



Editorial. Surveillance Studies: Understanding visibility, mobility and the phenetic fix.

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Abstract

Surveillance studies is described as a cross-disciplinary initiative to understand the rapidly increasing ways in which personal details are collected, stored, transmitted, checked, and used as means of influencing and managing people and populations. Surveillance may involve physical watching, but today it is more likely to be automated. Thus it makes personal data visible to organizations, even if persons are in transit, and it also allows for comparing and classifying data. Because this has implications for inequality and for justice, surveillance studies also has a policy and a political dimension.

Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century it is clear that ‘surveillance studies’ is a rapidly developing field of analysis and theory. Diverse practices and processes for dealing with personal data are multiplying, and the speed with which records can be accessed is accelerating. The old top-heavy bureaucracies of the earlier twentieth century are being replaced with computerized and networked systems. While it should be noted that some surveillance relies on physical watching, much is now digitized, which raises many new questions for understanding and interpreting the processes involved.

Suddenly, during 2001, the steady increase in surveillance – and in surveillance studies – received a boost from a world event. September 11 prompted widespread international concern for security in the face of global terrorism, seen terrifyingly in the suicide plane attack on the World Trade Center in New York, and the damage inflicted on the Pentagon. Already existing surveillance was reinforced at crucial points, with the promise of more to come. Many countries rapidly passed laws permitting unprecedented levels of policing and intelligence surveillance, which in turn draws upon other sources such as consumer records.

Well before the events of September 11, however, plans were being made by both analysts and activists to place on a firmer footing the already existing initiatives in surveillance studies, and to provide new means of networking between some of the key

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players, in different countries and contexts. The new online journal and resource web site, *Surveillance-and-Society*, is the result. This first issue editorial demonstrates the need for surveillance studies, and comments on some of its dimensions, disciplinary frameworks, and intended audiences and participants.

1. The need for surveillance studies

Surveillance studies covers a huge range of activities and processes, but what they have in common is that, for whatever reason, people and populations are under scrutiny. Focused attention is paid to personal details, that are monitored, recorded, checked, stored, retrieved and compared – in short, processed in many different ways. Compiling ordinary lists of persons constitutes one of the simplest kinds of surveillance, but if, say, that list groups together all who are thought of as ‘citizens’ of a particular nation-state, then its social consequences are clearly profound. Those on the list are included; those who are not are excluded.

Surveillance tries to make visible the identities or the behaviours of people of interest to the agency in question. The Personal Identification Number (PIN) needed for use with a credit card verifies that the cardholder is who she appears to be, and the public Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) camera aims to note the suspicious or unusual behaviour of those walking down the street (Norris and Armstrong, 1999; McCahill, 2002). In the former case, the process is automated, whereas in the latter, operators normally are employed to keep an eye on the screens. Such forms of visibility were new in the twentieth century, for although people have for centuries had to identify themselves or have been under observation, this has usually been for highly specific, limited, purposes and at particular times. Surveillance of all became routine during the twentieth century. Visibility became a social and a political issue in a new way.

There are many reasons for this, which is one important area for surveillance studies to explore. The geo-political power of nation-states is buttressed by surveillance, but these processes are in turn encouraged by the growth of bureaucratic regimes that bring a certain kind of ‘rationality’ to the routines of the modern world. New technologies, above all the computer, facilitate surveillance in ways that Max Weber, Franz Kafka, or George Orwell never dreamed of, but new hardware and software do not on their own create new surveillance. Indeed, much surveillance occurs because in the world of modernity people prefer a ‘private’ existence, which prompts the development of systems to authenticate their activities in the ‘public’ world (see Nock, 1993). Presenting a driver’s license to a police officer from within a private car makes the point well.

