Dialogue | Democracy's Savior or Citizen Spy?

Robert Tynes

Bard College, USA
tynes@bard.edu

Introduction

The events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, were some of the most widely broadcast live acts of American political violence. Thanks to cellphones and other portable recording devices, and to America's selfie culture, the entire world watched as rioters smashed in windows, busted through doors, and chased back Capitol police. The rioters destroyed furniture and posted videos of their bravado on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Parler. Despite initial reports that federal and local law enforcement agencies were taken by surprise, it became apparent that the "Stop the Steal" assault on Washington, DC was planned and well known. Multitudes of Americans saw it coming. As a consequence, when public sentiment became outrage, and citizens wanted accountability, numerous groups and individuals on the internet began collecting, posting, and doxxing.

The result was an information deluge over the next several days, wherein crews of tech savvy doxxers assembled libraries of footage and photos, exposing those who invaded Congress and destroyed public property. Citizen surveillance had stepped in to fill a failure of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other law enforcement agencies.¹ The general consensus seemed to be that public action was good and that citizens were saving the democratic state from collapse. Was that the case, though? Could it be that, instead, Americans had willingly become "citizen spies," the pinnacle of the historical development of America's surveillance society (Reeves 2017)? Ultimately, no. It seems that the doxxers had turned surveillance back on itself and reinstated morality into the system, without which democracy might not survive.

When the crowd in front of the Capitol switched from a "Stop the Steal" vocal protest into a bash-through-the-doors-and-windows riot, national news was there, covering it. Many media commentators were in disbelief at the violence and lack of police response. But experts on extremism and activists who had watched "Stop the Steal" organize for months online, said, "yep, there it is." They pointed to planning on Facebook and Twitter, which they were monitoring as the riot was happening. What they found was that the rioters themselves offered the best eyewitness accounts of the destruction going on inside the congressional building. And, probably because of the absence of major news media inside the Capitol as well as a significant lack of police resistance to the rioters, the experts, the activists, and the citizen journalists were compelled to collect selfie posts made by the mob.

¹ Rostami and Askanian (2021) note that the US's lack of attention to right-wing extremism may actually have motivated the Swedish Security Services to turn a finer eye to the threat of domestic terrorism.

Doxxing the Rioters

Crews of doxxers formed, crowdsourcing images and tweets to expose the political violence and destruction. The sub-Reddit space, r/DataHoarder, became a place for activists to post phone videos and pictures from Twitter, Facebook, and Parler. The international research collective, Bellingcat, set up a spreadsheet with hundreds of examples of mob destruction and utilized open-source facial recognition applications to identify rioters (Philp 2021). The European tech company, Intelligence X, created a data archive and search engine with over 80 GB of evidence (Burgess 2021). Individuals, such as PBDoxxer (@DoxxerPb), an expert on the Proud Boys, sifted through images and tagged those that had Proud Boys members. The effort to expose the rioters as transgressors of democracy was quick and effective, and the FBI was pleased to have the help. “We have seen an outpouring of tips and information from citizens around the country that has been nothing short of remarkable. We received more than 200,000 digital media tips from the public,” said FBI Assistant Director in Charge Steven M. D’Antuono (FBI 2021).

A Tension

Surveillance theorist David Lyon (2015: 125) observes “Democracy and surveillance are always in tension.” The riot at the US Capitol is a prime case in which we see this tension played out. The rioters sought to reinstate their vision of democracy, which in fact was a populist fantasy—a delusional narrative manufactured by the tweets of Donald Trump on Twitter, the lies of Tucker Carlson on Fox News, and the hysterical rants of Alex Jones on InfoWars. Trump and his crew used mass communication to let followers know what the world was “really” like, tapping into the surveillance function of mass communication (Lasswell 1948). But it was trickery, as empirical facts and transparency had been extracted from the message. Receivers of the information, however, thought what they read and heard was real. The effect was adiaiphorization, when “systems and processes become split off from any consideration of morality” (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 7). And when January 6th rioters videoed the event, posting themselves as trophies signifying the conquest of the Capitol, adiaiphorization was complete. This was the apex of the post-truth, Trumpian dynamic—and self-surveillance captured much of it. The rioters tried to seize absolute power over democratic thought and practice through a white privilege, violence-backed lie—“ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination” (McIntyre 2018: 13).²

