

PORNHUB HELPS: DIGITAL CORPORATIONS IN ITALIAN PANDEMIC CITIES

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Manuscript; final version published as:

Vanolo A. (2023) "Pornhub helps. Digital corporations in Italian pandemic cities", in D. Mackinnon, V. Fast and R. Burns (eds), *Digital (In)Justice in the Smart City*, Toronto University Press, pp. 195-208.

<https://utorontopress.com/9781487527174/digital-injustice-in-the-smart-city/>

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a huge impact on societies. This chapter develops a reflection on the legitimization of digital corporations and smart interventions in the scenario of Italian pandemics. Facts and anecdotes are mobilized in the paper in order to describe how, during the crisis, various corporations assumed novel moral positions. Then, the paper considers the case of Immuni, the Italian digital app for tracking potential infections. Ultimately, the chapter speculates on ongoing transformations in the diffusion of smart city rationales during the crisis.

Keywords

Smart city, digital infrastructures, justice, solutionism, Immuni, Covid-19

At the beginning of March 2020, Pornhub offered Italian users a free month of Pornhub Premium as part of a program to “keep Italians at home” and to “keep company to Italians.” It was sufficient to register. The company also donated part of its profits to Italian social initiatives. This approach was not new in the pornography sector, as xHamster had proposed a similar one a few weeks before. But there is more. In the same month, the Italian national social security system, the Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale (INPS), introduced a public policy supporting certain categories of citizens with a €600 bonus. In order to access the bonus, beneficiaries had to fill out a form on the INPS website. On the first day, the website collapsed because of the high number of requests (about 1.5 million), and it publicly displayed private data of those who applied, causing a national scandal. The following day, Pornhub offered its help for the improvement of the INPS website and for the management of its huge amounts of data (Pornhub is visited by about 120 million users every day, without any crash). Pornhub did not receive a reply from the INPS, but the news gained tremendous popularity, boosting Pornhub’s corporate image in the country.

Smart City, Solutionism, and Injustices

Over the past decade, critical scholars in urban studies have built a solid literature on the perils and limits of the smart city. Although critical discussions were proposed almost twenty years ago by authors such as Graham and Marvin (2001), the first to analyse fully and explicitly the politics and discursive strategies of smart cities was Hollands (2008), who focused on the tendency to reproduce celebrative, superficial, elitist, and business-led approaches to technology and to the management of cities. Building on his original contribution, a number of authors explored further dimensions of the problem, discussing the ambiguity of the meaning itself of the expression “smart city,” which seems to include very different ideas and imaginaries of technologies and urban life (see, for example, Greenfield 2013; Kitchin 2015; Townsend 2013; Vanolo 2014). The bulk of the first generation of critical literature in the field analysed ideologies of solutionism and neoliberalism, particularly by focusing on issues of participation, citizenship, surveillance, injustice, and the new forms of capital extraction and work exploitation allowed by digital technologies (for reviews, see Cardulo, Di Felicianantonio and Kitchin 2019; Karvonen, Cugurullo and Caprotti 2019).

Of course, the aim of this critical literature is not to demonize new technologies or to suggest any kind of Luddite vision. Obviously, innovations may determine dramatic improvements in the quality of life, they may sustain empowerment and participation, and they may help in fixing current urban problems and injustices. But the smart city does not strictly coincide with its

