



Editorial

Is Resistance Futile? Thoughts on Resisting Surveillance

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A recent issue of *Popular Mechanics* featured an article on emerging surveillance technologies, showcasing the latest innovations in the field (Krebs 2009). The magazine asked provocatively, “Who’s Tracking You?” and answered (indirectly), “everyone”, from your cell phone company, to your boss, your spouse and your government. Trying to describe the full range of the problem, the article indiscriminately mixed various surveillance techniques, from workplace spying methods with incidents involving modern ‘Peeping Toms’, quickly followed by descriptions of corporations tracking “your every move”, through mobile positioning systems in cell phones. Discursively, the message was simple: you are susceptible to surveillance and you should take protective measures. Fortunately for the reader, the magazine also offered tips on ‘fighting back’, mainly through commonsense suggestions for individuals, such as tracking the ‘cookies’ in your Internet browser and turning off your cell phone. In the end, the article was more entertaining than informative.

Yet the magazine demonstrates three important trends. First, that the notion of ‘surveillance as a threat’ is firmly entrenched in the public imagination. Not only does the public experience surveillance in their daily lives, but they also consume it as entertainment (as demonstrated by a myriad of movies and television shows with this theme). Second, that social discourse on surveillance is shallow and uncritical at best, merging important but different types of surveillance as if they formed a universal project. These representations of surveillance tend to reinforce the ‘Big Brother’ stereotype, neglecting a more nuanced understanding of the subject. Third, that resistance to surveillance is mostly about personal ‘protection’ measures’ that makes the individual feel better, but are likely not much more ‘secure’. More important, ‘protection’ from the ‘surveillance threat’ is often understood as a series of measures undertaken by individuals, hiding the collective possibility for resistance.

There is, of course, a wealth of recent literature on surveillance and its various configurations. However, surveillance scholars have paid relatively little attention to the issues of resistance to these technologies. This special issue addresses this deficit by collecting papers that foreground the interplay between surveillance and resistance, asking if surveillance can be successfully resisted, and, if so, how might this resistance look. We see this volume as an opening of a needed dialogue. We encourage other scholars to help us shore up the theoretical understanding of resistance by taking these ideas seriously, criticizing them, and pushing them forward.

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The genesis for this volume came from heated and passionate discussion at a workshop on surveillance hosted in 2006 by Torin Monahan, Jill Fisher, Gary Marx and Simon Cole. Throughout the day – and during the sessions and at lunch breaks – we debated and got to know each other, discovering strands of compatible thought and mutual interest. And, as it turned out, we also uncovered the fact that we – Luis as a scholar in the area of surveillance of social movements and Laura as a researcher with an interest in surveillance of marginalized inner-city communities – had both independently concluded that despite increasing levels of interest in the field of surveillance, very little theoretical and/or empirical work has explored the issue of resistance in a sustained way. Over coffee and pastry, we quickly formulated plans to remedy that deficit. To that end, readers will find within this volume papers that engage with the idea of resisting surveillance, employing novel theoretical and/or empirical approaches to addressing such issues as: manifestations of individual and group resistance, the formation of anti-surveillance groups and/or actor networks, and even the question of whether meaningful resistance is ultimately possible and, if so, under what conditions. Before we describe the content of this special issue, the next section presents some general ideas on how to study the resistance of surveillance.

Theorizing Resistance and Surveillance

As surveillance scholars are keenly aware, until fairly recently theoretical work in this field was dominated by two fantastical metaphors: Big Brother and the Panopticon. While these constructs have much utility for analysts, as many commentators have noted, their usage has not been unproblematic (Lyon 2006, Haggerty 2006, Marks 2005). Among their noted limitations is the fact that both Big Brother and panopticism have been conceptualized as, or as significant components of, ‘totalizing’ systems and often treated as such by those looking at surveillance in its actual employment on the ground (Graham 1998, Lyon 1994). This trend is even more prevalent in popular discourses of surveillance, as demonstrated in the *Popular Mechanics* article. Yet this all-encompassing notion of surveillance neither accurately reflects, nor indeed allows sufficient scope for, the myriad possibilities of resistance that some scholars have observed (*see* Monahan 2006, Huey, Walby and Doyle 2006, Starr and Fernandez 2008).

