

## SURVEILLANCE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

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This special section of *The Sociological Quarterly* explores research on “surveillance as cultural practice,” which indicates an orientation to surveillance that views it as embedded within, brought about by, and generative of social practices in specific cultural contexts. Such an approach is more likely to include elements of popular culture, media, art, and narrative; it is also more likely to try to comprehend people’s engagement with surveillance on their own terms, stressing the production of emic over etic forms of knowledge. This introduction sketches some key developments in this area and discusses their implications for the field of “surveillance studies” as a whole.

Jorge Luis Borges (1962:25) once wrote, “A system is nothing more than the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to some one of them.” As with all scholarly fields, surveillance studies has for a long time privileged certain theoretical frames over others. There have been remarkable growths and mutations in the study of surveillance as the field has engaged with, modified, and sometimes rejected influential concepts such as the panopticon, Big Brother, and privacy (Regan 1995; Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Gilliom 2001), but a focus on institutional-level power dynamics has been a gravitational force, pulling other scholarly approaches into its orbit and sometimes eclipsing promising alternative modes of inquiry.

There are logical reasons for this. After all, surveillance is about exercises of power and the performance of power relationships, most of which are more evident when status and other hierarchies are pronounced. Some of the originary and most influential works in the field started with a critique of institutional power or of the activities of institutional actors. For instance, James Rule (1973) traced the ways in which data-collection practices of large bureaucracies facilitate privacy invasion and social control of individuals. Gary Marx (1988, 2002) probed the covert practices employed by police using new surveillance technologies, such as infrared cameras, to obtain intelligence on subjects without corresponding increases in legal or procedural protections. David Lyon (1994, 2001), William Staples (1997, 2000), and others drew attention to the routine, systematic, and automated collection of data on individuals by organizations, contributing to the production of surveillance societies and enforcing corresponding degrees of social control. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) developed the concept of “the surveillant assemblage” to describe the ways that the many information systems to which people are exposed translate bodies into abstract data, which are then re-assembled as decontextualized “data doubles” upon which organizations act. While this general emphasis on

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institutional or organizational power has been amazingly productive, it also set a trajectory from which it has been difficult to deviate.

Nonetheless, the field's areas of interest are changing, and have been for some time. As scholars trained in different academic disciplines entered into the field and participated in its conversations, foci shifted—along with methods and theories—to be more inclusive of the full range of surveillance systems and activities throughout societies. Whereas surveillance studies may have gained considerable momentum from the early works of sociologists, it has now expanded to become a truly transdisciplinary enterprise with representatives from sociology, criminology, political science, philosophy, geography, science and technology studies, communication, media and information studies, anthropology, and other fields. This has brought about an enhancement rather than a dilution of sociological inquiry; it has fostered a sociological imagination in the deepest sense of the term, of tracing everyday practices of surveillance in local contexts to larger assemblages of power and influence. Moreover, these changes in disciplinary demographics have forced scholars to debate the direction of the field, criteria for evaluating scholarship, and definitions of surveillance, thereby requiring members to confront and defend, and oftentimes revise, their own disciplinary perspectives, subsequently advancing collective knowledge in the process.<sup>1</sup>

The task of this special section of *The Sociological Quarterly* is to identify some recent developments in surveillance studies as the field undergoes what I view to be healthy expansion and redefinition. In particular, this section seeks to explore research on “surveillance as cultural practice,” which indicates an orientation to surveillance that views it as embedded within, brought about by, and generative of social practices in specific cultural contexts. Rather than analyzing surveillance technologies, for instance, as exogenous tools that are mobilized by actors to deal with perceived problems or needs, studying surveillance as cultural practice would understand these technologies a priori as agential (as “actants” within a social system) and constitutive of knowledge, experience, and relationships. Such an approach is more likely to include in the field of inquiry elements of popular culture, media, art, and narrative; it is more likely to try to comprehend people's experiences of and engagement with surveillance on their own terms, stressing the production of emic over etic forms of knowledge. Studies of surveillance as cultural practice offer vital insights to surveillance and—as with other approaches—such studies similarly pursue critical understandings of complex systems; they just start, oftentimes, with data residing at different points within those systems.

