LONGING AND LACKING

Pasts, presents, and futures in municipal crime prevention technology

by Katarina Winter

This article examines the intersection of three key developments in global north societies: the growing emphasis on (in)security and fear of crime, the expansion and pluralization of policing, and the increasing digitalization of crime policy arenas. Focusing on the implementation of "System X", a leading Swedish crime prevention technology, this study explores how these trends manifest in daily municipal work. Employing the concepts of articulation work and sociotechnical imaginaries, the analysis reveals how expectations of System X are socialized and materialized in practice.

Findings demonstrate that public officials legitimize System X by contrasting its promise of future evidence-based crime prevention with a rejected "unsystematic past". Their daily often extremely time-consuming work, navigating both practical challenges and expectations of new technological solutions, reinforces their commitment through discursive and material vouching for System X. This implementation process involves a dialectic of anticipation and everyday challenges, with broader securitization discourses driving fear of crime, simultaneously capitalizing on techno-optimism. Challenges in this way constitute a presupposition for the work in that they legitimize the relevance of imagining the systematic future.

As a sociotechnical imaginary, security technologies like System X intersects with larger worldmaking and wider trends in plural policing and security markets. The implementation requires the public officials to exist in the past, present and future simultaneously, transforming imagined goals into meaningful present-day practices. This dynamic underscores the need for critical analyses of how optimism-driven technology co-exist with, and potentially obscures the complex realities it aims to address.

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Introduction

This article situates itself at the intersection of three key developments in recent decades within global north societies. First is the growing emphasis on issues of (in)security and fear of crime (Hermansson 2019; 2022; Brandén 2022; Sahlin Lilja 2021; Ahmed 2004; Lee 2007; Boutellier 2004; Lee 2007; Stanko, 2000),). Second, such changes drive a focus on increased order and control (Lee 2007), motivating an expansion and pluralization (when policing activities are carried out by multiple governmental, private, and local actors beyond traditional policing actors) of policing (Bayley & Shearing 1996; Loader 2000; Boels & Verhage 2016; Søgaard & Houborg 2017; Hansen Löfstrand 2021; Ellefsen 2021). Third, running parallel to these processes is the increasing digitalization of crime policy arenas, and the dual techno-utopian and techno-dystopian expectations entangled in visions of new digital solutions.

Internationally and nationally, the digital ambitions of governments have enabled the introduction of new predictive and preventive technologies into crime policy, positioning them as politically contested yet prominent features. In Sweden, the emphasis on matters of (in)security is reflected in public debate as well as in new crime policy initiatives and measures. For example, this includes expansion of camera surveillance to increase public safety and tackle gang-related violence (Regeringen 2025). Concurrently, digitalization is enthusiastically embraced in Sweden's policy goal to become 'the best in the world at utilizing the opportunities of digitalization', as set by the Swedish government (Regeringen 2017).

Research at the intersection of digitalization and policing has primarily examined technologies used in direct law enforcement, from the US 1990's introduction of systems like COMPSTAT (Walsh 2001; Weisburd

et al 2003; Bratton & Malinowski 2008) to a range of digital tools, algorithmic systems, and intelligence led, predictive, digital, data-driven or smart policing approaches (Ratcliffe 2016; Ferguson 2017; Lomell 2017; Fyfe, Gundhus & Rønn 2018; Kaufmann 2019; Kaufmann et al. 2019; Brayne 2020; Hälterlein 2021; Fest et al. 2023; Egbert & Leese 2021; Leese 2023; Egbert, Galis, Gundhus & Wathne 2024; Galis, Gundhus, & Vradis 2025; Galis & Karlsson 2024). Digitalization of policing also extends beyond law enforcement into domains such as municipal crime prevention, regions, housing companies, and so on, which involves new responsibilities, collaborations, and actors (Fest et al. 2023). The pressure and expectations on municipalities are expected to increase further with the introduction of new Swedish legislation (SFS 2023: 196) mandating municipal responsibilities for crime prevention.

Drawing on a case study of municipal implementation of the leading crime prevention technology in Sweden – referred to as 'System X' – this study explores the intersection of increasingly security-focused societies with pluralized and digitalized policing. Specifically, it examines the introduction of System X by analyzing how the expectations of its producers and users are materialized in daily municipal work. The empirical material includes interviews with municipal public officials responsible for implementation, along with relevant documents, website information and digital observations. Theoretically, the study is informed by the concepts of articulation work (Star 1991; Strauss 1985) and sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff 2015) focusing on both visible and invisible, as well as social and material, aspects of daily municipal technology implementation. The analytical lens centers on how imaginaries of the past, present, and future are integral to the establishment of System X.