Doxxing the rioters, however, had deflated the post-truth power, turning those selfies, those mirrors of lies, back onto the individuals in the mob. The rioters were manufacturing, and acting from, a false image of democratic reality. In Kantian terms, they were living in a phenomenal illusion. Once this illusion compelled the mob to be violent, a jarring fracture occurred in the social norm equation of democracy equals non-violence. As Lyon (2015: 127) noted, “Democracy encourages dissent and diversity and fosters trust, not suspicion and fear.” Fear was what the rioters produced. Further, the rioters had self-surveilled their actions in an effort to make themselves stars of their fiction. Other social groups were quick to counter the narcissistic, phenomenal illusion being generated by using surveillance techniques, such as doxxing, in order to re-install the reality of the noumenon. When Kant ([1781] 1966: 194) speaks of phenomena, he means the world of “appearances... [those] objects under the unity of categories” or the empirical world of objects verified by our senses. In a post-truth Trumpian world, those categories had been distorted to such an extreme extent that they had detached from reality and had become fodder for a self-obsessed mob. This detachment also meant the negation of noumena: those “objects of the understanding only... [those] objects of intuition,” that is, those things-in-themselves (Kant [1781] 1966: 194). The result was the loss of the “intelligible world” (Kant [1781] 1966: 194).

² We see several of the same dynamics—white supremacy, surveillance, and the state—with protests in Hong Kong. In fact, according to Zhao’s (2021) piece, Hong Kong protesters were motivated to be more violent after watching emboldened, racist, Trump supporters. In the US, though, it was doxxers who exposed the white supremacy, whereas in Hong Kong, it was the Chinese state that squashed white-specific, racial discrimination.

Doxxing the rioters countered the separation of phenomenon from noumenon. The act of doxxing was the act of making a selfie face a selfie, turning a reflection on itself thereby destroying the illusion of the “Stop the Steal” legitimacy. A sculpture by artist Christian Eckart exemplifies this dynamic. Eckart’s piece, entitled, “Noumena,” is two mirrors clamped together face-to-face, held tight by an aluminum support bracket.³ The piece is mounted head- and chest-height on the wall. The viewer knows that there are two mirrors facing each other, but all she sees is the dull, grey-painted back of one the mirrors and the four ends of the aluminum mounting bracket. The infinite self-reflecting images are trapped inside the piece and the material, empirical reality is revealed. This is what happened with “peer-to-peer surveillance” of the Capitol riots (Ball et al. 2006: 74). The materiality of the “Stop the Steal” fantasy became concrete reality.

It’s Messy, Though.

Surveillance is not monochromatic, though, especially in a world where people are quite comfortable with being watched, all the time, often constantly seeking it out. “The culture of peer-to-peer surveillance has also produced new variants,” a range that extends from self- and peer-repression by hyper-citizen spies all the way to rhizomatic defusing by political/culture jammers—activists and artists turning the practice back on itself (Ball et al. 2006: 74).

Skeptics might argue that doxxing was not some progressive democratic realignment. Rather it was straight up citizens spying on citizens. Following Foucault (2015: 23), it was the “inversion of the spectacle into surveillance” so that the “punitive society,” i.e., the State, could once again gain control. And to assert that doxxing the riotous Proud Boys, Baked Alaska, and the Oath Keepers returns democracy to its “rightful” place would be trite. Megan Ward (2021) is on the mark in her piece, “Participatory Security and Punitive Agency,” when she argues that many citizens became “deputized as motivated agents” to assist state surveillance practices.

