

Critical Discourse Analysis of Councilor Spina's Comments in Opposition to Automated Speed Enforcement

Abstract

The following briefly summarises our analysis of the segment of council discourse delivered by Councillor Spina during the December 2024 municipal budget meeting debate on the AMPS motion. Notably, the segment is about the automated speed enforcement system that has already been endorsed by the city and irrelevant to the AMPS motion in front of council. The comments position Spina strongly against the deployment of automated traffic enforcement technologies and provides a unique opportunity to analyse how language, authority, distraction, disinformation, diversion and discursive strategies are used to resist technological solutions in policy-making, confuse members of council on the discussion topic, spread disinformation, strengthen neoliberal arguments, subvert rationality and critical thought, sabotage municipal authority and debate, and advance right-wing populism. The analysis contains the following sections: first, an overview of the key themes and discursive strategies used in the segment; second, the ways in which authority and legitimacy are invoked; third, the framing of the technology itself; fourth, the role of community values and identity in the segment; and lastly, a comparative section contrasting Spina's argument with more typical pro-enforcement arguments, thereby highlighting the discursive clash between a human-centered policing discourse and a techno-managerial discourse.

Context and Overview of the Comments

Segment under analysis:

"This is one topic I've thought long and hard about uh each time we've discussed it and and I I'm going to speak from experience on most of this because I am uh someone who has 20 years experience in enforcing this in our community here uh and I will say there's been some points made by some of my fellow councillors here that have said this will not divert drivers to different areas or you know automated speed units will not divert or or change behaviour of drivers I would say that that is uh 100% an incorrect statement these units will 100% divert drivers to other areas they will simply displace Speeders from one area where this unit is posted to another and if that that were not true then I wouldn't be able to drive with my iPhone in my hand and have it send me a message automatically that says speed trap ahead slow down or divert your path that's happening today in everyone's phone in every Community across Ontario and across Canada so if we put these out there I'm willing to wager that it will divert traffic and it will simply display Speeders to a different part of the community where they are not now the number one thing we can do to address speeders in our community is to leave it in the hands of the people who are authorized to enforce it and that is the police service the second thing is these automated units have absolutely zero discretion a police officer doing traffic duties or traffic enforcement has discretion someone is racing to get their wife to the hospital because she's pregnant someone is racing to get a loved one to the hospital there's discretion there they're not going to get a ticket they're probably going to get escorted to the hospital how many of these tickets are going to be issued because there's an emergency vehicle that's gone by one of these units trying to get someone to the hospital or trying to get somewhere where they're going to assist people in our community it's a waste of time and resources because we're going to have to chase those down areas of concern like school zones and old homes deserve speed enforcement but they deserve the gold standard of speed

enforcement that is not these units that is an officer that is trained and able to provide speed enforcement in our community someone who is there to provide for the safety of the community and someone who is dynamic and has discretion in order to best serve the community in those functions I suspect in other communities where they have where there has been reduction in speed in these areas I suspect those reductions are simply because the Speeders have diverted to a different area and the traffic has diverted to a different area as our designers have mentioned they're well on their way to designing areas of our community to slow traffic down through environmental design I think that's simply the best thing that we need to do and these in my opinion these units are simply not what's best for our community I think they're going to be something that we are going to really have a hard time dealing with between any kind of vandalism to them and any kind of issues that come up in the future I think we need to leave this enforcement where it belongs leave it with the Police Service they are the experts and allow them to do it it's not City council's Job to get into the policing of this in our community.”

Councillor Spina's comments take place in the context of municipal deliberations over whether or not to fund the zero-levy AMPS to implement the council-endorsed, staff-recommended ASE system. However, the segment is clearly an argument against ASE systems, such as photo radar or speed cameras, and as such represents a re-opening and discussion about an irrelevant and inappropriate subject matter. ASE technologies are widely debated within communities due to their mixture of safety, efficiency, and surveillance implications. In this segment, Spina monopolizes a discourse of lived experience and past authority as a twenty-year enforcer of traffic laws, bringing experiential authority into the policy debate. His position is tightly aligned with a pro-human enforcement approach, emphasizing the irreplaceable nature of police officers' discretion and the risks of over-relying on machines. At the same time, Spina failed to include the human and discretionary roles under an AMPS system (the motion in front of council) by focusing on a generalisable ASE system. This served to divert public and council members' attention and spread disinformation, while confusing members of council and citizens around the purpose of the discussion and AMPS motion.

