

## Interviews

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# "The sharing economy was a promise that has been completely devalued in the hands of large corporations"



*Igor Calzada*

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Igor Calzada is a Research Fellow at Cardiff University, WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, funded by the ESRC), Senior Research Affiliate at the University of Oxford, and Senior Advisor on Digital Transformation in Urban Areas for UN-Habitat's People-Centred Smart Cities Programme, who specializes in urban transformation, city governance and digital rights. He has just published a book entitled [Smart City Citizenship](#) in which he reflects on how the adoption of new technologies and digital hyperconnectivity in cities affects the rights, privacy and, ultimately, the everyday lives of the people who live there. Calzada was a keynote speaker at the [7th International Workshop on the Sharing Economy](#) organized the UOC's Faculty of Economics and Business from 24 to 26 February.

**You talk about the fact that our cities are becoming increasingly hyperconnected in a scenario that is not always respectful of citizens' rights. Who or what has most to gain from this kind of hyperconnectivity?**

A series of changes related to global logistics processes are taking place in a way that is completely invisible to public scrutiny in post-COVID-19 cities that affect the way we live as citizens. And this is where hyperconnectivity plays a highly pernicious role if the social consequences for citizens are not monitored carefully.

The invisible hand of the market is clearly the winner in this scenario of hyperconnectivity, which is accompanied by zero transparency. We are living in a black box situation in which nobody is able to explain what happens when we shop online, chat online, or interact with others. The answer could be to work on unravelling these logistical chains at local level, providing we have the technical capacity and political power to do so. At present, we don't have either. And as such, as I point out in my new book, *Smart City Citizenship*, we need to begin by building data ecosystems at local and regional level, providing strong data sovereignty for citizens. That's the only way to protect 'pandemic' citizens.

**Is there any place for privacy in post-pandemic society?**

We are living in a paradox which we talk about as 'unplugging' at the University of Oxford. Who is able to exist without being connected in the hyperconnected and post-pandemic society? A privileged few who don't need to compromise their privacy. And at the other end of the less inclusive scale, those more vulnerable groups who don't even have access to connectivity. Privacy will end up being closely correlated to the personal circumstances of each individual; to factors like where we live, our daily routines or to what degree we need or are obliged to share.

**Is this privacy loss inevitable?**

We will obviously have to pay for our privacy to some degree or another. The issue for me is: how can we regain the civil liberties and digital rights that we are losing on a daily basis? With governments requesting PCR tests — which are necessary and should be free and not used as a speculative mechanism that is only available to those who can afford it — the approved providers are collecting biometric data on a mass scale which represents the start of a long chain that has the potential to end up encroaching on our privacy.

What if vaccines were common property and the monitoring of variants was democratized by

global interconnected hubs? Perhaps what we need are data and platform cooperatives so that we are able to share our data on a voluntary basis. While the sharing economy was a promise that has been completely devalued in the hands of large corporations, the post-COVID-19 era may offer opportunities for the practice of data donation and altruism. From a very dystopian point of view, COVID-19 provides the perfect cover for ensuring that citizens have no other option. Despite that, I believe we need to build alternatives based on data ownership and digital rights rather than on privacy itself. We have already lost that battle; we need to take things one step further.

### **Are we aware of this infringement of our privacy?**

No, we're not aware of what is going on around us. That's the worst thing in my opinion. Whatever their circumstances, the pandemic citizen is someone who is in a period of survival and resilience. The pandemic citizen 'manifests' out of necessity; and what digital tools do is to add that addictive component. It's an explosive mix, which only intensifies with the restrictions and constraints on our freedoms and rights. We're now living in digital and experiential bubbles.

### **The restrictions imposed on mobility to contain the pandemic have led to public spaces being abandoned or used on a limited basis. Could that slow the pace of hyperconnectivity in the public arena?**

Hyperconnectivity is on the rise and restrictions on mobility and the use of public spaces will only accelerate hyperconnectivity. We ask that public spaces be taken into account but then continue to act with very little caution in public spaces. It's too early to make predictions but I can see us moving to another form of socialization in which we will certainly be more reliant on public space. I envision a public space that is divided up into experiential and digital bubbles. And we will place a great deal of emphasis on contact in terms of our social life as citizens, so much so that it will be a very scarce resource. We need to empathize; that is vital to prevent the bubbles from causing cracks to form in the social interactions of citizens. The question I would ask is, how do we regain this social capital, how do we regain trust?

### **Might the pandemic serve as a kind of shock therapy to normalize certain control mechanisms?**

It already is! It has been right from the start. These days we are all preoccupied with vaccines and when we will be able to catch a plane or travel around again. That is shock therapy and then we also have a current of denial that is completely removed from the social reality, creating paranoia about 'normality'. In technopolitical terms, we have reached a point at which we need to return to the values of citizenship: we have a social responsibility in a scenario where it seems that personal and individual salvation seems to be taking priority. And that means adopting behaviour in which we consider others. We will only be saved if we save others as well. Distancing could be here to stay, which will lead to a new, perhaps unknown, experience where proximity and distance are measured in a different way. Perhaps we were more distant when we were hugging each other than we are now that we are more aware of what is at stake.

### **With the increase in teleworking are our homes now the focus of mass data collection?**

As Javier Echeverría predicted, we have become domestic cosmopolitans. And right now, in our forced solitude, we are hyperconnected domestic cosmopolitans. Telework is the most obvious way to contain the pandemic, but it also generates numerous malfunctions. We have never been so dependent on our domestic Wi-Fi network as we are now. To browse and consume online. To communicate with people we perhaps haven't seen in days or even months. All of which, as Shoshana Zuboff predicted some time ago, is subject to unprecedented capitalist surveillance. And in effect, our homes have become places where displaying the bookshelf behind us serves to illustrate our status or less vulnerable position and therefore personal and emotional protection. We are removing privacy from our homes at the expense of displaying huge volumes of personal data and information through digital windows.

### **Do you think that companies are committed to respecting people's right to unplug?**

Smart digital disconnection (unplugging) will become as essential as preserving online privacy. I'm afraid the extractive rationale of companies such as Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple won't be stopped. They represent such an economic powerhouse globally that, beyond European directives, that would be extremely difficult. What is clear is that the response needs to be organized from a local and regional level upwards. There are a few initiatives moving in that direction, such as data and platform cooperatives, although they are fairly marginal at the moment, with limited critical mass as, despite being attractive, they have complex organizational and ownership models.

### **Is there any way of reversing the process to safeguard these rights?**

The Coalition for Digital Rights is exchanging experiences with other cities around the world to learn how to respond to the pandemic via digital transformation without the loss and infringement of digital rights. We should not see this pandemic as a short-term phenomenon but as one that is already altering our way of life and even our way of interacting as human beings on a social level. Digital rights and the way we use technology also need to change over time and evolve to become more inclusive models. Even in the face of strong and powerful inertia, there must be a joint and resilient response from the public and innovative leadership, an alert civil society and socially responsible companies.

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