Book Review

Review of Trottier, Daniel, Rashid Gabdulhakov, and Qian Huang (eds.). 2020. *Introducing Vigilant Audiences*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers. 342 pp. Open-Access PDF. ISBN: 9781783749041.

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Surveillance scholars are still—to this day and despite surveillance’s growing visibility and the significant body of work that this field has produced—being asked the “so what?” question. That is, we are being questioned over the significant effects that surveillance practices have on people’s lives, with a clear insinuation that the effects are mostly absent, neutral, or benign. While surveillance scholars have offered up what can be considered “a list” of effects that these practices have on people’s lives, this list has to be constantly updated in order to encompass the variety and depth of ways in which surveillance makes a difference. Digital vigilantism, which is the main term that the book *Introducing Vigilant Audiences* centers around, is one such significant effect.

Digital vigilantism has several possible definitions, one of them being “the process whereby citizens collectively take action, in the online realm, against other citizens they feel offended by or who have opposing views about an issue” (26). This term, and the somewhat overlapping “digilantism” term, are different from common practices of trolling in that the actions here are aimed at promoting values or political goals and are done in cooperation with others, not individualistically. Still, digital vigilantism encompasses quite a wide range of operation, spanning from social media attacks on North American celebrities (25–48) to online combat against hate speech in the US (215–258) and Slovenia (187–213) to exposure and denunciation of school violence in Morocco (161–186) to moral policing of what vigilante attackers consider “social deviance” in Russia (107–127)—to name just some of the examples that this book contains.

Indeed, *Introducing Vigilant Audiences* does a great job of delivering on the promise to introduce the relatively novel topic of digital vigilantism and its breadth of application to contemporary readers. With its twelve chapters and array of authors from across the globe, it is packed with relevant case studies that provide evidence of the recurrent dynamics that such vigilantism creates, and of the diverse forms it may take according to the different contexts in which it is practiced. The richness of empirical examples makes this edited book a fascinating read and reduces the need for prior familiarity with theories in this field (which makes it suitable for undergraduate students). While I believe this book may be interesting for many scholars of racial and ethnic studies, social movements studies, and technology and society, surveillance scholars in particular can benefit from it by learning how surveillance practices are used in order to promote social and political goals.

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That said, it should be noted that *Introducing Vigilant Audiences* does little to conceptualize the link between digital vigilantism and surveillance practices. Although the word surveillance does appear throughout the different chapters a total of twenty-one times (reference lists excluded), the link between the two phenomena remains vague. Of course, the most obvious link would be to connect practices of digital vigilantism to “lateral surveillance,” that is, to the surveillance done by ordinary people on other ordinary people. The shaming tactics that are central to digital vigilantism would not have been possible without the use of lateral surveillance by individuals.

The case of fighting hate speech in Charlottesville, VA, described in depth in Milbrandt’s chapter (215–258), is a good example. Certain activists sought to hold the marchers at the white supremacist “Unite the Right” march of August 2017 in Charlottesville accountable for their hate speech and intimidation tactics. Social media platforms and users were recruited in order to identify those marching and disseminate the information to others willing and able to punish these individuals. Social media users were also recruited for the task of delivering the news about how a given case was handled. For instance, in one case, an identified participant in the march lost his job after being exposed, and in another, a participant was disowned by his family. In both cases, the individuals who carried out the punishment posted information about it on social media. It is impossible to imagine how similar vigilantism could be carried out without social media and the lateral surveillance that it enables. This, of course, has implications, since it means that, while readers may consequently deem some forms of digital vigilantism as doing good, these cannot be achieved without strengthening social media platforms, which are major tools of surveillance.

While this edited book leaves something to be desired with respect to theoretical linking with “neighboring” fields of research, empirically, its findings are in line with current surveillance and privacy scholarship. For instance, the focus on ordinary people’s activeness and participation in power-moves is in line with contemporary literature about surveillance from below (or empowering surveillance) and stands in contrast to the traditional way of seeing surveillance as an almost exclusively top-down practice. As its title—*Introducing Vigilant Audiences*—suggests, these active ordinary people are framed as “audiences,” which is a term taken from communication studies and cultural analysis. The use of this term elucidates the fact that there are many levels of participation in the digital vigilant act. Participation ranges from full-fledged participation in the shaming of targets to merely reading or viewing the posts/videos relating to this vigilante act. Thanks to the top-down surveillance of social media platforms, even passive acts of reading and viewing increase the visibility of such posts/videos.

The process that is at the heart of digital vigilantism—doxing—occurs when information about a person is intentionally circulated without their consent. The term doxing is closely related with other contemporary terms such as “weaponized visibility” and “imposed transparency.” They all allude to the power play (or forcefulness) that these practices involve. As such, they require ethical consideration, and indeed much of the content in this volume is dedicated to answering: (1) is digital vigilantism ethical as a whole? and (2) how can people carrying it out make it ethical? I found this discussion fruitful and relevant to all of us who interact with the means of surveillance that these power moves entail. The implications of our participation, even if relatively passive, should be weighed.

Context-wise, while it is clear that the authors have all sought to take the context of their case studies into account, I believe more can be done. Bottom-up power moves are carried out in complex social settings, which in turn have a significant effect on their success rate. While ethnicity was generally accounted for in this volume’s case studies, class was earnestly considered as a major factor only in Hou’s chapter about Hanmai videos in China (49–75; class was mentioned in passing in other chapters). Yet class, and position in the social stratification in general, are often mitigating factors in such cases, and I believe that there was more place to give them consideration. Specifically, since this book deals with vigilante *audiences*, a greater account of the social identity of these audiences and what motivates them would have been fruitful. That said, it should be noted that studying social media audiences is a very difficult task since surveillance data about such audiences is one of social media’s most precious resources. In that sense, what the authors and editors of this volume have succeeded in mustering is both commendable and beneficial.