technical infrastructure, nor does it correspond to any single technology or set of technologies: sensors, networks, and algorithms generally associated with the smart city could be developed and related to other settings, contexts, and discourses (Sadowski and Bendor 2018). Smart technologies are conceived as such not because of technical or institutional reasons – they can differ dramatically from each other from the technological point of view, and they are not necessarily produced by similar actors or implemented by specific institutions. Rather, technologies become smart city technologies by their association with certain narratives, logics, practices, symbols, and ideologies. In this sense, most of the critical literature, – particularly that developed during the first part of the past decade – partly developed as a reaction to a massively diffused framework of celebrative accounts of digital technologies, excessive hype, and uncritical support for everything in the field, from “e-whatever” public policies to market enthusiasm for private startups, from branding new apps and digital services as tools for “social innovation” to the supposed general belief that digital infrastructure is the core ingredient for fixing a variety of urban problems (see the edited collection by Marvin, Luque-Ayala, and McFarlane 2016; see also Wiig and Wyly 2016). More recent strands of the literature have not only pushed critical understandings of the smart city; they have also proposed specific and situated analysis of the way people coexist with smart technologies, sensors, and codes; how places are shaped, mediated, and co-constituted by the digital; how subjectivities, rationales, and identities take form in the urban digital space; and how citizens might resist and reclaim an informational right to the city, or a right to the smart city (see, for example, Cardulo 2021; Kuecker and Hartley 2020; Safransky 2020; Shaw and Graham 2017; Zandebergen and Uitermark 2020).

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature by situating a reflection on the provision of digital “solutions” in the very specific and contingent time-space of Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic, from February 2020 to the actual time of writing of this chapter (August 2020). In the dramatic situation of sufferance, fear, and lock-down, politicians, technological gurus, and a number of other urban experts looked at digital technologies and smart city discourses in search of solutions and knowledge to manage the crisis. As I discuss, the pandemic has been a testbed for new technologies with ongoing effects in the country that still have to be analysed fully.

The chapter focuses on a particular aspect of this scenario: the reconfiguration of major corporations working in the digital sector as fair and responsible subjects with the power, capability, and ethical will to help citizens and, ultimately, to operate for the general benefit of

society. The state of emergency caused by the pandemic helped overcome many critical discourses about the pervasiveness of smart technologies, surveillance systems, the gig economy, and platform capitalism, contributing to reframing discursively these elements as resources and opportunities in the struggles of the crisis (see Newell 2021; Taylor et al. 2020). This trend is coherent with the general tendency to *solutionism* that characterizes the ideology of the smart city. Solutionism is basically a variant of the modernist ideology, based on the idea that the right technology or the right app might fix every kind of problem, including problems “invented” by the technology itself, without the need for general readjustments in society (Cardulo 2021; Krivý 2018; March 2018; Morozov 2013; Vanolo 2016).

The critical perspective proposed in this chapter, although not strictly focused on cities, builds on ideas developed in the urban studies literature, and looks mostly at discourses enacted through journalistic representations and political interventions. The analysis is based on empirical materials, including journal articles from the main Italian newspapers, fragments of different kinds of news and public discourses circulating on the web, and the direct experience of living in a locked-down Italian city.

The Italian pandemic: basic facts

Italy was hit severely by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the first phase of the diffusion of the virus in Europe. In March 2020, it was the country with the most coronavirus deaths in the world, overcoming China.¹ In the weeks following 21 February 2020, a growing number of “non-essential” services and activities were closed in order to limit the diffusion of the virus. At the beginning of the crisis, regulation was mostly provided at the urban level, particularly by mayors of cities severely hit in the northern region of Lombardy (the Milan region). Regulation was extended to the entire country on 9 March and progressively tightened, with the fining of people leaving home without “good reasons.” Schools and universities were closed; basically, only supermarkets, banks, pharmacies, hospitals, and post offices kept working, with limited opening hours. Travel inside the country was banned. To leave home, citizens had to fill self-

¹ “Italy becomes country with most coronavirus deaths,” *The Guardian*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/france-may-refuse-entry-to-britons-if-no-strict-lockdown-is-imposed-in-uk-coronavirus>, accessed August 2020.

declaration forms providing meaningful justification, and the police were given permission to use drones to patrol streets.

This severe lockdown phase ended on 4 May, with the beginning of a “phase 2,” characterized by the progressive reopening of activities and slowing down of containment measures. For the first two weeks, it meant permission to visit family members within the same region, or to take away food from restaurants and bars. On 25 May, most urban services were reopened, including, for example, gyms. As this chapter was written (August), Italy was in a period of progressive lightening of containment measures.

