



## Editorial: Doing Surveillance Studies.\*

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### Introduction

Those of us involved in the burgeoning field of surveillance studies have had a great deal to say of late. The proliferation and intensification of surveillance practices within and between societies has prompted rich empirical and theoretical inquiry, stimulated lively debate, and generated vital insight into contemporary spatial and temporal dynamics of governance, risk, trust, identity and privacy. Almost no attention, however, has been directed at the practicalities and pragmatics of our project. What does it mean to 'do' surveillance studies? What aims assumptions, ambitions, ironies and institutional environments characterize this sub field? The unique contributions we can make are contingent upon how we navigate the familiar pragmatics of social science, whilst delineating novel territory and modes of investigation, while avoiding the conflation of the former with the latter. To put it another way, is there anything that could be said about 'doing surveillance studies' that is not immediately applicable to 'doing social science?' We believe that reflections upon the act of doing surveillance studies can indeed provide novel insights into longstanding questions about the social sciences: epistemology; transdisciplinarity; institutional pressures on academic careers; the consequences and impact of research; and the practicalities of knowledge generation are just a few examples.

This issue of *Surveillance and Society* represents a preliminary foray into questions related to doing surveillance studies. In this editorial we aim to introduce and accentuate some of the larger issues raised by this orientation using two simple questions. The first asks, 'who are we and why are we doing surveillance studies' and the second, inevitably, asks 'how are we doing it?' We do not have all the answers to these questions, but raise them because we have become too intimately familiar with how they are routinely answered. Sometimes we suspect that they are never raised at all. Ultimately we are conscious that the institutional context of our sub-field may legitimate particular articulations of our *raison d'être* which are, in themselves, problematic, and perhaps more indicative of successful socialization into a rapidly cohering academic group than an engaged form of encounter. As such this editorial intends to provoke further thought and reflection upon some of the more fundamental issues surrounding the emergence of surveillance as an important topic of investigation.

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## Surveillance scholars

Addressing questions concerning who we are and our motivation for doing surveillance studies engenders two commentaries. The first concerns our positions in relation to a range of institutions with which we engage as professional academics. In this sense, we share a number of characteristics which are typical of those faced by the social scientist currently working in institutions of higher education in the developed-world. Certainly, we face similar institutional pressures which require conscious manipulation and management, and we outline some of those below. The second concerns our relationship to the object of study: the complex of surveillance practices. In this sense we simultaneously occupy conflicting positions in relation to our object of enquiry: as agents, subjects and scholars of surveillance.

Any reflection upon academic identity in the present climate (whilst avoiding more existential and personal questions) is dominated by stories of compromise. Compromise, for example, between competing teaching and research, between work and family, and between scholarship and consultancy or policy work. Academics manage multiple identities which may, at times, obscure or even eradicate any deep seated or ideological commitment to tackling some of the problems raised by surveillance. Our participation in this emergent field is intertwined with our own personal projects, our careers, our need to provide for significant others, and for material, psychological and social well being. Today, major projects studying surveillance receive millions of dollars in state funds. The 'international surveillance studies project,' while still comparatively young and marginal within the wider academic field, nonetheless provides reasonable standards of living for many scholars. The governmental and social institutions which surround our engagement in professional work are at least matched by the academic institutions which dictate the form and content of our output. These institutions directly and indirectly shape our field of enquiry. Universities encourage and reward research, but simultaneously make demands on our time which curtail our ability to complete it effectively. This is particularly the case for younger academics. Furthermore their responses to government initiatives (such as the Research Assessment Exercise) has resulted in a form of academic auditing which reifies research productivity through journal articles and discourages academics from the production of monographs and long term immersion in their chosen fields. While investigating some surveillance systems clearly requires such immersion, and the findings of such inquiries can be profound, these studies can also represent a poor investment of academic capital. The current climate contrasts quite dramatically with that outlined in the early 1970s in the UK by Steve Wright in this issue. At that time inquiries into surveillance were comparatively rare, marginalized and unlikely to result in the types of returns in cultural capital that a researcher might desire. The personal sacrifices outlined by Wright highlight how institutional legitimation can work for, and against, scholarly endeavour, and how these types of scholarly endeavour can be highly disruptive at a personal level.

