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'For me, the most important issue is the games themselves': anti-Olympic activism and AI video surveillance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which activists contest Olympic-related security and surveillance measures. The Olympics bring about some of the largest security operations globally and, by drawing upon qualitative data, the article questions (1) how 'anti-Olympic' activists contest practices, technologies and legacies of security, and (2) how these activists can be situated within a wider social space – a security field – structured around security claim-making. This article argues that despite activists' efforts to question and critique security-related trends, the politics of (in)security constitute a significant barrier that may mute activists' expressed discontent within the field. Further, activists' critiques of security can only be fully understood if seen in relation to the more general social struggle against the Olympics-related gentrification, evictions, and human rights breaches which in itself is a struggle against injustices and uneven power structures in capitalist societies. These findings add to recent debates surrounding the importance of human rights and social justice within leisure contexts.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen renewed debates around the importance of human rights and social justice in leisure studies and, most specifically, around mega-events (Boykoff, 2020; McGillivray et al., 2019). This exploratory study provides an original analysis of the acts of resistance, and social and political contestations that occur in parallel with processes of (trans)national securitisation and their impacts on human and democratic rights. It demonstrates how these contestations against sport mega-events' social costs are enmeshed in wider struggles against urban, economic and environmental processes. As *the* largest mega-event globally, the staging of the Olympics directly and indirectly impacts millions of people, including host city residents, spectators, athletes and officials (Pauschinger, 2024). However, in contemporary societies, security concerns related to the Olympics typically proliferate and dominate before and during the event. As Giulianiotti and Klauser (2010) highlight, this may also give life to 'security legacies',

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whereby temporary and event-related practices, legislation or technologies remain in place after the 'brief sporting extravaganzas have left town' (p. 53).

At the most recent Olympics at the time of writing, in Paris (2024), there were reports about the use of a new, controversial Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance technology and the eviction of homeless and vulnerable populations. First deployed for the Olympic Games in Tokyo (somewhat redundantly, given the Covid-19 induced lack of crowds), AI surveillance tools are among the latest trends in security technology deployed at mega-events as a 'testing ground' for new surveillance and security measures (Samatas, 2025). This encompasses a range of technologies such as facial recognition and broader algorithmic surveillance which analyses bodily movements to detect unusual behaviours. The specific nature of the technology differs between host cities, with French law notably prohibiting facial recognition, but allowing analysis of behavioural patterns. These security measures introduced for the mega-event regularly remain in place as 'legacies' once the Olympic flame fades away to mark the closure of an Olympic edition (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009). Meanwhile, ring-of-steel or spectacular security are standardised facets of the Olympics (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012). These security efforts are intended to secure the masses of spectators attending mega-events. Reportedly, before Paris 2024 over one million tickets were purchased prior to the event, showcasing its status as a global attraction (Berkeley, 2023).

Not with standing, 'security' – when pursued or used as justification for new measures – remains a politically contentious field of high importance to social movement scholars (Jeffries, 2011). Parallel to the roll-out of novel security and surveillance technologies, we observe that protest groups and campaigners increasingly have contested not just the securitisation processes induced by the Olympics, but the Olympics itself (Boykoff, 2020; Boykoff & Fussey, 2014; Duignan et al., 2025; Talbot, 2024). However, while it remains established that issues of over-policing, new technologies and the fortification of cities collectively constitute an issue that 'anti-Olympic' activists *struggle against*, we contend that social movement scholars seldom zoom in on this 'security struggle' specifically. Analyses rarely develop an understanding of how precisely these struggles may tell us something important about activists' contestations over security politics and their position within a security field.

Instead, there is a tendency in existing research to first and foremost consider the top-down enforcement (from security actors, law enforcers, authorities) of new Olympic security apparatuses (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009, 2012; Pauschinger, 2024). This research gap is prolonged because the same tendency is visible in the study of security. Here, few studies examine activism, campaigns and movements questioning security measures (Montesinos Coleman & Rosenow, 2016) or surveillance technologies (Ludvigsen, 2025). One important task hence becomes to integrate social movement insights into the study of security-related processes.

As Jeffries (2011) notes in her study of social movement critiques of surveillance, one reason behind this research gap is that 'anti-surveillance' critiques seldom occur through the creation of coherent or surveillance-specific movements. Instead, Jeffries argues, we must locate surveillance and security-related contestations within wider movements of resistance and within 'activist groups that perceive the spread of surveillance as a process enmeshed in a more general social struggle around war, racism, the concentration of power, and the biopolitical calibration of public fears and insecurities' (p. 187). Extending

this position, we contend that ‘anti-Olympic’ groups encapsulate this precisely. These groups, indeed, struggle against securitisation and militarisation; though, primarily as a part of their wider efforts to critique the Olympics, and its associated processes of gentrification, human rights violations, and the (mis)use of taxpayers’ money to fund a sporting spectacle (Boykoff, 2020, 2024; Duignan et al., 2025; Talbot, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this article adopts an exploratory approach and engages with two research questions. First, how and why do anti-Olympic activists contest practices, technologies and legacies of security? Second, how are these activists and their groups situated within a wider, social security field (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010) structured around the (in)ability to make claims about, and define security? In doing so, the article draws from activist interviews and documentary data. We are also informed by our prior, empirical work, including Talbot’s (2024) scholar-activist research into grassroots activism surrounding the Olympics, and Ludvigsen’s (2023b, 2025) work on (in)security contestations in sport. All this feeds into our arguments, holding that the politics of (in) security serves as a potential barrier that may quell the activists’ expressed discontent within the field. Moreover, activists’ critique of security can only be holistically understood if analysed in relation to the more general social struggle against the Olympics-related gentrification, evictions, and human rights breaches which – in itself – remains a struggle against injustices and uneven power structures in capitalist societies.