Situating crime preventive technologies

Swedish crime prevention has transformed, mirroring changing perception of crime from primarily a social issue to an individual one (Gallo & Svensson 2019; Branteryd et al. 2021). Increasingly, the focus has moved toward potential future risks rather than actual criminal activities, signaling a move from a post-crime to a proactive pre-crime society; a preventive paradigm prioritizing pre-emptive and security logics (Zedner 2007; Lomell 2017). This aligns with the broader transition of safety and security from welfare-based assurance of safe living and working conditions to an arena marked by insecurity and fear of crime (Hermansson 2019; 2022). Such transitions distribute responsibilities to both private security actors and local arenas, tendencies described as dimensions of plural policing (Bayley & Shearing 1996; Loader 2000; Boels & Verhage 2016; Søgaard & Houborg 2017; Hansen Löfstrand 2021; Ellefsen 2021). As a result, safety has become equated with eliminating insecurity, to some extent explaining the rising expectations on municipal crime prevention and private firms supplying digital tools for these efforts. While research exists on municipal crime prevention (see e.g., Hörnqvist 2001; Andersson & Wahlgren 2022;

Brandén 2021; 2022), public sector digitalization (e.g., Nordesjö, Ulmestig, & Scaramuzzino 2024; Kaun, Larsson, & Massu 2024), and digitalization of public space and smart city initiatives (Laufs 2022), there is a gap in studies addressing the intersection these domains. Specifically, research exploring the expansion and practical application of technologies into the broader crime prevention domain, particularly regarding municipal involvement, is limited.

Framing this convergence of security responsibilities as a digital-plural policing complex, situates the study at the edge of digitalized policing research. Increasing scholarship from Criminology, Sociology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) has explored the purchase and adoption of digital technologies in law enforcement that work to analyze the "where and when" of future crimes (Kaufman et al. 2019; Bennett Moses & Chan 2016; Egbert & Leese 2021; Leese 2023). While it should be mentioned that digitalization could also be necessary to *preserve* police work (see, e.g. Weisburd et al, 2003 on the use of COMPSTAT to improve but maintaining traditional policing functions), studies inspired by STS

have continuously engaged with policing and futures (e.g. Gundhus, Skjevrak, & Wathne 2022) and how digitalization transforms police work (e.g. Chan 2003; Egbert & Leese 2021). For example, a greater reliance on technology increases the distance to the street-level and to citizens, what Terpsta, Fyfe and Salet (2019) have termed the 'abstract police'. Transformation of police work also takes place through everyday data practices that create criminal futures that inform crime prevention (Egbert & Leese 2021; Leese 2023). Other studies show how digital platforms are performative, embedding ideologies and ontologies that reshape police organizations and practices (Galis & Karlsson 2024). Resistance to new technologies is another theme in the literature (Gundhus & Wathne 2024, Brayne 2020, Egbert & Leese 2021). For example, Brayne's (2020) study of how police uses big data and surveillance technologies in their daily work shows that many police organizations describe themselves as technologically advanced, yet do not fully adopt new technologies.

Besides showing the transformation and/or resistance involved in digitalization of law enforcement, studies emphasize risks related to technology use in law enforcement, including how technology shapes our perspectives on what knowledge is considered relevant, what activities to focus on, and from where to gather information on such activities (Gundhus et al. 2022). For example, Ferguson (2017) has shown that governments rely on certain analytics to reduce crime and optimize resource allocation, risking to oversimplify realities and prioritizing easily measured outputs such as arrests and criminal rankings, and labelling of neighborhoods while overlooking more complex, qualitative aspects of policing, like police-community interactions.

Moreover, Diederichsen (2019) has argued that when new types of policing technologies are generalized (in Diederichsen's case: intelligence policing), this changes the nature of policing itself. Although technologies like automatic license plate recognition or face recognition are meant to target terrorism or organized crime, they risk turning the relationship between citizens and policing actors into an antagonistic one. This shifts the social relationship, that is foundational for policing practices, to one where citizens are transformed into potential criminals. Bias, inclusion, and exclusion embedded within these technologies pose further concerns, (Bennett Moses & Chan 2016), risking the creation and reinforcement of patterns in certain crime data (while overlooking other data). These patterns can impact definitions (Kaufman et al. 2019), decision-making (Bennet Moses & Chan 2016), and practices (Brayne 2020; Zuboff 2019; Eneman et al. 2020), with implications beyond everyday policing that may violate human rights (Egbert & Leese 2021).

Technologies not only transform police work but also extend beyond traditional law enforcement into broader arenas, reflecting the pluralization of policing (Bayley & Shearing 1996; Loader 2000). This expansion is characterized by the increasing procurement and utilization of similar technologies by various actors involved in security provision. By applying STS perspectives to the digital-plural policing complex, on digitalization of policing when studying such pluralization, the study embraces a sensitivity for the interplay between technology and society, such as how mundane practices create criminal futures (Leese 2023), as well as how our possible futures become locked to certain worldviews.

Case, material, and analytical framework

Alongside increasing repressive measures, Sweden has seen a significant expansion of crime prevention in recent decades, in particular on the local level (Andersson & Wahlgren 2022). Crime prevention in Sweden is organized on a national, regional and local level, with a growing emphasis on municipalities' as central to implementing national strategies, and as key stakeholders in the procurement and implementation of new technologies. Despite certain differences, Nordic countries share similarities in crime prevention, including national bodies supporting local efforts, commitment to police collaboration, and strong municipal autonomy. Compared to the UK's and partly Denmark's more police-led approaches, Sweden grants its municipalities greater autonomy partly due to social services' role in addressing juvenile offenders. Sweden further stands out with recent legislation mandating local crime prevention (SFS 2023: 196), aiming for structured, systematic efforts nationwide (Skr. 2023/24:68). According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, BRÅ), the law requires municipalities to produce situational pictures of local crime through knowledge-based mapping, root-cause analysis, and needs analysis.

