

THE ETHICS OF SURVEILLANCE CAMERA SYSTEMS IN CALIFORNIA: A CASE STUDY OF AB645

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Introduction

In October 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB645 into law, establishing a Speed Safety System Pilot Program in major cities of California. The program allows local governments to implement speed enforcement camera systems, which would automatically issue tickets for driving over the speed limit. Although the bill has been welcomed by some as improving community safety, others have raised ethical concerns about it.

“Dear Governor Newsom,
While we appreciate the author’s worthy intention to reduce traffic fatalities caused by speeding, we are concerned about the approach AB 645 takes to solving the problem, which raises fundamental privacy, due process, equal protection, and equity concerns while also costing significant money to run... On behalf of foreseeably impacted communities, we request that you veto AB 645, which would cost taxpayers millions and wrongfully penalize marginalized communities”.



– Human Rights Watch

Methods

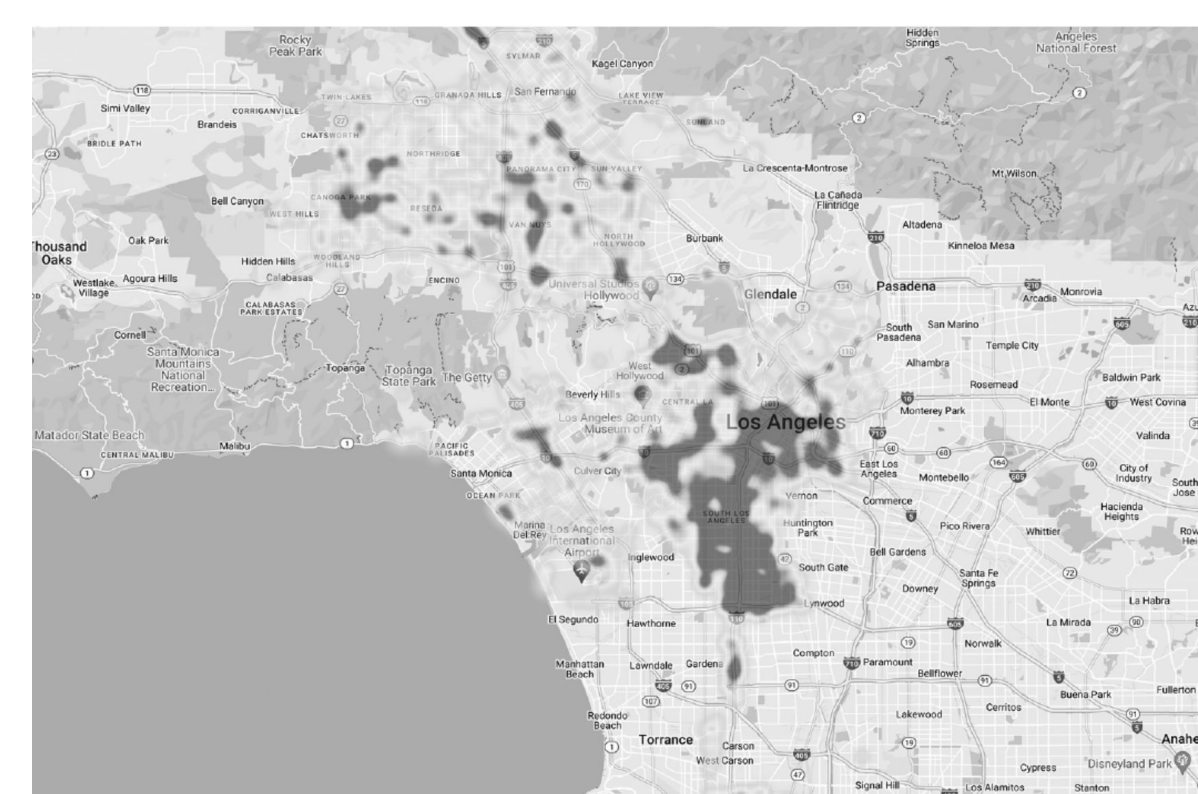
To examine discourses around public cameras and surveillance, our method consists of the following steps:

First, we compiled a list of media outlets in the cities included in the pilot program.. We also identified advocacy groups and state officials who participated in mediated discussions about AB645.

Next, we collected news articles and press releases that were published during the passing of the bill in 2023. This data collection procedure yielded a corpus of approximately 120 documents.

To analyze this corpus, we will employ critical discourse analysis, a methodological approach that is well equipped to examine the role of the media in the social construction of reality, with particular attention to power dynamics.

