

Coordination, Governance and Equity: A Research Framework for Security

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Introduction

When I was asked to write an essay on the past 20 years of security as a field of inquiry, as well as the future of the field, my initial thoughts were of personal and professional inadequacy. After all, I had only really been involved with this field for less than a decade, while many have spent their entire professional career grappling with these issues. After wrestling with the contents of this essay for a few weeks, I came to the conclusion that what I had to offer was embodied by this lack of experience, that is, I bring the perspective of an informed outsider. Coming from an urban policy/planning academic background, my entrée into security was a series of research projects I had the pleasure to work on at Temple University in the 1990s. One such project was a study of security/public safety systems in public housing complexes. This topic has long been one of the primary points of contact between security and urban planning experts, with the work of Oscar Newman and his defensible space theory being most salient (Newman, 1973). In this research context, the security issues of building and site design – as well as the management of routine activities in private and social spaces within the developments – was clearly related to larger urban planning and policy issues. Indeed, the social context of the residents on site, in addition to the larger socio-economic urban environment, brought together important considerations relating to the public–private continuum inherent in most security environments (Collins *et al.*, 1998). Another study, which formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation, looked at business improvement districts in inner city areas of Philadelphia. These organizations sprung up as an antidote to under-managed commercial space in cities. Under-managed in the sense that unlike their shopping centre and suburban mall competitors, urban commercial centres lacked a centrally controlled management apparatus that could afford them common area security planning. This work led to an article that appeared in this journal where I examined the roles of security operatives in this new type of organization (Stokes, 2002). The broader implications of this piece for the field rested in a theoretical and operational outlook for security that blurred the private–public distinction. This issue is frequently exhibited in security scholarship through the relationship, be it personal or strategic, between public law enforcement and private security.

Security is a multi-disciplinary field. Those from a variety of academic and practical backgrounds find their way to field and add much value to its substance, methodologies and theoretical underpinnings. The strength of any inter-disciplinary field is the diversity of

perspectives that challenge conventional wisdom and push the field forward. My academic training in urban policy/planning has clearly influenced my evolving conception of security, and the remainder of this essay is informed by this perspective.

As the charge of this essay is to explore the field's past, while offering some suggestions for the future, my most obvious observation is that security is in a constant state of flux. This is understandable as security is primarily situated in the private world of commerce; and the economic transformation the world has undergone over the past 20 years has been sensational, which has led to some equally sensational developments in security. This transformation has had three primary thrusts, each enabled and facilitated by technological advancement: (1) The movement towards commercial and cultural globalization; (2) The changing economic base in modern western societies, with a relative decline of manufacturing and the absolute increase in service and knowledge base commercial sectors – in addition to the growing importance of consumption; (3) The changing nature of commercial transactions, with less time spent doing face to face transactions, and more time using electronic technologies that also are used to manage the economy; (4) The blurring of private and public information/commercial information networks and the rising economic and political importance of protecting these networks from interruption. These four transformations have changed the nature of security over the past 20 years.

The theoretical basis of my own work in security was nested in larger discussion of the public vs private nature of security. In my efforts to examine the impacts of security, it became hard to determine a public welfare benefit perspective for security; indeed, it was evident that to private actors, security was organized in a cost management/loss prevention perspective: a largely private concern. While in the public realm, positive externalities related to improved general welfare, economic activity, and civic engagement were areas of interest. Despite these shared benefits, theorists in security studies and affiliated fields grapple with some of the tensions inherent in this public vs private debate. While space precludes a deeper exploration of these issues, let me identify three tensions in current security discourse that I see as most salient: (1) Coordination; (2) Governance; (3) Equity.

Coordination of security

The first issue raised here – coordination – recognizes that in a complex world, governmental, institutional, proprietary and individualistic responses to threats is merely as good as the weakest link in the proverbial chain. If seen as a broader social system or network, security must adhere to a shared vision of risk, threat and response. Making this problem even more complex is that public and private interests have never before been so entangled. As noted above, this is due to our modern economic base relying on the availability of electronic networking systems as both a means and an end to commercial activity. Moreover, as more U.S. commerce is related to consumption, rather than production, consumer confidence is intricately linked to larger issues of security.