Italian platforms and tracking apps: some facts and examples

In this section, I present some evidence and anecdotes concerning the growing legitimization of companies operating in the digital sphere during the months of the COVID-19 crisis. I begin by presenting speculations connected to digital corporations and the digital infrastructure; I then focus on the specific case of *Immuni*, the Italian mobile tracking app.

Companies Care a Lot

With the progressive lockdown of urban activities, digital relations and digital services acquired a prominent role: in Italy, web traffic in February 2020 was 90 per cent higher than in February 2019.² The digital dimension of urban life and the digital right to the city quickly became crucial elements in everyday life, with the huge diffusion of smart working and online courses as two of the most evident effects. It became clear that the possibility and capability of accessing Internet, web-based services and digital resources was going to mean a fundamental change in times of isolation and social distance. The scenario obviously widened the divide between those who were able to get online and those who were not. At the same time, it also revealed the limits of Italy’s digital infrastructure: put simply, several website and digital services crashed or became unusable due to an excessive number of users. As a personal account, I can mention the case of the university where I work: for some weeks, due to excessive traffic, its website was de facto

² “Emergenza Covid-19 e internet: c’è il rischio collasso?” *Teknoring*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.teknoring.com/news/ingegneria-informatica/emergenza-covid-19-internet-collassera/>, accessed August 2020.

unusable for streaming lectures, at least during the daytime, and several students suggested that I upload my lectures to the more reliable and efficient YouTube platform.

In general, major Italian telecommunication companies (such as Telecom Italia) denied the risk of a collapse of their digital infrastructure. Institutional bodies, however – particularly the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (AGCOM, the Italian authority for Communications guarantees) – opened a series of roundtables to discuss how to expand the digital infrastructure given the temporary suspension of existing laws and regulations.³ In Italy, there is a structural divide in the provision of hardwired broadband connections: most private operators have concentrated their investments in densely populated areas with great demand and where there are better possibilities for returns on investments – a phenomenon known in urban studies as “splintering urbanism” (see Graham and Marvin 2001). About 17 per cent of the Italian population, however, lives in small towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and almost half lives in towns with fewer than 20,000. According to the Ministry for Economic Development, the pandemic made it clear that Italy had to improve its digital infrastructure, possibly by sustaining the formation of a single operator scenario to avoid the duplication of investment and infrastructure. Debates on this topic, and on the potential role of the state in regulating this crucial and inefficient market, are ongoing⁴.

In the meantime, in March 2020, Netflix decided to reduce temporarily the quality of its streamed videos in Europe by a ratio of 25 per cent, to reduce data consumption and hence to avoid the collapse of digital infrastructure. The decision was reached after a discussion between a European Commissioner and a Netflix executive in relation to the challenges of the coronavirus. After a few days, similar interventions were declared by Amazon Prime, Disney+, Facebook, Instagram, and others. Several Italian newspapers described Netflix’s decision as “sensitive” and “responsible” in order to maintain the “security” of the digital infrastructure (see, for example, Bottin 2020). Netflix also donated €1 million to sustain Italian workers in the TV and cinema industries.

³ See *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni*, “Emergenza COVID-19 – Tavoli tecnici con gli Operatori,” <https://www.agcom.it/emergenza--covid-19-tavoli-tecnici-con-gli-operatori>, accessed August 2020.

⁴ See *Agenzia Italia*, “Che cos’è la rete unica nazionale e quali sono gli interessi in gioco,” 14 August 2020, <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-08-14 /rete-unica-nazionale-tim-enel-open-fiber-9417051/>, accessed August 2020.