Overall, this article makes two main contributions to extant literature. First, it synthesises insights from social movement studies, the sociology of sport and critical security studies to conceptualise, and empirically elaborate upon, a social field around Olympic securitisations, focusing predominantly on activists’ unique stories and perspectives. Our multi-disciplinary approach, thus, enables the conceptualisation of a security field as viewed from the ‘bottom-up’. Second, we contribute with new insights speaking to the glocalised struggles attached to the Olympics as a global event. Here, contentious processes move from city to city and reveal a set of standardised, yet locally shaped and dependent issues. Whilst much literature exists on the Olympics’ local implications (e.g. Boykoff, 2020), we add to this literature by showcasing how transnationally significant contestations over surveillance, as located in sports and leisure settings, are concurrently tied into a set of local circumstances despite the Olympics’ global nature.

Theorising contestations in a security field

This section conceptually positions social movements and activists within what can be understood as a security field (Bigo, 2000; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Ludvigsen, 2023). The mobilisation of this concept rests on Bourdieu’s (1977) field theory, which for long has been crucial for understandings of activists’ social struggles and interactions in social movement studies (Crossley, 2002; Ibrahim, 2013). Fields are social spaces (e.g. artistic, educational, protest fields) in which a ‘social game’ over different stakes takes place (Crossley, 2002). Here, structured systems of social positions are hierarchically ordered and based on the distribution of different forms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital – which, in turn, concurrently define the relevant field (Bourdieu, 1993). This means that social fields are characterised by struggle as they are structured by social actors’ struggle for the ‘capital pertinent to them’, and thus influence, status

(Crossley, 2003, p. 44) existence and power within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Whilst the Bourdieusian field is regularly utilised by social movement scholars (e.g. Crossley, 2002; Ibrahim, 2013; Ludvigsen, 2023) this thinking tool has also made its inroad into critical security studies. Powerful processes of ‘globalisation’ and the Cold War’s end significantly transformed the nature of security and blurred traditional categories of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ security (Bigo, 2006). In this context, the notion of a security field, was ‘largely inspired by Bourdieu’ (Bigo, 2000, p. 87) and surfaced in line with wider trends within transnational security and policing. Though, as Bigo (2000, p. 87) noted, the social [security] actors in the field he envisaged did not necessarily draw upon their economic, cultural or symbolic capital; ‘[r]ather, we have a distribution of positions depending on types of knowledge (for threat management) which permit types of statement [...] which each agency is trying to promote’. This was exemplified by the emergence of particularised institutions – for example, liaison officers, anti-organised crime units or national football policing points – dealing with specific threats that increasingly became entangled in a field where the underlying struggle concerned the definition of security’ (Bigo, 2006) and, ultimately, the authorisation to make claims about and state what security *is* and the measures that can be taken to achieve this.

Advancing this thinking further, Giulianotti and Klauser (2010) argued that the security field holds a special theoretical purchase in the sport mega-event context, considering the growing post-9/11 security complexes at Olympic Games. They encouraged researchers to approach security sociologically and, in turn, treat mega-event securitisations as a *socially contested domain*. The security field,

contains objective, game-like relationships that are played out between various ‘players’ (or stakeholders). Each player has different volumes and kinds of ‘capital’ or power within the field. Stakeholders within the security field may include local people and residents, visiting spectators, police officers, government officials, local authority officials, local business people, nongovernmental and community-based organizations, sports officials, national and local politicians, private security companies, journalists, and other commentators. (p. 57)

The pre-existing literature on sport mega-event’s security governance has, indeed, showcased the significance of social relationships in the make-up of security prior to mega-events in form of transnational policy-transfer activities (Ludvigsen, 2022), the cultural and emotional context in which special forces operate in during mega-event securitisations (Pauschinger, 2024), and interactions between forms of expertise that take place in a ‘complex field of agencies, driving forces, motivations and understandings’ (Klauser, 2015, p. 229). Anti-Olympic activists’ role as legitimate stakeholders in this security field has not previously been considered, with these groups often viewed as a threat to the event by security agencies as opposed to a legitimate stakeholder engaged in contestation over security (van Luick & Frisby, 2012).

This affirms that the meanings of ‘security’ around mega-events are contested, negotiated, ever-changing, and never detached from the international system’s wider security dynamics. These diverse meanings, however, require us to ask, ‘security for whom?’ (Pauschinger, 2024) and, indeed, as this section argues, there has been a dominant focus

on the hegemonic actors of the security field in the literature (i.e. the police, policy-makers, the IOC).

