cities, their organising committees, and the IOC typically justify the enormous costs of staging the Olympics by highlighting the beneficial post-event legacies that an Olympic edition, supposedly, will generate. Therefore, legacies are commonly framed in terms of the local, regional, and national economies, tourism, national pride, upgraded infrastructures, and international place-branding (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010, Boyle *et al.* 2015).

Notwithstanding, as mentioned, scholars demonstrate that legacies may also be framed in terms of security and surveillance, often conceptualised as ‘security legacies’ (Boyle and Haggerty 2009, Giulianotti and Klauser 2010, Boyle *et al.* 2015). Security legacies can be understood as the ‘security-related strategies and impacts which continue to have significance beyond the life of the sport event’ and, commonly, these encompass security technologies that are tried and tested for a specific mega-event, including ‘new CCTV or other surveillance systems in major urban centers’ (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010, p. 54) and data-analysing and criminal profiling systems (Houlihan and Giulianotti 2012). There is a longstanding political history of security legacies related to the Olympics and, what is more, there is ‘little evidence to show this trend will slow in the future’ (Duckworth and Krieger 2021). Despite this, there is little scholarly work which, to date, has captured the maturation, longevity, and the temporal and socio-spatial transportation of security legacies in diverse cases. It is here we argue that the case of AI surveillance at the Paris Olympics attaches another layer to the debates around security legacies. Indeed, we sustain that questions must be asked concerning how – or if – this particular technology will remain as a ‘legacy’, and whether this turn towards AI surveillance becomes the ‘norm’ within other urban events (e.g. protests, concerts, regular sport events) in the city and beyond following the Olympic experience.

When the AVS technology was initially cleared for use by the French government in March 2023, it was reported that the so-called ‘Olympics security law’ would also cover any large-scale (over 300 participants) gatherings, including other sporting events and concerts (O’Brien 2023). France’s 2023 Rugby World Cup (in September–October 2023) employed the AVS and, consequently, became a pilot or rehearsal event preceding the Olympics (Burke 2023) illustrating, simultaneously, the circuits of learning and lesson-drawing imbued in sport mega-event organisation and how implementation often spans various spatial and sporting contexts (Lee Ludvigsen 2022). In March 2024, it was also

reported that the AVS technology was tested at two music events in Paris (McConvey 2024). The French Interior Ministry commissioned the Wintics company to operate in the Paris region, where its Cityvision software platform powered surveillance cameras that were installed at the events (Untersinger and Reynaud 2024). While the trial of the technology was framed as a ‘success’ by Parisian police (Jabkhiro and Pretot 2024), what exactly constitutes a ‘success’ remains unclear, and the ability to define security policies’ effectiveness or success is commonly monopolised by the dominant professionals of the ‘security field’ (cf. Bigo 2006).

While the French government has initially emphasised that the expansion of surveillance powers before the Olympics is temporary and event-specific, it is evident that citizens, academics, and civil rights organisations have critically challenged this claim (Jaromi 2023), reflecting a broader critical stance emerging within transnational civil society, as discussed previously. For example, Noémie Levain, a legal adviser for a French digital rights group, stated that the AVS allows the police ‘to decide who is normal and who is suspicious based on their own stereotypes’ (cited in Morrow 2023). Concerns have also been raised about the potential long-term spread of AVS beyond the Olympics (Pouré 2023). Notably, Article 10 of the ‘Olympics security law’ states that images collected by AVS may be subject to algorithmic processing until March 2025 (Coillet-Matillon 2024). Levain (cited in Pouré 2023) describes this law as ‘a Trojan horse to permanently install automated video protection in public spaces’, echoing Boykoff’s (2013, 2023) sentiment that the Olympics often serve as a pretext for the deployment of new security tools and enhanced state power. Indeed, in September 2024, the chief of Paris police expressed his backing for keeping AI surveillance post-Olympics, claiming that it had ‘proved its usefulness’ (RFI 2024). Thus, despite initial assurances of temporary use, there are already institutional moves to normalise this surveillance tool beyond the Olympics.