While Netflix took action to preserve digital infrastructure, the Italian government's ability to deal with social and spatial divides in access to digital resources has been limited. To be clear, Internet connections are continuing to be provided by a small number of Italian commercial information and communications technology companies. Discount rates have been applied and advertised during the pandemic, particularly for those living in cities severely hit by the virus, but the commercial basis of those services remains untouched. The main official intervention introduced by the Italian government has been the project (i.e., a website) named *Solidarietà Digitale*, an initiative by the Ministry for Technological Innovation and Digitalization aimed at "reducing the social and economic impact of the coronavirus thanks to innovative solutions and services."⁵ The ministry intends the portal to create a network between the private and the social in times of crisis. In fact, however, the website simply provides a heterogeneous list of online services and contents delivered by private entities, ranging from free apps for smart working to free newspaper and libraries to e-learning resources. In many cases, simple "free trials" have been advertised through the instructional webpage of the initiative – for example, in the form of two weeks of free software for those registering, a common commercial strategy in the field. Beyond the good intentions of public administration, companies, and users, the initiative turned, to a certain degree, into a mere window for the advertising of services and brands.

Overall, a number of digital companies clearly have had the opportunity to expand their global role and credibility during the pandemic. To quote an example, on 13 March 2020, US President Donald Trump declared: "I want to thank Google. Google is helping to develop a website, it's gonna be very quickly done ... to determine whether a test is warranted and to facilitate testing at a nearby convenient location. Google has 1,700 engineers working on this right now, made tremendous progress." Shares of Google parent company, Alphabet Inc., rose immediately by more than 9 per cent, regardless of the fact that Trump's account was not accurate.⁶ Similar facts suggest that, at the global level, the technocratic elite has been increasingly framed as the ultimate solution to problems, from developing the right app to finding an effective medical treatment.

⁵ See the website at <https://solidarietadigitale.agid.gov.it>

⁶ The quote has been widely reported in the media – for example, "Google to develop website to help with coronavirus test – Trump," CNBC, 13 March 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-google-idUKL4N2B654T>, accessed August 2020. The account was basically inaccurate because the project was more limited and was developed by another distinct Google-related company, Verily.

As a matter of fact, global digital corporations – and other categories, such as pharmaceutical companies – generally have increased their market positions during the crisis. In the first half of 2020, many of them experienced huge increases in their global stock exchange values, as in the cases of Amazon (+43.8 per cent), Microsoft (+22.4 per cent), PayPal (+51.5 per cent), Netflix (+38.9 per cent), and Zoom (+255.1 per cent).⁷ These global figures are coherent with Italian trends. Zoom, for example, has been by far the most downloaded app in the country during the months of lockdown, being downloaded 2.5 million times in the month of March 2020 alone. Of course, Zoom is formally free, but it is also a commercial product developed by a Californian private company, founded by a former Cisco engineer, and has expanded its worldwide presence significantly due to the pandemic.

In Italy the pandemic has allowed several discursive moral reconfigurations about high-tech companies and smart initiatives. Surely, the pandemic has offered meaningful opportunities for enterprises, operating in very different economic sectors, to take a mindful approach to corporate social responsibility policies: beyond humanitarian reasons, consumers are expected to be proud of companies and brands that support their employees, donate money and equipment, and help with the crisis (He and Harris 2020). As an example, at the end of March 2020, Amazon decided to stop selling non-essential products. Many advertising features were also removed from its Italian website. This looked like radical and responsible behaviour for a commercial company. Despite its huge gains, Amazon apparently decided to limit commercial transactions in order to diminish the number of deliveries and, arguably, to follow a reasonable growth strategy for the company. Amazon also donated €2.5 million to the Italian government (*Protezione Civile*) and €1 million to local non-government organizations, and it shared for free some digital contents (Prime videos, Kindle, and Audible books). It also actively engaged against speculation on masks and sanitizer gel prices, and it introduced an Alexa skill for donating money (Cosimi 2020). Such initiatives surely helped boosting the company's image, which was suffering in Italy due to debates on tax avoidance and unfair working conditions.

