Dialogue | Introduction: Decolonizing Surveillance Studies

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Surveillance & Society has published periodic, focused debates on surveillance-related topics since 2011. With the re-named Dialogue section, we expand our prior focus on the debate format to include other forms of curated short-form discussions among scholars on issues of importance to the surveillance studies community. In this dialogue, a selected group of participants present their ideas for decolonizing surveillance studies. The idea for this focus on decolonization within surveillance studies scholarship was sparked by the growing recognition in a number of academic fields that certain viewpoints and perspectives have long been prioritized over others, often to the exclusion of important histories, theories, and experiences offered by those whose research or perspectives have not been well represented in the larger body of academic scholarship.

Existing surveillance-related power imbalances have led to situations where “governments, technology companies, and elite multilateral organizations ... often use ... the Global South public [or other marginalized groups] ... as testbeds for innovations in technological surveillance” (Arora 2019). Recent surveillance scholarship has begun to address these issues head on, from Simone Browne’s (2015) award-winning book, *Dark Matters*, to Payal Arora’s (2019) work “Decolonizing Privacy Studies” and Virginia Eubanks’ (2017) work, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. The seven pieces published in this Dialogue section seek to examine the broader decolonizing project and propose an agenda for decolonizing surveillance studies as a field of study.

We begin with an invited and somewhat longer contribution from Arora, which seeks to “devise a decolonial pathway to improve the human condition” by examining “the complex relationship between surveillance, privacy, activism, and law at the peripheries in the Global South.”¹ As part of this project, Arora questions whether existing regulations on data processing, such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), enable activists, individuals, and communities in the Global South or whether these laws are more likely to sustain the power of social and political elites at the expense of the less powerful. Arora also criticizes the GDPR as a form of “privacy universalism”—that is, a law that may have emancipatory aims but that acts as a sort of colonizing force throughout the Global South. Building on arguments made in earlier work, Arora (2019: 369, quoted in Arora, this issue) argues that “the way in which we can decolonize privacy and surveillance studies is by ‘questioning the normative understandings of selfhood, community, and nation, juxtaposed against the territorial, ownership, and propertied notions that pervade privacy discourse.’” That is, “we need to go beyond the data-centric and individual consent framework to genuinely understand the complex relationship between surveillance, privacy, activism, and law at the peripheries in the Global South and foster dignity for all.”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations in this introduction refer to dialogue pieces in this issue.

Next, Midori Ogasawara argues for the importance of foregrounding historical narratives of colonial surveillance in the project of decolonizing surveillance studies as a field of research. As part of this argument, Ogasawara makes three primary claims. First, that researchers should moderate technological fetishism with an appreciation and understanding of “the social implications of surveillance” from a historical perspective. Second, that “mainstreaming colonial experiences is essential to getting an integrated frame for surveillance studies” and that researchers should pay more attention to colonial narratives of surveillance. Third, Ogasawara urges us to question the premise that the initial use of surveillance in colonized territories is merely the initial test of surveillance prior to subsequent adoption more broadly and to recognize more centrally that “the systematic practice of surveillance left irreversible effects in colonies: stealing agency from individuals and depriving groups of access to life opportunities.”

Similarly, Minkyu Sung directs us to engage with historically thoughtful analysis of the shared history of colonialism and surveillance. In providing an illuminating glimpse into what it would mean to decolonize South Korea’s surveillance regime, Sung interrogates “the three intersectional hegemonic forces of maintaining a surveillance regime—the triad of colonialism, anti-communism, and neo-liberalism.” Specifically, the country’s resident registration system (RRS), with a history linked to Japanese colonization, is merely a “contemporary incarnation” of colonial power. In the end, “the legitimacy of neo-liberal surveillance, unencumbered by demands for legal frameworks of informational self-determination, is embraced by the anti-privacy scheme entrenched in the colonial and anti-communism legacies that relentlessly allow state power to control and intervene in individual realms.”

In “Black Carcerality and Emancipation in Postcolonial Jamaica,” Kimberley McKinson also critiques a national identification system and links it to colonial power. By interrogating the proposed introduction of a national biometric and informational identification system in Jamaica, McKinson examines “what the Caribbean can contribute to our understandings of the possibilities of black emancipation in the present moment of global surveillance.” Building from Aurora (2016), McKinson argues that the proposed system is an example of “a clear instance of postcolonial datafication governance” and a technological tool of government power. McKinson proposes “a shift in the study of surveillance, one rooted in a politics of decolonization” that includes paying more attention to surveillance and the development of surveillance societies in the Global South, investment in critical methods of inquiry, and political commitment to valuing the concerns and experiences of people in the Global South.

Next, Karen Fang approaches the decolonizing project from an entirely different perspective, examining how three critically acclaimed novels set in modern China (*The Fat Years* [Koonchung 2013], *The Three Body Problem* [Liu 2014], and *Death of a Red Heroine* [Xiaolong 2000]) depict “surveillance technology, policy, implementation, and resistance previously associated with Western powers.” While noting the limited focus within surveillance studies on Western literature written during Britain’s imperial decline—George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ([1949] 2003) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* ([1932] 2006)—Fang argues that this narrow, Western-centric view provides “a racially and geographically limited dichotomy that neither reflects the shifting geopolitics of the twenty-first century nor imagines how wealth, power, and freedom might be decoupled within this new world order.”

In “Postcolonialism, Time, and Body-Worn Cameras,” Amanda Glasbeek, Katrin Roots, and Mariful Alam draw from their study of police body-worn camera (BWC) adoption in Canada to argue that these cameras reproduce “white settler gaze and, thus, are unable to ‘see’ the structural violence of, and continuity of, colonialism.” In a postcolonial analysis, the authors examine how the intersection of racist policing and the state-sponsored capture of real-time images of police–public interactions produces “not-seeing” rather than objective and reliable evidence. In conclusion, they argue that “BWCs can only capture colonial time, law’s imprimatur of time, so that the marginalized or colonial subject is left with ‘the problem of creating narrative frameworks in which incommensurable histories might be put in dialogue or made productively discordant’ ” (Blair 2010: 162, quoted in Glasbeek, Roots, and Alam, this issue).

Finally, in “Unsettling Aerial Surveillance,” J.D. Schnepf explores how aerial drone surveillance played a role in the protests surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota, in 2016 and 2017. From the position that “in the context of the settler-colonial nation state’s legacy of violence visited on indigenous peoples and lands ... the adoption of aerial surveillance technologies over reservation lands invites careful scrutiny.” Schnepf argues that state-led “drone surveillance technologies perpetuate a familiar settler-colonial agenda.” Beyond Standing Rock itself, aerial surveillance allows nation states to “trespass into foreign skies with impunity,” a clear example of “the State’s disregard for the atmospheric sovereignty of communities the world over.” Schnepf’s article moves us from the past to an understanding and recognition that colonial surveillance practices continue to be actively present in contemporary society.

In conclusion, it is our desire that this Dialogue section continues the important line of work that recognizes and problematizes colonial histories and practices and their continuing influence on surveillance in modern life, and that it helps kick-start additional attention to these issues in surveillance studies scholarship and research. Decolonizing surveillance studies, like any academic pursuit, is an ongoing and evolving project. The views expressed in these seven dialogue pieces present a set of normative ideas about how this project should unfold, but there is certainly much for us to learn as we move forward.

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