Engaging Science, Technology, and Society 6 (2020), 312-319 DOI:10.17351/ests2020.295

The Conjoined Spectacles of the "Smart Super Bowl"

RENEE SHELBY[1]
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

SARAH BARNES[2]
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

NASSIM PARVIN[3]
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MARY G. MCDONALD[4]
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Abstract

This essay examines the Super Bowl and the smart city as conjoined spectacles. A focused case study on Super Bowl LIII and its staging in Atlanta, Georgia in 2019 allows us to investigate how the use of cutting-edge smart technologies, including cameras, sensors, artificial intelligence, image recognition, and data collection techniques to secure Mercedes Benz stadium naturalizes a broader anticipatory logic of state and corporate intervention, often evoked in the name of public safety and terrorism-prevention. Together the spectacles of sport and smart technologies gloss over systemic inequality and legitimize security infrastructures as well as related ideas that social problems such as a lack of affordable housing, police brutality, and environmental degradation are best addressed through technological solutions. Foregrounding the conjoined spectacles of the smart city and Super Bowl problematizes seemingly necessary security processes and social relations among people, events, technologies, and cities, inviting further research and discussions necessary for strengthening critical interventions and theorizing in these areas.

---

[1]Renee Shelby, Email: reneeshelby@gatech.edu

[2]Sarah Barnes, Email: sarah.barnes@hsoc.gatech.edu

[3]Nassim Parvin, Email: nassim@gatech.edu

[4]Mary G. McDonald, Email: mary.mcdonald@hsoc.gatech.edu

Keywords
smart city; Super Bowl LIII; Atlanta; security technology; surveillance; predictive policing

Introduction

From its inception in 1967, the NFL's Super Bowl has blended mass media consumerism, with patriotism and spectator sports into a "mythic spectacle." Since 2002, the Super Bowl spectacle has been ensconced in a national security apparatus, when the Department of Homeland Security first deemed the game a "national security special event"—a designation that places the US Secret Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation in charge of a security collaboration with the host city and local municipalities. Similar to other post-9/11 Super Bowls, the 2019 game between the New England Patriots and Los Angeles Rams, and related celebratory events, were framed by high-level security officials as commercial and national patriotic events particularly vulnerable to terrorism. In contrast to most previous games, Super Bowl LIII unfolded alongside the ongoing civic spectacle of Atlanta's smart city, allowing the national-local security coalition to frame the event as in need of protection by sophisticated smart city technologies. The resulting conjoined spectacle was an assemblage of civic and corporate security experts, NFL and media partners, smart technologies, sport fans, the Mercedes Benz stadium, and local Atlanta communities.

This particular spectacle is worth exploring as scholars like Guy Debord suggest capitalistic spectacles are deceptive serving "as total justification for the conditions of existing systems." As highly visible sites of legitimation, spectacles like Super Bowl LIII invite investigation into the co-production of knowledge claims and materialized forms of expertise that help to normalize powerful surveillance technologies for everyday use. As such, we explore how Super Bowl LIII, held in Atlanta, articulates with an ever-expanding security apparatus characteristic of smart cities. We argue that the conjoined spectacles of the Super Bowl and smart city uphold the interests of the most powerful—in this case the NFL and its team owners and corporate information and communication companies as well as the dominant discourses they promote—while casting popular attention away from the asymmetrical social relations, problematic assumptions, and the undemocratic logics they are built upon.

Showcasing Smart Security: The Super Bowl's New Historic Superlative

Media coverage before, during, and after Super Bowl LIII illustrates how security in general, and smart security in particular, are now central superlatives of the spectacle alongside more

traditional calculations of attendees and game play statistics. However, media reporting not only documents but also participates in the spectacle by authorizing particular forms of security expertise and knowledge claims about the necessity, effectiveness, and regulatory future prospects of smart security. In the case of Atlanta, such reporting included coverage of frequent news conferences and symposiums, while highlighting over 24 months of coordinated security efforts between the NFL and over 40 law enforcement agencies, including local police jurisdictions, the US Department of Homeland Security, the Secret Service, and the FBI that transformed Mercedes-Benz Stadium, and the communities that surround it, into sites of heightened "security" (see Figure 1).