Another example of improvement in the image of companies accused of exploiting workers might be related to the case of food deliveries. During the entire lockdown period, food delivery platforms remained fully operational in Italian cities. Restaurants were closed, and during the most severe weeks of the lock-down, riders on bicycles and scooters were the main visible human presence in the streets. Delivery services were considered “fundamental services” by

⁷ See the website at <https://www.ft.com/markets>

public institutions, allowing both the provision of food to people and the survival of many restaurants that were closed to the public. According to a sectorial research report by a private food delivery company, 90 per cent of Italians (out of a sample of 30,000 citizens) considered food delivery “an essential service.”⁸ Clear data are still unavailable, and it is quite difficult to say whether the sector expanded during the lockdown or suffered because of the general economic crisis and the reduced number of active restaurants. Surely, the situation allowed weakening hostile sentiments against food delivery: riders have been often described in Italian newspapers as “heroes” keeping cities alive (see, for example, Crippa 2020). Major companies have been praised because they enacted voluntary welfare policies, as in the case of Deliveroo, which activated for free a health insurance for riders contracting COVID-19. Still, riders have kept on mobilizing in Italian cities, asking for more decent working conditions in the gig economy.

In search of a tracking app

Technological corporations immediately considered the possibility of developing smart apps that might help limit the pandemic’s spread by tracing everyday contacts and signalling contact with infected people, originating what Taylor et al. (2020, 11) called an “epidemiological turn in digital surveillance” (see also French and Monahan 2020; Newell 2021). In some cases, individual companies proposed their own apps, experiments, and protocols, but the most relevant examples have been developed at the national level, with different kinds of support from government. Different countries have also proposed very different apps, characterized by individual approaches to technology and ethics (Newell 2021), posing relevant questions about the degree to which civil liberties may be sacrificed for public health (Kitchin 2020). The Chinese health code system, introduced in hundreds of cities, or the South Korean *Corona 100m*, are commonly considered as negative benchmarks in terms of intrusive surveillance and lack of transparency, allowing public authorities to gather data about citizens’ identities, positions, movements, and commercial transactions, among other details, and posing alarming threats to freedom and privacy. Still, the Chinese state, which managed to arrest the spread of the virus by using extreme techniques of surveillance-based control and containment, has also been

⁸ See “Coronavirus: food delivery essenziale per 90% italiani, boom gelato, +133%,” ADN Kronos, 20 April 2020, https://www.adnkronos.com/sostenibilita_/tendenze/2020/04/20/non-solo-pizza-boom-gelato-anche-cocktail-food-delivery-tempi-del-covid_eQs6o0YhN7Y7ArAPVyrGnJ.html, accessed August 2020.

praised by Western observers who previously might have denounced such tactics as abuses of human rights (French and Monahan 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, apps such as the Danish *Smittestop*, Austrian *Stopp Corona*, Canadian *Covid Alert*, Singaporean *Trace Together*, and Italian *Immuni* are widely considered positive examples (O’Neill, Ryan-Mosley and Johnson 2020). Their use is voluntary, unlike the cases of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, where the COVID app is mandatory and citizens refusing to install it or to register can be fined. The more positive examples set limitations on the amount and use of collected data, unlike in Turkey, for example, where data are used for law enforcement. Finally, transparency in these examples has been preserved by diffusing open-source code bases and making policies and designs publicly available.

Immuni has been promoted by the Italian Ministry of Public Health, and realized for free by the Italian company Bending Spoons. The idea of developing a mobile app for the purpose was first discussed in Italy in March 2020, causing severe reactions from political quarters worried about issues of surveillance and privacy. Despite this criticism, the shocking situation of emergency, risk, and fear ultimately made it possible to develop the idea, which arguably would have been considered unacceptable in different times (see Kitchin 2020). Still, newspapers mostly discussed the potential benefits of a tracking app, keeping in mind crucial and problematic examples of invasive surveillance technologies such as the South Korean *Corona 100m* (Sonn, Kang and Choi 2020; see also Soave 2020). Despite resistance, on 23 March 2020, a “fast call” for applications was launched by the Ministry for Technological Innovation and Digitalization, and on 16 April a task force of seventy-four national experts decided to opt for *Immuni*, which was quite optimistically expected to be made available before the end of the month. The following week, as a consequence of unexpected cooperation between Google and Apple to develop a common technological protocol, Bending Spoons announced the use of decentralized technology, which basically means that data are kept and processed in smartphones, and not uploaded to a central server (Taylor et al. 2020). This solution reassured part of the public about concerns of privacy, transparency, and data protection. *Immuni* uses Bluetooth technology in order to allow communication between mobile phones, and it notifies about potential risks. In case of a contact warning about the virus, it is up to citizens to inform the medical services and alert recent contacts, giving form to specific types of “lateral,” “social,” and “self”-surveillance (French and Monahan 2020). The software code was made available on 25 May, and the app