The key themes and critiques of Spina's comments are:

- **Displacement rather than speed reduction** of driver behaviour change as disinformation.
- **The irreplaceable discretion of police officers** in traffic enforcement while simultaneously excluding that of POA Officers, adjudicators and staff and the AMPS processes.
- **Concerns of inefficiency, waste, and potential misuse** of resources, while simultaneously neglecting the efficiency, fairness and effectiveness of resource demands under the AMPS, and the substantial financial and taxpayer savings of the AMPS supported ASE system.
- **The valorization of police expertise** in contrast to city council or technological interventions, despite the limited training, presence and expertise of police officers compared to POA Officers and the backstops and checks under the AMPS.
- **Skepticism of technocratic management** in favour of traditional forms of enforcement that also employ technology while simultaneously demonstrating a lack of understanding of the differences and nuances between data-driven and data-informed socio-technological systems (the primary cause/effect of the focus on ASE rather than AMPS). Ironically this conflicts with both his counter-technological responses argument, and ignores important privacy and surveillance discourses – we speculate around that conflict later.

As can be seen, both what *is* and *is not* said are critical in discourse analysis.

Discursive Strategies of Authority and Expertise

One of the most salient features of the discourse is how Spina asserts authority. He foregrounds his two decades of personal experience in traffic enforcement, distinguishing himself from his fellow councillors who might be seen as relying on abstractions or purely technical arguments. This is not only a strategy of self-legitimation but also a way of casting doubt on the credibility of alternative claims, which largely consists of staff research, experience of other communities and evidence of results to date.

- **Experiential Authority:** Phrases like “I have 20 years experience enforcing this in our community” create a contrast between Spina as the bearer of practical, grounded knowledge versus others who Spina positions as theorising. This reliance on lived expertise establishes his discourse as authentic, and in many ways, *uncontestable* because it derives from direct experience, albeit anecdotal and subjective.
- **Epistemic Power:** Spina articulates certainty in assertions such as “That is 100% an incorrect statement” and “These units will 100% divert drivers.” Such absolute formulations push back against the uncertainty or probabilistic reasoning that usually accompanies technical debates, where impacts are discussed in terms of likelihood. His categorical tone is itself a rhetorical weapon. It is used as disinformation that is grounded in experiential authority that directly contradicts the evidence on hand. In this way, questions around why speeders might divert route (almost certainly requiring longer travel times) rather than simply slow down as a behaviour change do not enter into the discourse.

This reliance on practical authority and experiential certainty opposes the logic often found in pro-technical policymaking, which tends to privilege statistical data, empirical studies, and expert reports. Spina instead elevates anecdotal and subjective practice over empirical observations and evidence, which destabilizes the conventional technocratic knowledge hierarchy—typically used to cast doubt and spread confusion—among members of council and the public, cultivating populist rhetoric. Importantly, in doing so, his comments reference the ASE system; not the AMPS motion in front of council. This tactic generally intends to place opponents (ie. supporters of the AMPS motion) on the defence, causing distraction and confusion.

Framing of the Technology: Automated Units as Flawed Agents

Spina continuously constructs automated speed units in ways that foreground their shortcomings:

1. Lack of discretion:

He stresses that machines cannot make judgment calls in exceptional or human-centered circumstances. While this is of limited accuracy, it foregrounds the argument as myopic, or centred on the ASE, ignoring the flexibility of technology to make numerous judgments as part of its design (now evident within the provincial discourse around ASEs) and disregards the use of the AMPS for precisely those human-centred circumstances and judgment calls. This logical error framed as his argument applied to the ASE system, not the AMPS motion under consideration, enables the transmission of disinformation. In addition, this technology-centred argument ignores the AMPS intentionally, which includes several backstops and options for human-centred intervention and decision making. By centring his comments on the ASE system, he then deliberately avoids confronting, and diverts attention from, the AMPS benefits in this regards. The anecdotal scenario of a pregnant woman being rushed to the hospital

demonstrates how discretion is both vital and deeply human at the stage of the ASE, but neglects it through the AMPS. He suggests ASE systems will fail catastrophically in these “edge cases” where moral judgment and compassion are required, which again ignores the roles of the AMPS. In so doing, he advocates for speeding under “certain” circumstances, disregarding the safety, option and equity of emergency services, undermining authority in multiple ways, and promoting a right-wing populist and individualist ideology.