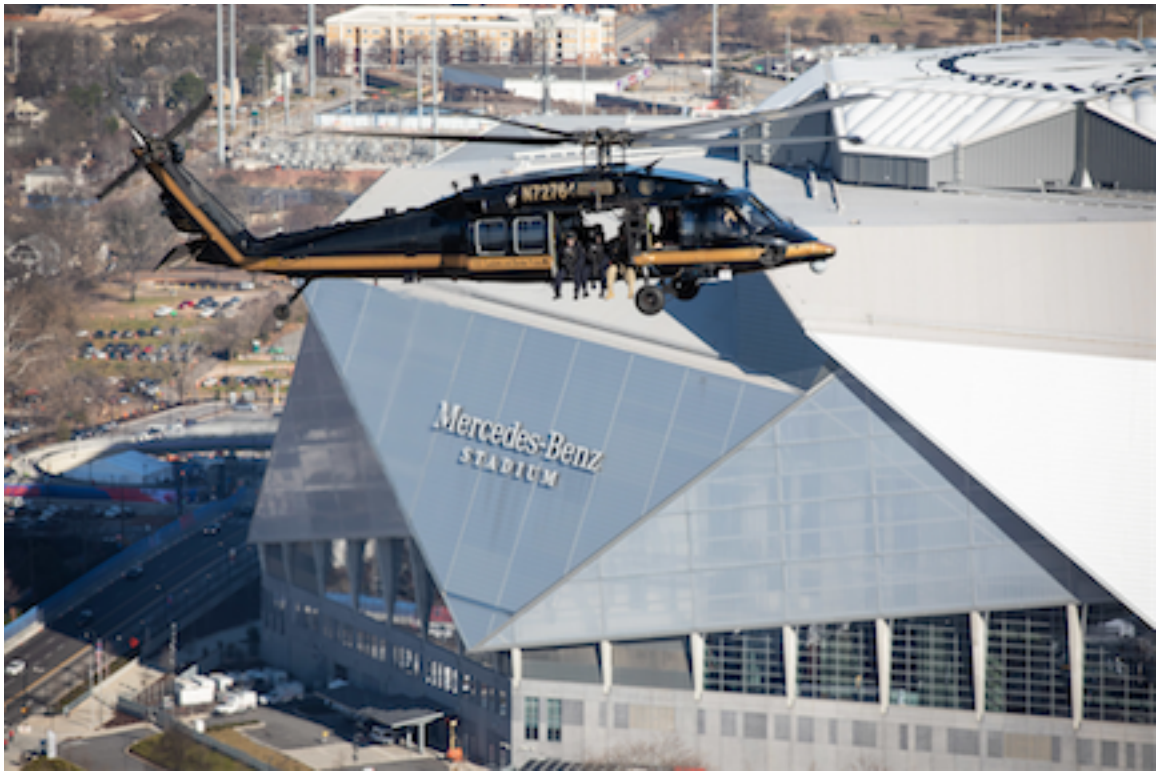

Figure 1: In the weeks leading up to Super Bowl LIII, federal law enforcement increased the frequency and visibility of military training rituals. U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Air and Marine Operations and Office of Field Operations Special Response Team provided air space security before Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta, Georgia. Photo by Ozzy Trevino, US Customs and Border Protection.