was available to the public on 8 June, in a period of meaningful decline in the spread of the virus all over the country. Two months later, the app had been downloaded 4.5 million times.

There are very different opinions and discourses about Immuni. On the one hand, positive accounts emphasize the overall quality of the app, which has been considered internationally as an example of simplicity, transparency, and privacy protection (O'Neill, Ryan-Mosley and Johnson 2020). On the other hand, critical voices describe the project as a total failure, especially if compared with initial intentions: policy makers expected two-thirds of the Italian population to use the app, and many actively supported the “sharing for common good” ethos.⁹ Current figures (4.5 million downloads out of a population of more than 60 million, August 2020) show that the app has been ineffective, especially considering that the figures include users who are not actually using it. By the end of July 2020, the app had detected fewer than 50 positive cases in the entire country, out of a total about 13.000 infected citizens. According to Italian commentators, the limited diffusion of the app is due to a mixture of laziness, difficulties in understanding the mechanics of the app (how devices communicate, how privacy is protected), and generic lack of enthusiasm for surveillance technologies, which apparently are of limited use at the individual level (Capitanio 2020). Political enthusiasm is clearly weak, and a number of national policy makers have ridden the momentum by explicitly declaring that they were not going to download the app (Bozza 2020). Overall, it seems that this “technology theatre” at the intersection of technology and politics has added little, or even harmed, public trust in health policies (McDonald 2020). Surely, a winner is Bending Spoons, whose name has acquired huge popularity – the names and faces of the four young, talented founders, managers, and technological heroes of the company are regularly displayed in the news.

Confronting the Virus, the Digital Economy, and Smartness

According to Sadowski and Bendor (2018), the imaginary of the smart city strictly relates to the idea that society, cities, and urban leaders are confronted with critical problems and crises threatening our very life, forcing us to discover new ways to deal with them. Crises, and the perception of an imminent catastrophe, are key elements at the core of the entire smart city

⁹ See “Lo spettacolare fallimento delle app contro il coronavirus,” Repubblica, 9 July, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/stazione-futuro-riccardo-luna/2020/07/09/news/lo_spettacolare_fallimento_delle_app_contro_il_coronavirus-261374292/, accessed August 2020.

narrative: the future of the planet depends on our ability to fix urban problems of actually existing cities. Specifically, the authors detect three types of crises: rapid urbanization, fiscal austerity, and climatic catastrophe. All of them suggest the need for smart infrastructure, smart urban governance, data-driven systems, public-private partnerships, and adaptive technologies to produce what IBM calls a “smarter planet.” In this framework, the smart city may be conceptualized as both a reactionary narrative of technological modernization – that is, maintaining stability and controlling uncertainty – and the ultimate technological utopia, grounded in optimistic visions of social and technological progress. In the smart city, the unknowable and the uncontrollable, which are supposed to be at the basis of most urban problems, are tamed through data, code, and algorithms.

The global pandemic crisis was not really unpredictable. Scholars and experts warned for years about the potential impact of coming global epidemics (see, for example, Žižek 2020). Still, the pandemic overwhelmed and shocked people, governments, institutions, and companies, threatening the very basis of urban and economic life. If, on the one hand, the crisis pushed many to rethink old rationales and to consider seriously different forms of change, at both the individual and collective levels, on the other hand it offered further possibilities for the consolidation of solutionism and the concentration of power, wealth, and credibility in the hands of a limited number of interests, including global digital corporations. In fact, the pandemic offered new opportunities for the technology and digital surveillance industries to reassure, comfort, and please citizens, and companies from Amazon to Pornhub, Deliveroo, and Netflix have had numerous opportunities to boost and humanize their image.

