| Essay | **Seeing Surveillance:** Twenty Years of *Surveillance & Society* |

Pete Fussey

University of Essex, UK
pfussey@essex.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reflects on the development of surveillance studies over the twenty years since the first publication *of Surveillance & Society*. It starts by pointing to key contextual changes that have provided fertile ground for surveillance-focused analysis and, in turn, shaped the emphasis of the field. The main body of the paper is organised over three (temporal) frames: origins of the field, present considerations, and future concerns. In doing so, attention is given to the reproduction, development, and innovation of intellectual knowledge in the context of surveillance studies.

Introduction

The establishment of the journal *Surveillance & Society* and the growth of the wider surveillance-focused academic community coincided with a series of dramatic societal changes. Driven by strengthening currents of globalisation, the same period witnessed an unprecedented digitisation and datafication of everyday life, one extending beyond the privileged regions of the global north. Conceived on the metaphorical eve of 9/11, at a time Bigo (2000) presciently warned of collapsing distinctions between "internal" and "external" security threats, surveillance studies expanded in parallel with the internationalisation of political violence and "global war" on terrorism. At the same time, step changes in biometric technologies have brought unprecedented surveillance capabilities, ones that, as Amoore (2014: 95) argues, "exterioriz[e the] intimate and corporeal elements of life itself" and hold profound implications for ascertaining the physical boundaries of the human body. Other concomitant changes involve the elasticity of social processes across time and space. Here, the internationalisation of labour relations and increasing remoteness of work, further catalysed by global pandemic, reflect an acceleration of Giddens' (1991) "time-space distanciation" of stretched social relations over time and space. They also perhaps complete Marx's fatalist warnings over worker alienation. While Giddens (1991) and others emphasised the global extension of social relations, a parallel, perhaps paradoxical, process also played out, one of equal interest to surveillance studies scholars: a time-space compression. Among other themes, just-in-time supply chain logistics and Taylorist economics became accelerated by innovations in AI and powerful computational processing. These developments have been further optimised through the increased online visibility of our (consumer and other) desires, their scrutiny by powerful data analytics tools, and resultant creation of finely tailored marketing to pique our cravings. These propinquities—between time and space and between desire and its gratification—hold a deep relationship with digital technologies and the surveillance capabilities they bring. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that these five themes—digitalisation and datafication, security, the body, labour, and commerce—have become staple concerns in the surveillance studies canon.

How We Got Here

The healthy state of surveillance studies today owes much to a core group of people that brought the disparate elements of the discipline together and drove it forward. Importantly, this was achieved not only through vital intellectual contributions that facilitated the understanding of complex technologies and its implications, but was also backed up with a commitment to developing this academic community.

My own encounter with the field started in the late 1990s when, among the sparse commentary that did exist, two texts stood out: Gary Marx's (1989) *Undercover* and David Lyon's (1994) *The Electronic Eye*. Both remain relevant today, not least through the analysis of police tech adoption (Marx 1989) and the intellectual reframing of surveillance tools that were becoming increasingly ubiquitous (Lyon 1994). Lyon's two follow up contributions, produced on either side of the journal's launch, *Surveillance Society* (2001) and *Surveillance and Social Sorting* (2003), were so influential that parts of their phrasing have become staple features of the surveillance studies lexicon. What is also remarkable about these contributions is not only their major achievement of offering intellectual tools for navigating a formerly uncharted field but also that both authors were enormously generous in supporting the burgeoning scholarship of others (albeit, it has to be said, in rather different ways!). Many scholars, myself included, have directly benefitted from the energetic willingness to engage, selfless dedication of time, and preparedness to share insights that Lyon and Marx had cultivated over decades. This generosity also set a tone, one that has sustained through the growth of surveillance studies. It may be stretching the metaphor to say this tone has brought harmony to the field, but it unarguably resonates in the continued commitment of academics to maintaining the supportive environment that allows the field of surveillance studies to flourish.

