NYU Press

Chapter Title: Surveillance

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Book Title: Keywords for Media Studies

Book Editor(s): Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray

Published by: NYU Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gk08zz.64

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Surveillance

Kelly Gates

Surveillance literally means "watching over" and has a string of related associations—monitoring, tracking, observing, examining, regulating, controlling, gathering data, and invading privacy. The word is derived from the French term *veiller* and the Latin *vigilare*. It probably first appeared in the early nineteenth century in administrative reports, such as an 1807 document "Draft decree containing regulation for the maintenance and surveillance of the banks of the Rhine," and an 1812 document "Draft decree on surveillance, organization, administration, accounting, police and discipline of French Theatre" (both French-language documents located using the Google Books search engine). Google Books Ngram Viewer, an imperfect tool that measures the appearance of words and phrases in books printed since 1500, shows a sharp increase in the use of the word "surveillance" in English-language texts beginning in the 1960s. Writing in the early 1970s, a prominent sociologist of bureaucracy defined surveillance as "any form of systematic attention to whether rules are obeyed, to who obeys and who does not, and to how those who deviate can be located and sanctioned" (Rule 1973, 40). The term implies efforts to govern or control the activities of individuals under observation, and in this sense always signifies a power relationship. It is most often associated with preventing certain behaviors, but it can also connote efforts to encourage, enjoin, or even manipulate people into taking certain actions or conducting themselves in a particular manner. The term is sometimes used in reference to the monitoring of things like plant life, insects, animals, weather, viruses, and machines, but such uses tend to neutralize its political valence and make it synonymous with "observation." While this usage is correct in a literal sense, it robs the word itself of some of its signifying power.

The figure most closely associated with exploding our thinking about surveillance is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault detailed the principle of continuous surveillance designed into the panoptic architectural form envisioned by the English utilitarian social reformer Jeremy Bentham. The figure of the panoptic prison and the general principle of panopticism have become commonplace conceptual tools for making sense of the complex forms and effects that "watching over" has taken over the period of modern state formation. While Foucault used the panoptic principle to explain the rise of a historically specific set of disciplinary institutions (prisons, hospitals, schools, insane asylums), the concept has been extended to explain the myriad ways in which all manner of physical spaces and technical systems are designed to induce in individuals a state of continuous visibility and vigilance, from modern urban areas and shopping centers to the Internet and social media.

Today, the term "surveillance" is commonly associated with media artifacts like video cameras and camera-embedded devices, microphones, sensors, biometrics, drones, satellites, smartphones apps, and social media platforms. It is partly for this reason that the concept and its material manifestations have become objects of interest to the field of critical media studies: *surveillance* technologies are *media* technologies, and networked digital media are essentially *surveillant media*. "Surveillance" takes both representational and nonrepresentational forms—it can signify either visual

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or data-oriented forms of monitoring, or "dataveillance" (Clarke 1994). In fact, this conceptual distinction has become increasingly difficult to sustain along with the digitization of visual media. Surveillance now encompasses technologies, formats, practices, and protocols for reproducing and analyzing images, sounds, texts, and transaction-generated and other forms of data. It is used to refer to a wide range of monitoring and tracking systems that are structural features of information infrastructures, like the Internet, the Global Positioning System (GPS), and other networks that support data transfer across interconnected computers and electronic devices. Implied in the term are operations of widely varying scales, from home surveillance to satellite-supported military command-and-control systems. It is also used as a sweeping definition for present social conditions, as in "the surveillance society" (Lyon 2001), a historical phase seen as emerging contemporaneously with the spread of both computerization and closed-circuit television or video monitoring systems.

The term "surveillance" is typically associated with the main activities of the state and state security agencies, but systems designed for monitoring individuals and groups are also defining features of private security, labor management, and consumer research. Private companies engage in a wide range of activities properly termed surveillance, from visually watching over privatized shopping and work spaces for security purposes to monitoring employee conduct and productivity and gathering and analyzing data on customers. The market research industry employs a vast surveillance apparatus that includes everything from point-of-sale systems to social media platforms, experiments with new forms of emotion measurement using technologies like neuroimaging, automated facial expression recognition, and computational linguistics for "sentiment analysis" of text-based media. Global IT companies like Google and Facebook operate enormous monitoring, tracking, and analytic systems, their server farms housing petabytes of data on the online activities and expressions of hundreds of millions of Internet users across the planet.

The significance of the term "surveillance" clearly extends beyond the denotative meaning of "watching over" to encompass a great deal of complex connotations. Just as there is a blurry distinction between visual surveillance and "dataveillance," it is impossible to draw a clear line between state and private-sector forms of surveillance. Federal government and local law enforcement agencies alike contract with private security companies to deploy and operate their surveillance systems. The US National Security Agency likewise relies centrally on government contractors like Booz Allen Hamilton for its mass data collection activities, as well as telecommunications providers like AT&T and Verizon (as revealed by the whistle-blower Edward Snowden, a name now intimately tied to the term "surveillance," and himself a former employee of both Booz Allen and the Central Intelligence Agency). Personal data compiled and processed for commercial purposes can be and have been repurposed and mined for state security reasons. In fact, what characterizes surveillance in late capitalist societies is the complex network of state and private actors involved in system development, monitoring operations, data collection, and analytics. It is now common to encounter references to a "surveillance-industrial complex," an assemblage so vast and sprawling that no one—not even those who hold leadership positions within its organizational structures—knows the full extent of its reach. Much like the "military-industrial complex," a complex set of social and political-economic forces are seen as driving the development of this expansive "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000), from the post-9/11 obsession with security to the rise of neoliberalism.

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The range of meanings associated with the term "surveillance" also reflects the fact that surveillance technologies and practices are fully integrated with our cultural imaginaries and present-day "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977). Surveillance themes and narrative structures pervade literature, cinema, television, and visual art. The entire genre of reality TV has become a defining surveillant media form, featuring real people voluntarily laying their lives bare for the cameras. In this way, it has been argued that reality-based shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor* subtly urge viewers to enact a form of transparent subjectivity, embracing the kind of willing submission to constant monitoring necessary for the success of online economy (Andrejevic 2002, 2004). Celebratory narratives about surveillance are also found in television's fiction genres. For example, the action-drama *Person of Interest* (2011–16) depicts an artificial intelligence system known as "The Machine," which provides always accurate yet incomplete information to the show's human crime fighters. Conversely, popular culture can be a site of commentary and critique about surveillance, a place where cultural anxieties are negotiated and social implications explored. Novels like George Orwell's science fiction classic *1984*, and its social media remake *The Circle* (2013), by Dave Eggers, offer disturbing cautionary tales of life under conditions of extreme transparency. Science fiction films like *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg 2002) and *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol 1997) likewise depict sympathetic protagonists fighting against oppressive surveillance regimes. And the historical-realist drama *The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck 2006) critically reflects on the repressive monitoring operations of the East German Stasi in the 1980s.

As suggested by the prevalence of surveillance in science fiction, the term also encompasses ideas about predicting and controlling the future, ideas inflected with technologically determinist tendencies. The primary purpose of surveillance is to foresee, prepare, and control for the range of possible outcomes that could result from present actions and conditions. In recursive fashion, much of the discourse about surveillance suggests that a hypersurveillant future is itself predictable, a foregone conclusion. If such determinist beliefs shape the spectrum of possibilities for how the future is imagined in the present, it seems incumbent on critical media studies to conceptualize and interrogate surveillance in ways that destabilize the logic of inevitability implied in the term.

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