Before examining resistance, however, we must look at the nature of surveillance itself. We know from Lyon’s (2001: 2) work that surveillance, in broad terms, refers to “any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purpose of influencing or managing those whose data have been garnered.” Lyon’s definition points to an important aspect of surveillance: it involves power – that is, surveillance involves the collection of information for the purposes of “influencing or managing” some individual or group. Surveillance, then, is relational, involving a power dynamic likely to unfold in complicated ways. As scholars of surveillance, our task is to examine this dynamic, its implications and its outcomes. We agree with Gary Marx in that “surveillance needs to be viewed as a dynamic process involving emergent interaction and developments over time” (this issue: 296). We add, however, that this dynamic should be examined in the context of the power relations unfolding in a given phenomena.

It is also important to understand the different types of actors who may engage in surveillance, since the social and power location of the actor will inevitably impact the type of dynamic that unfolds. We know from numerous studies that surveillance, as defined above, can originate from different locations. Rather than categorize the different types of surveillance techniques, then, it is more useful to enumerate the different types of actors who may engage in surveilling a subject. Surveillance can originate at several different levels, as has been pointed out before. Some of the possible actors include the state, employers in various institutions (private and public), corporations (collecting data on clients), or individual and interpersonal actors (such as spouses, lovers, neighbours, and so on). Key to this crude typology is the implicit understanding that power dynamics will likely vary depending on the location of origination, thus producing different dialectics. In some instances, we may document conflicts between corporations and their clients, resulting in a power dynamic different from the surveillance by a state actor of political protestors. In other words, our analysis of surveillance should be predicated on the origins and actors

involved. If the above logic is correct, then it follows that studying surveillance (and resistance) is going to be situational, contextual, and historically specific.

Let's now turn to a quick examination of resistance. As a central theme in the surveillance literature, it is striking that resistance, as a concept, remains under theorized. In part, this may be due to the generalized nature of the concept, which can cover vast territories of divergent human action. Thus, like surveillance, it is probably useful to start not with all-encompassing definition, but with an understanding that resistance too will be contextual, relational, and dependent on the power dynamics of a given situation. Possible actors engaged in the resistance of surveillance, then, could include individuals, groups, institutions, networks, and the state itself (e.g., states versus states). But the nature of resistance tactics, technologies, and techniques will evolve in a direct response to a power struggles.

Of the work in this area that has been produced to date, what is clearly revealed is the fact that surveillance-based practices are highly contested political territory within and across contemporary society, both at the individual level and collectively. Monahan (2006), for instance, asserts that surveillance is already imbedded in a set of social practices that reproduce social stratification. If he is correct, and we believe he is, then most forms of surveillance are, from their inception, already embedded in a power dynamic that could, with some help, lead to forms of resistance. We see this as a good starting point for analyzing the potential for resisting surveillance, since it builds a dialectic relationship between those who observe and collect data, and those who are observed and from whom information is extracted.

Further, we suggest that another good starting point in the study of resistance and surveillance is not surveillance mechanisms, but resistance itself. This insight comes from Hardt and Negri (2004), who in their analysis of revolt and state control argue that revolt is generally the innovator, with the state adapting and developing new forms of control to address the innovations. For example, Fernandez (2008) shows how protesters caught the Seattle Police off guard at the 1999 World Trade Organization protest, eventually resulting in significant policing innovations in the following years. This same dynamic, we believe, might exist in the resistance of surveillance and might yield important insight on how surveillance evolves. In sum, we suggest that if surveillance and resistance are best understood as dynamic, then we must examine instances of resistance first, since they are likely going to be not only a response to surveillance practices but also present the new starting ground for the next set of surveillance mechanisms. This, we think, inverts the current analysis of the relationship. We encourage scholars to pursue research projects along these lines of inquiry.

Content

The articles in this special of issue draw from a broad theoretical base that incorporates several disciplines, including sociology, international relations, sexuality studies, social psychology and media studies (to name a few). Collectively, the papers add to the growing body of work of surveillance, offering new theoretical possibilities for the field in general. Viewed as whole, the research here demonstrates both the range of possible resistance techniques, but also a diversity of approaches in studying resistance.