## SOCIAL STUDIES OF SURVEILLANCE

Whereas much of the accepted theoretical apparatus of surveillance studies has contended with institutional-level power dynamics, as witnessed by the influence of Michel Foucault's (1977) treatment of the panopticon, social studies of surveillance tend to concentrate on individuals in local contexts. Oftentimes, this means holding empirical data on local practices up to existing concepts to see whether the data fit those concepts, and if not, deciding how theory should be modified to account for differences (e.g., Lyon

2006). This is effective on one level because it advances knowledge, but it can lead to diminishing intellectual returns, especially if scholars content themselves with making modifications to concepts rather than developing something altogether new.<sup>2</sup> The risk of this mode of knowledge production, which is of course not unique to surveillance studies, is forcing concepts upon data instead of allowing patterns to emerge in a more organic and inductive way (Clarke 2005; Charmaz 2006).

It is nonetheless clear that the field has advanced rapidly because of empirical research on surveillance, which itself has expanded out from those doing surveillance, to those subjected to it, to those appropriating it for their own purposes. Some of the notable early work in this evolution was by criminologists studying police and security personnel operating public-area, closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems (Norris and Armstrong 1999; McCahill 2002; Wilson and Sutton 2003). The privileging of institutional actors like the police encouraged the development of analytic frames that tried to account for the political conditions that fuel CCTV implementation (Fussey 2007), as well as for the motivations and intentions of those behind the cameras (Goold 2004; Smith 2004). In this vein, David Lyon (2001) made the insightful observation that different forms of surveillance could be positioned along a spectrum from “care” to “control”—from watching over one for purposes of protection to scrutinizing one’s behavior in order to enforce discipline, respectively. This was a major contribution in that it called upon scholars to eschew simplistic critiques of surveillance as inherently negative; rather, evaluations of surveillance would have to be made on a case-by-case basis, acknowledging the reality that surveillance often operates simultaneously in both of these registers (care and control). Taken on its own terms, though, this insight also raises to the surface the limitation that such evaluations effectively lend greater validity to the *intentions* of surveillance subjects, while subordinating the experiences and agency of those monitored as surveillance objects.

Departing from investigation into CCTV and the police, a turn to study surveillance in everyday life exploded the field, directing researchers to document the manifold instantiations of surveillance in routine activities and engagements with all organizations (Staples 2000; Monahan 2006; Deflem 2008; Aas, Gundhus, and Lomell 2009; Nelson and Garey 2009). From this perspective, researchers noted that effects and experiences of surveillance differ by population, purpose, and setting. The many surveillance systems to which people are exposed sort populations according to anticipated risk and value (Torpey 2007). Such “social sorting” (Lyon 2003) manifests in the unequal regulation of people’s mobilities (Graham and Wood 2003; Adey 2006), unequal monitoring and disciplining of people accessing public services (Eubanks 2006; Willse 2008; Monahan and Torres 2010), unequal treatment of consumers (Gandy 1993; Turow 2006), and unequal handling of people in just about every other domain as well. It is important to note that surveillance does not simply slow down or single out people considered risky—it also accelerates and augments the experiences of people considered to be of commercial value and low risk, as can be seen with dedicated toll lanes on highways (Graham and Marvin 2001), priority response from call centers (Graham and Wood 2003), or security prescreening and preapproval schemes at airports (Adey 2006;

Lahav 2008). Social sorting characterizes just about all contemporary surveillance systems, the net result being the amplification of many social inequalities (Monahan 2010b).

Targets of marginalizing forms of surveillance deal with their experiences in thoughtful ways, oftentimes mitigating deleterious effects through subtle forms of resistance. John Gilliom's work exemplifies these possibilities, where in *Overseers of the Poor*, for instance, he unearths some of the tactics used by women welfare recipients to evade the bureaucratic surveillance of welfare systems and records their sophisticated ethical rationales for their actions (Gilliom 2001). More recently, Gilliom (2010) has studied some of the ways that public school teachers and administrators attenuate the disciplinary force of a widespread and routine form of institutional surveillance: standardized tests. Surveillance-studies scholars have documented and problematized other resistance practices too, such as Cop Watch programs where activists film police to try to reduce instances of abuse (Huey, Walby, and Doyle 2006; Wilson and Serisier 2010) or technological interventions where groups monitor state agents and use cell phone text messages to coordinate police avoidance at mass public protests (Institute for Applied Autonomy 2006). Recognizing the agency of the watched is one crucial aspect of inquiry into surveillance as cultural practice, even if resistance sometimes confirms, more than challenges, the reach of abstract systems of control.