Limited research – both within security and social movement studies – considers the role of activists and social movements in face of securitisation processes. While some scholars draw attention to how civil society actors challenge established security narratives, for example, how activists contest the definition of specific subjects as sources of insecurity (Rossdale, 2016), Montesinos Coleman and Rosenow (2016, p. 213) remained adamant that analyses within critical security studies have continued to revolve around ‘obvious processes of maintaining order in the context of threat’, and ‘still focuses too much on what policymakers themselves regard as “security” practices’, compared to, say, activists, social movements and protesters. Thus, a *twofold specific/general* research gap, which we set out to fill, becomes visible here. Not only are security-related contestations surrounding the Olympics only given limited attention in existing work; the very same may be said about security or surveillance-related activism more broadly (e.g. Jeffries, 2011).

Whilst theoretically and empirically understanding, for example, policing actors or the IOC’s positions in the definition of ‘security’ remains crucial, such research cannot necessarily capture the breadth and width of mega-events’ security fields – which may entail local residents, community-based organisations and NGOs. Thus, analyses of *bottom-up* contestations of security, that occur in parallel with those versions of security set out by the dominant actors are much needed to gain a more holistic and nuanced portrait of mega-events’ security field.

From the Bourdieusian proposition, *struggle* remains an inherent element of social fields (Crossley, 2003). Moreover, scholars have called for using ‘struggle’ against dominant regimes of power and knowledge as starting points for analyses (Montesinos Coleman & Rosenow, 2016). Thus, to extend our understanding of the activism/security nexus, the security field becomes an important conceptual framework that can help us understand how social movement articulate their contestation within a security (movement) field, how they interact with other agents in the field, and how they navigate the lack of direct access to policymakers or security actors (Ludvigsen, 2023). Overall, we argue for the importance of examining and capturing bottom-up struggles and contestations surrounding security practices, discourses, and technologies.

The Olympics offer a potentially rewarding, empirical context for such examinations for two key reasons. First, the enormous socio-political significance of Olympic securitisation was mentioned earlier. This is further illustrated by the recent \$348.42 million security budget for the Paris 2024 Olympics, including the use of 35,000 security staff (Reuters, 2024). Given that such figures represent the norm, rather than the exception, critically interrogating the *meanings of security* becomes paramount (Ludvigsen, 2022). Especially so, as the Olympic security apparatus – whilst designed to prevent terrorism and control large crowds – ‘can also be applied to other concerns such as low-level incivilities and, most notably, silencing political dissent’ while leaving behind a post-event ‘security legacy’ (Boykoff & Fussey, 2014, p. 255). In this sense, mega-events may accelerate further a type of militarisation of urban spaces; which Virilio theorised through spatial re-organisation, and a set of dromological effects insofar as time-specific practices may begin to dictate the speed of everyday (post-event) social life (e.g. Virilio, 2006). Second, as unpacked next,

securitisation processes are only *one* of the many processes that anti-Olympic groups and activists have coalesced over locally, nationally and globally in recent years (Boykoff, 2020). Despite the IOC's insistence that the Olympics should remain *apolitical*, the mega-event constitutes an important entrée for analyses of activism, security processes, and other urban and neoliberal processes. The Olympic case thus invites us to clarify the wider puzzles regarding the dynamics of 'anti-surveillance' activism (cf. Jeffries, 2011) and how social movements are positioned – conceptually and empirically – in a security field.

As Houlihan and Giulianotti (2012, p. 702) write, the Olympics can be envisioned as a political arena that:

provide an increasingly distinct political opportunity structure; but what is arguably more significant is the ease with which such an opening can be utilized by the governments of participating and host countries as well as by a range of social movements.

Concerning the latter, social movements and activist groups opposing the Olympics have become a common feature wherever the event is organised. In recent decades, the exponential growth of the Olympics has led to deleterious impacts on host cities, including displacement, securitisation, environmental damage and other issues, while these events also serve to create a broad media platform for oppositional groups (Duignan et al., 2025). Mega-events therefore simultaneously bring political opportunities due to vast media coverage, and political threats due to their wide-ranging impacts, to use the language of political opportunity structure (see Tarrow, 1996). As a result, social movements in host cities – including Rio De Janeiro, Tokyo, Paris and Los Angeles – have tended to coalesce around these issues, symbolising a 'moment of movements' (Boykoff & Fussey, 2014, p. 25). As Talbot (2026) demonstrates, this commonly constitutes a central *umbrella group*, co-ordinating a range of *ancillary groups* focused on specific issues. Increasingly, these place-based movements are forming a transnational resistance movement, and work together, sharing resources, knowledge and make claim on the global stage (see Andrews, 2020; Boykoff, 2020; Ganseforth, 2023; Talbot, 2026).

Concerning the securitisation of mega-events, it is visible how movements have focused on a broad range of issues speaking to the policing prior to, and during the Olympics, and these practices' post-event legacy. Prior to recent Olympics, major concerns related to racial profiling (Fussey et al., 2012), surveillance (Fussey, 2012; Viegas Ferrari, 2023), militarisation (Pauschinger, 2024) have been highlighted. Moreover, the trend of using public spaces as temporary venues – like the construction of a skatepark at *Place de la Concord* in Paris – also means that event-related security exceeds official venues, and into cities at large (Smith and McGillivray, 2022). Event-related technologies, policing practices and the reconfiguration of urban space might also outlive the event as a security legacy (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009). Thus, while activists often articulate their concerns about securitisation impacts *during* an event, they are often more focused on the post-event phase where exceptional security and legal measures, that would not normally be permissible, are left behind and permeate everyday life and urban spaces, coalescing into a 'new normal for policing' (Boykoff, 2024, p. 73).