The study explores the everyday work involved in the implementation of System X, marketed as Sweden's first and largest tool for systematic, knowledge-based crime prevention and security work, based on qualitative data collected between 2022 and 2023. Ethical approval was obtained from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority (grant no 2022-02333-01). System X offers capabilities such as reporting and mapping activities contributing to insecurity. It provides "advanced analysis" based on criminological research, directs and evaluates interventions based on this analysis, and feeds back results to decision-makers and citizens. Besides the analysis based on reporting, the system provides additional analytical possibilities using demographic data and police statistics to perform comparisons of geographical differences when it comes to crime and insecurity. The rationale of the system is that these analyses deliver situational pictures making crime prevention more knowledge based, systematic, and efficient, thereby reducing crime and increasing security within the geographical areas related to its users: primarily municipalities, but also housing companies, and the police.

Despite the company's extensive descriptions on websites and the like, little is known about its specific functionalities. Although the descriptions are lengthy, the texts mainly contain a repeated message of the company's product as a knowledge based, systematic solution for more efficient crime prevention and security work. Moreover, the company frames System X as produced through 'scientific knowledge' and an enabler of collaboration, as requested by Swedish national authorities. The founder of System X holds a professorship at a Swedish university, and this expert role is emphasized in promotion materials and in news articles.

Municipal enthusiasm for System X was evident when I proposed interviews. Already in our initial e-mail correspondence, several interviewees emphasized that they highly value digital crime prevention and security work and research about it. The study comprises interviews with municipal public officials responsible for implementing the System X, observations of their interaction with the system, and analysis of relevant publicly accessed material (e.g., websites, news articles, public events, YouTube promotion films, instruction manuals, protocols, and other documents). Municipalities were selected based on publicly available information about their work on crime prevention and security. They varied in size, geography, and implementation stage, yet public officials' work was relatively uniform, likely due to the structure and control of the implementation process. While the sample is limited, observations provide indicative insights into similarities and differences in municipalities' experiences with System X.

I made requests via e-mail in which I introduced the study to specific actors responsible for crime preventive work. In some municipalities, additional interviewees were identified locally through network selection generation within the same municipality. In total, 17 interviews with 20 individuals from 13 municipalities were conducted, including three larger and ten smaller municipalities. 15 were individual interviews while two were group interviews, including, one with three public officials and another with two interns. Semi-structured interviews allowed officials to discuss meaningful aspects of their everyday work with System X. The interview questions ranged from investigating the background of the public officials and their general work tasks, to their perspectives on and practical experiences of working with System X. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.

Data was coded using the Nvivo software program. An open coding strategy was applied initially, following Charmaz (2006) grounded theory approach. This detailed work was iterative, keeping an eye on the empirical level of interviewees experiences while remaining sensitive to potential theoretical insights or associations. Initial open coding highlighted 'time' and 'expectations' as central themes, prompting a focused coding phase to explore variations, contradictions, and coherence regarding these themes, and how they were both ascribed to and infused by the technology as well as by articulations of past, present, and future. After this initial open coding and sorting of the material, I turned to sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff 2015) and articulation work (Strauss 1985; Star 1991) to stimulate and elevate the analytical process.

Surrounding all technology are continuously changing networks of actors that either enable or hinder its establishment. Technology is in this way "thoroughly enmeshed in society" (Jasanoff 2015: 8). One way to deal with this enmeshment is to approach the coproduction and interaction of System X and municipalities as happening through sociotechnical imaginaries. Sociotechnical imaginaries bridge binaries between real/imagined, objective/subjective, and structure/agency by articulating "collectively held, institutionally stabilized and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff 2015: 10).

However, translating these collectively imagined futures into practical realities is neither straightforward nor a linear movement from point A to point B. It requires coordination between actors and activities, which inherently involves complex entanglements of translation, communication, and coproduction – a process I approach as articulation work (Strauss 1985; Star 1991)

Articulation work centers attention on who performs the work, whose contributions are visible or invisible, and which work is acknowledged. In other words, it raises the question of 'Who are all the people working on a given production' (Star 1991: 281). Here, 'the given production' refers to the movement of the technology from the producer outside of the municipality to the inside, along with the associated activities. 'All the people' includes not only prominent figures like System X's developers and public officials responsible for the implementation, but also less visible human and non-human actors, such as reporters (actors responsible for reporting and logging activities related to insecurity into System X), the system itself, as well as the beliefs, values, and discourses associated with it.

I analyze System X's implementation as a socio-technical imaginary with interconnected actors, beliefs, and practices, with articulation work central to the analysis (Star 1991). This approach frames implementation work and System X itself as an evolving process where past, present, and future are not separate but interacting forces.

Past dismissals, present challenges, and future promises

When describing the work with System X, the public officials expressively engage with expectations anchored in the past, present, and future. The past is dismissed as unsystematic, without direction or opportunity, offering no right to amend. The present, on one hand,

is the main challenge but, on the other, holds few promises, as no final results are expected yet. Instead, the promises are directed towards a bright future, envisioning knowledge-based and systematic activities grounded in yesterday's hopes.

