



# Surveillance & Society



## Book Review

**Andrejevic, Mark. 2007. *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press.**

325 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95 (US), £20.50 (UK). ISBN-10: 0700615288; ISBN-13: 978-0700615285

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The hip and pervasive insertion of an ‘i’ immediately preceding products and concepts in a range of institutional contexts, perhaps best exemplified by Apple corporation’s ‘iPod’ brand, reflects the widespread acceptance and even the celebration of the new interactive era. And why not celebrate? Interactive technologies promise no less than a participatory revolution destined to overthrow elite culture, media, and politics. This book shows why celebration is inapt. Beginning with the crafty and subversive insertion of an ‘i’ before ‘Spy’ in its title, it reveals the new interactivity’s dark side – submission to power and surveillance.

This book is a perceptive analysis and trenchant critique of new media interactivity in the tradition of Oscar Gandy’s ground-breaking *Panoptic Sort*. Andrejevic argues that the rhetoric of interactivity as a form of empowerment providing for equal and largely open exchange of information (i.e., as a means of sharing power) fails to reflect its reality, which is one of increasing surveillance and information gathering by corporations and the state via new media technologies. The book focuses on interactive technologies and how the information they produce is or could be used for social control. Most consumers and citizens are aware *their* information is being collected when using a cell-phone, Internet search engine, or credit card, but are ignorant of what information is gathered, how it is used, and by whom. Convenience is exchanged for surveillance and manipulation of daily life. We are invited to “participate in staging the scene of our own passive submission” (15).

A key concept is the “digital enclosure,” which is “an interactive realm wherein every action and inaction generates information about itself” (2). Access to this largely private and asymmetrical “enclosure” requires allowing others to monitor our conduct, habits, attitudes, and innermost anxieties. This process does not mark the ‘end of privacy’ in the face of ever-intrusive commercial and state surveillance systems. Rather, privacy is alive and well in that – somewhat ironically – the information gathered through interactivity about daily life is restricted from public view, privatized by corporations, and exchanged as commodities (133). The digital enclosure is not the anti-thesis of privacy, but rather is dependent upon it. A vital concept describing how the “enclosure” is created is “cybernetic participation,” which refers to the practice of enlisting the public to give feedback on products and policies to commercial and state authorities who control the interactive technologies to achieve results decided upon beforehand. Thus, the path to the outcome can shift; its end point cannot (49).

One among many technologies discussed by the author is ‘TiVo,’ an intelligent VCR that permits viewers to watch television on their own schedule. It is widely touted to be akin to a revolutionary overthrow of the TV programmer by the viewer. Yet, TiVo simultaneously generates information about how viewers consume programming. This information can then be used by marketing firms to more efficiently customize manipulative advertising because now habits can be predicted ahead of time. TiVo also permits viewers to avoid scheduled commercials but – not to worry – there can be more product

Lippert, Randy. 2009. Review of Andrejevic’s *iSpy*. *Surveillance & Society* 6(1): 78-80.

<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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placement in customized programs, a trend that “anticipates the transformation of all content into advertising” (12).

Andrejevic's qualitative methods range from personal observation to examination of online surveys to unscientific but telling experimentation conducted on the social networking site, 'Facebook.' Through this, the “enclosure” process is taken up in detail in economic, cultural, social, and political domains. The book thus covers a comprehensive range of programs that enlist the new interactive technologies. Internet transactions produce information as a form of feedback that can target identified anxieties and insecurities. The move to “mobile interactivity” (95) is accompanied by the spatialization of information gathering. Here the convenience of receiving information, for example, about snarled traffic en route comes with revealing your car's location and receiving customized advertising to match, all of which is aided by combining global positioning with cell phone technologies. The voting hotlines for *American Idol* (241) and fan web sites are a means of monitoring viewer preferences and habits and the free labor required to generate the valuable information is provided by eager participants (143-59). The new media can be deployed to offload responsibility and duties onto the public by state authorities such as in the ‘global war on terror’ (162). New media will permit customization in the political sphere whereby targeted political appeals based on their politics and background are the order of the day. The exclusion of some citizens (e.g., those known not to vote) from the equal provision of public information also emerges with this development (207-8). The digital enclosure will also permit peer-to-peer monitoring (i.e., iMonitoring) to grow to heightened levels. This entails the further importation of information gathering into daily life, and constitutes not resistance but the mimicry of the surveillance practices authored by media corporations and the state (239-40).

Thus, interactive participation is far less than power sharing, but rather than dismiss interactivity as an empty ‘buzzword’ or as pure ideology, Andrejevic lays out some possibilities for realizing interactivity's democratic potential (257-68). Bypassing privacy issues for issues concerning power concentration, he argues for greater levels of symmetry; the ability to shape goals *and* the means for achieving them; and a move from private control of the digital enclosure toward public control made possible through mechanisms such as open-networks and ‘open-source’ code that permits parameters to be changed by anyone (267).

Throughout, Andrejevic avoids the easy drift into a paranoid and alarmist narrative in the face of what are – even for surveillance scholars – some pretty frightening programs and systems. That said, they may be too frightening in places. While at times pointing to barriers, such as total media monitoring's “stumbling blocks” (91), elaboration of resistance specific to trends in each realm would have been welcomed. While this relative neglect of resistance is not uncommon in surveillance studies, the bleak present (and future) described nevertheless seems a bit too seamless. To mention but one example, do participants not occasionally enter phony names, others' names, or derivations of their own names when inputting information to gain conveniences or to be able to strategically watch where the information goes without giving up their identity or other information? Is iMonitoring always an element of the “enclosure” or can such surveillance be directed back at authorities in order to rip a spectacular seam in its wall? There seems to be too little allowance for this kind of resistance. My only other minor quibble is that Andrejevic focuses a bit too much on the US context, including the political (e.g., the Bush Administration's authoritarian policies and practices) and cultural realms (e.g., Americans' faith in the technological fix) which may not have purchase elsewhere in relation to a global “digital enclosure.”

Overall, though, Andrejevic effectively demolishes celebratory accounts of interactivity in this excellent book. Writing in a rich, engaging style, he expertly draws on work of a wide range of media scholars and theorists (e.g., Cass Sunstein, Jurgen Habermas, and Mitchell Dean) but he is equally adept at explaining the workings of an equally wide range of new technologies. Few interactive stones are left unturned in a work that is not only well researched but also remarkably up-to-date, a feature undoubtedly difficult to accomplish given the incredibly rapid pace of technological change and function creep. This book will be of special interest to students and established scholars in surveillance studies and Foucault-inspired

studies of governance, but also those in communication studies more broadly. While not showing an easy way out, since most of us are already within the “digital enclosure,” this book cannot help but be relevant to a popular readership as well.