2. Displacement of problems rather than solutions:

Spina disputes the claim that speed cameras change driver behaviour, contradicting the evidence and his own arguments around diversion. Instead, he frames ASE as merely pushing speeding into other neighborhoods: “They will simply displace Speeders... to a different part of the community.” In other words, he contradicts himself by suggesting ASE *won't* change driver behaviour by claiming ASE *will* change driver behaviour. Here, the technology is constructed as not solving but re-routing problems, undermining the policy justification for their implementation through direct disinformation. More importantly, he distracts attention away from his illogical argument by centring on the ASE rather than the AMPS. However, ASE is used in community safety zones, and displacing speeders *is* considered a success (especially as a short- to medium-term intervention). This fact can only be ignored by focusing on displacement as a problem in and of itself. Notably, this argument is about the ASE, not the AMPS, suggesting his comments—specifically his displacement argument—were intended to create space for distraction and disinformation to cast doubt, cause confusion and appeal to populist views.

3. Resource inefficiency and potential for additional problems:

He points out that these units would generate downstream burdens, such as chasing false tickets created by emergency vehicle interference or dealing with vandalism. This inverts the usual argument—that machines save resources—by arguing that they create extra costs by, again, invoking disinformation and distraction. Spina is able to do this effectively by centring his arguments on the ASE and not the AMPS, which has intentionally resolved such issues as police resources and costs through the use of specially trained POA Officers and alternate court adjudicators and dispute processes, and mechanisms to exclude emergency vehicles from ticketing while far exceeding the temporal and spatial resources efficiencies of policing. Further, of course, the issue of vandalism is the vendors problem, a fact disinformation can disregard in its appeal to populist rhetoric.

By framing technology as an ineffective, indiscreet, and even burdensome intervention, Spina positions ASE (not the AMPS) not as a modern safety tool but as an invasive and unreliable intrusion, contrasting it with his argument for a reliable, dynamic figure of the police officer, despite their extremely limited success rate of catching speeders, resource intensive and costly attempts for even limited patrols, and their inability to re-normalise speeding drivers to safer speeds and driving practices (for several reasons, including the very argument that “if that were not true then I wouldn't be able to drive with my iPhone in my hand and have it send me a message automatically that says speed trap ahead slow down or divert your path” in reference to ASE, *and equally applicable* (indeed, the example he used here applies specifically to speed traps) *to police speed traps*, contradicting his police “gold standard” argument). Spina's discourse effectively distracts the council conversation away from the AMPS motion and towards the ASE system, previously endorsed by council.

Valorization of Human Policing

At the core of Spina's discourse is the consistent valorization of the police as both the rightful and practical guardians of traffic enforcement, despite his argument for environmental design to create a default or self-enforcement, and the fact the police have endorsed the ASE. Notably, police do not prevent speeding; they enforce the Highway Traffic Act when they catch speeding drivers. Conversely, ASE re-normalises driving behaviour across entire municipal jurisdictions, and the AMPS provides far superior discretion and moral ownership than that which Spina claims only belongs to police. Several interlinked discursive moves are used in Spina's argument:

