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Exploring Surveillance Culture

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It seems to make sense — though it might be annoying — when you receive internet ads that seem to match your interests, just after you clicked on a site for household tools or exotic vacations. This is a commonplace, unremarkable online event in the early twenty-first century. But what about old-fashioned email? Can corporate surveillance track you there? Surely. Commercial emails contain a high density of third-party trackers.[1] Trackers thus learn the user's IP address, when the emails were opened, *and* browsing histories and profiles. Cross-device tracking can follow — after all, many use multiple devices — helping to link between online and offline activities. Email senders are typically warned only about the risks of learning about users, *not* about third-party trackers. It does not end there. Others, such as intelligence agencies, may piggyback on advertising cookies and identities may be gleaned from web activities. It is a straightforward process as many emails are sent in plaintext.

In other words, while one once might have been surprised to learn how mundane, everyday activities had been noted by, say, a warranted police probe, today it is well known that such supposedly private practices contribute in unprecedented and highly significant ways to surveillance, including to some kinds of surveillance that participants might resent. This surveillance sometimes seems indefensibly ubiquitous even though it clearly has a user-generated aspect. Equally, most are aware that people send those emails — or spend hours each day on social media platforms — even when they know, however hazily, about the risks, which they seemingly discount. This is the shallow end of surveillance culture. Many are already in the deep end. How did this happen?

1_How We Got Here

Surveillance once existed at the edges of everyday life. It was a background feature, scarcely noticed by many. People knew of intelligence-gathering agencies, of police searches and tracking, of workplace strategies to ensure that employees complied with expectations, and of health monitoring, to name some of its key features. But, apart from those who lived under authoritarian regimes — in, say, Chile or East Germany — they had only occasional contact with such activities, if at all. Awareness was low. Today, surveillance is an unavoidable and unmissable aspect of daily life. ID and credit cards, social media and the internet, 'smart' devices from phones to cars, all weave

surveillance into the very fabric of our communications, travel, transactions, health, learning and entertainment. Surveillance is experienced in expanding and intensifying ways.[2] But we also engage with surveillance as never before, variously complying, complaining and — even competing for attention from its gaze. Surveillance is now part of a way of life.

Three elements of this are worth stressing. One, the back-story is the rapid rise of social media and the Facebook-Google discoveries of how to make money from so-called data exhaust. Google got there first by finding ways to sell the surplus data produced by every connection and transaction — where, when, how long, and other apparently innocent 'metadata' could be sold to those wishing to track our everyday mobility, our little life-paths.[3] Facebook's like button enabled connections across different sites, for example, increasing the amount of data available. Such platforms became the richest 'surveillance capitalist' entities on the planet. This brought to public attention the ways in which surveillance had already been spreading, steadily, as everyday devices of many kinds became 'logjects'[4] that record and share data with other parties.

Two, the internet and social media have quickly established themselves as 'indispensable' essentials of everyday life. The ease of connecting with others, making online purchases or presenting our persona means that many simply enjoy what the digital offers. Not only individuals, but any political party, church, art gallery, business or sports club has sees it necessary to have a web presence. All parties report finding these means of contact fruitful, fulfilling, fun. Once negatively named, surveillance is now normalized in creative texting and tweeting and the desire to expose one's life to public scrutiny, scoring 'likes' and 'followers.' Lying behind this, remember, is a new type of business organization, the 'platform,' that has become prominent in promoting the idea that 'sharing' of many kinds offers essential benefits.[5]

Three, this adds 'engagement with' to 'experience of' surveillance; the active involvement of users. As surveillance expanded from the late twentieth century, it entered the public consciousness more and more frequently. People slowed for cameras, reluctantly gave their fingerprints. Surveillance was more frequently encountered and this has to be factored into how surveillance is understood. Today, the public is not only used to surveillance, but as well, the activity has become do-it-yourself. Employers check job-applicants' personal pages, they may even ask for Facebook passwords. And ordinary users scan the pages of others, often complete strangers, finding out what

would otherwise take a private detective several weeks to achieve. While the former is an extension of workplace surveillance, 'social surveillance' has evolved primarily in a digital, social media environment.

Technically, it could be said that the rise of 'data-driven' enterprises is one factor that links together these three elements that have spawned surveillance culture. While cultural-historical developments from twentieth century radio and television media helped to pave the way[6] and the ongoing belief in the power of technology to make a positive difference still seems strong, data-dependence is key to present day cultural formations. For instance, José Van Dijck calls contemporary trust in corporations to take care of personal data 'dataism.'[7] *De facto* reliance on the commercial and organizational potential of data is a central impulse enabling today's surveillance culture.