The establishment of System X thus relies on a sociotechnical imaginary that legitimizes the technology despite, or, as we will see, even due to the disjunctions experienced in the present everyday work. Below, these aspects are presented in three themes: *The past need for a knowledge-based future system, Present hard work while longing for the future*, and *Visiting the future with yesterday's hopes*. The entanglement of past, present, and future phases is evident in the approach of sociotechnical imaginaries, in the analytical experience of dealing with the material, as well as in the headlines derived from these reflections. Nevertheless, there are differences between the sections. The first theme engages with how a collective imaginary of a systematic future necessitates a consensus on an undesirable past, and how this, in turn, relate to both material and discursive implementation work. The second theme elaborates on how imaginaries empower manual and time-consuming efforts of the present to co-exist with established routines outside system X. The final theme explores two ways of handling the "future present", where the unsystematic past is recontextualized, reflecting large differences in imaginaries while reflecting similarities between the practical realities of these differences.

The past need for a knowledge-based future system

One of the most common sentiments among the public officials was distancing themselves from the municipalities' previous work on security and crime prevention. Specifically, they highlighted two main issues. First, interviewees described that the mapping and collection of information on relevant activities data, as well as its analysis, took place in an unproductive and unsystematic way, often through randomly sent e-mails. Second, they argued that much knowledge was confined to, and thus dependent on, a few reporting individuals, making it difficult to obtain a broader picture and a more extensive knowledge base. In contrast to this past, System X was portrayed as an easing solution:

> IP4: *This is more systematic and knowledge-based, since they [the reporters] can report into the system, everything is collected in one place, which simplifies the work for those analyzing the information.*
>
> I: *So how was this done before?*
>
> IP4: *Actually, through e-mails or meetings. Mostly e-mails, and not systematically. More like by chance, running into each other, or something happens, and they send an e-mail. But here the aim is for a more continuous effort, which we didn't have before.*

Descriptions of data collection occurring unsystematically and sporadically via e-mails, excel files, or causal encounters, were emphasized by nearly all public officials. Accounts of the past were often framed with empathy – we didn't know any better – alongside

a hint of dismissal: luckily, now we do. As IP14 explains, the previous actors 'did a very good job, but nothing was documented […] So what is the effect? When I speak to politicians, is it established in gut feeling or actual knowledge?'. Actual knowledge is required for many reasons, distinguishing the present work from the unsystematic past of 'gut feelings' and channeling it into effective measurement of outcomes.

The dialectic of the unsystematic past and the systematic future motivates necessary changes in the municipalities. Moreover, the decision to implement System X brings about changes in the composition of public officials. Those responsible for implementation are often new to the work environment. In some municipalities, these new recruits were already familiar with System X, having been former students of the system's founder. Consequently, they have limited knowledge of traditional workflows but more experience with the new system. Because they were not part of the municipality's past operations, they readily dismiss previous workflows as inefficient. Similarly, when more senior officials are involved, they are either recruited from other departments within the municipalities, or, if they have prior experience with the municipality's past crime preventive work, they also articulate distance from it. For example, they frame themselves as long-time advocates for these changes and argue that progress was delayed due to slow action by the organization, national authorities, or leading politicians. This stance aligns with municipal officials' general approval of the new national mandates (SFS 2023: 196) on statutory municipal responsibilities in crime prevention. Many municipalities had already begun undertaking work aligned with the new law, such as conducting fear of crime surveys and creating situational pictures in cooperation with the police.

Technology is often viewed in terms of what it can contribute relative to user needs. Rather than clarifying the needs, the past work is presented as reflective of the system's solution. Since many municipalities are in the early stages of implementation, there is yet to be concrete evidence on the system's success or the changes brought by its implementation. Instead, public officials collectively assert that the system will, in time, enable evidence-based and systematic crime prevention and security work. This is a shared promise among separate local municipal actors and the company behind System X. Public officials further attribute the system's promises to the founder's academic expertise and experience; some interviewees even refer to him as the evidence-base himself. Moreover, there is a strong sense that System X effectively addresses new national mandates. There are few competing systems, so procurement choices were minimal, though this might change in the future. Although new systems are emerging on the market, System X is still widely acknowledged as the top choice, both by its competitors (as per my correspondence with representatives from other companies) and municipal actors. Some local initiatives are mentioned, though even actors using these alternatives affirm System X as the leading and credible solution.

System X is thus the longed-for, easy-to-use, evidence-based, effective, and needed knowledge object. Just as the municipalities'

crime prevention needs are vaguely specified, the system's knowledge, functionality, and capabilities are similarly unspecified. Concrete descriptions of system benefits often dissolve into claims of its 'ease of use'. The fact that multiple actors can log information is one of the few specific features highlighted as 'easy'. While specific features remain vague, 'knowledge' is consistently emphasized as a central benefit of the system. For instance, the company organizes 'knowledge seminars' and conferences aimed at public officials involved in crime prevention or security interventions within municipalities, housing companies, security firms, emergency services, or the police, promising 'inspiration, new knowledge, dialogue, networking, and development'. Public officials validate such initiatives, often framing them as benevolent support activities. The knowledge seminars are 'entirely free of charge' (highlighted three times in a single invitation) webinars in which existing and prospective customers can 'just listen and have a coffee or participate actively and ask questions'. While this knowledge is emphasized as free, the seminar subtly indicates that access to 'more knowledge' is available through purchasing various packages.