If one employs a symmetrical approach to research (Bloor 1991), however, then the set of technologies, techniques, and practices that the field calls "surveillance" should be identified and studied as such when deployed by individuals or groups operating outside government or corporate organizations (Monahan, Phillips, and Murakami Wood 2010). *Surveillance can be defined as the systematic monitoring of people or groups in order to regulate or govern their behavior.* This is but one possible definition, of course, but it is useful for being agnostic about the subjects and objects of scrutiny and control. Surveillance can be mobilized to repress populations or bring about conditions of collective empowerment; it can be used by people occupying positions of high institutional status or by those excluded from traditional arenas of power and influence.

From this perspective, surveillance can serve democratic or empowering ends if it brings about openness, transparency, accountability, participation, and power equalization among social groups and institutions (Monahan 2010a). For example, Gwen Ottinger (2010) writes about grassroots monitoring of air quality by people living near oil refineries in Louisiana, which when coupled with some control over the criteria for deciding what constitutes a health risk has the potential to empower residents, regulate polluting industries, and make communities safer. In another example, James Walsh (2010) shows how progressive activist groups engage in technological surveillance of the U.S.–Mexico border, border agents, and vigilantes to prevent immigrant deaths, by using geographic information systems, for instance, to determine where to site water stations. Lane DeNicola (2009) investigates activists' use of earth remote sensing satellite systems, long associated with military operations, to engage in environmental forensics and

counter-mapping efforts to render visible environmental disasters, overdevelopment, and even genocide, subsequently introducing a valence for community and government intervention.<sup>3</sup>

This section sketched a rough continuum for research emerging from the social studies of surveillance: from the intentions and practices of the watchers, to the experiences and (re)actions of the watched, to the proactive mobilization of surveillance from below. One problem with this narrative, other than being partial and artificially linear, is that it does not adequately account for the thorough integration of surveillance into social worlds, not as a set of tools to be used for instrumental ends but as forms of life in their own right.

## EXPLORING CULTURAL PRACTICE

People, as creative actors, constantly draw upon and reproduce cultural knowledge (de Certeau 1984). While each culture maintains itself through *habitus*, or through a series of logics that acquire durability and presence through practice (Bourdieu 1977), this is an evolving play that exceeds the instrumental objectives of individuals. In fact, the bulk of everyday life is comprised of unplanned events, occurring on micro-levels of human interaction, below the surface of conscious awareness or intentionality (Mauss 1973; Ortner 1994). Technological systems are clearly integral to cultural practice and important components of modern myth and ritual (Pfaffenberger 1990). Just like all technologies, then, surveillance systems attain presence as negotiated components of culture and accrete meaning by tapping a culture's immense symbolic reservoirs, which can include narrative, media, and art, among other things.

Nils Zurawski's article in this special section illustrates the power of narrative to weave surveillance artifacts and systems into webs of local meaning and signification. A mundane surveillance artifact—the customer loyalty card—is his foil for tracing the ways in which basic social activities like shopping plug people into vast, global networks of surveillance based on data collection and manipulation. Instead of positioning loyalty cards in the center of his map of surveillance relationships, which would be the expected approach if someone were strictly adhering to actor-network theory, for example, Zurawski starts with and privileges the narratives and practices of his informants. For them, loyalty cards are subordinate accessories to the shopping experience, which is primarily a social activity predicated on interaction with others and an affirmation that they are part of a community. As with all designed objects, the loyalty card absorbs meaning through its use and through what it symbolizes to its users (cf. Boradkar 2010). Whereas the honed surveillance-studies researcher might quickly conclude that loyalty cards are manipulative connections to extractive surveillance systems that diminish privacy and trust, by postponing judgment, Zurawski uncovers something more interesting and empirically accurate: Even when people are aware that they are giving away personal data, this is of little concern to them and is a trivial part of the larger shopping experience. This does not imply in the least that consumer-based surveillance systems are inconsequential or that researchers should

stop analysis with the reporting of informant articulations; rather, it highlights the challenges researchers face in situating those systems in local *and* global contexts and mobilizing cultural critique that takes seriously the perspectives of the people being studied.

Ariane Ellerbrok, also in this special section, similarly destabilizes easy criticisms of commercial face-recognition applications by showing the ways in which these biometric systems can be enjoyable and fun for their users. Automated face-recognition systems invite users of Facebook, Picasa, iPhoto, or other applications to identify people within their digital photo libraries by training the programs to link names with faces. This can be a playful experience for users, predicated on creating varied groupings of photos and sharing within and across social networks. As with Zurawski's discussion of shopping, play is a vital cultural practice that demands theorization (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2005). Play may also serve as a mechanism of enrolling users in their own exploitation as they willingly generate data for the benefit of industry and government organizations. While this larger critique should be integrated into robust analysis, it can be insulting to begin from a position that presumes people are dupes and that they simply do not understand their situations as clearly as do researchers. Rather, people can and do appropriate surveillance systems for their own ends to achieve forms of recognition, independence, and empowerment (Burgin 2002; Koskela 2004), to embed themselves in social networks (Regan and Steeves 2010), and to become creative—and critical—producers of content that others can appreciate and enjoy (Postigo 2008).