This does not necessarily mean that ordinary users of Google or Uber have a strong sense of the data-driven dimensions of these corporations. Convenience to consumers, the evident benefits of efficiency and the reassurances offered by the ease of instant communication are much more likely to be the incentives for use. These are celebrated, of course, as superior to prior arrangements for shopping, travel or staying in touch, although much-publicized data scandals relating to Facebook's data breaches in particular may affect perceptions of how reliable platform data-handling really is. The inflated claims often made for 'big data' and new data analytics in general have yet to become a major issue in quotidian surveillance cultures, although the current scandals relating to Facebook and Cambridge Analytica over micro-targeting voters may help to change that.

2_Surveillance Culture

What qualifies as 'surveillance culture'? When certain attitudes and actions can be thought of as part of a discernible 'way of life' the word 'culture' fits. Adapting concepts from Charles Taylor,[8] we see how people picture the world and their place in it partly in terms of the online. These are not so much people's 'theories' as their 'imaginaries' — in this case people are more associated with their Twitter handles, emails, online persona or pic posts than their landline number or street address. Users relate to others via their online presence and reputation. That shades into what Taylor calls 'practices,' in this case, how actors actually live out those imaginaries in a digital world.

Travellers act out for airport security, internet users click accept before reading the terms and strolling pedestrians evade the camera when they know it is there.

So what I have in mind, using the 'surveillance culture' term, is how watching has become part of a 'way of life,' which is derived from how Raymond Williams[9] conceived 'culture.' This is different from, but clearly overlaps with surveillance culture in the sense of cultural products such as films, music or novels that often take as their inspiration from actual experiences of surveillance. Just as George Orwell's mid-twentieth century *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* has helped to shape not only public understanding of surveillance but policy and legal responses to it, so contemporary work such as Dave Egger's *The Circle*[10] and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*[11] may succeed similarly in the surveillance culture of the twenty-first.[12] Creative and imaginative depictions of and interactions with surveillance feed into the culture of surveillance in the way-of-life sense with which I am mainly concerned.

Of course, these new novels are American, just as Orwell's was British, and they depict different kinds of surveillance culture. Cultures of surveillance differ widely, depending on many factors, including age, gender, class, and, especially, region. There is no one surveillance culture. However, as the crucial enabling factors are decidedly globalized, from the commercial social media and gig economy platforms to networked national security agencies, health-care providers or urban development digital infrastructures, surveillance cultures do have some features in common even though their details differ. Ordinary actors in everyday life encounter and engage with similar modes of surveillance whether they are in Bangalore, Berlin or Buenos Aires. This is because, in each of the examples just given, people are drawn in because there are currently few alternatives to participating in highly surveillant systems, whether for survival or entertainment.

3_Understanding Surveillance Culture

In order to develop studies of surveillance culture, some conceptual frames are needed that will guide research. Here, I suggest a list of six such concepts before also arguing, in conclusion, that studies of surveillance culture should also be critical. The following list is far from comprehensive; it is more suggestive, indicative. It is meant to offer some clues about cultures of surveillance, and to stimulate critical reflection. Concepts and theories are only useful if they aid our understanding and so I share some that I

find illuminating. I expand on these in my recent book, where a fuller discussion may be found.[13]

I start with the notion of *liquid surveillance*, acknowledging my debt to Zygmunt Bauman's rich ideas. We did write together on this topic, but the liquidity theorem itself was proposed by him long before.[14] Like many other features of contemporary societies, that once seemed more solid, surveillance has become increasingly fluid, hard to pin down. And of course, some common factors drive this, such as the broader mobility of capital, the flexibility of work and the digital information infrastructures that in no small part enable these trends. Gilles Deleuze offered some early insights here, suggesting that surveillance was coming to resemble less a fixed, tree-like structure and more, a rhizome, a creeping plant with constantly reproducing underground roots. And this fed into Haggerty and Ericson's now classic analysis of the 'surveillant assemblage' that captures flows of body-data and creates highly mobile data doubles.[15]

The liquid metaphor links with my second concept, the notion of *immersion*. We are submerged in surveillance today. It is the stream in which we swim; it is unavoidable. The pop culture gloss is the UK's Channel Four reality show, *Hunted*, in which participants try to go to ground, remaining beyond the reach of ubiquitous surveillance — and it is extremely difficult. But the daily reality has also become clear to many, even without watching reality show thrillers! As so-called smart cities and the internet-of-things develop, they take the immersion deeper. Data-driven approaches to urban governance, for example, mean that data are extracted at every conceivable point, using systems such as wearable technologies, smart devices, sensors, biometric verification. What once seemed trivial and inconsequential, the 'data exhaust' from multiple systems, now contributes to the tracing and tracking of everyday activities of all kinds.

