Review Essay: Surveying Surveillance Studies

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For scholars of surveillance, as the old curse has it, these are interesting times. With the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the subsequent “War on Terror,” issues of governmental monitoring, surveillance, and public security have attained sudden prominence in media coverage and public debate. Propelled by post-9/11 fear and loathing, sweeping changes in the legal framework governing surveillance activities, information gathering, and civil liberties have been proposed and almost as quickly passed into law in both the U.S. and Canada. Immigration and residency laws have been modified to include new restrictions and reporting requirements for individuals of suspect nationality. Selective law enforcement and patterns of “random” search procedures have given rise to new allegations of racial and ethnic profiling. Vast and controversial data systems—including the recently unveiled United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT)—have been introduced to track the movement of foreign elements within the U.S. body politic. “Total information awareness” has been ripped from the pages of Orwellian fiction and introduced as a credible policy option in Washington.

In light of these changes, recent and high-quality additions to the surveillance studies literature such as those reviewed here are particularly welcome. Two years out from the events of 9/11, the greatest contribution of both the Lyon and the Caplan and Torpey volumes may well be to provide the sort of historical depth, breadth, and theoretical subtlety notably lacking in the post-9/11 public surveillance debates. For if 9/11 and its aftermath have sparked new concerns and renewed public debate as to the legitimate extent of governmental, corporate, and other forms of information gathering, in other ways recent events have merely crystallized within the public imagination a much older and more fundamental set
of trends, practices, and questions. Long before the trade centre collapsed, developments in computer, communication, and information technologies were offering governments, corporations, and other powerful actors new possibilities for the collection, integration, and manipulation of personal information. The implicit social contracts sustaining Cold War Western welfare states—and with them, a temporary stability in the relation between individuals, governments, and corporations—began to crumble long before the towers in New York, victims of other fundamentalists armed with other box-cutters (globalization, tax cuts, and so on). As the contributors to the Lyon and Caplan and Torpey volumes remind us, contemporary surveillance questions can only be properly understood against the backdrop of a much broader history of communication, surveillance, and control.

*Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination* derives from a 2001 conference hosted at Queen’s University in Kingston, and more generally out of the longer-term research program of the Queen’s-based Surveillance Project. The issues addressed by the book’s international cast of scholars range from those widely recognized as communication topics (for example, online architectures of control, video surveillance) to those that haven’t traditionally attracted much attention from communication scholars (for example, biometrics, intelligent transportation networks, spatial control technologies) but perhaps should. What draws the various contributors together is a shared sense that while surveillance per se is hardly a new phenomenon—as Lyon correctly notes in his introduction, historical experiences of surveillance have varied widely along familiar lines of race, class, and gender—recent developments in data collection and integration technologies, along with broader changes in the societies and political economies of Western post-welfare states, have expanded the scale, scope, and social reach of such practices.

Although the Lyon book is consistently strong, several chapters merit particular mention. Dwayne Winseck’s “Netscapes of Power” traces the shifting constitution of political economic and architectural power on the Net, exploring the strategies adopted by rapidly consolidating media firms in their attempts to edit, monitor, channel, and otherwise manage on-line information flows. Winseck’s work in aligning the ownership and market power concerns of political economy with control mechanisms operating at the level of design or “code” is significant and represents an important future avenue for critical communication scholarship. Clive Norris’ “From Personal to Digital: CCTV, the Panopticon, and the Technological Mediation of Suspicion and Control” draws from careful fieldwork on the closed-circuit monitoring of public space in Britain to argue for both the suggestiveness and limitations of panoptic metaphor. As Norris documents, the sheer volume of accumulated data has proven an obstacle to current closed-circuit surveillance efforts; contrary to the visual bias of the panopticon, surveillant power lies not in the eye but the archive of the beholder, imposing serious constraints on the efforts of would-be surveyors in Britain. (Though as Norris notes, emerging patterns in digital storage, search, and visual recognition methods may yet make the dreams of the guardians of British public order tenable.) For those new to sur-
veillance issues, Lyon’s introduction and first chapter, along with Elia Zureik’s detailed survey of workplace surveillance issues, provide a richly theorized overview of principal themes and concerns. The engaging clarity of Lyon’s introduction, along with the range and general accessibility of the chapters that follow, would make this a very useful advanced undergraduate or graduate-level teaching text.