Finally, David Barnard-Wills's article explores media discourses of surveillance and investigates their role in shaping public knowledge and debate. The media have long been recognized as fostering "moral panics" and circulating misleading information about public threats, which is something that has been well documented with discussions of terrorism and national security (Altheide 2006; Monahan 2010b). With a focus on UK print media, Barnard-Wills argues for an expansion of conceptual categories to take seriously the discursive engine that propels meaning-making practices about surveillance, as a complement to examination of sociotechnical systems and more traditional forms of politics. Whereas the concept of the surveillant assemblage stresses the "machinic" elements of the system, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) original assemblage concept also included an enunciative dimension that is often neglected or marginalized in many treatments of surveillance. Enunciations can be understood, drawing upon linguistic theory, as requiring contextual cues to interpret meaning because unlike statements, they neither aspire toward generalization nor contain sufficient information to be understood on their own (Barthes 1986). The enunciative dimension of surveillance, therefore, must always be grasped in local contexts, which should, in turn, push scholars to confront cultural, geographic, and other differences and be suspicious of grand generalizations about the role of surveillance or the existence of "the surveillance society" as something singular or monolithic (pace Murakami Wood 2009b). The mass media, as well as alternative forms of media, are keys to the unfolding and understanding of surveillance systems (Gates and Magnet

2007). Engagement with media, as producers or consumers (or as “prosumers”), is a local cultural practice with global significance.

There are many other possible avenues for the study of surveillance as cultural practice. The creation and study of artistic interventions are clearly fruitful in this regard, as artists provide imaginative resources that oftentimes channel latent concerns and anticipate future worlds in ways that social scientists would have difficulty doing without deviating from disciplinary norms. Artistic works or performances, which enroll others as witnesses or actors, can also serve as vital agents of social change. Because the topic of surveillance seems to lure creative minds, the field has been in a loose conversation with artists, fiction writers, and their robust material for a while (e.g., Levin, Frohne, and Weibel 2002; Nellis 2005; Murakami Wood 2009a; Veel 2010). Surveillance-themed films, novels, photographs, plays, performance pieces, installations, and the like abound, and some artists have made explicit forays into the field of surveillance studies (e.g., Levin et al. 2002; Institute for Applied Autonomy 2006; Surveillance Camera Players 2006; Luksch 2008). And while there has been one special issue of the journal *Surveillance & Society* devoted to the subject, there is ample room for more serious treatments of artistic works in the field.

Similarly, popular culture in general presents abundant material for explorations of surveillance in societies. Notable in this regard is John McGrath’s (2004) book *Loving Big Brother*, which interrogates how people use and understand surveillance systems and how television shows and movies contribute to cultural imaginaries. The field is rapidly coming to grips with cultural practices in this sense and working to theorize them in connection with broader political economies. Some of the work being done in these directions includes research on general interactive media (Andrejevic 2007), social networking (Albrechtslund 2008), games (Chen 2008; Steeves 2010), cell phones (Koskela 2004, 2009), and television (Trottier 2006). Studies of surveillance in popular culture open a window into the construction and interrelation of symbols that shape quotidian meaning, on one hand, and that operate as powerful truth constructs that drive ideology and policy, on the other (Monahan 2010b).

In a different register, an exciting new area of investigation for the field is on cultural differences in the use and meaning of surveillance, whether within or across national boundaries. Important new work is now being done on differential surveillance experiences by race, class, gender, sexual identity, and age (Kenner 2008; Currah and Moore 2009; Browne 2010; Eubanks 2011; Magnet Forthcoming), as well as on surveillance’s role in propagating intersectional forms of oppression (Campbell 2006). National cross-cultural comparisons are now taking off as well, whether through ambitious, multi-sited individual projects (e.g., Murakami Wood 2010), large-scale team efforts (e.g., UrbanEye 2004; The New Transparency 2010), or the production of findings from heretofore understudied counties, which fill the empirical record and stimulate comparison (e.g., Samatas 2004; Arteaga Botello 2007; Kanashiro 2008; Frois Forthcoming). Research on culture and surveillance in this sense is about seeking out meanings and practices in local contexts, embracing rather than ignoring particularities, and problematizing dangerous presumptions of universality.