It is in part the growing fluidity of and immersion in surveillance that enables surveillance culture to emerge. If Bauman worried about the dissolution of long-term social bonds as evidence of liquid modernity, then these are even more palpable in the pulsing relations of social media in particular, and the internet in general. Analysts such as Sherry Turkle and, especially, Shoshana Zuboff make those connections clearer in discussing surveillance.[16] The latter sees the corrosive impact of surveillance capitalism on relationships of trust while the former notes — in *Alone Together* — how performance is a key element of social media activity. This feature is in turn encouraged

by what Bauman sees as the increasingly competitive — and socially corrosive — character of liquid modernity.

Indeed, *performance* is the third concept that I find helpful in considering surveillance culture. If panoptic surveillance was the fixed form of surveillance that fascinated Foucault, performative surveillance is at the core of today's cultures of surveillance. And this, not only in the relatively obvious realm of online activities, but also in sites of security surveillance. Airport security, for instance, is often described as 'theater,' but some of the players are the would-be passengers who perform for the agents that check their documents and bags. Even in the days of early web-cams, Hille Koskela noted the ways in which young people in particular would use their computers to perform for an audience, a practice they found empowering.[17] This important theme is taken up, for example, by Anders Albrechtslund, Kirstie Ball and Bernard Harcourt.[18]

Clearly, many online participants find performing to be empowering. At the same time, there is little doubt that several kinds of power relations are involved in performative surveillance. Power relations exist at everything from surveillance at an immediate and interpersonal level[19] right through to those of corporate and government surveillance at a global scale. Such *power relations* — my fourth concept — are highly complex and hard to unravel, especially as they are often in a mutual relation with each other. When commentators and critics argue that empowerment is conferred by surveillance — enjoying the publicity and attention obtained through 'likes' and a growing band of 'followers' — they may also be unintentionally missing or downplaying the ways in which those behaviours are shaped by the structure of the platforms themselves. In other words, while the power of the gaze within contemporary surveillance culture is not in question, how it is manifest is not as easily discernable.

This raises a fifth issue, of *compliance*. Are those who find enjoyment and satisfaction in participating simply succumbing to the sirens of platform designers? It is easy to claim that the quest of consumer convenience lies behind the relative lack of resistance to, and even the apparent enthusiasm for at least some aspects of today's surveillance. This issue has been debated at length as, for example, the 'privacy paradox.' It was referred to earlier in the suggestion that internet users might say they care about their privacy while simultaneously engaging in practices that erode or destroy it. Part of the problem, of course, is that 'privacy' persists in popular parlance as the primary 'antidote' to surveillance when in fact the concept is itself undergoing radical change

as surveillance and its cultures mutate in an era of digital immersion and platform capitalism.

Within such platform capitalism, there are deep and deliberate strategies for cultivating compliance, as Shoshana Zuboff and others have argued.[20] The best-known social media platforms are built to addict users and to shape behaviours. Much more research needs to be done before clear evidence about such processes becomes available. But the combination of systems crafted to create compliance and the relative dearth of meaningful oversight and regulation — even in the European Union — means that compliance is all-too-easy. The social factors enabling compliance are one of the most interesting and important phenomena within today's culture of surveillance.

Of course, surveillance culture does not come pre-packaged or even fully formed. In a liquid world especially, ongoing flux is to be expected. Linked closely with compliance, the question of how today's novelty becomes tomorrow's normal is another process requiring special attention. *Normalization*, the sixth concept, focuses attention on this. It is not a new problem in the history of the social and cultural reception of and resistance to technology and it is a peculiarly difficult one to predict. Technological products often start life as novelties that excite attention or spark desire for the object but that then become increasingly 'natural,' taken-for-granted. The smartphone is one and — perhaps even more so — the tablet, especially the iPad, is another. Each had no real precursor but quickly became popular and then commonplace. Understanding surveillance culture requires that processes of achieving normality be explored, especially when the item in question — say, a location-based app — is highly surveillant.

4_An Ethical Political Turn?

