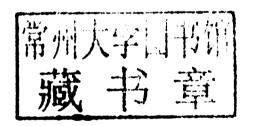# SuperVision

An Introduction to the **Surveillance Society**

John Gilliom and Torin Monahan

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THE SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY

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PREFACE

Video cameras monitor the streets and sidewalks. Cell phones record locations and messages. Facebook postings share intimate information. Credit card transactions are logged and assessed. A visit to the ATM leaves a data trail. A police officer watches the intersection. A car's onboard computers record location, performance, and driving practices.

A ten-minute errand exposes the typical person to many dimensions of surveillance. Normally they blur into the background of our daily lives—we're usually too busy doing other things to pay attention to these often silent and invisible moments of supervision. This book pushes these moments to the foreground to explore surveillance as an increasingly pervasive element of social life. Our definition of surveillance is broad: we write about everything from your cell phone to drone aircraft, from your Facebook page to antiterrorism initiatives, from your credit card to your Google searches.

In the story we tell, our lives as citizens, students, employees, and consumers are fully embedded in interactive and dynamic webs of surveillance. We'll argue that such vast and transformative changes require a complete reimagining of social life. Our primary goal is to invite readers into this reimagining by providing a crash course in the current practices of surveillance and a set of core questions that can guide the journey. To make this invitation work, we've opted to keep this book short and accessible, with a focus on topics that are relevant to most people's daily lives. We examine mechanisms of surveillance, explore contexts, ask tough questions, and move on; we're trying to give our readers the tools to understand and critically engage, and we don't aspire to have the final word.

As academic researchers, we almost always write for insiders—our colleagues who study surveillance and related issues in society and

politics. But as citizens and teachers, we've long felt the need for a book that introduces nonspecialists to the world of surveillance. Here we start in the practical context of everyday life and explore these new phenomena in ways that recognize how little we know and how much we have to learn. Because we aren't writing for insiders, we've avoided many of the formalities that can make academic writing less accessible. You can frolic in the endnotes to see the academic and journalistic works behind what we're covering, but for the most part we keep that stuff backstage to create a more enjoyable read. As a result, this book may frustrate some of our academic colleagues. Some will feel we've oversimplified complicated issues. Others may think we've omitted important locations, tactics, or implications of surveillance. And still others may long for more full-blown explorations of the theoretical and conceptual issues behind our discussions. Our response: This book wasn't written for you. It was written for our students, our friends, our neighbors, and others who might be curious about the world of surveillance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

Are You Under Surveillance?

Let's do a quick check.

Do you have any of these?

- a cell phone
- a credit or debit card
- an identification card

Do you do any of these?

- use Google, Gmail, or Facebook
- go to school
- have a job
- drive a car

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then you are under surveillance. Every one of these items, places, and activities is a key agent in the overlapping systems of watching, recording, and assessing that make up a "surveillance society."[1] These forms of supervision might take the shape of tracking your cell phone location, calls, and contact information; checking your urine for signs of drug use; or designing a personalized online ad campaign by scanning your e-mail. This book is designed to help you become aware of surveillance, teach you some tricks to deal with it, and provoke new ways of thinking about it.

Our primary audience is those who are vaguely aware that Google keeps track of things but aren't sure what they are. These readers are pretty confident that their cell phones store their locations and calls,

but they don't know how it's done, who might use it, or why anyone cares. No one has taught them to use their credit cards in ways that protect their credit ratings or even told them that credit card companies track and analyze purchasing habits. These readers' lives have included standardized tests, school and workplace ID cards, air travel, and online sites like Facebook, but they've never really thought of these things as "surveillance." And they aren't particularly concerned. They've heard people talk about the "right to privacy" and they know journalists carry on about Big Brother, but they really can't see what the big deal is. If any part of this description fits you, then you're in the right place.

The Surveillance Society

Why do we call this a surveillance society? Because virtually all significant social, institutional, or business activities in our society now involve the systematic monitoring, gathering, and analysis of information in order to make decisions, minimize risk, sort populations, and exercise power. We define surveillance as *monitoring people in order to regulate or govern their behavior*. In this book you will see countless ways that surveillance compels new scales and forms of visibility in almost every dimension of our lives. We'll be arguing that the power exercised through these new forms of vision and visibility brings new modes of governance to schools, workplaces, and society at large. This book will not advance one grand theory or argument, because the dimensions and forms of surveillance are too varied, diverse, and shifting to boil it all down to a single take. There are so many types of surveillance, in so many contexts, with so many unimagined developments yet to come that our goal cannot be to reach a definitive conclusion. We hope, rather, to create a broad awareness and raise a set of critical questions.