A notable observation is the near alignment between national guidelines for local crime prevention, System X's descriptions in the producer's materials (web pages, seminars, information campaigns, etc.), and municipal officials' accounts of System X. The focus on and need for a knowledge-based support system is collectively affirmed by municipal and System X actors alike. Knowledge is both essential and invaluable, and the work cannot proceed without it. The same statements (or variations thereof) found on the company's website are echoed in interviewee descriptions and municipal protocols. For example, the webpage contains numerous affirmations of System X's effectiveness, knowledge-based and collaborative benefits. These claims are articulated through quotes from in-house actors (mainly the CEO and the founder), and through customer endorsements. Such 'voicing' (Myers 2004; Winter 2019a) effectively frames the system as a constructive and productive technology for future municipal crime prevention and work. Public officials repeat nearly all arguments from the website, thereby performing not only material but also discursive implementation work. This work is mainly verbal, but also textual, presented in documents (e.g. meeting protocols, strategy and administrative documents) introducing System X, often as bullet points reiterating System X's own framing of its future relevance.

In summary, regardless of whether public officials have personal experience of the municipality's past, they collectively create a consensus of a desirable future (Jasanoff 2015), and, equally, a collective imaginary of an undesirable past. The unsatisfactory work of key actors also belongs to the past. National actors and/or politicians lag behind but they are finally recognizing the value of municipal work leading the way forward. There is a sense of municipal relief: Finally, they are meeting our standards. The articulation work that contributes to the collective imaginary in System X's implementation also involves verbal work on imaginaries. Public officials vouch for the technology as functioning

and effective even before it has been fully implemented and tested. This vouching is a form of witnessing (Shapin 1984; Barry 1999; Collins 1988, Winter 2019b) occurring "pre-practice", situating System X within a materially unreachable yet discursively realized future. In the next section, I will further explore these high hopes through diving into the present.

Present hard work while longing for the future

The public officials' 'present' is heavily centered on hands-on, manual tasks. First, they invest substantial effort in identifying relevant actors to serve as reporters. Second, they need to train these reporters, to use the system correctly. Third, they work to ensure that the reporters continue their reporting. Finally, they must review and analyze the reports, to compile a knowledge base for collaboration meetings focused on situational pictures. IP1 describes the first of these tasks as follows:

> The big challenge right now is to obtain information. We need information regarding the urban environment, unsafe places, insecurity-inducing events, citizens' opinions, you know. We need our employees, in home care or the like, people who are out and about in the community you know. We have many employees so we have people [to perform reports]

Reporters are generally those in roles that enable them to observe and report relevant activities, mainly within public space. They often include staff working outside the core municipal management, such as in schools, home care, and social services. Regardless of how long officials had been working with System X, the work with reporters remained a daily and intensive task. Follow-up interviews confirmed that recruiting new reporters is still a central work task, requiring time-consuming efforts and face-to-face interactions with potential candidates. This in-person approach is critical in subsequent steps as well, particularly for educating the reporters, and following that, getting them to continue the reporting through encouraging their ongoing participation. According to the public officials responsible for the implementation, this is time worthwhile spending, as meeting onsite with reporters eases the educational aspect of reporting. IP4 explains, 'We have tried doing it digitally at times […] but it is much more difficult to help them digitally'.

The risk of reporters ceasing their participation is a persistent challenge for most municipalities. A recurring reason is that reporting falls outside the reporters' official responsibilities, and, therefore, is not part of their daily job tasks. Consequently, encouraging reporters to continue their reporting assignments involves much more than oversight and control; public officials invest time in motivating, engaging, and giving feedback, activities that also affects the company itself. Initially, the company did not address reporters directly, treating them as a natural friction free part of the work with System X. However, this has substantially shifted, with the company now addressing reporters directly on its website with phrases like, "Important information for you as a reporter", "You are very important!", "Your reports ARE very important" (the word 'important' appears nine times in the same text).

The continuous threat of decreased reporting underscores the potential conflict between the ideal of a systematic flow of reports and the everyday challenges officials face. Few public officials, however, interpret this as an actual problem. Instead, they display patience, acknowledging that systematic reporting will take time. This envisioned, systematic future remains on the horizon, even as they recognize that municipalities may lack fully structured systematic information for some time. Even when challenges arose in incorporating reports into the system over time, there was minimal conflict with this vision. The 'verbal vouching' described in the previous section is thus complemented by manual efforts, a material manifestation of the collective belief in System X as a marker of progress.

The final step involves analyzing the reports to create situational pictures in collaborative meetings. Gathering data is one thing, but officials argue that the analysis stage is essential, without it, the information lacks meaning. The unsystematic past – systematic future dialectic discussed earlier is echoed here as the gap between a future with a robust reporting volume available for systematic analysis and a present that accepts the current absence of such order and results.

Daily work is thus marked by efforts to recruit, train, and motivate reporters and to some extent coordinate reviews, analysis, and situational picture meetings. By affirming the current lack of results, officials justify their "work in progress" logic, allowing for the beginner's position. This position is quite convenient as it reduces pressure to meet specific outcomes: 'We're just in the beginning [...] we are rookies' (IP1) is a common sentiment that reinforces that while the municipalities have taken action (we are finally doing something), they are not yet fully accountable. There is, therefore, an understanding that nothing need be fully operational yet. No one can (at least not yet) demand or expect that everything is already set.