- **Exclusive Authority:** "The number one thing we can do... is to leave it in the hands of the people who are authorized to enforce it and that is the police service." This positions policing as a closed jurisdiction, not open to technological supplementation, political intervention or, one might assume, environmental design. This argument ignores and distracts from the fact that the AMPS system is designed to provide authoritative enforcement through a combination of the ASE system technology and human centred review and discretion of evaluation by trained POA officers and court adjudicators. As a former police officer, the position Spina advocates for could reveal a potential conflict of interest in the ASE and AMPS.
- **Discretion = Humanity + Justice:** Police discretion is portrayed not as arbitrary but as empathetic, situationally aware, and ethically superior. The contrast is drawn between "a trained officer" who has flexibility and the rigid, blank machine incapable of compassionate judgment. However, in doing so, Spina also argues that at times drivers may be permitted to speed or otherwise violate the HTA (rushing to the hospital or driving distracted. Further, this argument undermines the essential role of emergency services (ambulance in the former example) thereby eroding political and public support for public services, and driving a wedge between fiscal austerity and essential services, undermining the legitimacy of municipal authority and fuelling a right-wing populist view in addition to the neoliberal ideology of fiscal austerity, despite arguing for increased spending (policing).
- **Moral Ownership:** By arguing "It's not City council's job to get into the policing of this," Spina constructs a boundary between governance and enforcement, and indeed counters his very own and that of the Mayor's argument for environmental design to prevent speeding. This serves not only to strengthen police authority but also suggests that technological involvement oversteps legitimate boundaries. By doing so, Spina undermines municipal authority at the very same time the city is struggling with an excessively ballooning police budget. Note also here that Spina frames ASE/AMPS as "city council's job" in contrast to ASE/AMPS as a legitimate policy-setting role of city council, further undermining municipal authority as well as fomenting anti-authority, populist and extremist views while spreading disinformation.

This construction of the police officer as the "gold standard" of safety crucially resists the rationalist and efficiency-oriented logic of machine enforcement, and the human centric AMPS role that was supposed to be the topic of discussion at the December 2024 budget meeting. Instead, Spina's argument emphasizes moral authority, human discretion, and expertise that cannot be automated by directly neglecting (discussion of) the AMPS through distraction, disinformation and diversion.

Community Values and Identity

Spina appeals repeatedly to community identity, reinforcing an imagined shared value system:

- **Local knowledge and collective experience:** His references to drivers using iPhone warnings about speed traps invoke everyday shared practices that resonate with community members. He constructs reality in terms of *what already happens in practice*, suggesting official policies cannot override what is lived. In this manner, Spina is not only advocating for drivers to violate the HTA (by driving distracted), but also advocating that drivers avoid speed enforcement wherever and however possible, undermining legitimate authority and invoking right-wing populist extremism, and neoliberal ideologies (e.g. individualism versus community safety). Nevertheless, Spina is speaking again about the ASE system, not the AMPS motion, and neglected to note that the ASE system must display a driver warning sign that ASE is located ahead; an equitable road user warning (versus the distracted driving individualist/elitist counter-technological approach Spina argues for). Why he did not simply use that signage as an example of drivers avoiding the area perhaps speaks to his shared narrative that was used to appeal to drivers through populist rhetoric, reflecting the deeply embedded cultural phenomenon of automobility and motornormativity.
- **Community safeguarding through environmental design:** He endorses non-technological community-based interventions, such as road designs that naturally slow down cars. Here, the discourse opposed to surveillance-oriented enforcement is re-centered onto urban design and communal self-management. However, in doing so, he again neglects to reference the immediate- and medium-term purposes of the AMPS system in funding long-term environmental design solutions, and the primary supporting goal of the AMPS for short- and medium-term community safety. Nevertheless, this argument fails to consider the budget meeting motion at hand about the AMPS in an apparent effort to reinforce his anti-ASE, anti-safety narrative to distract members of council. While important, this argument is irrelevant and was not corrected by the chair.
- **Skepticism of intrusion:** Technology is associated with future burdens (“vandalism,” “issues that come up”) and with external imposition, whereas the community is constructed as capable of self-regulating through police and environmental design. Which is why the AMPS system (or any other system to administer the technology) exists, but was neglected in the narrative, permitting the narrative to serve effectively as disinformation and distraction.

Thus, the community is positioned as needing to protect itself both from reckless drivers and from the misguided overreach of automated systems. Ironically, that is the exact intent of the ASE system supported by the AMPS. In effect, Spina's arguments, if followed through to their logical conclusion in the context of the AMPS, were all in support of the AMPS, yet, bizarrely, his recorded vote is against the AMPS.

Discursive Contrast with Pro-Technical Arguments

To highlight the clash more starkly, it is important to compare Spina's discourse with the dominant pro-technical frames that usually justify traffic cameras and automated enforcement.