First published in 2002, the journal emerged from a workshop hosted by Clive Norris at the University of Hull, England, in spring 2000. Papers from Roy Boyne on post-panopticism, Stephen Graham on digital exclusion, Kirstie Ball on "elements of surveillance," and David Lyon on surveillance society, among others, traced the contours of an emerging field. As a PhD student, I also met all five founding editors, Clive Norris, Kirstie Ball, David Murakami Wood, David Lyon and Stephen Graham, the same morning, and during the post-workshop drinks the idea of the journal took form. (In one of my poorer academic decisions, I skipped this seminal meeting in favour of a night out with friends in nearby Sheffield.) The journal later became incorporated as a component of a new organisation, the Surveillance Studies Network (SSN), established later in 2006. SSN would not only "own" the journal but, also, due to its charitable status, protect its editors from personal liability for the journal's content. That the journal grew under the aegis of a charity and made entirely open access from the beginning also revealed an ethos that exerts a progressive and positive influence to this day. The "charitable objects" of SSN—the framework that sets out the legal conditions of how charitable companies operate under UK law—express the purpose of SSN as,

> [T]he advancement of education for the public benefit by the promotion of the study of surveillance as a facet of contemporary social and technological change and its consequences for individuals, groups, organisations, nations and regions by:
>
> 4.1 supporting and promoting the free exchange of academic information about surveillance across academic disciplines and cultures;
>
> 4.2 promoting learning and the sharing of knowledge about surveillance between scholars, students, organisations and the public world-wide;
>
> 4.3 owning and publishing a journal known as Surveillance and Society and other online resources devoted to the publication of communications which advance knowledge concerning the study of surveillance and society. (Surveillance Studies Network 2006)

This document and the events surrounding it are remarkable for several reasons. The first is how this commitment to sharing learning and making it free for all was such a radical contrast to the rapid

corporatisation of British academia at the time. Such knowledge could have easily been monetised but, purposefully, was not.

This generosity extended further. The charitable status of SSN necessarily meant the continued sustainability of both the organisation and the journal relied solely on the unpaid labour, dedication, and selfless time commitment of these early advocates. Success has many parents, but two contributions particularly stand out. One is David Murakami Wood's accomplishment in securing Canadian research council funding to provide ongoing financial support for the journal, an action that not only secured its viability but also was critical to shaping the form, reach, and quality of today's publication. The other was Kirstie Ball's colossal efforts in establishing, professionalising, and driving forward the Surveillance Studies Network. As a "charitable company," SSN was beholden to both charitable and company UK legal structures. Its viability therefore relied on servicing two of the labyrinthian auditing, reporting, and accounting measures that British public administration specialises in. The scale of these activities and the enormous efforts involved were revealed to me during my own tenure as SSN co-director from 2013, a task made immeasurably easier by the professional organisational structures already laid. Also important to recognise is how such invisible labour continues to sustain the network and support the surveillance studies community. The biennial SSN conference, an event that since 2004 has furnished the journal with a constant stream of contributions, relies on such efforts. Among numerous other examples, Daniel Trottier stands out as deserving particular recognition and credit for his tireless work on the three conferences that spanned my involvement with SSN. Reflecting on the energy of these foundational activities generates questions over the condition of surveillance studies today and its future directions.

From the Present to the Future?

Much has been made of the relentless digitisation and datafication of everyday life. Amid such processes, surveillance-focused scholarship has perhaps never been more relevant. Added to this is how attempts to understand and address many of today's issues of urgent societal and planetary concern implicate digital technology and digitised data. These include matters of climate change, global pandemic monitoring, accelerating inequality, growing societal polarisation, insecurity, escalating military conflicts replete with semi-autonomous lethal weaponry, the rise of synthetic media, and the complex digitisation of life itself. Such issues often gain complexity through increasing uses of digital technology to understand the diagnosis and prognosis of such issues. In a twenty-first-century echo of Weber's fatalism, knowledge about profound issues of global consequence becomes more specialised. The need for researchers to understand these dynamics and complex processes, evidence their implications, and translate esoteric knowledge to produce meaningful analysis has arguably never been more important. In the current climate of increasing polarisation, this intellectual labour is particularly vital for surfacing the harms of such developments and the voices of those exposed and vulnerable to them.