## CONCLUSION: AN INVITATION TO REFLEXIVITY

Surveillance studies, as a field, is an evolving system of knowledge production. As a system, it necessarily subordinates certain elements of interest or ways of knowing to other ones. It has been organized in large part by an interest in institutional-level power dynamics and theoretical explanations of them. Thus, even as the field has expanded into a full-fledged, international network of scholars engaged in social studies of surveillance, empirical research on experiences in local contexts predictably circles back to conversations about macro-level, institutional forms of power. Obviously, the disciplinary origins and initial interests of the field's early practitioners guide these scholarly practices and provide the stage upon which scholars from other backgrounds have had to act. Because the field is growing rapidly and is transdisciplinary, the center is shifting and new areas of interest are challenging existing paradigms, which is ultimately a healthy and productive development.

An approach to surveillance as cultural practice is one of the directions that surveillance studies is heading, or is being pulled. Cultural practice is merely another lens or a different point from which to view, organize, and understand the knowledge-production activities of the field. I am making no claims that this construct or its foci are better than traditional sociological interests in institutions and their agents. What I would assert is that disciplinary diversity is good and brings about more thoughtful scholarship. Research on cultural practice is currently providing a venue for marginalized disciplines within the field to assert themselves and inject alternative concepts and content areas into the collective conversation. These changes also invite critical reflexivity both for the field as a whole and its members.

In many respects, research is a form of surveillance. Researchers systematically collect, organize, analyze, interpret, and disseminate data with the aim of influencing others, including those whom they study (Ball and Haggerty 2005; Haggerty 2009). Because research functions as surveillance, scholars should strive to avoid the fundamental critiques that the field's members often make of contemporary surveillance: that it affords the violent abstraction of people and their actions from their primary contexts; that it is predicated upon biased valuations of some populations or activities over others; that its governing logics are opaque, making them difficult to discern or contest; that it denies or ignores its own partiality and situatedness. Modern science aspires toward placeless knowledge, toward universal facts that do not require an explanation of their origins and that resist inquiry into the value-laden process of their construction (Latour 1987; Haraway 1988). Reflexive science, conversely, does not try to eliminate partiality and the messy particularities of knowledge construction but instead own up to them, articulate them, and subject them to further scrutiny (Woodhouse et al. 2002; Fisher 2011).

To avoid reproducing that which they critique, surveillance-studies scholars should be pursuing reflexive science. They should try to keep their research embodied and grounded in its full context, interrogate the values and constraints of their systems of knowledge production, and be suspicious of truth claims that float above particularities.

It is crucial to note that being reflexive is not at all the same thing as being reflective. As Lynch and Woolgar (1990) explain:

The organization, sense, value, and adequacy of any representation is “reflexive” to the settings in which it is constituted and used. . . . “Reflexivity” in this usage means, not self-referential nor reflective awareness of representational practice, but the inseparability of a “theory” of representation from the heterogeneous social contexts in which representations are composed and used. (Pp. 11–12)

Perhaps the emerging “cultural studies of surveillance” is better equipped to embrace reflexivity, at least as an unproblematic starting point, because its constitutive and aligned fields (literary studies, film and media studies, science and technology studies, cultural anthropology, and some stripes of communication) already prioritize local meanings, interpretations, and knowledge construction. Even if being reflexive may be an uncomfortable mode for people operating more firmly in the social studies of surveillance, which is clearly still the dominant orientation, these practitioners, as well as the field as a whole, could surely benefit from taking steps in this direction. The trend toward studying surveillance as cultural practice is encouraging in this regard because it directs attention to local, grounded meanings as the primary units of analysis, which can implicitly challenge current hegemonic organizing frames, as the articles in this special section demonstrate.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The online journal *Surveillance & Society* has been one of the primary forums where these advances have occurred, along with many workshops, conferences, and edited volumes.

<sup>2</sup>For instance, the field is awash with embellishments on the concept of the panopticon, including the superpanopticon (Poster 1990), synopticon (Mathiesen 1997), ban-opticon (Bigo 2006), and oligopticon (Latour and Hermant 2006).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, <http://www.skytruth.org> or [earth.google.com/outreach/cs\\_darfur.html](http://earth.google.com/outreach/cs_darfur.html).

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