This backdrop remains significant here, as we employ the Olympic struggle over surveillance as a starting point. Next, we seek to empirically capture how surveillance

contestations are enmeshed into activists' wider struggles; how precisely securitisation processes are contested, and what this can tell us about the security field's dynamics. To do so, we exploratively focus on the contestations emerging between the recent Paris (2024) and forthcoming Los Angeles (2028) Olympics.

Methodology

This explorative paper draws from a qualitative examination of activist responses to Olympic securitisation. We use AI video surveillance as a way into a discussion of what constitutes security in Olympic cities as this relatively new technology brings new legal, political, and social contestations. Following ethical approval from the University of the West of Scotland, data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2025, by the first author, with four activists involved in anti-Olympic activism. The interviews, conducted online, covered a wide range of topics, including the key actors in the security field in each city and discussions of resistance in the context of the Olympic Games. Importantly, these interviews build on extensive scholar-activist engagement with the anti-Olympic movement by the first author over a period of more than five years. With securitisation being a relatively niche issue in anti-Olympic resistance movements, which hampered recruitment of participants from cities such as Tokyo (2021) and Milan (2026) (alongside language barriers), the small number of interviews reflected the small number of people with relevant expertise and experience.

Based on this, the interviews and our chosen sample size, were specifically targeted to those activists with specific experience and expertise related to the research questions, coupled with a strong, pre-existing rapport through prior scholar-activist engagement with anti-Olympic movements, which supports the trustworthiness of the data (Talbot, 2024). Interviews were planned to include activists from umbrella groups and ancillary groups related to policing and security, based on the typology of anti-Olympic activism presented in Talbot (2026). While interviews could not be arranged with activists in Olympic host cities Tokyo or Milan, for reasons noted above, although documents and online materials were provided by activists and considered as supplementary sources of data. Four interviews were conducted, ranging from 35 to 50 minutes in length, with two activists each from Paris and Los Angeles, representing activists from an umbrella anti-Olympic group and an ancillary group focusing on policing or surveillance from each city. Table 1 summarises the interviewed activists. As public figures in their activism, interviewees were asked to choose whether they wished to be made anonymous or identified in outputs – all chose to be identified.

Supplementing our bespoke interviews, this paper also draws from a document analysis of purposively sampled policy-documents with direct relevance to the Olympics in question. These were selected as they provide insights into the *context* in which (i) Olympic securitisation proceeds and matures within; and which (ii) activists

Table 1. Interviewees and their umbrella/ancillary groups.

	Umbrella Group	Ancillary Group
Paris	Natsuko – Saccage 2024	Noémie – La Quadrature du Net
Los Angeles	Jonny – NOlympics LA	Hamid – Stop LAPD Spying

critique. In line with Bowen (2009), a document analysis is analytically concerned with excerpts, quotes or passages that are organised into themes and categories and lends itself to thematic analysis – as set out below. Such documents can be read as reflecting the official discourses of their owner/publisher, the IOC, allowing for examinations of the global templates and ideas that follow the Olympic Games from one host city to another. The sampled and analysed documents included the *Olympic Charter* (IOC, 2025) and the host city contracts for the Paris and Los Angeles Olympics respectively (IOC, 2017a, 2017b). Especially the latter remain crucial, because they stipulate that host country authorities remain responsible for ‘tak[ing] all necessary measures in order to guarantee the safe and peaceful celebration of the Games’ (IOC, 2017b, p. 17). As we demonstrate, these measures and the meanings of safety are, however, contentious.

Concerned with finding patterns of meaning within qualitative data, the analysis of our data (both interviews and documents) followed the key premises of thematic analysis in order to generate codes, subthemes and, finally, themes which represent frameworks for organising and reporting analytical observations (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In line with our explorative aims, the data-driven analysis revealed how security carries distinctive and parallel meanings according to different actors in the field. We start by situating the activists and the contexts they operate within. Three dominant themes from the analysis are then presented and discussed: (i) *barriers*, (ii) *opportunities* and (iii) *broader struggle*.

Situating the activists

As has been well documented in the literature on anti-Olympic resistance, the nature of opposition differs across contexts. The debate around algorithmic video surveillance in the United States is markedly different from the debate in France, which has a substantial influence on the positions and actions taken by social movements. However, it is clear that, for umbrella groups in both Los Angeles and Paris, surveillance technology was only one aspect of their organising, often a relatively minor element (as returned to later), and ancillary groups tended to take a lead, with umbrella groups in support.

At the beginning, no, no-one from Saccage was very conscious of Olympic security but it was really thanks to La Quadrature du Net that we discovered this problem and we could deepen our knowledge. (Natsuko)

We’ve been working closely with Stop LAPD Spying over the years. They’re kind of at the forefront of that work in LA ... they’re following that with a much finer toothed comb. (Jonny)

Beyond this, one of the main challenges with organising interviews in Tokyo and Milan was locating activists whose focus was on this issue, with no clear organisation focussed on security as part of anti-Olympic organising in those cities. One notable exception to the notion that umbrella groups delegate to ancillary groups on this issue was related to the proposal by organisers of the Los Angeles Games to use facial recognition technology not for security purposes but for ticketing. While not a major issue for Stop LAPD Spying, which focusses on the use of technology by the police, NOlympics LA have made the privacy implications of facial recognition for ticketing an element of their agenda.