As the range of topics, disciplines, and conceptual vocabularies that continue to pour into enquiries of surveillance increase, it becomes more difficult to define a coherent and singular direction of how the field may develop. Nevertheless, current approaches to understanding digital society may be seen as a complex, and often paradoxical, assortment of intellectual dynamism and stasis. Among these understandings are at least three discernible tendencies.

Eternal Return

The mainstreaming of surveillance concerns has unarguable and colossal benefits. It also comes with disadvantages. Among these is the repeated application of tired and outdated framings of surveillance that constitute an intellectual stasis. Commonly these have involved the (literarily inaccurate) Orwellian narrative and (the over literal) application of Foucault's panopticon. The shortcomings of the latter were comprehensively addressed by Stan Cohen's (1985) perplexingly overlooked analysis of nearly forty years ago. They were also highlighted by Foucault (2007) himself before the ink had dried on English translations of *Discipline and Punish*. Despite this, the metaphor persists with the regular and now tedious application

of the "opticon" suffix. Addressing this issue with refreshing forthrightness, Haggerty (2006) spoke for many with his exasperated statement of having "enough" of the metaphor. Yet Haggerty's (2006) frustration also contained an elegant point: a certain irony exists in the way the panopticon concept has become an all-encompassing and ubiquitous idea that modifies an entire intellectual climate.

Other approaches include the continued application of tired antagonistic binaries. These include the legally illiterate "nothing to fear, nothing to hide" and "liberty versus security" framings. More recently, the growth of AI-driven assistance through public sector decision-making has brought a new justificatory logic, one similarly framed in binary terms: that such computational logics provide "decision support" rather than constituting "decision-makers," an argument either disingenuous or naïve to the basic workings of human psychology.

While such arguments have become easy to knock down, the relevance of other framings are more complex. For example, the theme of computational logics plays out in intricate ways. Among these commentaries, many exhibit varying degrees of a utopian or dystopian character. While oppositional, they retain shared conceptual limitations. These include both their inaccuracy and technological determinism in the assumption that technology will assert transformative effects by virtue of its existence. Indeed, this is a debate that can be traced back to at least 1867 when, buried deep in the pages of *Capital*, Marx (1970 [1867]: 422) observed that, "it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workmen." While debate over technological determinism persist, more pertinent questions perhaps arise over technological *essentialism*. For example, as radical constructivists such as Grint and Woolgar (1997) argue in their pointed critique of actor network theory, debates concerning the degree to which objects are considered to hold (essential) properties outside of these actor network relationships are far from resolved.

Rediscovery and Reinvention

A second tendency involves reconsideration of the value to be found in existing approaches. Around the same time surveillance studies was coalescing into its recognisable form, the psychoanalyst and critic of her grandfather's famous gospel Sophie Freud (1998) wrote a particularly insightful essay. Considering the legacy of psychoanalysis and its grand narratives in a post-modern world, Freud (1998) wrote elegantly on how, in rummaging in the dust of seemingly tired and outdated concepts, one may also find pioneering insights of enormous, continued, relevance. While her observations focused on trending end-of-the-century psychoanalytic concepts—such as the shift from the unitary to the divided self, the rise of constructivism, and advances in neurophysiological brain research—her essay also serves as a profound commentary on the memory and replacement of knowledge. Invoking a (somewhat appropriately) traditional idiom, she cautions against "throwing the baby out with the bathwater."

At a time when rapid advances in technology grab our attention and genuinely novel conceptual insights develop apace, Freud's (1998) warning may serve as good advice: to remember the theoretical advances within surveillance studies, to guard against excessive recency bias, and to find new theoretical value in commonly discarded ideas.