Some studies of surveillance cultures, in their understandable and welcome attempt to indicate that there are other ways of grasping surveillance than the conventional, negative critique, stress the apparently innocent activities of those who enjoy the surveillant gaze, finding fun and even empowerment there. While I believe that it is essential that surveillance studies get to grips with the elements of surveillance culture that embrace, enjoy and profit personally from the gaze, this does not mean that such studies should spurn a critical approach. If cultures are about the imaginaries by which society and our place in it are understood, and if these shade into actual surveillance practices

that contribute to ongoing surveillance of various kinds, then it is important to indicate the consequences of such cultural engagement.

User-generated surveillance is fuelled in part by platform design. Platforms are planned to pull people back, again and again, engineering addictions. But such surveillance is also enabled by the understandable and commonplace craving for recognition by others, now supplied increasingly online with a few clicks. As so often, especially when discussing the social dimensions of technologies, it is clear that a profound ambiguity pervades the platforms in particular. The very process of understanding such ambiguity is a potential way to open a door to alternative ways forward. If we take Raymond Williams' analysis of modern culture as a springboard, this becomes clearer. He spoke of different tendencies within the cultures that he observed in the mid-twentieth century.

First is the dominant culture, which in the world of surveillance today is, understandably, shaped largely by the platforms that predominate, along with other corporations that aspire to operate in similar ways, and government organizations and others that might benefit from new modes of data analysis.[21] While there is some volatility within the platforms such that users move between them, abandoning one or another when it seems not to work to their advantage, the sheer fact of their success indicates that they engage large sectors of given national populations. Two-thirds of American adults use Facebook, for instance, while younger people are divided between Instagram and Snapchat.[22] Meanwhile nearly three-quarters of US adults use an online, on-demand service such as ride-hailing or home-sharing.[23]

However, this is far from a complete picture. Many, especially younger users, are all-too aware of the slippery, liquid style of surveillance and find agile ways of second-guessing or circumventing what is happening. This, along with those attempting to create new, more democratically-oriented platforms for both social media and the wider digital economy, suggests that Williams' category of 'emergent' elements in culture are evident in the digital realm.[24] It may be, too, that the very rise of increasingly undemocratic and corporate practice-led modes of surveillance may generate more efforts to evade or undermine them and to seek alternatives to them, especially among the tech-savvy. Online behaviour itself makes a difference to the success of surveillance strategies and the media themselves could prompt change.[25]

However, Williams has one other category of culture; its residual forms. Some users are more hesitant, dubious about the much-lauded virtues of social media use, just as they might doubt the efficacy of CCTV in city streets or security checks at the airport. Such skepticism may lead users to distance themselves from prominent patterns of social media and digital economy use, and to promote instead more traditional forms of communication. Though this might suggest a backward-looking or nostalgic approach, this is not a necessary conclusion. It may be wise. Indeed, within such cultural currents people may equally seek for alternatives, but not ones that depend on data-hyped or democracy-spurning practices.

Despite what might seem to be uncertainties about the burgeoning cultures of surveillance, the *Black Mirror* future is far from inevitable. Cultures, which are always in some degree of flux, can change direction, especially when participants start to see themselves in the 'mirror' of such popular cultural critiques. Or even when they recognize how they are implicated in more academic analyses such as this brief article. Indeed, the journey has already begun, with anything from social media fasts to the development of more democratically-organized platforms. The potential for alternatives is growing.

_Endnotes

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2 See e.g. Colin J. Bennett, Kevin D. Haggerty, David Lyon, and Valerie Steeves, eds., *Transparent Lives: Surveillance in Canada* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2014).

3 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Progress Publishers, 2018).

4 Logjects are discussed in Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011).

5 See Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Progress Publishers, 2018).

6 See e.g. Joshua Meyrowitz, "We Liked to Watch: Television as a Progenitor of the Surveillance Society," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625.1 (2009): 32–48.

7 José van Dijck, "Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology," in *Surveillance & Society* 12.2 (2014): 197–208.

8 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

9 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

[10] Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Knopf, 2013). I devoted a chapter of The Culture of Surveillance to an analysis of The Circle, suggesting that it is a candidate to replace Nineteen-Eighty-Four and a fine fictional depiction of surveillance culture.

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[12] Virginia Pignagnoli, "Surveillance in Postmodern American Fiction: Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* and Gary Steyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*," in *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, eds. Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackey (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 151–167.

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[16] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Shoshana Zuboff, "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization," in *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015), 75–89.

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[19] Alice Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life," in *Surveillance & Society* 9.4 (2012): 378–393.

[20] Shoshana Zuboff, "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization," in *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015): 75–89.

[21] See David Lyon, "Surveillance, Snowden and Big Data," in *Big Data & Society* 1.2 (2014): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951714541861>.

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[23] <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/05/19/the-new-digital-economy>

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