Stop LAPD Spying, embedded in the US context where well-established black movements have contested police actions for decades, views the development of algorithmic

video surveillance as part of a much deeper pattern extending the security state into the everyday:

We call it the stalker state, how you're traced, you're monitored, you're followed, and you're stalked because the information sharing environment is as such, and particularly post 9/11, that all of these streams of information and data collection flows between public agencies, private agencies, law enforcement, social media, and it impacts every aspect of our lives. (Hamid)

This 'stalker state' works in tandem with what Hamid calls the national security police state to control and incarcerate the population, particularly the poor, black population of Los Angeles. In this context, Stop LAPD Spying defines itself as an abolitionist movement, against reforming a system that they view as fundamentally hostile to the interests of marginalised populations. Their actions flow from this ideological outlook, including grassroots organising, particularly on Skid Row, and consciousness raising, although NOlympics LA are more involved in lobbying local government, in line with their inside-outside strategy (see Boykoff, 2020, pp. 91–104).

Conversely, La Quadrature du Net, with its origins in privacy campaigns, is much more focussed on protecting privacy through a legal framework. Noting that EU data protection regulations make the use of algorithmic video surveillance illegal without specific national legislation creating exemptions from this, Noémie highlights that their objectives have been to limit the use of algorithmic video surveillance, as opposed to a broad abolitionist approach to the security state:

We focussed a lot on this [algorithmic video surveillance] because this was quite big in France and also promoted by French companies . . . this is going to be an exhibition moment to show how we do . . . the two phenomenon combined with this law, with a law that passed in 2023. This Olympic law saying 'oh, Olympic Games are special moments, we need some special technologies.' (Noémie)

As such, La Quadrature du Net's actions have involved briefing politicians and other elite actors and campaigning to increase public knowledge around specific legal provisions related to algorithmic video surveillance. In this, we can see La Quadrature du Net (and by extension Saccage 2024) taking a more reformist position on surveillance than that of Stop LAPD Spying (and by extension NOlympics LA), with their actions seeking to lobby politicians and public opinion towards changing specific laws, while Stop LAPD Spying engages in grassroots organising towards abolition of the security state. In this sense, the political opportunity structure within the different legal jurisdictions serves to shape the approaches of social movements. With different contexts, from EU data protection legislation that may provide some protection against algorithmic video surveillance to a much stronger and more deeply rooted anti-police movement in the US, these contextual factors have a clear impact on the nature of anti-Olympic resistance to security issues.

Barriers: the trump cards of security and Olympic success

One dominant theme emerging from our analysis speaks to the barriers that oppositional activists face in enforcing change or reform to mega-event securitisation. In this respect, activists acknowledged how the top-down deployment of the term 'security' could in

itself work as one barrier to social change and public debate on emerging issues, most notably, new surveillance technologies. Accordingly, security, unlike other issues activists contest (e.g. housing, environmental politics, or commercialisation), does not necessarily lend itself to an open public or democratised debate. As one interviewee stated: ‘obviously housing can be very complicated too, but there’s like a different level of, like, I think detail and sophistication and understanding how some of these surveillance systems work’ (Jonny). Rather, the assessments and definition of security – and the means best placed to ensure it – are typically limited to a selected few experts, who, with possess technical knowledge, authority and whose ‘behind-the-scenes considerations’ (Hagmann et al., 2018) cannot necessarily be easily challenged by general publics. In the language of Sidney Tarrow (1996), the political opportunity structure serves to hinder social movements in the case of security.

Accordingly, the closed-off realm, and binary nature of security created a situation where activists’ counterarguments could more easily be muted. More broadly, too, Aradau and McCluskey (2022) observe the difficulties of NGOs in making general claims that may match, or challenge top-down justifications of surveillance. In the case of Paris 2024, one interviewee captured this logic:

Every time we work on security and surveillance [it] is very binary. And I see the left parties in the parliament, like really, when they fight with the Minister of Interior, it’s really like, yeah, you don’t care about child[ren], you don’t care about security of people. And it’s very . . . some authoritarian narrative that it’s really hard to fight. (Noémie)

What Zedner (2005) describes as the ‘trump card’ of security may hence be used to craft a narrative that mutes activists’ claims regarding civil liberties, potential errors, and the potential spatio-temporal expansion of Olympic surveillance. These counterarguments, in turn, may be defused as not ‘caring’ about, or ‘wanting’ security. Activists therefore face a situation where law enforcers, local organising committees, and the IOC possess the power not just to define security, and the measures best placed to ensure it, but its societal and political importance. However, this impacts activists’ ability to call for change. Regarding the AI surveillance technology utilised in Paris, it was noted that regardless of whether this technology worked or not, it would likely enforce a similar outcome: namely, a prolonging of a technology that originally was temporary:

. . . we also said before the Olympics [in Paris] that this evaluation committee could be our enemy everywhere. Because if the technology worked, they would say: ‘oh, let’s postpone [the end of the legal exemption allowing algorithmic video surveillance] so we can use it more’. And if it didn’t work, they were like: ‘oh, let’s postpone so it could work’. And this exactly what happened, so we knew it. (Noémie)

As such, a potential failure or ineffectiveness of this security measure could, as this interviewee asserted, simply be utilised as a rationale for a further extension and fine-tuning of the AI surveillance, rather than as a rationale for abandoning it.

