
Liquid Surveillance is the product of a series of email conversations between Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon that took shape between September and November 2011. The book is structured around questions posed by Lyon; however, Lyon’s role is more than that of interviewer. As Bauman and Lyon are both highly influential scholars and social theorists, there is a great deal to recommend about this book.

As the title of the text attests, the book picks up on Bauman’s earlier work on liquid modernity as a framework for thinking about contemporary surveillance. In the introduction to the text, Lyon explains the importance of the liquid metaphor in contrasting the “mobile, pulsating signals of today’s flowing forms” with the “fixity and spatial orientation of solid modern surveillance” (p. 15). Using liquidity as a premise, the book’s seven chapters are organized into themes around which the conversations took shape. The themes addressed include drones and social media; liquid surveillance as post-panoptic; remoteness, distancing, and automation; in/security and surveillance; consumerism, new media, and social sorting; probing surveillance ethically; and agency and hope.

Liquid Surveillance is not a traditional, heavily-sourced academic text; instead, it is a book that follows the authors as they discuss surveillance and social theory through a series of wide-ranging examples, from Facebook and online dating to drones and Nazi death camps. Despite the breadth of material addressed, several dominant themes appear throughout the text. Three of the most prominent are DIY (do-it-yourself) surveillance, adiaphorization, and hope.

DIY surveillance is, in Bauman’s terms, the result of a second managerial revolution in which the location of and responsibility for surveillance have shifted from the managers to the managed. He writes, “In a nutshell, just as snails carry their homes, so the employees of the brave new liquid modern world must grow and carry their personal panopticons on their own bodies” (p. 59). The authors later take up this notion in relation to consumerism, using Amazon.com as a primary example. In the case of Amazon, as in other forms of DIY surveillance, users willingly contribute to increasingly extensive information databases in order to participate in the conveniences that such databases afford (as in Amazon’s suggested books, music, or “Wish Lists”). The result is the oft-cited paradox in surveillance studies of the continual push-pull between privacy and publicity that marks much of contemporary culture.
Adiaphorization is a term developed by Bauman in earlier work to describe a process whereby difficult moral and ethical questions are elided in favour of action (whether in the form of making a purchase or pulling a trigger). Key to this process are the distancing effects of information technology, a topic Bauman returns to throughout the book. He argues, “the most seminal effect of progress in the technology of ‘distancing, remoteness automation’ is the progressive and perhaps unstoppable liberation of our actions from moral constraints” (p. 86). The net effect of adiaphorization is highlighted by Bauman in the example of on-line dating: he argues that “when another human being is treated along the lines of a commodity good, selected according to colour, size, and number of add-ups, adiaphorization is in full swing and at its most devastating” (p. 137).

In Liquid Surveillance, the oppressiveness of surveillance—manifest in the discussions of DIY surveillance and adiaphorization—is counterbalanced by the search for hope and agency. The theme of hope and agency is one of the more interesting components of the text, primarily because of the dynamic that builds between the authors. Lyon frequently raises questions about the productive potential of surveillance. In the first chapter, he wonders whether “responsible and caring” (p. 37) forms of surveillance are possible. In chapter 3, he asks whether surveillance technologies can be “tuned to the key of care” (p. 96) or whether they are inherently oppressive. And in the last chapter, Lyon pushes Bauman again to consider whether or not surveillance can help rather than harm.

Lyon's emphasis on hope throughout the book is tied to his larger concern with the human condition—the impacts of surveillance on people’s “life chances”—and Bauman’s responses never satisfy. His answers are abstract and distant from the specifics of Lyon's questions, suggesting a curious parallel to the notions of proximity and distance found in Bauman’s 1993 text, Postmodern Ethics, and cited by Lyon in Liquid Surveillance. In the continual discussions of “action-at-a-distance,” Lyon is drawn to questions of proximity—of the impact of surveillance on the lives of individuals and groups, and of the potential dissolution or (if possible) strengthening of human bonds. In contrast, Bauman foregrounds the distancing effects of surveillance, tying it to adiaphorization and the continued elision of moral questions in favour of action. And yet, there is a distinct sense of hope in the text. This is most apparent in the concluding chapter, in which the authors tackle the question of hope directly. Their discussion is inconclusive (as it must be), but hopeful. As Bauman summarizes, “hope is one human quality we are bound never to lose without losing our humanity. But we may be similarly certain that a safe haven in which to drop its anchor will take a very long time to be found” (p. 149).

The passage cited above points to one of the book’s highlights: Bauman and Lyon, both talented writers, fill the text with evocative passages and metaphors. The conversational format allows for the free flow of ideas, which makes the book a compelling read. However, the lack of sustained, focused analysis and the partial list of references will leave some readers wanting more. Liquid Surveillance would not suffice as a stand-alone text for teaching but would serve as an excellent partner to other texts on surveillance and social theory.Outside of the classroom, the book will be of interest to
schrödinger’s cat was used to demonstrate quantum superposition, in which a particle can exist in multiple states simultaneously until it is observed.

Reference

**Jonathan Finn, Wilfrid Laurier University**