Indeed, the primary critique of our vulnerability prior to the September 11 terror attacks was a failure of coordination. At its most basic conception, coordination involves the sharing of pertinent information in a timely fashion. A more expansive elaboration of the concept involves shared responsibilities and systemic approaches to threats and response strategies. In sum, evaluations of the efficacy of security efforts at any scale must recognize

that coordination of information, assessment, action and evaluation is of paramount importance.

Governance of security

The second issue raised here is governance. This area directly poses questions regarding the legitimacy of the field itself. What is the current state of governance in security? Does it leave room for public oversight (that is, is it accountable?). As noted above, the interests of private commercial concerns and the interest of a “public”, while always inextricably linked, have become more so after the September 11 attacks. A common example of this struggle in the US is in the issue of conflict between security and constitutional-civil rights. Current political discussions in the US regarding private commercial concerns collecting information for business purposes, and then being asked to share this information with public security operatives, has re-enlivened an historic debate over the reach of the state in private matters. While many have cast this as an inappropriate business action, the fact that terror actors seem just a likely to direct their mayhem at private commercial infrastructure than public or military sites tends to further blur the public–private distinction regarding discrete vs societal risk assessment and response. The issue of governance or transparency has always been a difficult issue in matters of security. The private sector has little desire to acknowledge vulnerability due to liability concerns. Moreover, the dissemination of effective systemic security responses is also seen as bad business in that these are considered trade secrets and factor into competitive operational and cost advantages. Thus, without the ability to profit for system development, businesses are not financially rewarded from creating public goods from internal security innovations.

In the public sector, where bureaucracies tend to move slowly, the tendency has been to insulate smaller, more nimble operations from larger political concerns over effective governance of security development. Thus, public–private task forces and advisory panels have become more prevalent. This is in contrast with the development in the US of its Department of Homeland Security; which was ostensibly an effort to reorganize the nation’s security and response capabilities by merging a set of seemingly synergistic government agencies. While the jury is still out on the efficacy of this effort, an analysis of that department’s planning and response capabilities around natural disasters has left many questioning the strategy.

Equity issues in security

A popular bumper sticker on the doors of college professors reads: “No one is free if others are oppressed.” While this is a pretty absolutist notion, does this saying hold any meaning for security? Is security in a societal sense like a private commodity or a public good? In other words, is it like an automobile; or, more like fresh air and water? Here, security is analogous to another social good (at least in the US) that has come to be organized by a complex web of private, public and non-profit providers: that is, health care. Security is analogous to health care, in that there are individual benefits as well as social benefits to both good health and security. So, how much “security” should an individual in society get? And, should an individual or a community’s level of security be related to their ability to

pay? An on-going concern in urban planning circles is the development of gated communities and private police forces for wealthy communities. The truth is, there is no agreed upon basic level of security in society. Thus, like other commodities or goods in society, we tend to get what we can afford. Just as the distribution of other public and quasi-public goods have informed other fields of scholarship, should these issues also be examined in security? Considering the overriding theme of this essay, that of complexity and coordination, my answer is yes.

Research agenda

The theme of this essay has been that technological developments have led to the transformation of global economic and social systems; and that the speed of this transformation has left bureaucratically designed public organizations behind the curve in developing effective governance, coordination and equity systems that identify and effectively deal with shared threats. Thus, a future research agenda needs to develop frameworks for understanding the complexity and interrelatedness of security in a modern society while accepting that the failure of larger social systems to address these threats means that the smaller, immediate issues in security are just as important to society in a collective sense. Simply put, the presence of an active, global terror organization does not absolve you from locking your door at night. Conversely, merely taking care of yourself, your economic concern, or your community, while a necessary component, is hardly a sufficient strategy for assuring security goals.

Therefore, in addition to seeing the bigger picture, it is likewise imperative for security researchers to address the smaller bits of the network and develop a catalogue of what works, where and under what physical and social conditions? In sum, the field needs to examine the myriad of policies, technologies and strategies from the perspective of their relative effectiveness while utilizing the most rigorous set of evaluative frameworks available.

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