Navigating the demands of competing institutions is a game academics are increasingly required to play. This not only involves resisting or manipulating particular demands but also capitalizing on institutional resources. Institutional game-playing thus becomes a pervasive lens through which we can reflect upon our engagement with the object of study: surveillance practices. For instance, one of the most important factors that the

university provides is a cloak of readily available justifications in which we can blanket our research. Characterized by their commitment to the ‘advancement of knowledge,’ universities offer a host of easy rationalizations and legitimations for practices that arguably deserve more sustained contemplation. For example, when recast in terms of one of the central tenets of surveillance theory, power/knowledge, the stability of the positions we adopt in relation to our own inquiries becomes a little more tenuous. Ultimately, by engaging in research we are also agents of surveillance. We monitor and record the behaviour of individuals and institutions and do so, at least partially, to advance our careers and material interests. The easy and immediate counter argument to this truism is to adopt a utilitarian stance, suggesting that such inquiries advance knowledge, and that this is, on balance, a social good. While one might be able to defend this position, the appeal to ‘the advancement of knowledge’ is more typically an example of researchers speaking one institution, and practicing another. While academics now have a long history of decrying many attributes of the modernist project, we are not so quick to interrogate the modernism of our own institutions and practices which rely on the unfailing normative assessment that ever more and more intrusive academic surveillance can only be a good thing. The difficulties of navigating the research field in the face of such seemingly controversial attributions is discussed by Thomas Kemple and Laura Huey, who outline how field researchers can be implicated in existing surveillance networks in which their presence can be misinterpreted and seen as inflammatory. Robert Sweeny also examines the contrasting surveillance positions occupied by art educators.

Hence, the nature of our positions in relation to the object of study is contentious as it becomes clear that we simultaneously occupy positions as agents, subjects and analysts of surveillance practices. This is as evident in the development of this journal as it is anywhere else. In the spring of 2005 the editors of *Surveillance and Society* discussed the prospect of exploiting the data management capabilities the societies’ Web site to learn more about who was accessing the site and for what purposes. Like most Web pages, ours can track who has accessed the site, from where, how often, when they did so, where they went to on the site, and which papers they read or printed. Accessing this information would provide some indication as to the popularity of different parts of the site and enable us to make changes oriented to the interests of our community. We also joked at the prospect of being able to discover which of our colleagues most commonly engages in practice of ‘ego surfing’ – using the site’s search engine to find references to them or their work. We ultimately decided not to exploit these data, largely because of time constraints, and perhaps a bit of ironic discomfort at the prospect that the editorial board would be the agents of such scrutiny.

Having touched upon some of the institutional and pragmatic aspects of studying surveillance, here we focus on ideological commitments, and suggest that things may not be quite as they seem. Typically, but not exclusively, surveillance scholars are motivated by issues of equity, fairness, justice and respect for the person in a digitally mediated world; a world where judgements are made on the basis of encoded information about an individual, rather than on the basis of an interpersonal and experientially grounded knowledge of an entire person. Hence, surveillance scholars often implicitly acknowledge that something is lost, ignored or cast aside in these processes. The question remains as to the nature of this lost dimension. Is our orientation towards undemocratic forms of compliance, control and spatial ordering in surveillance practice all indicative of some

underlying and unacknowledged essentialism or lack upon which our arguments are founded? This begs the question as to whether the self-proclaimed radical Foucauldian, Deleuzian and otherwise post-structural analyses which dominate this field are actually predicated on the scholar's concern for liberty, freedom, and autonomy? In short, are we all closet liberal humanists? Raising this issue points to a need within the surveillance studies community to contemplate the world that it would like to fashion, as opposed to the one it currently perceives, while recognising that these worlds would inevitably have their own set of intractable problems. Accounts of such post- or extra-surveillance worlds are sometimes best articulated in literary works which present different visions of dystopia and utopia; concepts which can be useful for examining the problematic nature of extensive personal surveillance. The use of literary analysis to discuss the relationship between Orwellian dystopias and utopian alternatives is discussed by Peter Marks in the context of recent films which are set in surveillance based dystopias. Moreover, Lynsey Dubbeld and Anders Albrechtslund outline the pleasurable consumer oriented and entertainment products of surveillance practice, which contrast sharply with the dynamics of social control with which many of us are preoccupied.

Hence, understanding how we 'do' surveillance studies partially rests upon situating ourselves as surveillance scholars. Heightened reflection on our part serves as a source of considerable irony, but is also a productive opportunity to learn more about the processes we seek to uncover and understand. As individual scholars we are institutionally embedded, and occupy a range of positions in contrasting settings (inside and out of our working lives) which shape and compromise our scholarly practice. We are subject to pressures and uncertainties, and have concerns for stability and continuity which may be reflected in our work. Moreover, the variety of positions we occupy in our lives as scholars, workers, consumers, family members and citizens (among other things) means that we are able to engage with different aspects of surveillance practice from a variety of standpoints. The sheer ubiquity of surveillance means that we are all implicated in its perpetuation as well as its avoidance and critique at the most personal of levels, something that helps to make surveillance studies unique.

