

Cmore: South Africa's New Smart Policing Surveillance Engine

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"Ever watched a crime drama or spy film...where a team of technicians are sitting in a darkened room full of big, fancy monitors that enable them to constantly track and follow a Jason Bourne-like assailant with great precision, in real-time, while being in constant communication with a team of operatives and controlling traffic lights and surveillance cameras seemingly at will? That is the kind of advanced shared situational awareness that the Cmore system can enable."

These are the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research's (CSIR) words to describe Cmore, South Africa's high-tech domestic surveillance system. A "platform for shared awareness", Cmore covers vast geographic expanses, enabling real-time surveillance and analytics of "entities" of interest and "incidents" such as service delivery protests.

Cmore: Watching over South Africa

Post-apartheid South Africa looks increasingly unstable. It is among the most unequal countries on earth – a situation which worsened *within* races since the transition to formal democracy in 1994. The poor majority continues to face conditions of extreme poverty as neoliberalism ensures wealth remains in the hands of a few. In the past decade, public protest rates are at record strike levels by global standards, while a new progressive student social justice is taking the country by storm. In 2015 and 2016, #FeesMustFall protesters shut down the national university system and colleges in a unified struggle for free education, decolonization of curriculum, worker rights and sexual justice, among other issues. It is the most powerful student movement since the 1976 Soweto uprisings.

In parallel, computer and military technology has undergone rapid development. The digital revolution is offering powerful new tools shaping the conduct of human affairs, with dominant influence from the US military and its frequent ally, Silicon Valley.

Within this cauldron of affairs, the CSIR – Africa’s largest R&D organization – developed Cmore. Mimicking the West, Cmore is a “comprehensive portal” integrating internal and external data sources to conduct surveillance, defence and policing operations. *Internal* “forces in the field” – say, patrol units – use the Cmore Mobile app on mobile devices for movement coordination, real-time feedback and communications within the surveillance network. *External* sources feed data to Cmore through sensors like “Public Webcams”, “Image/Video” resources and unmanned aerial surveillance drones (UAVs).

The software system consolidates information from different sources to watch over South African spaces. Using a centralized server, Cmore can coordinate geo-spatial planning and perform predictive analytics as a function of “modern security” to allegedly prevent “future crimes”.

South African authorities now “Cmore” of maritime waters and national parks – the central focus of its initial development.

But Cmore also targets border areas to police immigration, a cause for concern given South Africa’s anti-immigrant troubles. More controversially, these new Jason Bourne-like surveillance systems enlist participation from the South African Police Service (SAPS).

SAPS and CSIR – Partners in crime

In February 2014, the CSIR and SAPS signed a memorandum of understanding “aimed at improving the country’s safety and security”. At the time, soon-to-be suspended police commissioner Riah Phiyega hailed it a “critical milestone in the journey of transforming the SAPS”, with CSIR tech offering “smart technology, smart planning, and ultimately ‘smart policing’”. The agreement seeks co-operation with “other players in the national security sphere”.

Over the course of development, the CSIR began thinking about using Cmore “for police”, a key developer, Priaash Ramadeen said. Details and slides in Ramadeen’s CSIR presentation showcase Cmore’s tools for policing categories frequently pursued by the SAPS in the streets, such as theft, illicit drugs and public protest.

Experiments involving the SAPS include “crowd-control concept demonstrations”. More than 77 organisations have registered with Cmore.

The CSIR-SAPS partnership, as well as Cmore’s surveillance system, received scant attention from the media, academia and NGOs. Much like United States police forces, the SAPS releases little detail about many policing practices.

With little press or public transparency, South Africa has so far been spared of controversy surrounding the smart policing revolution it is in fact deploying. CSIR’s surveillance technology aims to “improve police management in...crowd and riot control”, integrate intelligence, enhance command and control and use unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) as an “eye in the sky” for “unrest situations” and “illegal border crossings”. Facial recognition CCTV cameras on the streets, UAV surveillance and vast data collections used for predictive policing are a growing part of South Africa’s “defence and safety” arsenal.

Controversy in the making?

The smart policing revolution has come under fire by civil rights and liberties organizations – especially in the United States. #BlackLivesMatter and civil libertarians have drawn attention to studies finding *de facto* racism in predictive policing software, as well as a concentration of surveillance equipment targeting poor black neighborhoods.

#FeesMustFall students are being monitored by police intelligence. In 2016, CCTV cameras sprouted like mushrooms at Rhodes University – while management is

withholding details. Society now faces controversial high-tech surveillance in public spaces.

How much longer until South Africans discover smart policing?

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