The 2024 Olympics, therefore, has not merely attracted criticism from *anti-Olympic* campaigners, but also from international NGOs, including Amnesty International which has heavily criticised the AI surveillance technology, maintaining that it would pave the way into a ‘dystopian future’ and ‘expand police powers by broadening the government’s arsenal of surveillance equipment, permanently’ (Amnesty International 2023). Here, the criticisms Amnesty International have levelled at the AVS relate primarily to the technology’s potentially discriminatory nature, its potential incompatibility with the right to protest and, finally, its potential violation of the right to privacy. Other campaign groups, meanwhile, have warned about the security legacies that might endure when the Games are over, and used previous Olympic Games as examples to warn about the problematic nature of exceptional Olympics-related measures becoming normalised (BBC 2023). As such, we argue that the case of Paris 2024 is particularly revealing of wider social movement-based critiques of surveillance (see Jeffries 2011). This is powerfully expressed by the public letter signed by 38 civil society organisations, in March 2023, criticising the new Olympic law, its potential legacies, and its incompatibility with democracy and, within a human rights frame, with proportionality and necessity. As this letter warned, the technology and law also set a ‘dangerous precedent for other European countries’ (see 2023).

The ways in which the AI surveillance discourses are followed by counter-discourses, of course, remains of high relevance to scholars of security, activism, and social movements.

However, as argued here, key questions for scholars to engage with relate to not merely if the AI surveillance remains permanent or not post-event, but also the extent to which its alleged 'success' or 'effectiveness' are cited in public discourses ahead of future sporting events, protest, or other urban festivals in Paris, but also beyond the 2024 Olympics' immediate context, as security legacies are not always confined to one place. For example, within the EU context, it is well-established how strategies of surveillance and policing tested in sport are occasionally used in the policing of protests, demonstrations, and concerts (della Porta 2013). Moreover, Duckworth and Krieger (2021, p. 272) highlight how Ecuadorian government officials, after visiting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and seeing its surveillance apparatus, 'were impressed by what they saw, [and] purchased the same surveillance equipment'.

It can therefore be argued that the extent to which AI surveillance now becomes the 'norm' ahead of future Olympic spectacles, and how the case of, and lessons from Paris 2024 inform these, emerges as a key area that warrants continued research. Finally, given the emphasis on the creation of 'clean venues' free from commercial, religious, and political messages or advertising – as requested by the IOC's own policies for host cities – one potential avenue for further work relates to how surveillance mechanisms, in a Foucauldian sense, at the Olympics might contribute to the creation of these 'clean venues' which, whilst seeking to contain 'ambush marketing' also contribute towards the privatisation of spaces of expression (Heine 2018). As argued elsewhere, it is possible to analyse this specific policy as an institutionalised attempt to control and govern Olympic populations towards Olympic spaces of consumption and sponsorship (Byrne and Lee Ludvigsen 2024) and thus, contribute towards what Giulianotti *et al.* (2015, p. 132) call 'corporate kettling', whereby 'physical geography, security measures and expert advice combine to direct and to maneuver people into spaces of transnational consumption'. Thus, as argued here, the regulation of Olympic and '*post-Olympic*' spaces, its connection to 'celebration' or 'surveillance' capitalism (cf. Boykoff and Fussey 2014, Zuboff 2022), and the potential normalisation of exception requires further critical and comparative analysis.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the politics of contestation and evolving discourses and counter-discourses that surface in line with new surveillance technologies, exemplified by the build-up to Paris 2024. However, the implications of this exceed Paris. If future Olympic Games and other sport mega-events follow the similar trajectory, these (counter-)discourses within and beyond the world of sport are likely to re-emerge. Overall, and first, this article contributes to broader debates on the social consequences of intensified surveillance and security projects in the twenty-first century (Bauman and Lyon 2013). Second, this discussion extends the literature on the nexus between securitisation, surveillance, and the Olympics (Tsoukala 2006, Boyle and Haggerty 2009, Klauser 2017, Coaffee 2024). This nexus, as demonstrated, remains not only historically significant but sociologically important because securitisation of mega-events, in many cases, travels into other areas of society and public life and may even be transported transnationally (Klauser 2017, Duckworth and Krieger 2021). Crucially, although the event in itself is temporally restricted, Olympic securitisation is never entirely limited by time, space nor its immediate social context. Indeed, as the most globally significant mega-event, the