However, if we understand security as one ‘trump card’ that could quell activists’ calls for reform on privacy or civil rights or liberties grounds, another mentioned barrier to reform that was mentioned was the Olympics in itself. Specifically, it was mentioned how the traction of activists’ own counter-discourses was limited because of the historically rooted ideas of the Olympics’ supposed social goods and scales, which could override calls for change and earlier signs of progressive outcomes. While acknowledging that

some grassroots movements in Los Angeles had been able to draw attention to why new surveillance technologies, introduced into the city's general policing, could pose a 'civil rights nightmare' (Jonny), one interviewee felt that the city's staging of the 2028 Olympics hindered further progress on these issues:

... the worry with the Olympics is that, even the community work like this will just be completely overridden because we have to have the Games and we have to have the safe Games and like you know, who knows what's gonna happen between here and there? (Jonny)

This quote underlines the context which these activists operate in, where the show – the Olympics – must go on. Here, they are attempting to question two values to be protected individually (security *and* the Olympics) and collectively (Olympic security). This dynamic was also referred to in the French context where one interviewee stated that because the Olympics had been historically depicted in a positive way – even by left-wing parties – 'anti-Olympic' discourses could not necessarily compete with widespread, 'pro-Olympic' views that highlight Olympic principles of peace, dignity and the development of humankind (see IOC, 2025). As Natsuko noted:

Everybody repeats the same rhetoric and the same arguments to defend the Olympics, because it's for peace and it's also useful for working-class people. Yeah ... Like every communist discourse, they repeat the same thing again and again [... for] decades and decades. I understand this is important for French people over maybe 50. Younger people are not directly influenced with this kind of discourse, but if there is no counter-discourse from the left-wing, so that's now versus 70 years of pro-Olympic discourse from the French Communist Party. So, it makes sense that why we were powerless against this long history of left-wing pro-Olympic discourse in France.

The barriers-theme therefore points towards primarily two key factors. Not only is 'security' – by default – a value to be protected and unquestioned, but that also relies on oft-inaccessible assessments from experts. Yet, concurrently, historically hegemonic ideas of the Olympics (i.e. its association with ideals of peace) and the importance of letting the Games 'go on' mean that voices questioning, or reflexively highlighting the social consequences of Olympic securitisation can be more easily muted or disregarded as uncaring of security and safety. Thus, as Natsuko acknowledged, 'Maybe [pause] emphasising the security issue to criticise the Olympics in general is not a wise way. Maybe it can be divided'.

Opportunities: awareness and alignment with the wider field

The fundamental barriers, unpacked above, remain important as a background for this section. Here, we demonstrate how the interviewees also spoke about the political opportunities that emerged from their opposition to Olympic surveillance measures. In particular, the creation of a wider, public awareness of the social and political costs of new Olympics-related technologies or laws was regarded as a vital – especially because of the inherent difficulties of making authorities or law enforcers revert or depart from their positions.

Noémie elaborated on these opportunities in the Parisian context. Here, the French court allowed for the use of automated video surveillance in 2023, ahead of the 2024

Olympics. This decision was quickly opposed by rights groups such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, who argued that the technology constituted a threat to democratic principles and civic freedoms (O'Carroll, 2023) but was not abandoned for the event. As Noémie said:

But one of our big battle[s], I mean, a big, I mean, a big difficulty is to have the society awareness and just knowledge on this because nobody knew there was going to be an experiment. So, we tried to do that also, last year, so we did a new campaign in 2024. With posters [...] we did a big booklets on AVS [algorithmic video surveillance]. And so, we were like trying to compile all our knowledge on this. So, we're like 'okay, it's coming now, people have to be aware'. We tried to also [...] [to] send it and share, spread the news to cities, to local groups, we know that fight against surveillance. So having other people saying the same thing. [...] But actually, I think one year after, two years after, in the media, everybody know, a lot of people – I'm of course, not really objective, because I'm working on this – but I think more people know. And yes, as I told you, the political cost is higher.

As Boykoff (2011, p. 45) argues, the use of long-term public education projects has been central to the work of activists seeking to 'to demystify the ostensibly win-win nature of the Games'. From Noémie's comment above, we see that the creation of awareness of algorithmic surveillance's political costs relied on specific information-based campaigns (e.g. posters and booklets) and working with other groups with resonating or similar aims. For instance, Noémie also mentioned that her organisation had provided citizens with a template letter that could be sent to local politicians asking them 'not to install this kind of software'. Ensuring that 'more people know' about the security-related trends that accompany the Olympics, therefore appears to be one aim that, against the backdrop of security's closed-off realm, is regarded achievable by the activists. Indeed, Hamid's comments before LA's 2028 Olympics resonate with this: 'Our comments are more towards the public [...] [such as] How do we expose? How do we disrupt? How do we raise awareness? How do we engage in political education? How do we do popular education?'