Of course, it is ironic that the quest for privacy *produces* surveillance, because privacy is also looked to as protection *against* surveillance. But privacy is in any case a relative term. Once, the home was thought of as a private realm par excellence, a place into which others could not intrude. Now the means of surveillance flow freely through domestic spaces, in telephones, televisions, computers, and even in the metering of utilities (Graham, 1998). Privacy is today sought in the street, not only in the space between the

walkman headphones, but from the eyes of the camera. More significantly, privacy is sought for communications and transactions, many of which happen on the move. Yet the more privacy is sought, the more it is challenged.

Privacy can no longer refer to fixed spaces. Both privacy and surveillance now exist in a world of *flows* (Castells, 1996:376f.). Tourists and business persons flow across borders, travelers flow through airports and stations, images and messages flow through telephone, telex, and Internet systems. The means of communication are increasingly mobile, and people on the move cannot thus hope to evade surveillance. Road tolling systems, cellphone locators, and traffic control monitors keep track of movement, and data from these can – within legal limits – be integrated with other kinds of surveillance, such as CCTV or transactional data. There is a sense in which modern surveillance was from the earliest days a means of keeping tabs on the mobile (Lyon, 2001) but today surveillance itself is part of the flow.

But what is all this ‘watching’ for? This too, is in flux. Once, police kept an eye on a specific person, suspected for some good reason of an offence. Or the debt collector tried to track down defaulters who owed money to others. While such practices still occur, much more likely is the creation of categories of interest and classes of conduct thought worthy of attention. If the modern world displayed an urge to classify, today this urge is endemic in surveillance systems. What I call the ‘phenetic fix’ (see also Phillips and Curry, 2002) describes this trend – to capture personal data triggered by human bodies and to use these abstractions to place people in new social classes of income, attributes, habits, preferences, or offences, in order to influence, manage, or control them.

Thus it is not merely that new information technologies have made everyday actions and communications routinely visible as never before, or that networked technologies have helped to turn the rigid top-down apparatus of surveillance into a flexible assemblage (Ericson and Haggerty, 2001) of pulsating, undulating observations, but that the phenetic drive has been raised to a new level. Categorizing persons and populations – or ‘social sorting’ (Lyon, 2002) – is now a key to understanding surveillance. This was noted in some important studies in the 1980s (Gary Marx, 1988, on ‘categorical suspicion’) and 1990s (Oscar Gandy, 1993, on the ‘panoptic sort’) and today it is unavoidable.

One of the clearest signs of the phenetic fix is in the new surveillance initiatives following September 11 2001. Several tacks have been taken to try to plug the gaps in intelligence and security made poignantly evident by the success of the notorious attacks. They include the use of biometrics, new ‘smart’ ID systems, CCTV with facial recognition, and upgrading communications interception techniques (Lyon, 2002a; Webster and Ball, 2003). In each case the primary goal is to obtain data to classify persons in terms of potential risk – the most obvious being profiling of those with ‘Arab’ features or of ‘Islamic’ convictions.

In each of these three areas, visibility, mobility, and classification, surveillance studies has begun an important task of analysis and theory. But the fast-growing capacities of systems, and the intensification of surveillance after September 11 2001 are just two of

the ways in which current knowledge of surveillance is shown to be inadequate. We simply do not understand at present the full implications of networked surveillance for power relationships, or of the ‘phenetic fix’ for security and social justice. Surveillance is a central – and, now, necessary – feature of today’s advanced societies, but exactly how it developed, how it works, and what its consequences are is as yet unclear.

2. Comparative and historical perspectives

In order to obtain some leverage on these questions, then, some serious analysis has to take place. One key method for situating surveillance situations is to ask historical and comparative questions. If this is how things are done today, was it always like this, and what brought about the changes? Models and paradigms for surveillance are useful for some periods but not for others. Whatever one may learn from Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon or George Orwell’s totalitarian telescreen technologies, it is not clear that these are entirely helpful ways of understanding surveillance today. The kinds of processes we now confront have more in common with the lawn weed ‘Creeping Charlie’ with its star-shaped shoots or with the Google web search engine (though these lack the cachet of the ‘inspection tower’ or ‘nineteen-eighty-four’).