The National Security Special Event coalition's material and discursive efforts were rendered most visible to the estimated 650,000 visitors who participated in the Super Bowl LIII's

ten-day expo, where the pageantry of corporate, smart city security spanned the human and non-human. This extravagant display included the incorporation of familiar military surveillance and patrol tactics, and predictive policing technologies driven by big data. Black Hawk helicopters patrolled the sky creating a 30-mile no-fly zone around the stadium, while sanitation trucks, cement barriers, and water-filled barricades formed barriers on the ground. Walking among crowds of fans, over 5,000 law enforcement personnel brandished *FieldWatch*™, an app that live streams video from thousands of police cell phones into the command center for tactical analysis; and 180 police canines, including 20 patented Vapor Wake™ Canine Teams, worked the arena and mixed-use space. Super Bowl attendees also witnessed parades of smart technologies typically used to secure national borders and military theaters in the commercial and residential zones near Mercedes Benz stadium, including:

> advanced cargo and vehicle screening technology, magnetometer screening trainers (which use an electromagnetic field to detect metal objects, such as concealed handguns), low flying helicopters equipped with radiation sensing technology, and Bio Watch Screening (a system of sensors that detect when pathogens are intentionally released into the air).

Yet, unlike most previous Super Bowls, and instead similar to security enhancements within recent Olympic Games, this temporary, and highly militaristic, display of the smart security-industrial complex appeared alongside Atlanta's already-robust smart surveillance apparatus, which emerged in 2007. This is when the city launched *Operation Shield* to innovate communication between the Atlanta Police Department and the private sectors creating what the city calls a "force multiplier" for crime prevention and emergency preparedness. The city's sophisticated Loudermilk Video Integration Center (VIC) serves as the data infrastructure hub for *Operation Shield*, providing police real-time access to 12,800 cameras, of which only 800 are city-owned. *Operation Shield* is representative of what Phillip Boyle characterizes as a security knowledge assemblage that reinforces securitizing actors' belief in the surveillant value of video technologies, and which now constitute a central aspect of the public-private partnerships that characterize smart cities and sport mega events.

Despite the security coalition's show of technological force during the game and ten-day expo, in many ways Super Bowl LIII worked to showcase the "ready-made security" of the smart city rather than the "security in the making" of previous Super Bowls. As Atlanta Police Department Special Officer Sutton revealed,

> We have made some improvements to the [VIC] camera network in advance of the Super Bowl. . .but ultimately the camera network has been working great all along. While the Super Bowl is a really huge event for our city, we had a lot of the technology in place a very long time, so it's also "just another event" for us.

Despite this rhetoric downplaying the significance of this technology, the political maneuvers of VIC are more complex. While the law enforcement and smart technologies funded by public-private partnerships were put to work to protect the financial and social interests of NFL's team owners, the NFL in return served to support the financial interests of big technology corporations—and their shareholders—such as AT&T, IBM, and Verizon. After all, these companies can boast of providing smart expertise and practical experience as they seek to expand their market reach particularly into the global South. This symbiotic relationship, in turn, provides a powerful means to promote central narratives about the capabilities of smart technologies. This type of mutually beneficial relationship is embedded in a post 9/11 spatial *terror city hypothesis* that organizes urban initiatives and policy around the identification of risk and worst-case scenario planning—securitizing efforts that have become central logics of the smart city.

This is clearly the case in Atlanta, which is already among the top ten most surveilled cities in the world. In 2015 the city launched its smart city plan "SmartATL," which has been heralded by policymakers as a panacea for social problems such as traffic management, pollution, and public safety. Like other smart city constructions, SmartATL discourses portray the city as a site of urban problems ranging from traffic congestion to worst-case terrorist scenarios to questions of environmental sustainability. Each of these crises are framed as serious threats to the future of Atlanta, yet solvable through the strategic implementation of smart technologies (e.g., sensors, data centers, and algorithms)—if only we act quickly and invest early.