## **Assessing Surveillance Studies**

In addressing questions of how we are doing surveillance studies we are keen to point out that we do not consider there to be a model of how it 'should' be done. Indeed the diversity and theoretical and empirical richness which is inherent within a transdisciplinary and international subject such as ours means that surveillance studies is subject to multiple norms of scholarship. However, rather than retreating into relativism we consider some of the challenges of studying surveillance which, in our opinion, apply to the field because of the nature of its subject matter. First, we discuss discrepancies surrounding the concept of surveillance; then we discuss how we have chosen to constitute it within our academic discourses; the dynamics of secrecy and the potential unintended consequences of our inquiries

The first issue concerns the concept of surveillance itself. While the presence of surveillance is obvious to surveillance scholars, the identification of particular arrays and arrangements of materialities, technologies, socialities, organizations and so on, as

surveillance practices is often not so obvious to others. Nonetheless, it is our suspicion that there is little value in identifying things as surveillance *a priori* in a monolithic or unproblematic sense. Merely labelling different sociotechnical relationships as 'surveillance' does little to enlighten us as to the dynamics of the control, resistance, emergence and development of surveillance practices. Similarly it also does little to illustrate how surveillance is symptomatic of and a precursor to social and spatial configurations and identity formation (among other things). This would appear to be common sense, yet multi-dimensional notions of surveillance are thin on the ground. Mason et al (2002) discussed 'surveillance capable' technologies, Ball (2002) has tried to identify the different 'elements' of surveillance, and Marx (2005) continually problematises surveillance theorising, but the story does not end here. Before one can establish whether a particular set of sociotechnical relations constitutes surveillance various observable elements might need to be present. Little, if any, work so far has attempted to identify and confirm what the elements of surveillance might be across different empirical contexts.

Surveillance studies has also developed some normalised and ritualistic aspects to its theorising which are in equal parts predictable and limiting. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the demarcation between surveillance and privacy. The typical way in which privacy and surveillance are counterpoised to one another represents what Beck (2000) would characterize as a 'zombie concept' – something that lives on despite its limited utility. We must get past this routine demarcation as involving some sort of zero-sum game in order to appreciate the specifics of how these phenomena operate: sometimes in opposition, sometimes as mutually constitutive and occasionally more ironically than we might anticipate. A simple example concerns the development of the Canadian Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA). This new privacy initiative is directed at regulating how the public sector handles customer information. While it has enhanced privacy protections for citizens, it would be wrong to suggest that it has necessarily resulted in a straightforward reduction in surveillance. Instead, it has helped to increase the transparency of the corporations themselves, as their data handling practices must now be amenable to official scrutiny. This suggests that surveillance and privacy can at times be mutually constitutive.

Whilst this is a very simple example, there are more complex instances of conceptual and descriptive normativity emergent from studies of surveillance which merit attention. These include liberal usage of tropes related to revelation and an undercurrent of technocentric gloom. This is often combined with a theme of progression, manifest in recurrent suggestions of surveillance undergoing greater expansion, intensification and penetration. Again, without denying the importance of these discourses, there is nonetheless a need for greater nuance. Repeated warnings about the surveillance potential of new technologies serves a political purpose, but is also inherently self limiting, and even risky. It risks providing our scholarship with a form of built-in obsolescence that mirrors the manufactured obsolescence of the tools we study. It can provide our discipline with a form of structured conservatism as we continually decry new technological developments. Indeed, if one goes back to examine earlier generations of work about surveillance it can often appear quaint to read the dire warnings about the coercive potentials of technologies that were never ultimately developed, or those which many of us have embraced for years. At least part of our difficult analytical relationship with



surveillance technologies can be attributed to the publication timeline of academic books and journals, something that often guarantees that our analyses of new developments in blogs, cameras and DNA will have become familiar or surpassed by the time our work is published.

Addressing this technological orientation from a different angle, we might also ask why we do not examine the dynamics of technological decline or obsolescence? The orientation is instead always to what is new and cutting edge, giving the field a form of cultural cache, but also ignoring important social questions about a different surveillance dynamic. In those few instances when the decline of technology is discussed, it is typically in the context of a larger narrative about how they have been supplanted by new tools that provide ever more efficient, effective and intrusive surveillance. The inevitability of this dynamic is more a matter of dystopian faith than an empirically demonstrated phenomenon. As such, it also represents a topic of inquiry that deserves more sustained examination.