You've probably heard our times described as the information age or the information society. Information societies are defined by the generation, exchange, and application of data by institutions and individuals; they require communication infrastructures and databases for the functioning of financial markets, industrial production, education, energy systems, voting, communication, transportation, and more. Just try to imagine a major enterprise in your life that doesn't have a developed information management dimension. What's less obvious to most people is that information societies are necessarily surveillance societies. Read that line again: *information societies are necessarily sur-*

veillance societies. That's because organizations and individuals amass data, through electronic and other means, so they can act on it. They make decisions that influence people, that protect or punish people, that divide people into groups and shape their behavior. When information is acted on in these ways, it creates relationships of power and control—it's a form of surveillance.

Confronting Surveillance

This book spends a lot of time exploring new and emergent technologies, but we shouldn't forget that surveillance has been around for a long time. Older, less formal, less technical versions took place as people watched each other within families, small towns, schools, and religious institutions—and they still do. New forms of surveillance emerged as these institutions mutated and became less central in the face of an urbanizing, globalizing, mobile, and growing population. With the dawn of the information age and the wildfire spread of affordable computers, surveillance went high-tech and moved to the center of many dimensions of our lives.

Because of these changes, those of us living in the early decades of the twenty-first century experience a new world. Picture a simple example of the transformation: Wanda B. applies for a mortgage in a small American town sometime in the middle of the twentieth century. She's debt-free and from a well-known family. She's a deaconess at her church, has been in her current job for twenty-five years, and is known for her well-tended home and yard. The white banker turns her down because he's angry that Wanda B. is an African American woman who is a local leader in the civil rights movement. This practice, known as "economic lynching," was used to strip activists of their jobs, homes, insurance, and vehicles.

Fast-forward to 2013: Wanda B.'s granddaughter, Wanda D., is also a politically active African American woman with a tidy home. She doesn't attend church, but she has a steady job and her credit score is a stellar 822. The credit score is derived from surveillance of her credit card use, her bill-paying habits, her debt-to-income ratio, and other criteria. It does not factor in race, church attendance, or political activism. The banker has never met Wanda D., but she approves her loan application based on a couple of forms and the magic 822.

This example illustrates the rising importance of institutional sur-

veillance, data-driven decision making, and the powerful mathematics of the credit-reporting industry. But it also shows that the seemingly heartless and technocratic surveillance that shapes our times has *the potential* to be a wonderful and liberating thing. It can make it more difficult for personal power and racism to affect important decisions. Modern surveillance can also make it easier to catch dangerous criminals. It can help first responders find locations and rescue people. It can help teachers identify struggling students and help colleges, graduate programs, and employers identify qualified applicants. Contemporary surveillance programs also make sure that the advertising on your Internet browser reflects your interests, that your software updates are punctual, and that you get helpful recommendations from online businesses like Amazon.com, Gmail, Netflix, and iTunes. In all these ways, surveillance is critical in helping people, businesses, and governments do their jobs.

But plenty of other examples give a different view of surveillance. Even though Wanda D. got her loan, the credit-scoring industry can make things extra hard for most low-income and minority citizens. Because lower credit scores plague lower-income groups, which, as you no doubt know, have higher proportions of African Americans and Latinos, credit scores work as one more tool in the system that cements historical inequalities. That's because lower credit scores not only make it more difficult to get a loan; they make the loan more expensive by driving up fees and interest rates.[2] And, as you'll see later in this book, a low credit score can also make car insurance more expensive and even make it tougher to find a job or a place to live.

Along with the many stories we'll see about the clever things modern surveillance can do for us, there are stories about more troubling applications. Here are some quick examples. After the 2009 pro-democracy demonstrations in Iran, the Iranian government and cell phone giant Nokia cooperated to use cell phone records to track down and jail the movement's leaders. From 2009 to 2010, school officials in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, tapped into the remote-control camera function on school laptops to snap photographs of kids in their bedrooms. An insurance company used Facebook photos of a woman smiling to deny her disability claim for depression. And security guards and police have been known to employ video surveillance to profile people of color and to spy on young women. Some of these stories are scary, others just a

bit creepy, but they're reminders that there's more to surveillance than easy credit, rescued hikers, and well-targeted ads.