Project Overview



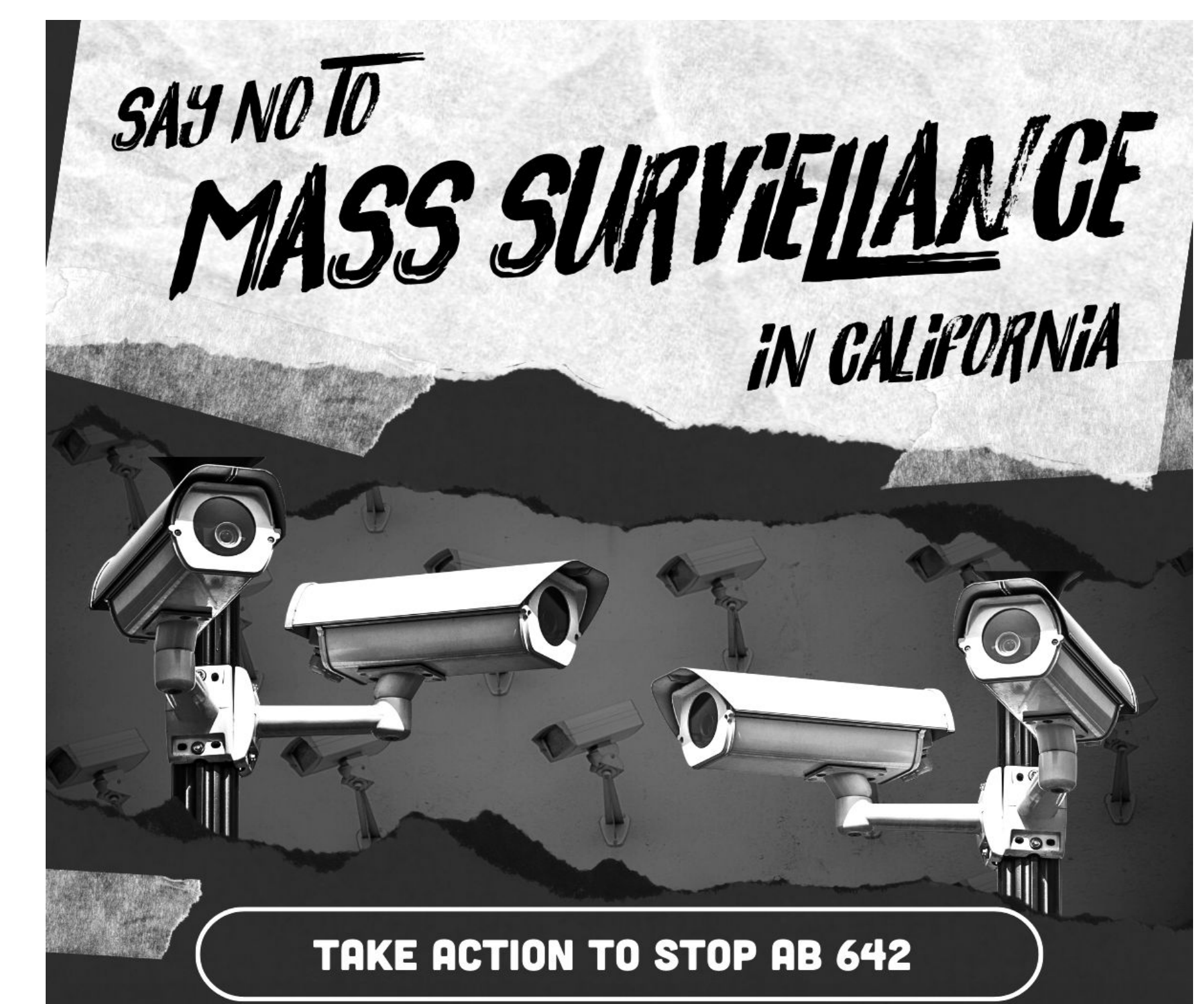
Our goal is to study the ethical considerations and debates in mediated discourses on AB645. To that end, we ask: what ethical considerations did people raise in these discourses? How should these debates be resolved in the future?

The introduction of the Speed Safety System Pilot Program sparked intense debate California, where similar proposals had failed in the past over privacy concerns. AB 645 has been welcomed by some as a deterrent to speeding, potentially reducing car-related fatalities, and improving community safety. The mayor of San Francisco described it as a “critical tool to make our streets safer and save lives.” However, others have raised concerns about it. News outlets called the speed cameras “a cash grab” that provide “a false sense of security.” Privacy advocacy groups suggested that the bill might worsen the disproportionate allocation of surveillance technology in the region, by penalizing minority communities who have been historically subjected to over-policing. From their perspective, AB 645 introduces serious challenges to fairness, transparency, and equity.

Public discourse about AB 645 calls into question the expansion of surveillance and policing measures, their efficacy, and potential privacy infringements that could occur during its execution. This debate also suggests that the procurement of this technology requires ethical decisions about where they will be placed, educational campaigns for drivers, and public oversight. Considering this reaction, we argue that the passing of this bill provides a critical case study for emerging ethical considerations and dilemmas about state surveillance.



Expected Outputs



By studying how the press, state institutions, and advocacy groups engaged in public conversations about AB 645, we will analyze how these groups frame (and contest) perceptions and ethical considerations about surveillance and public cameras.

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References

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