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The Contested Smart City:
Discourses and Networked Practices in the Production of Smart Cities

My PhD-project investigates the interplay between a city’s dependency on technological tools created by tech-providers and the ways in which new tools are used as instruments of citizen empowerment. I aim to analyze how technological tools act as restrictions or enablers in establishing urban governance arrangements that connect citizens to governance networks. As smart cities have advanced urban infrastructures and changed the political, cultural and economic practices of citizens, my PhD thesis plugs into two debates on smart cities: First, it draws on the debate whether large tech-companies (e.g. IBM, Microsoft) that “make cities smart” work to position themselves as indispensable providers of know-how. Second, it addresses the debate on the relationship between strengthening local participatory policy-making and – in turn – increasingly relies on global communications technology.

To understand these developments, technology receives particular attention as it is not only object of governance but also its agent. For this, an Actor-Network-Theory-based tracing of technological tools through the types of use(r)s will provide new data on how the civil society appropriates itself of tools made by large tech-companies. Furthermore, social network analysis based on participant interviewing, a project-participant database and the use of ego-centered network maps allows understanding the impact of new cooperation links across organizational sectors (e.g. private, public) created by the production of a Smart City.

These methods are applied to the critical cases Amsterdam and Barcelona as this allows grasping the conditions in which citizen collaboration have an impact on smart city strategies. Both case are similar in pursuing a collaborative smart city approach which includes citizen participation, yet Amsterdam focusses on a more sustainable energy consumption, while Barcelona prioritizes social cohesion and improving services, public participation and mobility.