Each day, with each new technology, we grow more accustomed to the surveillance society. This will be one of our central themes. Whether we're gaming, shopping, texting, or watching TV, we're generating data for others to scrutinize in the online world. If we're driving, our cell phone, GPS, iPad, or OnStar system constantly monitors our location, while the "black boxes" in newer cars record driving behavior. At work, school, and the doctor's office, digital portfolios burst with data about our assessed characteristics, talents, and conditions. And most of us tend to like and appreciate it. Perhaps not all of these surveillance measures are of great importance on their own. But taken together, they describe important, large-scale changes in the way people and institutions operate. By the end of this book, you should have a pretty good idea of what these changes look like and mean.

The Three Big Denials

When asked your opinion of surveillance, you might say something like "I've got nothing to hide." In our experience as teachers and speakers, many people are interested in exploring the implications and politics of the surveillance society, but there's always a subset looking to shrug it off and avoid the conversation. Here's a special section for those folks.

If you get by thinking that "no one cares about little ol' me," we urge you to think again. You may live a fairly obscure life, but you're a valuable commodity to some, a security risk to others, a future customer or potential voter to still more. This isn't to say there aren't different degrees of exposure. If you're young, pay with cash, avoid a cell phone, stay off Facebook, and keep away from the health, banking, and online retail industries as well as the military and law-enforcement systems, you're going to have less of a profile. But most of us either can't or won't avoid all these types of engagement and therefore would be better off understanding how the surveillance society works.

If you *are* one of the many people who say something like "If you don't do anything wrong, you don't have anything to worry about," we think you'll have a different view when you finish this book. In the surveillance society, definitions of "wrong" shift and vary and can include things like participating in political demonstrations, having poor

health, losing your job, being young, getting old, being male, being female, or belonging to any racial or ethnic group on the planet. In short, there are so many different and conflicting definitions of *wrong* that we're all doing something wrong all the time. That's in large part because institutions are looking for different types of wrong. It's not just classics like smoking dope or shoplifting—techniques of surveillance are on the watch for any person or pattern that can present a risk. So, in the end, since each of us presents some sort of risk to some institution at some point in our lives, we're all doing something wrong. But the rise of the surveillance society also means that those things you do "right" should also worry or, better, *concern* you in the sense that you need to attend to them and be aware of your digital persona. Credit ratings need to be monitored and managed for signs of fraud or error. The same thing goes for school, health, and insurance records, in addition to the many other registries that document our lives. In these ways, we're taught to engage in a kind of self-surveillance in order to manage our data images.

Finally, if you believe that your privacy is being protected by laws and user agreements, think again. In Western Europe, you may have slightly better protection through government privacy regulations, but by and large the famous "right to privacy" is not well enforced. There are many books you can read about the ups and downs of privacy.[3] Our perspective is that in the face of rapidly advancing technology—coupled with nearly unchecked power for law enforcement, the military, and corporations all wanting to implement new technologies—the promise that the right to privacy may have once offered is being quickly outstripped.

Okay, so we've introduced you to a complex and threatening reality *and* knocked down the most popular denials and coping mechanisms. Sorry about that. But we want to be clear that you've *got* to know about this stuff. So where do we go from here?

Rethinking Surveillance

It would be easy for us to write a short, shallow book called *Big Brother and the Death of Privacy!* or *Surveillance to the Rescue! Safety, Shopping, and Savings in the New Information Economy*. We could probably sell thousands of copies and maybe even get on a few talk shows. But these simple, well-worn takes on a complicated subject don't do justice to the

intriguing contradictions of living in a surveillance society. We've been able to stay interested in surveillance for many years because there are so many things to learn and think about. It never gets old because we find ourselves in a rapidly changing world that constantly invites us to ask—and try to answer—challenging new questions.

In the struggle to ask and answer new questions, we need to abandon some of the old frameworks. For example, we believe that terms like *Big Brother* and *privacy* are out-of-date and no longer help describe the dynamic new forms of technology, power, and politics. We also believe that simplistic dichotomies mislead us: surveillance versus privacy and freedom versus security are superficial ways to structure an argument. They might make for a dramatic little debate, but they don't do much to help us think creatively about deep new issues.

The result of these obsolete terms and conventional wisdoms is that people have gotten kind of dumb when it comes to surveillance. We can watch a couple of on-air personalities have a fiery debate about privacy, security, and Big Brother and convince ourselves we've done a good job at being informed citizens. We haven't. There's *a lot* more going on here, and that's what we hope to show you. And by the way, we're not going to just invent some new words as if we have all the answers. Since we don't yet know what the "right" new vocabulary is, this book focuses on exploring this new world *and* the ideas and terms that can help us better understand it.