The revelatory discourses connected to our work become apparent when we highlight the ambivalent relationship we have to some of the main terms used in our inquiries. For example, while we embrace concepts like surveillance and privacy in discussions with our peers, we sometimes consciously distance ourselves from these terms when conducting research for very sound, pragmatic reasons. In academic worlds, characterising something seemingly innocuous as a pervasive surveillance technique makes for powerful rhetoric. Because surveillance brings to mind images of spies, coercion and Big Brother in the public imagination, characterizing a particular practice as ‘surveillance’ at the outset of our research can be counter productive in terms of securing research access.<sup>3</sup> We suspect, often with good reason, that agencies are less likely to grant access to researchers who explicitly speak of ‘surveillance.’ Surveillance based research highlights the power relations inherent in surveillance practices: power relations that concern an organization’s ability to watch in an unproblematic and unchallenged way. As we sometimes mask our own research intentions, research which names surveillance *as surveillance* may be seen as a direct challenge to the legitimacy of wide sets of organizational practices which they would also prefer to keep normalised or even secret. Personal dilemmas may also arise surrounding labelling willing research subjects as ‘agents of surveillance’: as these people are frequently perfectly decent human beings and probably do not warrant the negative connotations that accompany such a designation. One wonders whether the ‘agents’ we talk to would recognise themselves in our work. As with surveillance practice, then, social scientific narratives about these processes can dehumanise and mask our true intentions in order to further our goals – practices we typically decry in the surveillance practices of other institutions.

It is almost as if surveillance based research sees its subject matter as simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous yet unarticulated, silently acknowledged –repressed, even. There is, we suggest, a dynamic of secrecy, which dominates not only surveillance practices in the field, but also our research practices more generally. Indeed the secrecy which surrounds surveillance practices in some spheres will invariably challenge the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the more managerial sounding ‘Electronic Performance Management’ frequently replaces ‘Employee Monitoring’ in call centre access negotiations.

reliability of the knowledge we generate about those practices. For example, in 1974 vital new facts were publicized about Allied efforts during World War II to break the secret communications system that the Germans had employed using their Enigma encryption technology. While it had long been known that the Ultra code breaking initiative had allowed the Allies to intercept some German communications successfully, the scope of their successes was previously unknown. Indeed, we now know that Ultra had produced an unprecedented ability of the Allies to gain undetected access to German radio communications, often giving them real time intelligence on German intentions. Not surprisingly this was one of the most closely guarded military secrets of the war, with the specifics of the code-breaking efforts remaining classified for decades. Today our awareness of the scope of this Allied endeavour has necessitated a fundamental re-assessment of all Allied military actions during the latter part of the war, prompting the prominent military historian John Keegan (2003: 370) to conclude that all histories of the war written before the 1974 revelations of the scope of this secret surveillance system are flawed.

We often deal with organizations that work hard to keep matters related to surveillance very secret. Indeed, it is entirely likely that some of the most significant and intrusive forms of official surveillance that are currently in operation are known only to a privileged group of insiders, with the details to be revealed only in the fullness of time. Military and security agencies have demonstrated an ability to conceal the full extent of their surveillance activities. As Wright's contribution in this volume attests, even the existence of massive and invasive global technological monitoring projects have been kept comparatively secret. Hence, perhaps one of the unique attributes of surveillance studies is the requirement to contemplate things about which we might never know, and address the suspicion that our inquiries into publicized surveillance practices might actually only be scratching the surface of the totality of contemporary monitoring efforts. Minas Samatas demonstrates a wry sensitivity to this issue when he observes that the highly symbolic burning of official Greek surveillance files might have been coterminous with the secret digitization of those files. Dwelling too long on this issue can give rise to accusations of being a conspiracy theorist and ultimately risks manifesting a form of paranoia. Ignoring the issue risks being naïve about the vital secrets of surveillance which are beyond our reach.

The irony is that it may sometimes be in the interests of all concerned to maintain the secrecy of various surveillance initiatives. 'Outing' surveillance may well produce some unsavoury and unintended consequences for those directly involved in those practices. Of particular concern to surveillance scholars has been how such devices can foster increased forms of social control, further entrench racial and sexual divisions and extend class hierarchies. At the same time it also behoves us to address the largely unarticulated question of whether doing surveillance studies might itself produce its own form of unintended consequences. This can be conceived of in at least three different ways.