In 'Surveillance is Sexy', David Bell asks us to consider the destabilizing potential of new forms of erotic voyeurism – a sensual and consensual dance between exhibitionist and voyeur that challenges traditional notions of the power dynamics embedded in the act of surveillance. In this rather playful piece, Bell follows in the path of such scholars as Hille Koskela (2003, 2004) and Anders Albrechtslund and Linsey Dubbeld (2005), while carving out new terrain for us to examine. Bell's particular contribution to recent discussions of the erotic aesthetics of surveillance is his claim that we should not attempt to desexualize reality television, pornographic webcam sites and so on, but rather see in these activities "possibilities of reading sexualized voyeurism and exhibitionism which deploys a 'surveillance aesthetic' as cultural

critique, even as emancipatory action” (this issue: 204). Whereas Bell’s analysis focuses on synoptic forms of ‘erotic’ resistance, Aaron Martin, Rosamunde van Brakel and Daniel Bernhard’s work in this volume draws our attention to another neglected domain: resistance involving multiple actors working individually and in concert. Using a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, these authors argue that resistance can involve not only the agent of surveillance and its target(s), but also “surveillance authorities, commercial enterprises, international governmental and non-governmental agencies and the surveillance technologies themselves”, each of which is capable of developing in combinative forms “a complex resistance nexus, capable of resisting and being resisted in a diversity of ways” (this issue: 213). To enhance our understanding of their multi-disciplinary, multi-actor framework, these authors demonstrate its utility through an analysis of the U.K.’s National Identity Scheme.

In a recent paper addressing the state of surveillance studies, Gary Marx (2007) echoed a familiar refrain heard in other fora: the need for empirical research on contemporary forms of surveillance. We would argue that this is no less the case with respect to the subject of resisting surveillance. Fortuitously, papers submitted for this special volume – including one of those mentioned previously – offer insights into the phenomenon derived from empirical research in the field. Three other papers similarly provide empirically rich opportunities through which to explore this subject. Amy Gibbons and Lucas Introna’s “Seeing Eye to Eye” will capture the attention of those readers looking for new and exciting modes of collecting and analyzing data. In this paper, the authors employ social network analysis (‘webometrics’) to map out what they term a “network of meta-surveillance” (this issue: 233) in the form of a stable group of actors individually and collectively engaged in resisting surveillance practices. The importance of such networks, they suggest, is the capacity to form a “system of collective awareness of state-surveillance practices” with the potential to “become a powerful form of resistance” (this issue: 248).

Also included among our empirical offerings is a paper by Helen Wells and David Wills based on a study of driver resistance to speed cameras in the U.K. Drawing upon data collected through interviews, focus groups, and online texts, these authors examine various beliefs articulated by both individual drivers resistant to speed camera technology and those within organized resistance groups. What their analysis of discourse in this area reveals are a set of ‘core narratives’ structured around oppositional identities: the “self-ascribed identity of normal, respectable, non-criminal drivers ... threatened by technologies of risk and ‘techno-fixes’” which are contrasted by resisters to other motorists who are viewed as “risk-carrying, deviant, and criminal” (this issue: 259). The presence of such narratives in framing resistance challenges assumptions that opposition to surveillance is nearly always framed through a traditional civil liberties lens.

The final paper in this collection is a case-study. Andres Sanchez’s “Fracas on Facebook” looks at the issue of how resistance was mobilized online following the implementation of ‘news feeds’ on the popular social networking site. Faced with a technological ‘enhancement’ that resulted in one’s personal information being available to other subscribers, groups of users quickly mounted protests. This response, which Sanchez analyzes in detail, is said to demonstrate the possibilities of ‘resistance-through-distance’ as an “effective and playful means of toying with the synoptic gaze” (this issue: 291).

A commentary and a poem round out this collection. In a commentary that challenges us to think about resistance both theoretically and methodologically, Gary Marx outlines different moves and counter-moves between the watcher and the watched, revealing possible ways to start studying the dynamical relation between surveillance and resistance. Finally, in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the journal, we conclude the issue with a poem by RezNoir titled panegyric 6.6.

We hope that the reader finds the articles in the issue provocative and that the work of these scholars helps the field focus more narrowly on the possibilities of resisting surveillance. Perhaps what we will discover in expanding this field is that resistance is *not* futile.

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