Zooming in on the daily work on implementation of this seemingly straightforward, knowledge-based, and efficient system reveals a process that is hands-on, time consuming, fairly manual and inherently social. It involves face-to-face physical activities to locate, train, and motivate reporters.

Situational picture meetings are regarded as essential in municipal work, aligning with national guidelines and valued by the public officials themselves. These meetings serve as both the goal and the justification for the significant time and resources spent on reporting. The meetings offer opportunities for collaboration, representing the purpose for which the reports are collected. Yet, there are also a long-standing part of municipal processes, with well-established collaborative routines already in place. While some municipalities rely on System X information in these meetings, others use data from alternative systems (such as the police system Hobitt) and manually organized situational information. These meetings are described as effective and essential collaborations, largely unaffected by System X's presence or absence. Public officials do, however, express a desire to integrate System X more fully into these meetings, potentially as a unifying platform that centralizes data from multiple systems.

The verbal vouching of future progress is thus complemented by manual and material efforts in the tangible present undertaken by the public officials or the reporters. While there are clear disjunctions between the belief in the future system and its current practice, they co-exist without conflict. This demonstrates how "imagination is crucial for action" (Jasanoff, 2015), that is, the imagined future legitimizes the hard work of the present. The current efforts even co-exist with established and seemingly well-functioning routines outside System X. Nevertheless, the company's shift in communication – now addressing not only costumers but also reporters directly – also suggests the opposite: that action is crucial for imagination. The manual work experiences of the difficulties of reaching and engaging reporters have now become an issue for the company to address, marking a departure from its earlier determination on envisioning beliefs in a systematic future. Time will tell if this tension will affect the 'future present'.

The contrast between new actors (public officials implementing System X) and existing actors (municipal staff, becoming reporters, police and other collaborators) also becomes apparent. Potential reporters often prioritize other duties, and the police use their own systems. The following section will engage further into this contrast by examining the future as experienced by those who have worked with the system for an extended period.

Visiting the future with yesterdays' hopes
As the previous sections have highlighted, there is a prevailing realization of a belief that System X will eventually bring greater efficiency and a knowledge-based approach to crime prevention and security work in the future. Given the relatively short time the system has been in use, it is understandable that much of its potential is placed in the future. Visions of an increased number of reporters, expanded reporting activities, and deeper analysis of reports make the current, often challenging, work meaningful. When visiting municipalities that had used the system for a longer time, I explored these public officials' 'present' as the 'future' that previously interviewed officials' had anticipated. For example, officials just beginning implementation expected future activities like collecting zero reports (i.e., reporting the absence as well as the presence of activities) or adding new modules to the system (e.g. demography data sets, police statistics, or fear of crime surveys). These features were already in place in municipalities that had been using the system for some time. However, when it came to the systematic reporting envisioned for the future, it often remained a challenge. When I, so to speak, was visiting the future, either through interviews with public officials who had been working with System X for a longer while, as well as follow-up interviews with those previously identified as 'rookies', it was clear that while the number of reporters had grown in some cases, there were ongoing challenges in increasing number of reporters, maintaining reporter engagement, and consistently receiving reports in the system.

The lack of a systematic approach to handling reports involved three main aspects: an insufficient volume of reports to create

systematic knowledge, variations in practices where some actors continued to use alternative systems or email-based reporting, and a lack of comprehensive analysis of the reports. Consequently, reports were far from being produced systematically. Public officials adopted two different approaches to addressing these issues in the future present. The primary approach was to maintain faith that the system would ultimately reach its full potential. This meant that even though the anticipated future practices of systematic expansion and reporting were not yet in place, optimism regarding the feasibility remained:

IP15: We can't really find the structure [for some of the reporting]

I: Why is that?

IP15: Because we haven't been persistent enough.

This interviewee leaned on the belief that greater persistence will lead to success, and that 'we' could establish structure through more determined work. There was little room for challenging perspectives with this approach. When I asked IP15 for further clarification, they described a few internal obstacles that they expected the system to eventually resolve within the system. The phrase 'within the system' has a dual meaning; challenges were seen as manageable within the public officials' existing knowledge horizon, and as issues that the system, aligned with this horizon, would address. For example, when the desired quantity of reports was not achieved, the promised systematic analysis was instead performed on data from modules and add-ons of available data sets from the police, Statistics Sweden (SCB), and other resources.

The second approach viewed the problems as outweighing the solutions. This alternative approach was held by one municipality that had ended its collaboration with System X. The official from this municipality describes several difficulties:

IP13: Another difficulty has been getting other actors to report within the system. [...] Instead of reporting through the system, they sent us emails, which has essentially led us having several parallel systems to manage.

I: you mentioned returning to email-based reporting?

IP13: Well, it's not really returning; we never actually stopped [using email for reporting]; it has always been in use. [...] We'll never be able to convince them to use System X. It would just add a lot of extra work; it's not realistic. This multiplicity of reporting systems makes this digital tool itself... become less, lose some of its utility."

IP13 made it clear that the previous methods – receiving information via emails and other reporting systems – had always coexisted with System X, and persuading other actors to adopt a single system was considered unrealistic. While other municipalities acknowledged the challenges of engaging reporters and managing alternative systems,

they did not question who the relevant reporters, or the relevant systems were, always framing System X as the prioritized solution. In contrast, according to IP13, the reality consists of a wide array of actors (housing companies, the police, the business sector, citizens) who were already engaged with their own reporting systems:

IP13: The variety of digital systems that exist... There's an inflation of digital systems. While they offer some benefits, they also require additional resources to manage them. Since there are so many, they naturally don't overlap. They have different purposes, principles, goals, senders, payments and resource owners.