In addition to informative and awareness-oriented projects, opportunities are also afforded by aligning with NGOs and groups that transcend borders and may possess different types of priorities or resources. Noémie, for example, explained that their organisation had been working with Amnesty International, but that 'they [Amnesty] always try to link it with facial recognition [rather than algorithmic video surveillance]'. Still, she noted that, 'it was good because we were like quite complementary and they have bigger budgets, so they can do more stuff'. Similarly, scholars have established how activists in different Olympic cities have forged relationships and pass on knowledge about their cities' experiences with fellow activists, including anti-Olympic summits in Tokyo (Boykoff, 2020) and Paris (Talbot, 2026). Hence, occurring in parallel with globalised processes whereby host cities share security-related lessons and best practices with each other (Pauschinger, 2024), these spaces offer opportunities for the transfer of knowledge between activists. As Jonny alluded to: 'so we knew LA has that legacy of just specifically policing and surveillance right now [after LA's 1984 Olympics]. We were able to go to Tokyo, and we've worked with them a lot'. Despite this, given the different political opportunity structures and the devolving of these issues to ancillary groups, which are often much less involved in transnational collaborations (Talbot, 2026), the extent of these collaborations on the issue of security remains limited.

Overall, with respect to the security field of struggle, this remains significant because the power of activists, in this field, seemingly relates to their ability to engage and educate wider publics about the possible pitfalls of security measures and technologies, and, crucially, ensure that this information is transferred to other host city communities and movements, through transnational circuits of knowledge. Thus, in the field's unique context, where, as Jonny commented, 'we're not privy to most of the information', the activists' opportunities primarily relate to and are projected towards wider publics' awareness about the more generalised costs and legacies of Olympic securitisation.

Broader struggle: Olympic exceptionalism

Whilst issues related to securitisation processes – as this paper underpins conceptually and empirically – constitutes a contested arena of the Olympics, it must similarly be highlighted that the interviewed activists regularly saw securitisation as merely *one* part, or symptom of the structural social, political and economic issues embedded within what they primarily oppose: the modern-day Olympics. This was best illustrated by Natsuko, maintaining that: 'Of course, they [surveillance, gentrification and environmental destruction] are important issues [...] but personally, my interest goes to the more structural problem of the Games'.

As such, rather than taking shape as an outright 'anti-surveillance' movement, it could be argued that the activism surrounding the Olympics exemplify Jeffries (2011) suggestion that contemporary surveillance-related activism is often situated within a broader struggle, and proceeds with broader aims than, for example, reverting or opposing surveillance trends. For example, the artist-activist group, Fulana, which primarily opposed neoliberal globalisation in New York City, also intervened in public debates around security and privacy post-9/11 (Jeffries, 2011). In Europe, politically engaged football supporter activists also express their critiques of surveillance measures; but here under a wider banner of opposition to securitised, commodified 'modern football' (Numerato, 2018). We contend that a resonating logic emerges in Olympic contexts. Here, direct, event-specific critiques of surveillance are engaged in, but rooted in a wider 'anti-Olympic' discourse, as articulated by umbrella and ancillary groups.

I don't think it is the most important issue, because for me, the most important issue is the Games themselves. How a democratic country accepts this kind of undemocratic event is *the* issue of the Olympics. But the obvious issue is not related to this question, in the sense of exceptional security measures are only accepted in exceptional states. (Natsuko)

We saw that in Japan, we saw that in Russia, in Brazil, etc. And how even more than Olympic Games, with every [...] sports mega event is used to . . . I mean, the special, the exceptional side of this event is used to implement exceptional repressive measures. And this is exactly what happened in France with a French specific context. That is algorithmic video surveillance that was already here for a few years. And so, yes, we arrived in the battle against [the] Olympics alongside with other organizations, for example, climate organization[s], housing organization[s]. (Noémie)

Importantly, these excerpts illuminate how the issue of surveillance was seen as attached to a wider struggle that is not necessarily rooted in one place. The struggle, bundling together oppositional claims relating to housing, the environment, security and

democracy, is against the exceptionalism that arrives with the staging of an Olympic event. Further, we may see how ‘the expansion and intensification of mass surveillance are conceptualised and struggled against – not only as a threat to civil liberties and privacy but also as a technology of social discipline embedded within global matrices of power’ (Jeffries, 2011, p. 188). Given that twenty-first century Olympics is characterised by a move away from ‘normal’ times, with the implementation of new laws, technologies, and ‘turbo-charge’ gentrification and displacement (Boykoff, 2024, p. 72), it could be argued that the processes of surveillance, both locally and globally, are not disassociated from the wider urban and commercial trends, and the opposition towards the macro-structural forces and conditions upon which Olympic staging proceeds upon, and accelerate. This reinforces, as Grabher (2020) argues, events and festivals and their disputes must be analysed within the socio-cultural context they are staged.