Spina's Discourse

Authority rooted in **experience**: 20 years of policing

Machines lack **discretion**, risk punishing emergencies unjustly

Automated units **displace** speeding

Police are the **gold standard** of enforcement

Technology creates **new burdens** (false tickets, vandalism)

Council should not **intervene in policing**

Properly Designed Systems Discourse

Authority rooted in **data-informed (versus data-driven) decision making and empirical studies** on speed reduction and crash prevention

Machines ensure **consistency and impartiality**, avoiding biases or selective enforcement; systems such as the AMPS ensure discretion and fairness

Automated units **deter** speeding and produce measurable safety gains across the community by re-normalising driver behaviour to safe speed and legal obligations

Humans introduce **bias, inconsistency, inefficiencies and costs**, while machines provide efficiency and their systems support fairness and discretion

Technology **saves resources** by reducing need for constant police presence and resources, along with the discretion to monitor and ensure legal adherence and fairness, complemented by vendor agreements that reduce burdens and unanticipated costs

Council has a duty to **innovate and apply modern safety tools** for citizen health and community wellbeing especially where already endorsed; the AMPS supports the endorsed ASE system

The divergence reveals a profound discursive clash: Spina frames traffic enforcement as a human, professional, and situational art, whereas the ASE system supported by the AMPS manages traffic enforcement as a rational, data-informed, and cost and resource efficient method of community safety. Where the ASE system frame highlights efficiency, Spina highlights excess resource costs; where the ASE system advocates want re-normalised driver behaviour, Spina appeals to HTA violations and right-wing populism. The debate is thus not only about traffic policy but about broader rival discourses of authority: *community safety, legitimacy and municipal authority versus individualist ideologies, populist extremism and neoliberal authoritarianism*.

Critical Evaluation of Discursive Strategies

Spina's comments are rhetorically forceful but also rely on several debatable premises. His assertion that displacement is inevitable due to apps like Waze oversimplify behavioural patterns and contradicts the evidence, which suggests are often altered by consistent enforcement through systems such as ASE. His valorization of discretion conceals concerns about unequal policing practices, where discretion has historically enabled bias and inconsistent outcomes. It also ignores the intent and roles of the AMPS, which might have been identified had Spina focused on the motion at hand and not re-opened a closed conversation about another matter (the ASE system). In this sense, fundamentally, Spina's comments supported the AMPS. Nevertheless, his discourse strategically mobilizes imagery that is difficult to challenge as populist rhetoric: the pregnant woman rush to the hospital (versus an ambulance), the community protecting itself from technological determinism (versus the backstops of the AMPS), the tensions around municipal overreach (versus undermining municipal authority), and the gold standard

of a police officer (versus the trained expertise and cost savings of POA Officers and adjudicator).

Critically, his comments reject the technocratic promise of disembodied rationality which is, unfortunately, not at issue here. Instead, his comments humanise enforcement, reframing machines as incapable of matching human judgment only by neglecting the motion at hand about the AMPS. This is a potent counter-frame in populist argumentation because it resists the social obligations that are the basis of legislation, such as the HTA, and fuels right-wing extremism based on authoritarianism and individualist ideologies such as neoliberalism.

Conclusion

Councillor Spina's comments demonstrate how automated enforcement technologies can be resisted not only on the grounds of disinformation and distraction, but by appealing to populist values—authority of lived (anecdotal) experience, legitimacy of individual choice, and the moral superiority of human judgment for enforcement. His rhetorical moves construct police officers as the “gold standard” and machines as flawed, inflexible, and even harmful. He is able to do this by disregarding the AMPS—the topic of the motion—and employing distraction, disinformation and diversion.

When contrasted with the AMPS system design arguments, the clash reveals two competing paradigms of governance: one grounded in individual choice, technological empowerment and populist rhetoric; the other in social responsibility, community wellbeing, facts and evidence, and safety. This discursive battle reflects broader societal tensions around how authority, governance, and expertise should be distributed in an increasingly automated world. Spina's comments bridge this battle by appealing to populist rhetoric, disinformation and distraction in a manner that leads to social polarisation, authoritarianism, and extremism only by neglecting the crucial role of the AMPS—orienting the ASE system as one that is assumed to be a dystopian data-driven approach in Spina's comments, rather than one characterised and designed as data-informed with multiple human interventions under the AMPS or a similar system—which should have been central in his comments. This fatal flaw in argument was derived by centring his comments on the ASE system without regard to the AMPS.