The existence of certain security or military surveillance systems, or the specifics of their operating dynamics, are often sensitive state secrets, understood to be vital to national and international security efforts. Individuals who unmask the states' surveillance infrastructure are therefore occasionally accused of undermining national security. Precisely this dynamic was recently played-out by President Bush II when he suggested

that the individuals who revealed the existence of his illegal wiretapping program were traitors who had made the world more insecure (Koring 2005). Such accusations are often little more than self-interested rhetoric, voiced by officials to avoid accountability for their actions. At the same time, easily dismissing such accusations in this fashion can also be a facile way to avoid contemplating the real implications of unmasking surveillance efforts. If we reflect more on the Ultra code-breaking program noted above, it becomes abundantly clear that there *are* situations when revealing the secrets of surveillance programmes can be a dangerous and perhaps self-defeating exercise. In certain contexts it could well be an unintended consequence of surveillance studies to decrease security, or even to risk peoples' lives. Nonetheless, the ethos of surveillance studies is unrelentingly focused on the act of unmasking surveillance practices, and there has been no serious sustained discussion of the ethics of maintaining secrets.

A second way to contemplate the unintended consequences of surveillance studies involves considering the potential cumulate effects of some of our most prominent tropes. The field generally embraces a metanarrative of ever more surveillance becoming more discriminating and intrusive. We need to think more about the configurations of surveillance, the possibilities of visibility and invisibility amongst different groups. It is not true that all institutions are visible in the same, ways, to the same extent and the with the same repercussions. One limitations of the 'ever more surveillance' narrative is that it relies upon a highly questionable assumption of institutional competence or even perfection. Every new technology that comes on the market with surveillance implications is often interpreted as manifesting the fullest and most draconian surveillance potentials. This overlooks considerable scholarly literature that accentuates how organizations are often profoundly inefficient in handling information and capitalizing on new technologies. The mere existence of these technologies does not necessarily imply that their surveillance potential will be exploited. A more nuanced form of empirical inquiry into the real world operations of those surveillance tools is required.

Ultimately, the purposes of the dystopian current in surveillance studies are both pedagogical and political. Such accounts will hopefully help capture public attention and motivate citizens to ever greater concern about these issues. It is also possible, however, that the continual reiteration of this theme can have the direct opposite effect. As a group we tend to produce a cumulative image of the inevitable expansion of surveillance and co-optation of efforts to resist surveillance systems. Hence, rather than motivating political action an unintended consequence of how we typically present our accounts might be to induce in the public a form of resigned fatalism and political paralysis.

Finally, one of the more paradoxical unintended consequences of a certain form of surveillance critique is that it might result in more intrusive or expansive surveillance. To appreciate this prospect one should consider those situations where surveillance scholars or activists criticize new surveillance initiatives because they do not live up to their professed abilities. This can include accusations that a new surveillance device does not work as well as its proponents profess, that it makes too many mistakes, or does not approximate desired levels of discrimination. While such critiques are often motivated by a desire to thwart the introduction of such tools, cumulatively they can result in yet more surveillance. That is because the individuals who have invested in the development of these technologies rarely abandon their devices in the face of such critiques. Instead, they



return to the laboratory and reengineer their tools such that they better meet the criteria professed by the surveillance critics. This can often necessitate making the device more intrusive. Hence, surveillance scholars who continually emphasise that certain technologies do not work as well as they should, might want to pause and consider whether they would prefer the existing system that works poorly, or the more perfect system for which they might be inadvertently advocating.

## In conclusion

By way of a brief concluding comment, it is worth accentuating that this introduction has consciously sought to be inclusive, using terms such as 'we,' 'our,' and 'the surveillance studies community.' It is, nonetheless, worth interrogating the nature of this community, what different scholars might bring to the project, and how coherent we are as a group. For example, it goes without saying that after years of collaboration and co-operation on the part of the editors, *Surveillance and Society* is a labour of love, and each editor has invested considerable personal time and effort in its development. Yet, despite our common interests, shared commitment and passion for the project, and an explicit claim that we are a transdisciplinary endeavour, there are limitations to what two geographers, two sociologists, a lone organization theorist, and various guest editors can share conceptually. In the wider field, one which encompasses not only our own cognate disciplines, but also information systems, law, anthropology, military studies, political science, criminology, education, art, science studies and media and cultural studies, the sheer diversity in intellectual resources multiplies exponentially. The strength and weight of perspectives prompts a consideration of what transdisciplinarity means for us. Ultimately, no discipline knows more than any other, and as such, combining intellectual resources to address the problems and issues raised by contemporary surveillance practices is a worthy endeavour. It is perhaps unrealistic to have a centralised notion of the field with core concepts and 'legitimate' views thereon. It is even more undesirable to fragment the field along disciplinary lines, with scholars retreating into their own disciplinary dogma. The key, it seems, is patience: it takes time to learn the language of others' disciplines. This can only occur through sustained dialogue and interaction. Transdisciplinarity can be a form of transgression, one that problematises existing institutional boundaries and works hard to overcome our differences to make modest progress in doing surveillance studies and advancing new understandings of surveillance.

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