For example, while the shortcomings of top-down surveillance narratives have been extensively laid out, it is important to recognise amid all the attention to "surveillance capitalism" that the harms of state surveillance are not overlooked. This is particularly relevant in the context of continually evolving state–commercial surveillance imbrications. Elsewhere, the unhelpful shadow of panopticism has concealed other theoretical offerings from Foucault's prolific contribution. For example, Bigo's (2008) observation of Foucault's concept of security as "a field left fallow" attends to a concept that has much to say on the delineation of population flows in today's advanced digital society. Security in this sense also served as preparation for Foucault's major project on governmentality that, while often erroneously synonymised with neo-liberalism (Collier 2009), offers conceptual tools to comprehend increasingly complex dispositifs of power. Tracing the sequence of his career further, the conceptual value brought by emphasis on aggregated population management above the level of the state, contained in Foucault's ideas of biopolitics, has yet to

be exhausted by surveillance scholars. Tracing Freud's thought through from above, the contemporary relevance drawn from novel analysis of longstanding ideas is articulated in Browne's (2015) analysis of "racializing surveillance." Here, her attention to Bentham's journey to Russia on a boat that, literally, concealed slaves below deck articulated how, figuratively, such racialised dynamics were correspondingly overlooked in his intellectual life and the ideas it influenced.

Similar dynamics resonate with other theoretical staples in surveillance studies. The landmark concept of the "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) has proved vital in apprehending how diverse, and often latent, surveillance processes integrate and become magnetised towards specific objects and subjects. Yet francophone readings of the Deleuze and Guatarri's (1987) original rendering of the concept, of *agencement*, offer wider interpretations, ones that emphasise the implications of such arrangements: the *emergence* (Phillips 2006). Indeed, and in a further connection between the different theoretical foundations of surveillance studies, Deleuze (1988) himself claimed that emergence was Foucault's great unfinished project, one he intended to complete had he not died so prematurely.

This reclamation of ideas has perhaps been demonstrated most effectively by Latour's (2002) exhumation of Gabriel Tarde's ideas. Indeed, the latter's emphasis on aggregates and multiple social orders appear to hold particular relevance for the digital age. Elsewhere, recent attention by surveillance scholars to other foundational figures in sociology has proved particularly valuable. For example, recent work by Browne (2015) and Monahan (2022) has emphasised how deeper insights into the surveillance of minoritised groups can be found through the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. The same could be said for the continued relevance of other often overlooked African American sociologists, such as Monroe Nathan Work, who wrote extensively on racial disparities in the US justice system more than a century ago.

Innovations in Technology and Thought

Innovative and exciting technological developments often invite innovative and dynamic ways of thinking about them. Yet deciphering the impact of technology is conditioned by many elements. The urge for "hot takes" demanded by the quickening speed in which digital innovations hit the market, and the pressures on academics to provide responsive commentaries and to "stay relevant," often invites more descriptive analyses. At stake here is the role of robust empirically informed evidence of how these technologies play out in their socio-technical settings. A further enduring challenge is the often-stated disparity between accelerating technological developments and our ability to understand their implications and to meaningfully regulate them.

In the context of security and law enforcement, informed understandings gain importance in jurisdictions where advanced surveillance technologies are routinely, and casually, experimented on citizens. While such developments are, of course, nothing new in authoritarian contexts, a current mix of inexpensive consumer electronics and cheap political populism have made this tension more acute and widespread. In England and Wales, the jurisdiction of *Surveillance & Society's* conception, for example, wilful attempts by a Brexit emboldened government to dismantle scant existing surveillance oversight and accountability mechanisms are underway. Such attempts are evidenced by the 2022/2023 passage of the *Digital Protection and Digital Information Bill*, a value-laden mechanism that implies all biometrics other than DNA are unworthy of meaningful oversight and myopically considers surveillance harms reducible to issues of data protection. This widening gap—between digital innovation and meaningful oversight and regulation—is an interstitial space where much can happen: licentious uses of surveillance, casual attributions of suspicion, unaudited decision-making and unchecked biases to name a few.

Beyond this, current applications of advanced surveillance technology generate subtle yet profound shifts in human discretion, trust, and the ways suspicion is constructed. Following traces of investment in the biometrics and other surveillance industries—which significantly emphasise facial and behavioural biometrics—demonstrates how these concerns are set to resonate for many years to come. Beyond this, unknown technological futures await. These are likely to bring new challenges of decipherability. As Rouvroy (2015) describes, we are witnessing "the rationalisation of the world based on something not

instantly understandable by human beings… the categories through which we understand the world, are not created by ourselves." Even charting today's certainties brings considerable intellectual challenges. Current developments of quantum and, separately, edge computing respectively bring a scale and connectivity to computational power. These may easily translate into surveillance capabilities that dwarf those we are exposed to today.