Historically, one notes that surveillance in the everyday, routine sense that we know it today is a product of modernity. Indeed, it is one of the features that define and constitute modernity (Giddens, 1985). Record-keeping and monitoring behaviours – in workplaces for example -- are deeply rationalizing processes, and are equally deeply ambiguous. This too is very modern. The same systems that may be feared for their power to keep track of personal lives are established to protect and enhance life-chances – to promote justice in property holding, or participation in political life. Surveillance always displays these two faces, which means that merely paranoid perspectives are almost always inappropriate. And just as surveillance shows two faces, so its negatively-perceived consequences can always be challenged. What Giddens calls a ‘dialectic of control’ appears to characterize all of the new power alignments of modernity, and surveillance is no exception.

But it is not only a question of different times, but also of different places. Surveillance, and popular and policy responses to it, vary from country to country, region to region. Surveillance has had different trajectories, and purposes, in European countries compared with North American, and in Asian compared with both. Conceptions of what is appropriate and inappropriate watching differ from culture to culture, as do the spaces and opportunities for dissent and resistance. Gender affects the picture strongly here, as does ethnicity, nationality, class and income.

Some of the processes evident in surveillance today are globalizing ones, but as with all such phenomena, they often serve to reinforce local differences as well. New technologies may well be exported from country to country – the US Sun Microsystems supplies the national ID system to Thailand for example – which may encourage forms of convergence. Police surveillance is also something that is often learned from other

jurisdictions (Marx and Fijnaut, 1995) as also is data protection and privacy law (Bennett and Grant, 1999). Some significant projects have appeared recently, such as the Urban Eye research on European CCTV systems across several different countries. Comparative analyses are very revealing, and are vital for surveillance studies today.

3. Cross-disciplinary; policy-and-politics-oriented

Surveillance studies is already a cross-disciplinary enterprise, and this trend should be encouraged. The key disciplines are sociology, political science, and geography, although as we have seen, history and philosophy also contribute in important ways. The reason why these disciplines are central is that they offer substantial means of analyzing and explaining surveillance practices and processes. They depend upon sustained empirical analysis on the one hand, and interpretive theory on the other. They are also sources for serious critique.

Other disciplines are also significant, including computing and information science, for more recent developments in surveillance; law, for understanding legal responses to it; and social psychology and anthropology, for exploring the ways in which surveillance is experienced. Moreover, other cross-disciplinary fields are also relevant, including those of consumer studies, social movements studies, globalization studies, labour studies, media studies and so on. Of the last, it is worth noting that novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or films, such as *GATTACA*, offer important insights into surveillance – in these cases, its gendered or its genetic dimensions.

The study of surveillance is also profoundly connected with policy analysis, especially in the areas of privacy and data protection law (Etzioni, 1999; Lessig, 1999). But, increasingly, it also has links with local and organizational policy, such as the development of standards for business practice, or of guidelines for the processing of personal data within companies and institutions (see Regan, 1995). Again, computer professionals and media organizations have become deeply involved in these debates (see e.g.: Agre and Rotenberg 1997), as well as specific movements such as the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) or the Global Liberty Internet Campaign (GLIC) – and are vital participants in any cross-disciplinary activity.

Surveillance studies is not an arcane branch of academic inquiry, ensconced in some supposed ivory towers and distanced from the real world of ethical tensions and political struggle. It has some direct relevance to those engaged in specific tasks, such as policing (see Ericson and Haggerty, 1997; Newburn and Hayman, 2002) or welfare (see Gilliom, 2001). While surveillance studies itself is not aligned with any social movement or political persuasion, it both includes such within its purview, and is aware of the uses to which surveillance studies are put by them. At the end of the day, surveillance studies has normative positions with regard to the processes it describes and explains. As with any mode of social and political explanation, surveillance studies is articulated with quests for justice, liberty, and human well-being.

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