There was a moment, however, before deputization, wherein surveillance transcended state control and “state thinking” (Bourdieu 2014: 3). A small opening was created by the doxxers. Their surveillance affirmed, for a moment, that we are living in a political space of “multifaceted dissonances” (Connolly 1995: 198). We glimpse the messy and chaotic fact of pluralization, beyond the closed and exclusionary, telos-bound myth of democracy generated by the popular imagination. That opening, however, was soon sealed shut, as Ward (2021) details in her piece, with the FBI swooping in and gladly using the information for their surveillance and punitive practices.⁴ Nonetheless, the initial doxxing offered one tactic for how we might move through the socio-political mess in the US. As political theorist William Connolly (2005: 159) states: “what is needed is creative modes of *intervention* posed at several strategic sites in the servicing of reducing economic inequality, fostering intra- and interstate pluralism, and promoting ecological sanity.”

Maybe the US Capitol case was one such type of intervention. It was an instance in which we witness what Topinka, Finlayson, and Osborne-Carey (2021) refer to as “surveillance-as-method” and “surveillance-as-critique” merging together in the actions of the doxxers. In the very least, following Hakim Bey (1991: 106), doxxing the rioters shows us that if we want to counter the negative effects of surveillance, we must find ways to turn the practice back on itself, methods of “psychic nomadism” that deflate power and then disappear.

³ For an example of Eckart’s artwork, see: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/christian-eckart/noumena-FACGVv0g6w0KZr5mEBTnkg2>.

⁴ Similar to the Spanish case described by Jiménez and Cancela (2021), the FBI-style of surveillance punitivism has been endorsed by many American mass media on the left and center, but, unlike the Spanish case, rarely by far-right mass media.

References

- Ball, Kirstie, David Lyon, David Murakami Wood, Clive Norris, and Charles Raab. 2006. A Report on the Surveillance Society: For the United Kingdom Information Commissioner. September. https://www.personuvernd.is/media/frettir/surveillance_society_full_report_final.pdf [accessed July 21, 2021].
- Bauman, Zygmunt, and David Lyon. 2013. *Liquid Surveillance*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Bey, Hakim. 1991. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2014. *On the State*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Burgess, Matt. 2021. Open-Source Sleuths are Already Unmasking the Capitol Hill Mob. *Wired*, January 8. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/capitol-riot-photos-video-online> [accessed July 21, 2021].
- Connolly, William. 1995. *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2005. *Pluralism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- FBI. 2021. FBI Assistant Director in Charge Steven M. D’Antuono’s Remarks on Press Call Regarding Violence at U.S. Capitol. Office of Public Affairs, press conference, January 26. <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/washingtondc/news/press-releases/fbi-assistant-director-in-charge-steven-m-dantuonos-remarks-on-press-call-regarding-violence-at-us-capitol-012621> [accessed July 21, 2021].
- Foucault, Michel. 2015. *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France 1972-1973*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.
- Jiménez, Aitor, and Ekaitz Cancela. 2021. Surveillance Punitivism: Colonialism, Racism, and State Terrorism in Spain. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 374–378.
- Kant, Immanuel. (1781) 1966. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by F. Max Müller. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- Lasswell, Harold D. 1948. The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. In *The Communication of Ideas*, edited by Lyman Bryson, 37–51. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lyon, David. 2015. *Surveillance After Snowden*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- McIntyre, Lee. 2018. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Philp, Rowan. 2021. How Open Source Experts Identified the US Capitol Rioters. Global Investigative Journalism Network, January 15. <https://gijn.org/2021/01/15/how-open-source-experts-identified-the-us-capitol-rioters/> [accessed July 21, 2021].
- Reeves, Joshua. 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America’s Surveillance Society*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rostami, Amir, and Tina Askanius. 2021. State Surveillance of Violent Extremism and Threats of White Supremacist Violence in Sweden. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 369–373.
- Topinka, Robert, Alan Finlayson, and Cassian Osborne-Carey. 2021. The Trap of Tracking: Digital Methods, Surveillance, and the Far Right. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 384–388.
- Ward, Megan. 2021. Participatory Security and Punitive Agency: Acclimation to Homeland Surveillance in the United States. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 345–349.
- Zhao, Bo. 2021. White Supremacy, Nationalism, and Surveillance in Hong Kong’s Recent Political Turmoil: A Global Perspective. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 379–383.