Jane Caplan and John Torpey’s *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* provides some of the historical depth pointed toward, but not fully developed, in the Lyon book. As suggested by the title, the volume is centrally concerned with the practices and technologies by which modern states have come to know, order, and manage their populations. Drawing on case studies ranging from late imperial Russia to twentieth-century Rwanda, the contributors produce a rich portrait of the evolution of “paper regimes”—passports, identity cards, fingerprint records, et cetera—collectively constituting a state capable of differentiating, speaking to, and shaping the life chances of its citizens. The chapters of the opening section are grouped loosely around changing conceptualizations of personhood and subjectivity in modern and pre-modern Europe; particularly noteworthy here is Valentin Groebner’s nuanced study of identity practices and concepts in medieval and Renaissance Europe, providing a careful empirical grounding for the sorts of modern/pre-modern continuities and breakpoints too frequently breezed over in social theory debates. The book’s second section explores the central connection between the emerging sciences of identification and policing in the nineteenth century, charting the crucial role of techniques such as fingerprinting, anthropometry, and search warrants in fixing identities to bodies over time and space—the taken-for-granted foundation of modern criminal and penal systems.

A third section of the book builds on earlier work by Torpey (2000) exploring the contested role of the passport in enabling and constraining transnational mobilities. As Torpey and others document, the passport, and the right of mobility it conferred or denied, represented one of the most tangible expressions of the gathering “embrace of the state” by which individual lives were brought within the purview of an increasingly integrated territorial, administrative, and national power. The book’s final section comes closest to the concerns of the Lyon volume, turning to contemporary questions of identification and surveillance ranging from DNA-typing and genetic surveillance to the identification of illegal workers in the German labour market. The book’s most haunting chapter (and a powerful argument for the political relevance of surveillance studies) is Timothy Longman’s concluding analysis of connections between the identification systems of the colonial and post-colonial state and the political pathologies underlying the Rwandan genocide of the mid-1990s. As with Lyon, the general clarity and accessibility of the volume, along with its historical and theoretical range, would make *Documenting Individual Identity* a useful teaching text.

Beyond their specific contributions, *Surveillance as Social Sorting* and *Documenting Individual Identity*, and the rapidly maturing field of surveillance
studies they represent, advance and enrich debates on communication, information, and control in several important ways. Their first contribution (and most attractive for a reviewer writing from Southern California, where the discourse of market liberalism reigns supreme) lies in the insistence, shared by each of the contributors to the Lyon volume in particular and underscored in Lyon’s introduction, on the social character of surveillance. This flies in the face of much contemporary scholarship and public debate, where surveillance questions too often begin and end with the question of individual privacy. Privacy is, of course, a central concern, and represents one of the pre-eminent platforms upon which surveillance dramas have been and will continue to be staged. But as the contributors to the Lyon volume suggest, the liberal individualist framing of privacy debates, particularly in the U.S., may well obscure important group-based and categorical effects. Drawing on the earlier work of Lyon (1994) and Oscar Gandy (1993), several of the case studies reviewed here address the growing role of information control in the increasingly precise work of social differentiation: the parsing of epidemiological and genetic risk along racial and ethnic lines, the construction of desirable and undesirable market segments through the work of the geodemographics industry, the construction and ordering of ethnic nationalisms out of the administrative practices of late imperial and Soviet Russia. From this perspective, surveillance is not a purely negative phenomenon (the oppressive hand of the state sitting heavily on the shoulders of the heroic individual) but rather a constitutive act, defining and producing the identities and life chances of groups, and thus occupying a crucial position in the informational politics of late modernity.