Discussion and conclusion

Efforts to create and enforce security demands that scholars ask the question ‘security for whom?’ (Pauschinger, 2024). By generating new empirical insights and bringing together perspectives from sociology, social movement studies, and critical security studies, this paper addressed one important research gap speaking to how grassroots activists contest, critique and oppose surveillance practices and technologies around sport mega-events. Activism surrounding the Olympics was approached as an entry point for improving our sociological understanding of how resistance in the face of surveillance transpire and is articulated (Jeffries, 2011). The theoretical puzzle this paper clarifies hence speaks to how social movements may be situated within the notion of a security field which, hitherto, has been primarily envisaged in relation to the powerful actors that define, make claims about, and enforce security (Bigo, 2000; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010).

Against this backdrop, three key, theoretically informed but empirically elaborated upon arguments can be forwarded. First, insights from umbrella and ancillary group activists reveal how the exclusive politics of security *and* the Olympic spectacle creates new threats in the political opportunity structure in host cities. Activists face distinctive challenges and lower prospects in terms of reversing the use of algorithmic surveillance technologies, or achieving policy changes in host cities, such as an abandonment of approved or planned technologies. Second, these circumstances reprogrammes the groups’ opportunities, given that the security field formed around Olympic editions are dominated by actors whose authority stems from a particularised security authority and expertise (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009). We therefore see a recalibration of activists’ power, which they see as characterised – within the field – by their ability to educate and inform publics about the ethical, social and political costs of novel, contentious, and occasionally untested technologies, for which the media coverage surrounding the Olympic Games creates new political opportunities. Here, we see how umbrella and ancillary groups align with actors situated in a field in form of activist groups in other Olympic host cities, or NGOs, who share similar concerns, but possess different prioritisations, resources or localised challenges. While such alliances can serve to generate opportunities, particularly in contesting technical expertise, they are ultimately forged in response to increased threat in the political opportunity structure.

Finally, our findings provide empirical support for Jeffries's (2011) suggestion for social movement scholars, maintaining that the significance of anti-surveillance activism relates not to its *specific* opposition to surveillance, but rather, its embeddedness in wider struggles against neoliberalism, militarism, imperialism and patriarchy. One important theoretical implication of this, is that this reaffirms sport's important position for readings of social movements and protests, and specifically, the importance of mega-events as what Rowe (2012, p. 286) calls forums for 'political contestation within "global civil society"'. However, while our analysis of localised security fields within host cities demonstrates contention around these issues, they remain somewhat marginal and this differs dramatically from city to city, with some such as Milan having limited engagement with this topic. While scholars have suggested that we are witnessing the emergence of a transnational anti-Olympic movement (see Andrews, 2020; Talbot, 2026) leading to IOC policies attempting to address issues such as housing and environmental impacts that are key parts of this coalition (Talbot, 2023; Lopes; dos Santos & Delaplace, 2023), issues of AI driven security technologies remain marginal at a global scale, reducing pressure on the IOC and other mega-event owners to engage with the issue.

At a time where scholars have 'recognised the potentially negative, exclusionary and rights-infringing nature of sport' (McGillivray et al., 2019, p. 185), we add to these debates, arguing that the Olympics, as a time/place structured, neoliberal focal point, offers an exemplary site for clarifying and stretching our understanding of how surveillance-related critiques cannot always be disassociated from wider struggles over social injustice, climate emergencies, gentrification and neoliberal policies, all of which the modern-day Olympics continues to embody – wherever it takes place (Boykoff, 2024). As such, future research should continue to explicate the anti-surveillance dimensions of activism, at mega-events and across other leisure settings.

By advancing towards an understanding of surveillance, exclusion and activism around the Olympics, we demonstrate how the critiques and contestations over surveillance are part of a wider struggle – in this case against the Olympics. 'Anti-surveillance' activism is hence characterised by a diffuse dynamic and might be *activated* via the opposition to other processes, like a city's desire to stage the Olympics and the associated social costs. Regarding the security field, this article's findings underline that the actors making claims within this field may find themselves there primarily because they are opposed to other, or wider issues – like the modern-day, neoliberal Olympics – that essentially generates relational spaces, and is accompanied by the spread of surveillance practices, technologies and consequences. As argued, given that bottom-up struggles may be considered a characteristic but under-examined feature of security fields, it therefore holds value for social movement scholars.

Given the Olympics' sequential and global nature, this has important implications for future research in leisure studies, especially on the topics of sport, activism and protest. Over the next years, cities and places like Milano (2026), Los Angeles (2028), the French Alps (2030) and Brisbane (2032) will stage the world's largest mega-event, and contentious political questions will follow. For activists in these cities, the implications of our findings suggest a need to centre concerns around security within their broader critique of the Games in order to leverage change and take advantage of the political opportunities the Games creates to contest new security technologies. Further collaboration among activists in different host cities could support this, but the differing political context makes this

challenging and further research is needed. It remains crucial that our findings regarding the barriers, opportunities, and broader struggles across the social movement/surveillance nexus are extended, or refined, into new contexts. Moving *beyond* a sole focus on ‘anti-surveillance’ activism, such work could examine activist perspectives on enhanced urban surveillance and monitoring in other urban contexts, for example, via exemplars from anti-tourism activism, housing justice and anti-gentrification movements (Miura, 2021), to name a few. New and transnational cases and comparisons remain crucial as technological advances reconfigure the filtering and securing of modern-day urban spaces.

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Ethical approval

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