Concluding Thoughts

The current moment in surveillance studies holds promise for its continued relevance but there are perhaps three components vital to this enterprise: intellectual innovation that also maintains sufficient reflexivity, continued commitment to generating robust empirical evidence of digital surveillance outcomes, and crucially, a reappraisal of surveillance studies vernacular. Regarding the latter, for example, notions of creep remain important for understanding professed purpose limitation and proportionality of surveillance measures. However, the intended interoperability of emerging technologies and their inherent promiscuity renders this concept redundant in some contexts.

Potential also exists for reinvigoration of the field. At the recent biennial Surveillance Studies Network conference in Rotterdam, David Murakami Wood observed what he felt was a "changing of the guard," and remarked on how positive it was to see new scholars, novel theoretical positions, and a diversifying range of concerns renewing a field. Among many possible candidates to mention were impressive contributions such as those from Azadeh Akbari and Ana Valdivia that brought fresh insights into the surveillance of mobilities and at borders. With human movements continually animated by geopolitical crisis and accelerated by climate-induced insecurities and widening inequalities, such analyses hold clear ongoing significance.

However, 20 years is a long time in an intellectual life. It is also plenty of time for the enthusiasm of novel pursuits to wane, the evangelism of converts to ebb, and for disciplinary furrows to deepen. As issues of digital surveillance become mainstreamed across public and political discourse, it remains important they become reflected in a wider range of academic commentaries; an intellectual agility to keep pace with the speed of digital innovation. Now, more than ever, do analyses of surveillance require dialogue with other fields. Positioning surveillance studies as a rendezvous point between these, one that acknowledges, learns from, and reciprocates is now more important than ever before.

References

Amoore, Louise. 2014. *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security beyond Probability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bigo, Didier. 2000. When Two Become One: Internal and External Securitisations in Europe. In *International Relations Theory and The Politics of European Integration*, edited by Morten Kelstrup and Michael Williams, 171–204. London: Routledge.
———. 2008. Security: A Field Left Fallow. In *Foucault on Politics, Security and War*, edited by Mitchell Dillon and Andrew Neal, 93–114. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Cohen, Stanley. 1985. *Visions of Social Control*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Collier, Stephen J. 2009. Topologies of Power: Foucault's Analysis of Political Government beyond "Governmentality." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (6): 78–108.
Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Foucault*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Freud, Sophie. 1998. The Baby and the Bathwater: Some Thoughts on Freud as a Postmodernist. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 79 (5): 455–464.
Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Grint, Keith, and Steve Woolgar. 1997. *The Machine at Work: Technology, Work and Organization*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell.
Haggerty, Kevin D. 2006. Tear Down the Walls: On Demolishing the Panopticon. In *Theorizing Surveillance*, edited by in David Lyon, 37–59. Cullompton, UK: Willan.
Haggerty, Kevin D., and Richard V. Ericson, R. 2000. The Surveillant Assemblage. *British Journal of Sociology* 51 (4): 605–622.

Latour, Bruno. 2002. Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social. In *The Social in Question. New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, edited by Patrick Joyce, 117–132. London: Routledge.

Lyon, David. 1994. *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of the Surveillance Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Lyon, David. 2001. *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Lyon, David. 2003. Surveillance as Social Sorting: Computer Codes and Mobile Bodies. In *Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination*, edited by David Lyon, 27–44. London: Routledge.

Marx, Karl. 1970 (1867). *Capital, Volume 1*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Marx, Gary T. 1988. *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Monahan, Torin. 2022. *Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Phillips, John W.P. 2006. Agencement/Assemblage. *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2–3): 108–109.

Rouvroy, Antoinette. 2015. All Watched Over by Algorithms. Presented at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, January 29. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nPJbC1cPTE.

Surveillance Studies Network. 2006. Surveillance Studies Network Memorandum of Association. Unpublished legal document.