In the months leading up to the 2019 Super Bowl, the security coalition mobilized these logics. Consequently, the security coalition cast the idealized smart city infrastructure as technologically sophisticated, flexible, and central to the survival of the sporting spectacle. Although then Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen indicated there are "no known threats," Super Bowl-related upgrades were made to SmartATL surveillance infrastructure. This included the installation of CNL's *IPSecurityCenter*, a software platform that aggregates and blackboxes disparate surveillance systems for analysis in a central command center. In other words, the scale and complexity of ongoing urban and Super Bowl security needs were framed as serious enough to require deep investment in new smart technologies and as a means to ensure a "safe and secure day," the vulnerabilities posed by those technologies (e.g., cyber-attacks on data

storage facilities or hacking of traffic control systems) notwithstanding. In this manner, the Super Bowl and smart cities conjoined spectacles further cement the terror city hypothesis and technologies that embody the *anticipatory logic of state-based security* in ways that secure future trajectories of technology development broadly aligned with the interests of big technological corporations like CNL and IBM who analyzes data collected from Mercedes-Benz Stadium's WiFi network.

Whose Spectacle? Overshadowing Social Issues and Inequities

In sum, under the guise of protecting a signifier of American exceptionalism, the securitizing aims of the smart Super Bowl spectacles disproportionately benefit the most powerful while failing to address social inequities—and creating new digital ones—as more and more money is pushed into security technologies at the expense of other pressing local issues and concerns. For example, the designation of "national security special event" authorized a sense of urgency that marshalled technological upgrades and additional financial resources to Atlanta's IP Security Center without much public awareness, consultation, and seemingly without consideration of its long-term social implications and legal consequences for the city. Discussions about whether and how these surveillance technologies should remain part of the urban infrastructure as well as questions about their long-term value and legitimacy, sustainability, maintenance, and obsolescence remain largely absent from public discourse in spite of ongoing scholarly challenges and discussions of alternatives as well as examples of public backlash.

The extraordinary efforts to privilege transnational corporate interests over pressing local social need is particularly noteworthy—although given existing power imbalances, is not surprising. Atlanta's unhoused population—which was estimated to be over 3,000 in 2018—bore the fallout of the smart Super Bowl. Just two weeks before the spectacle, the City of Atlanta announced it would clear away the homeless encampments that surrounded the downtown area near Mercedes Benz Stadium. Just as blatantly, the tax-free development of the securitized Mercedes Benz Stadium overshadowed the urgent revitalization needs of the historically Black Vine City and English Avenue neighborhoods and deprives them of roughly $26 million in property tax revenue every year. Mobilizing on behalf of this public, attorney Wayne Kendall is suing county tax assessors in order to compel Falcons owner Arthur Blank, the owner of the NFL's Falcons who play in Mercedes-Benz stadium, to pay stadium taxes. This is an especially pressing concern given that the city will spend over $1 billion in public funding in building and maintaining the technologically sophisticated stadium.

Seeing the socially inequitable development that co-produced the smart Super Bowl illustrates the parallels of smart cities' abilities to create and circulate a veneer of technological progress and innovation that continues to advantage the most powerful. Today, as cities increasingly turn to tech companies to help develop and re-develop public infrastructure and security apparatus, the case of Super Bowl LIII as spectacle is instructive. This case illuminates smart city discourses and technologies as urgent sites for both practical intervention and theorizing that differently imagines more reciprocal and equitable relationships between people, technologies, and cities.

Author Biographies

Renee Shelby recently received her PhD in History and Sociology from the Georgia Institute of Technology, and will begin a postdoctoral fellowship in Northwestern's Gender and Sexuality Studies program in the fall of 2020. Shelby's research examines the socio-legal dimensions of surveillance technologies, with particular attention to how these structures co-produce in/equity in terms of race, gender, and class.

Sarah Barnes is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Sports, Society, and Technology Program in the School of History and Sociology at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on athlete welfare and debates about science and technology in sports. Barnes is working on several manuscripts that explore how sleep enhancing products and technologies are taken up in athletic settings.

Nassim Parvin is an Associate Professor of Digital Media in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Parvin's research explores the ethical and political dimensions of design and technology.

Mary G. McDonald is Professor and Homer C. Rice Chair of Sports and Society in the School of History and Sociology at the Georgia Institute of Technology. McDonald's research focuses on inequality and sports.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate the helpful feedback of the external reviewers and would like to thank editors Daniel Lee Kleinman and Katie Vann for their additional advice and support of this article.