Not only the work but also the necessity of the system itself was thereby questioned: Is there truly a need for yet another system? During my interview with IP13, the municipality was in the early stages of ending its collaboration with the company behind System X. This decision was influenced by the perceived lack of ease offered by System X, and by the diversity of available technologies already in use across different sectors. Additionally, IP13 argued that the system failed to capture the complex reality by avoiding the specificity required to understand details in reports, both in terms of geography and content, reflecting critiques in the literature on digital policing regarding the risk of reinforcing inequality or structural biases (e.g., Kaufman 2019; Egbert & Leese 2021).

Besides illustrating the variety of available technologies, IP13 and other officials also showed diverse visions of available futures. While IP15 and others believed that persistence could achieve a systematic use of a single, general system, IP13's inflation perspective reflected skepticism, interpreting the inflation of systems as evidence of the impossibility of achieving such uniformity. For them, this led to discontinuing rather than expanding System X. Two key aspects of the unsystematic past are at play here. First, while other officials described email reporting as unsystematic work, IP13 saw it as a functional way to obtain relevant information both then and now: 'we never stopped'. Second, while IP13 positioned System X as part of the municipality's past, other officials considered it as the pathway to a systematic future, legitimizing the current unsystematic present as a necessary stage. For them, System X not only belongs to the future, it also offers the future.

The situational picture meetings and collaboration between the municipality and the police are pushed as the tangible potential outcome of systematized work and the implementation of System X. In this way, the eventual success or failure of systematized reports appears almost secondary. When I ask IP13 about the future, they made it clear that situational picture meetings would continue without System X, aligning with new legal requirements on producing situational pictures in collaboration. Thus, while the imaginaries held by IP13 and other municipalities differ dramatically, the practical consequences of these differences on their ambitions and goals remain minimal.

Discussion

Kaufman (2019) has argued that understanding the national and global implications of new technologies, as well as the agency that accompanies them, requires analyzing their local practices. Such an approach sheds light on the specific expectations, practices, and actors surrounding these technologies. By focusing on municipal public officials responsible for implementing crime prevention technologies, this study highlights these officials as a new group of municipal 'data professionals' (Fest et al. 2023) operating outside traditional law enforcement. By examining how these officials manage the practices and expectations surrounding System X – a leading system in Sweden's crime prevention and security work – the analysis contributes to the broader discussions on digitalization and the pluralization of policing, especially in how everyday work and expectations are intertwined with visions of the past, present and future.

Viewing the work with System X through the lens of a sociotechnical imaginary reveals how imagination fuels action: it shapes the everyday meaning-making in challenging implementation work as well as produces worldmaking where future hopes are bound up with pasts (Jasanoff 2015). Public officials legitimize System X and its related work by rejecting an unsystematic past and, concurrently, investing in an enthusiastic belief in the promise of evidence-based, systematic crime prevention. Although the company, public officials, and recent legislation (SFS 2023: 196) respectively and collectively envision the system as the solution, realizing these expectations remain an ongoing challenge with systematic analysis still a distant goal. Daily work is laborious and sometimes inconsistent, involving significant time spent on identifying, recruiting, and encouraging reporters, and keeping them engaged. Rather than creating conflict, however, public officials' discursive and material vouching for System X enable these challenges to underscore the officials' sustained commitment to System X, positioning it as a bridge between ambition and pragmatic use. Consequently, encountered and ongoing challenges in constitute a presupposition for the work in that they legitimize the relevance of imagining the systematic future. Their work requires them to exist in the past, present and future simultaneously, transforming imagined goals into meaningful present-day practices. In this way, I also attend to how collective imagination avoids conflict through building consensus (Jasanoff 2015) around System X.

The belief in better, more efficient, and systematic futures is crucial yet delicate, depending on trust in progress. Some futures were possible to 'visit'. In municipalities with a longer experience of System X, progress in terms of change was apparent – although often in areas like integrating additional modules rather than expanding the volume of reporters and reports. The use of existing databases from agencies such as the police allows System X to deliver 'systematic analyses', though the focus of such analyses diverges from the intended causal analysis. At the same time, this was a crucial activity to enable analyses within the system. Such

'knowledge thrifting' practice, or the repurposing of existing data, aligns with broader trends where private actors repackage public data as part of their offerings (field correspondence, 2024).

As key technology recipients, municipal officials provide crucial insight into how new technologies become institutionalized through knowledge co-production (Jasanoff 2004). Notably, these data professionals', whether or not they had prior affiliations with the system's founders, often express loyalty to System X and its providers, emphasizing the expertise associated with it. This does not mean that implementation takes place without co-production, but rather, that such allegiance and enthusiastic belief (see also Winter 2019a) are pivotal to coproduction. Unlike other STS insights on implementation as a matter of translation and transformation, System X implementation might be better described as processes of 'dubbing', reflecting the simplistic techno-optimism characterizing public sector digitalization in general.