Secondly, the research conveyed in the two books raises the crucial work of sociotechnical intertwining upon which the practice of surveillance depends. Where networks of surveillance hold, they do so by virtue of a dense interweaving of social and technical form and process—what Ericson & Haggerty (2001) describe under the Deleuzian language of assemblage, or what communication and science studies scholars Bowker & Star (1999, 2002) have usefully conceptualized as infrastructure. This blending poses important and enduring analytic challenges, demanding of the analyst a hybridic sensibility all too often squeezed out by current disciplinary arrangements. Effective analysis of surveillance is thus necessarily multi-sited and multi-scalar, lending itself to the kind of robust interdisciplinarity frequently talked about, and less frequently practiced, in today’s academy. Here the long-standing “between-ness” or disciplinary refusal of communication scholarship—and its growing and productive brush with cognate fields such as science and technology studies—may be a strategic advantage.

This suggests a third and largely methodological lesson: namely, the need for more solidly grounded ethnographies and histories of surveillance. For too long the phenomenon of surveillance has been captured by the theoreticians, or overwhelmed by a focus on the ominous facade of systems and a perhaps too-ready willingness to accept the claims of system-builders at their word. (In this regard it is striking to note that the metaphors of control most frequently invoked to describe real-world surveillant powers—Orwell’s Big Brother and Bentham’s [via
Foucault] Panopticon—are fictitious [or, for Bentham, ideal-typical] examples whose rhetorical attractions lie precisely in the sharp-edged totality of their vision.) Popular conspiratorial portrayals aside—men in dark suits in dim and smoke-filled rooms, the sanitation worker speaking discreetly into his sleeve—a great deal of the work of surveillance is not secret, but lies hidden in plain sight, disappearing, if at all, into the foreground of contemporary social experience. To be truly effective, surveillance must become ordinary, even boring (and here attention to post-9/11 fireworks may distract us from some of the more enduring social questions and historical trends involved).

Finally, the case studies contained here do a nice job of exploring the fundamental ambiguity of surveillance. Ambiguity describes the frequently unintended consequences of surveillance: the unlooked-for unities, identities, and claims; the unexpected legacies; the emancipatory projects that emerge from systems of classification and administration designed for entirely other purposes. Ambiguity also characterizes one of the fundamental ironies of surveillance: namely, that the very sorts of rights and entitlements (to privacy, to self-determination, to the moral autonomy of the individual) upon which claims against surveillance are so frequently founded are themselves in part historical products of the modern state’s will to knowledge. Frameworks portraying heroic individuals and natural publics squaring off against the ever more intrusive aspirations of the state neglect the debt owed by the very concepts of ‘individual’ and ‘public’ to the ‘technical’ work of state formation. From this perspective, as the volumes make clear, to be a citizen is to be surveilled; to enter, willingly or otherwise, into regimes of papers through which one’s political kinship with other familiar strangers may be sanctioned or denied; to surrender oneself to the classificatory impulse, the “phenetic urge,” of the state. In meeting surveillance, we constantly renegotiate the Hobbesian grudge, our reluctant acquiescence to systems of frequently arbitrary and absolute authority (expanded now to include the market, technical, and other forms of extra-statist power that Hobbes failed to foresee). Four hundred years after the consolidation of modern state power this remains a fresh wound, as a visit to contemporary political theory or any post-9/11 security-obstructed airport line will quickly reveal. Acknowledging tension and dissent as a frequent and potentially transformative property of such systems is not to engage in post-structural romantisms built around the inevitability of resistance to power, but rather to make a simple and empirically defensible point: namely, that people meet surveillance in distinct and consequential ways, and that this encounter is rarely a purely one-sided affair.

The volumes are not without gaps, of course. Both focus primarily on European and North American experiences, and neither pays sufficient attention to the rich and distinctive experiences of surveillance to be found in a diverse array of Asian, African, and Latin American settings. For this reason, the volumes do not yet comprise the sort of comparative sociology and global history of surveillance that is arguably so urgently needed (though they may well mark an important contribution to this larger project). There remains as well considerable room for
engagement with sections of the communication literature (for example, visual communication, science communication, new media studies) currently un- or under-addressed by surveillance scholars—a point intended more in the spirit of invitation than critique.

In sum, *Surveillance as Social Sorting* and *Documenting Individual Identity* cast new and welcome light on the shifting terrain of information, surveillance, and control central to the politics of late modernity. This is indeed interesting work for interesting times. Communication scholars have much to learn and much to teach, and would do well to take note.

References