In the case of Italy, the crisis implied not only a further acceleration of the outsourcing of public functions, but also the framing of information technology companies and service providers as heroes that help. For example, the entire educational infrastructure essentially has been left in the hands of users and teachers, who rely on Zoom, Classroom, WebEx, and similar “free” private e-learning technological solutions. Surely, this has forced technological upgrading in schools, but it evidently has also raised technological divides, leaving it to families to cover the costs of PCs, connections, and technical skills for e-learning, exacerbating existing inequalities and fuelling the notion that digital technology will relieve us from in-person interactions and thus reduce coronavirus spread (see Burns 2020; Manzo and Minello 2020).

On a psychological level, it can be also argued that the diffusion of a climate of fear has grown side by side with the need to control, tame, and turn the unpredictable into the predictable

(Žižek 2020). In Italy, the diffusion of everyday statistics, facts, maps, and models about the spread of the virus surely might be connected to this psychological need for control and for the reduction of uncertainty in a more and more unstable (and liquid) society, in a way not much different from the desire obsessively to control one's bodyweight or the number of calories consumed every day (see Bauman 1999). Complex problems surely are at play, but the perceived need to limit and control bitrate usage or compulsive commodity consumption, while sustaining new programs of digital surveillance, also might be explained partly by such psychological dynamics. Certainly, the perception of digital insecurity has not been contained by the Italian government, which has only limited credibility as a regulator, at least in the digital realm – what we might call “smart governance.” Fears of a collapse of the digital infrastructure, the ironic case of Pornhub's offering help to the crashing website of the Italian social security system, or the low number of downloads for Immuni, are somehow symptomatic of a situation – at the time of writing of this chapter – where citizens do not perceive the state as a credible player in the field. Moreover, although the Italian government has had to introduce severe and unpopular lockdown measures, global corporations have had the opportunity to play a different role by offering – in many cases apparently for free – solutions, recreation, possibilities for social relations, imaginaries of control, and a number of other tools and resources. Immuni fits in this framework: although the app has not been that successful – the fate of similar software all over the world (see Taylor et al. 2020) – it is coherent with the logic of taming and controlling the world through the extraction and management of data, which is at the core of smart city ideology and contemporary surveillance capitalism. For experts, it was clear from the start that digital tracking systems would be insufficient to limit the pandemic, as traditional tracking techniques, which include fieldwork, are crucial (Newell 2021; Kitchin 2020; Sonn, Kang and Choi 2020). Still, Immuni is a politically relevant experience in the building of Italian smart city culture. The shocking state of emergency caused by COVID-19 allowed the introduction of a form of digital surveillance that had been politically unthinkable a few months before, opening the way to future experiments in the field. Immuni is also coherent with the idea that technology is the ultimate weapon to tackle urban problems and that the state cannot really master technical tools. The controversial declarations of several Italian policy makers made it evident that the political elite have had quite confused ideas about tracking technologies. Instead, grounded knowledge has had to be provided by an external, young, and growing company. The credibility and popularity of Bending Spoons, which offered skills, knowledge, and talent “for free,” is currently high in the country.

Overall, the still-evolving case of Italy confirms a further acceleration in both the diffusion and the legitimization of smart city logics and digital platforms. The problems and injustices related to technologies and to the ideology of solutionism have not been reduced, but probably exacerbated by an uneven situation of crisis and responsabilization of individuals in accessing resources, including digital ones: the case of smart work is crucial in this sense. Still, the smart and digital narrative has gained momentum, meaningfully shaping our experience and perception of the pandemic, and opening new spaces of credibility and opportunity for corporations.

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