Olympics are reflective of, and entangled in a web of, internationally significant security complexes and trends. These, we argue, have important political and sociological consequences.

The backdrop of our discussion is that, before and during Paris 2024 Olympics, as Coaffee (2024, p. 16, emphasis added) submits, 'concern [has] continued to be expressed about the *draconian and dystopian security* that would be deployed with a special focus upon "experimental" AI enabled surveillance technologies'. These concerns have, so far, been framed in terms of its potential permanent nature and implications for privacy and civil liberty. This is explained by the fact that '[h]istory shows that the Olympic state of exception often becomes the new normal, handing more power to the already powerful at the expense of movements from below pressing for justice' (Boykoff 2023). As this trend has evolved, one crucial challenge *vis-à-vis* mega-event securitisation hence relates to the 'balance between privacy, security and the role of technology in hosting the Olympic games' (Duckworth and Krieger 2021, p. 276).

Hence, this conceptual article aimed to question and examine (1) the social implications of the use of AI surveillance at Paris 2024, and (2) the potential contestations and counter-discourses that emerge in line with this. Responding to this, the article produced two key arguments. First, we argued that the intention and decision to employ AI surveillance at the Olympics do not solely reinforce the extant Olympic securitisation trajectory; but also reveal a broader embrace of technology, exemplified by AI, within modern security and surveillant assemblages. Unlike earlier forms of surveillance, AI systems introduce automation, anomaly detection, and predictive capabilities, shifting the logic of security from visual monitoring to algorithmic judgement. This transformation is not only technical but political, as it reconfigures how suspicion is generated, acted upon, and justified. In this regard, Paris 2024 exemplifies how the Olympics will continue to serve as a 'testing ground' or 'laboratory' for security (Giulianotti and Klauser 2010, Clavel 2013).

Yet, as we argue, this is not an uncontested phenomenon and it raises questions speaking to the ethics of security, the 'from-below' resistance by civil society actors including anti-Olympic and human right campaigners, and finally, the concretisation of such technologies in other parts of society, including, potentially, the policing and securitisation of protests, urban events and festivals, and the public order. Second, for these reasons, we argue that Paris 2024 raises a set of intriguing agendas for research. These, however, and importantly, are *not* confined to Paris 2024 or mega-event securitisation: they relate to the wider ethics and activism around security-related technologies and their potential longevity in local communities, urban spaces, and crowded events of cultural, political, and sporting significance. The use of AI surveillance in this context also sets a precedent: if such technologies are normalised under the banner of Olympic security, it is likely they will reappear at future events – potentially in more expansive or less regulated forms. Understanding how Paris 2024 is framed, resisted, and operationalised therefore holds important implications for the governance of future sporting events such as Milano-Cortina 2026 and Los Angeles 2028, where decisions around AI surveillance may again become flashpoints for debate. However, such research should be *interdisciplinary* by nature, and, for example, we argue that the technology's relevant implications for civil liberties should be examined *vis-à-vis* conceptions of proportionality and the

right to privacy from a human rights or legal studies perspective. Given the mobility of expertise, technology, and policy in mega-event contexts (Boyle *et al.* 2015), scholars are also encouraged to explore whether the lessons (and counter-lessons) from Paris inform future Olympic securitisations, their cities, and parallel anti-Olympic campaigns and these campaigns' counter-arguments.

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