But it is not the public officials who perform simplification. Rather, it is the system developers who create simplification through complexity. They ornament the system with a visually complex costume, drawing from high-profile, non-specific concepts such as "evidence-based", "systematic", and 'collaboration' (as seen in the national guidelines). The potential risk is that such simplifications may undercut the complex social problems that require nuanced solutions, fostering premature optimism about 'evidence-based expertise', even before any evidence exist. Given these techno-optimistic pitfalls, further critical examination of digital policing technologies is warranted to uncover potential weaknesses and blind spots (McGuire 2020; Chan, Sanders, Bennet Moses and Blackmore 2022; Bennett Moses and Chan 2018; Browning & Arrigo 2021; Ferguson 2017). In line with Chan, Sanders, Bennet Moses, and Blackmore (2022), scrutinizing the 'political nature of data practice', remains crucial. For example, through examining how the 'constructed nature of police intelligence become sanitized' and the political choices that accompanies it becomes invisible and black-boxed (cf. Jasanoff 2017). The material and discursive vouching of evidence-based knowledge and practices that surround System X, sanitizes the implementation process and the potential political nature, and moreover, it produces a success of the evidence even before concrete evidence substantiates it. The idea that what is talked about as knowledge is what counts as knowledge is brutally illustrated here. The contemporary crime policy and public debate in Sweden, marked by fear of crime and/or (in)security discourses underpin this enthusiasm. Consequently, System X is not only a case of local world making. As a sociotechnical imaginary it intersects with larger worldmaking and wider trends in plural policing and expansion of crime prevention and (in)security market. Previous research has shown that exaggerated focus on future threat scenarios without a robust theoretical and empirical grounding risks policy interventions based on weak assumptions, potentially

promoting increased control measures (Flyghed 2002; 2005; Nilsson 2008). In this context, while technologies are partly sanctioned by threat scenarios, these technologies and their entwined imaginaries of control, are also legitimized by optimistic beliefs in technology as a benevolent tool of plural policing.

Diedrichsen (2019) highlights that intelligence-led policing can drive policing standards toward antagonistic relationships between citizens and policing actors. This raises questions about the legitimacy and ethical foundation of such technologies, as well as on researchers' responsibility to examine the world-making of technologies. As crime and security discourse increasingly leans on imaginaries of digital and efficient futures, solutions with narrow scopes sidelining complexity about crime, safety, and insecurity. In such imaginaries, only the technology as such is allowed complexity. Although technologies used within certain police institutions, territorial border practices, or public transport allow for considerable complexity, studies have also shown deficits in the advancement of technologies (Chamard 2006) and the organizations that use them (Brayne 2020). System X does not inherently add complexity, partly because the lack of reports blocks the possibility to perform more intricate analyses, but also because System X offers but a narrowly defined future, limiting possible visions of municipal crime prevention to specific metrics and formats. Instead, it is the everyday social reality that provide complexity: in finding and motivating relevant reporters, in realizing there are other systems, in allocating time and resources invested. Other studies have explored how everyday data practices transforms police work and shape policing futures (Egbert and Leese 2021), through creating criminal futures that inform crime prevention (Leese 2023). While these studies also argue that mundane practices are understudied in criminological research, the current study adds to this discussion that futures in policing encompass not only criminal scenarios but also positive imaginaries. These positive imaginaries legitimize the everyday mundane work, and are simultaneously coproduced between this work and the actors involved in implementating the new technology.

As Jasanoff and colleagues have shown, imaginaries can be both plural and singular, but a full socio-technical imaginary takes shape when the 'vanguard vision' (Hilgartner 2015) is adopted collectively (Jasanoff 2015: 10). System X, initially a singular imaginary, becomes collectively adopted through the continual reinforcement of public officials, not despite the difficulties with systemic work and number of reporters, but also *because* of these difficulties. They are hindering and meaning-making actors at the same time as the difficulties in the present legitimize the future, but they also make the company to adjust to them. Thus, 'shared understandings' of social life and social order take place through 'advancement in science and technology' (Jasanoff 2015). An advancing system both affects the realities and work within local levels, but are also affected by this very work to be able to continue to advance. Moreover, municipalities are increasingly enrolled by the state as responsible for crime preventive action, and the new law (2023:196) will engage new actors, ways, and arenas (schools, housing companies, et cetera) adding to the indeed complex social reality of working with crime prevention. In response to new legislation, security companies are now adjusting their products to align with these emerging responsibilities, signaling a shift toward municipalities as primary platforms for security technologies.

It is no surprise that securitization discourses escalate both legislation and a focus on crime and security in the public sector, or that private actors engage with this discourse and with municipalities as the future platforms for their market. Nevertheless, the societal acceptance of this development is noteworthy. Whereas Jasanoff identifies co-existing optimistic and pessimistic visions of technology, this case study finds that System X's implementation process thrives on a dialectic of anticipation and everyday challenges, with broader securitization discourses driving fear of crime and suspicion also feeding on techno-optimism. This dynamic underscores the need for rigorous and critical analyses of how optimism-driven technology co-exist with, and obscures the complex realities it aims to address. Vestby and Vestby (2021) call for an 'open conversation' on policing technologies despite its (sometimes) specialized nature. This paper adds to this call by emphasizing the need to acknowledge both the (sometimes) simplicity of policing technologies and the simultaneous specialized nature of the social.

Acknowledgements

Author description

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