What's the Big Idea?

(Actually, there are several.)

Before we dive into the main part of the book, we want to briefly introduce what we consider the most important arguments or ideas. We've already hinted at some of them, but since this isn't a mystery novel, we're going to be as straightforward as possible.

The Ten Big Ideas

1. The established vocabulary and entrenched ideas like privacy and Big Brother can't do justice to our new and complex situation. These influential concepts can contribute to our dialogue, but their reign in the world of surveillance has got to end. A smarter way to think about today's surveillance begins with a fresh reckoning of the nature and

implications of a rapidly changing array of technologies and policies. It means looking at how surveillance is really used, who's using it, and how it affects our world. It means understanding surveillance as a form of power and governance woven into the fabric of our lives. Surveillance is no longer a brief intrusion or a scary idea from a movie, it's a way of life. It's *our* way of life.

2. Surveillance doesn't always come out of the dark recesses of Big Brother's evil scheming—at first glance, some types of surveillance look like fun and don't seem to threaten values like liberty, equality, or democratic governance. Most previous books about surveillance place almost complete emphasis on the negatives. There's nothing wrong with that because skepticism is an essential part of critical thinking. But there's also some enjoyable, engaging, and productive stuff going on, and we're going to explore it.

3. Picturing "big government" as the principal source of modern surveillance is wrong. Governments are important players, but most of the innovative new surveillance initiatives are coming from the corporate sector, which frequently links up with governments in a contractual relationship. We'll argue for reimagining the classic public/private divide so we can better grasp the contemporary fusion of corporate and government power.

4. Surveillance does more than just watch. Surveillance programs definitely "watch" us, although an actual visual dimension is often missing. But in watching the world, surveillance also *shapes* our "selves" by creating odd edited versions of who we are (a test score, a driving record, a credit risk) to form the basis for decisions about us. And surveillance also *makes* our world by establishing patterns of reward and punishment that guide our choices and behaviors. Goals, ideals, taboos, sanctions, rewards—*values*—are part of any surveillance program. As we orient our behavior around the values expressed through surveillance, our lives and our worlds take on new forms.

5. It is incomplete to think of surveillance *only* as something forced on an unwilling populace. It certainly is that in many places and times, but we also have to acknowledge the surveillance programs that people sign up for, support, or even do to themselves. No one ordered us to get cell phones, but when we did, we logged ourselves in to one of the best surveillance networks ever devised. No one makes us post compromising photographs or other content on social networking sites, but for

some reason we do. Our tendency to desire some types of surveillance is a fascinating dimension of the surveillance society.

6. Surveillance challenges the ways we typically think about space and time. Your credit card company can be "watching" you from half-way around the world. Your blog posting today will be a retrievable part of your life far into the future. A grade in a college course is forever. Even a simple life involves a complicated juggling of different social worlds, contexts, and people—it gets immensely more complicated when the normal boundaries of space and time erode to open each moment to the possibility of global permanence.

7. There may be a massive uncelebrated anti-surveillance move-ment formed by all the people who cheat, lie, evade, trick, or otherwise undermine surveillance programs. These activities, sometimes called "everyday resistance," are a controversial part of the politics of surveil-lance because they often fall into a gray area that is not quite crime, not quite politics, not quite honorable, but sometimes noble. In a world of ubiquitous monitoring, everyday resistance is a frequent and perhaps necessary element.

8. Systems of surveillance are often unique new expressions of power, but they join existing social patterns tied to inequalities of race, class, and gender. Sometimes new programs challenge these patterns. Other times they advance them. While something like financial surveillance may become more color-blind, surveillance at border crossings brings seemingly inevitable intensifications of race-oriented profiling.

9. As pervasive and impressive as surveillance systems are, they don't always work. Or, more accurately, they don't always produce the de-sired or promised results. Security cameras don't really prevent crime, though they can sometimes move it elsewhere or help police identify and apprehend suspects. Amazon.com shopping recommendations can be comically wrong. And a student's performance on a standard-ized test may be a horrible predictor of academic ability or success. Surveillance may not work perfectly, but people still believe in it and act on it.

10. Scientific rationalism is the dominant mentality of our time, lead-ing to an insatiable hunger for information. Because of this, organiza-tions are almost always pro-surveillance. Governments, corporations, courts, and individuals all seek information so they can make smart choices. This is in many ways the modern definition of responsible de-