

5 Insights Why Research on Cameras Is Crucial

By Inge Janse & Arthur De Jaeger

From artists to scientists, and from journalists to citizen consultants. End of October, many perspectives on cameras were shared at Het Nieuwe Instituut. The occasion was the kick-off of *Start Making Sense*, the research project on cameras and the related data in Rotterdam.

Start Making Sense is an initiative of the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Centre for BOLD Cities, in collaboration with the Afrikaanderwijk Coöperatie, Vers Beton, and the Resilient Delta Initiative. The project aims to map as many cameras as possible, together with as many people as possible. This mapping forms the prelude to a discussion about the desirability of surveillance cameras and who should have a say in their presence, who the winners and losers are, and what actually happens with their data. You can find more information at the [website van het Centre for Bold Cities](#).

1. The strange has become familiar

When you walk through Rotterdam, you encounter so many cameras that they feel more familiar than strange. That's exactly the point that Professor Jiska Engelbert, Academic Director of the Centre for BOLD Cities, contests. She refers to a core principle of anthropology: *making the familiar strange*. Only in this way can we regain our already surrendered rights to anonymity in the face of cameras. "Because walking unseen through the city should not be an individual preference, but a basic right."

By registering as many cameras as possible, the project aims to make what seems normal into something strange again. This is an excellent starting point for a conversation about what we actually find normal and strange and under which conditions. Engelbert emphasises the importance of conducting this research not from an academic ivory tower, but by involving many more perspectives. She calls for a shared project, where the university facilitates rather than orchestrates.

2. You only see it once you realise it is there

Maarten Inghels is going to try, in the coming months, to create an "[invisible route](#)" through Rotterdam: a walk during which no camera watches you. According to Inghels, that is crucial for the 'flâneur', the person who merges into the crowd and believes they are not being observed, thus being their most authentic self.

He is not entirely optimistic: the camera-spotting tour he joined earlier that afternoon does not immediately convince him that such a route is possible. His previous attempts in cities such as Antwerp, Hasselt, and Sint-Niklaas taught him that he is trying to

achieve something that seems almost impossible. Moreover, he knows that his map is already out of date by the time he prints it because cameras are always being added, never removed.

Still, he commits to the cause, if only to immortalise how many cameras there are, and how small his chances of invisibility really are. His experience shows that people are shocked by the maps he produces, including the hundreds of notes about cameras present, and the maze-like routes he has to walk to remain anonymous.

3. A good picture requires good representation

A critical view on the role of the university comes from the [Cooperative Consultancy Bureau](#), represented that afternoon by Annet van Otterloo and Mustapha Easisaouiyeen. They advocate for integrating reciprocity into academic research. As citizen consultants, they bring a bottom-up perspective, directly from the community.

This yields surprising and valuable new insights. Because why should it always be the university that decides which data are relevant, and which conclusions to draw? And why are only scientists given the time and space to reflect?

They therefore call for radical equality in research. In their model, all participants, from citizens on the street to university professors, occupy the same position. This way, they can jointly decide which questions are important, which data matter, and which interpretations do justice to reality.

To illustrate, Van Otterloo and Easisaouiyeen refer to the National Programme Rotterdam South, intended to address the supposedly disadvantaged position of Rotterdam South. According to them, that programme itself defines the parameters of what “safety” is. In doing so, the voice of the very citizens to whom the programme is supposed to apply is forgotten. Who defines whose safety? Who decides what safety means? Who determines who threatens safety? And why are the people concerned not allowed to have a say?

The Afrikaanderwijk Coöperatie therefore, wants to explore within *Start Making Sense* how one can think about and work on safety beyond technological solutions (such as cameras) and governmental data, for example, by investing more in the community.

4. Be prepared for resistance

“You don’t have anything to hide, do you?” That was the frequent reaction to a piece by journalist Rens van de Plas about cameras in Eindhoven. On his platform [Woeste Grond](#), he wrote this autumn about his attempts to walk through Eindhoven while remaining unseen, without success.

Van de Plas recorded cameras, interviewed their owners, peeked into the control room, and examined laws and regulations. From that work, he found out that many camera

owners do not comply with the rules, such as the right to removal, avoiding capturing public space, and properly indicating the presence of cameras. Moreover, the government often lacks the capacity and priority to enforce the rules.

However, this was not widely seen as a scandal. Thanks to the resistance that Van de Plas observed in society against criticism of cameras. For many people, the logic is: if you have nothing to hide, then more cameras are always better.

His advice for the project in Rotterdam is therefore: be aware that many people will be indifferent or even defensive about this issue.

5. Soon the camera will be our best new friend

The work of artist Roos Groothuizen with personal technology may seem like a game. She makes [images of ghosts and zombies](#) that you can stick on these cameras to scare their owners. She also built an [escape room](#) to solve a murder using data from smart household devices.

But underlying this is the observation that, precisely through personal use, the technology is being marketed ever more positively. Government cameras may still evoke dystopian, *Enemy of the State*-like feelings. [But doorbell cameras are deliberately presented as friends of the family](#), helping to record the most beautiful and funny moments of your life.

As these cameras gain a permanent place in the household, a normalization of surveillance in the family and the neighborhood emerges. No child can slip away unnoticed, no neighbor can receive surprising guests unobserved. Even more: we share the videos of them, laughing heartily with our friends, making surveillance an integral part of our lives.

Groothuizen argues that not only do we lose our right to be unseen, but we also intrude on others' privacy. For instance, she recounts how her hairdresser, without shame, showed doorbell video footage of his neighbor cheating. Moreover, the police can demand such footage when an offense is serious. If you refuse, you yourself may face punishment.

Before the afternoon's session, about twenty people participated in a "camera-spot tour" around central Rotterdam, led by Tom van Arman (Tapp) and Mike de Kreek (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences). In less than an hour, they mapped over 200 cameras around the Museumpark. The results are shared on [Tom van Arman's website](#).

Photography by: [Fleur Beerthuis](#)