

Book Review

Gary T. Marx. 2016. *Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology*. University of Chicago Press. 404 pages.

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Surveillance has thoroughly permeated all domains of our individual, communal, and global existence and yet the most basic questions, “What is surveillance? How does it work? Who is involved? What are the consequences?” continue to generate a great deal of confusion. Public discourse, public policy, and even much of the academic pursuit on the nature of surveillance is characterized by disorientation and disconnection. State security is conflated with national or communal wellbeing, military activity with policing, security with theft protection, espionage with whistle blowing, secrecy with freedom of information sharing. There is much confusion about how surveillance is related to monitoring of spread of infectious diseases, blood pressure fluctuations, bird migration, high school graduation rates, corporate labor supervision, or compliance with food and drug administration. No less, unsanctioned reading of another person’s correspondence, non-consensual filming of a social event, monitoring a sleeping infant, eavesdropping on a conversation, or observing another person’s mannerisms in a public space are also examples of surveillance. What these widely differing institutional and inter-personal practices have in common is one central element, namely, observation of individuals or groups for the purposes of extracting information about their behavior.

Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology by a veteran observer, Gary Marx, takes on the challenge of situating this expansive understanding of surveillance in its historical development which has been traced to two distinct contexts: interpersonal interactions and bureaucratization. It is possible that some version of information extraction through mutual observations of symbolic communication in inter-personal interactions may be found in most societies. Sociologist Irving Goffman was an early observer of these practices in the western culture. Similarly, early forms of bureaucratic religious and political institutions already relied on some form of note-taking, counting, and inventory of individual members’ activities and behavior. As Marx rightly emphasizes, these early practices were bound to local cultural and institutional settings and relied on observations with a naked eye.

The emergence of the nation-state, the development of technology and science, and industrialization shifted institutional practices of extracting of information about human behavior in the direction of systematization of information gathering, perfection of instruments of measurement, and invention of statistical techniques for information processing. This was largely driven by notions of institutional planning and anticipating the future. Statistical modeling of human behavior came to manufacture versions of a person which, as the book title suggests, are considered windows into that person’s soul. The book provides a variety of examples of how these bureaucratic developments in the means and technologies of extraction of personal information trickle down to the levels of interpersonal interaction, permeating and shaping interpersonal relations. For instance, with the invention of moving image, the precursor of today’s ubiquitous short circuit television camera, it became possible to bypass the requirement of standing still for a photograph so that recording a moment of another person’s life no longer required that person’s consent. These new methods and technologies of information extraction transcend the limits of human senses, protrude into personal space, and surpass the physical boundaries of the human body.

A shift from analog to digital information transmission and processing encoded writing, voice, and image into a language a computer can understand directly. This transition stimulated a burst of creativity in technologies of information extraction, means of data analysis, networks of data sharing, and new venues for digital surveillance applications. What used to be labor intensive data collection in disparate forms and localized places and times morphed into an effortless stream of data flow in real time through extensive global networks merging into centralized data bases with limitless storage capacities. To mention another interesting illustration, this one involving Martin Luther King, digital technology eliminates the need for agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation to go through the trouble of installing listening devices to monitor and control social activists. Any and every communication traveling through digital technological means is by default recorded and stored indefinitely for potential use at some future time. Through these technological progressions we are faced squarely with the central Foucauldian question of how surveillance data is related to power and how this power is exercised through institutional practices and in inter-personal relations.

Save the occasional public outcry when whistleblowers, hackers, or leakers bring these developments to public attention, we are yet to see a sustained and far reaching public discussion about the profound implications of surveillance. Ongoing transformations in technologies and techniques of information extraction seem to be accepted as something convenient,

efficient, and protective of public safety. This information tends to be accessible to those who monopolize technological means of data collection, those who pay for access, and those who exert power to gain access. Unlike individual and collective memories, digital memory has no limits and does not forget. Surveillance data is divorced from individuals from whom the information is extracted and disconnected from the collective contexts in which human behavior transpires and makes sense. Surveillance data extraction, management, and processing are delegated to algorithms. While these have become a new household word there is little understanding of ways in which algorithms are given agency for social change, that is, how they mediate our interpersonal communication and help transform our individual and community lives. There is growing empirical evidence that the legal system, considered to be the pillar of protection against abuse of surveillance is bending and often crumbling under the pressures of these transformations. In light of this, as Marx emphasizes, it is imperative to engage in robust public and academic discussions about social and ethical implications of how surveillance is shaping our notions of privacy, individualism, interpersonal trust, conduct in public spaces, and political culture.

Windows into the Soul pushes sociologists beyond “why would you want to study *that*,” steers policy makers away from the wrong question “is surveillance good or bad,” and helps the public transcend the false choice of “either security or privacy.” As it navigates the reader through the expansive parameters of the study of surveillance, the book emphasizes important nuances about concepts such as personal, private, public, sensitive, secret, or intimate, and the ethics of anonymity and publicity. The central conceptual focus and policy relevance is in analyzing surveillance in terms of the means through which information is collected, the purported purposes of these practices, and the stated intentions of the use of such data. There is a sustained emphasis on why it is important to understand how these means, goals, and ends can be abused and manipulated. The book is an invaluable resource for much needed surveillance courses in social sciences and humanities alike. For these purposes, additional materials are openly accessible on the website of the University of Chicago Press. While it unfortunately runs short on discussing important research on how surveillance practices transpire at the level of the global, the book is nevertheless sure to stimulate serious theoretical engagement with this topic and encourage detailed, systematic, and focused empirical case studies and cross-cultural comparisons of how surveillance shapes sociality.