Debate

Dear Voyeur, meet Flâneur... Sincerely, Social Media

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There are times and places where people like being watched. And there are times and places when people like watching. Technology brings the flâneur and the voyeur together in new ways, constructing multibillion-dollar industries that profit off of their symbiotic relationship. From reality TV to Facebook, the flâneur and the voyeur come together to see and be seen. Yet, for all that people like being watched and for all that people like watching, there are limits to their comfort. Critical questions commonly emerge: who's watching? For what purposes? What are the potential benefits or consequences of watching or being watched? These are precisely the questions that Surveillance Studies bring to bear.

Implicit in any conversation about surveillance is the issue of structural power. Institutions and entities watch people. Challenges to surveillance also tend to focus on responses to structural power, as people interrogate institutions and entities. Yet, there are different forms of power at stake when we think about the watcher and the watched. Most importantly, there is situational power. People hold power over each other not simply through authority but through their interaction dynamic at any given point in time, watching and then being watched. Some situations enable people to maintain power when watching while others require people to make themselves vulnerable in order to watch. Likewise, technologies enable different configurations and with different outcomes. What Facebook enables is quite different than what is made possible by reality TV.

When critics think about the production of reality TV shows or the creation of Facebook, they typically focus on the institutions behind these entities and, thus, focus on the structural power that can be abused. But when people talk about invasions of privacy on sites like Facebook, they are not just talking about structural power; in fact, more often than not, they're talking about situational power. They're talking about how people—including and, especially, people that they know—can hold power over them in a particular moment. They feel violated when they are taken out of context against the social norms that regulate the situation.

In his seminal book, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, legal scholar Larry Lessig (2000) argued that systems are regulated by four different regulatory pressures: the market, the law, code (or architecture), and social norms. Most conversations about privacy and surveillance focus on the role that the law can—or should—play in curbing abuses of privacy by the market and the government because of available technology. Social norms are bandied about as a justification for nearly any approach with rhetoric like 'Privacy norms are changing' and 'People do (or don't) care about privacy'. Yet, social norms—when contextually understood—highlight how privacy and surveillance are both being challenged by an increasingly networked society.

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Bennett's essay, 'In defence of privacy', clearly articulates how unclear privacy is as a concept and why privacy, in its slippery state, fails to serve as an antidote to surveillance. At a regulatory level, his argument is persuasive—operationalizing a term that no one can agree upon is impossible. Likewise, he responsibly highlights a simple reality: people like to think about, talk about, and work towards defining privacy. In short, privacy is 'cool' and, pragmatically, leveraging privacy discourse has its advantages. While I agree with Bennett's assessments, I would argue that there is an additional reason that surveillance scholars should engage with privacy discourse: its messiness actually has value.

In trying to describe different facets of privacy, Bennett highlights that one of the greatest weaknesses of discourse about privacy is that it's individual-centric. He uses Valerie Steeves' (2008) critique to highlight how privacy is a dynamic, socially constructed process. Meanwhile, he argues that surveillance offers a better angle with which to think about violations that aren't well captured by privacy, in part because surveillance provides a framework for thinking about groups and categories. Of course, Steeves' critique also applies to a surveillance model that is group-centric. To resolve Steeves' challenge, it becomes critical to not only understand the role of social interactions but also the networks in which people inhabit. Helen Nissenbaum (2009) captures this as 'context', but it is important to highlight that context, in her sense, is more than just a definition of the situation; it's about the relationship people have to people, information, technology, space, and time. People's understandings of privacy and surveillance are very much driven by position in the various networks, and their interactions with others are shaped by these relationships. Technology only makes the networks more salient, both to those watching and those being watched.

People develop different strategies to manage realities in which they are observed. While there is little doubt that surveillance affects people's behaviour (Foucault 1975), people are also quite creative in finding ways to manage being watched so as to achieve privacy. Let me offer two examples in the form of case studies derived from my ethnographic work:

Case #1: Carmen, a 17-year-old Latina girl living in Boston, was having a bad day. She and her boyfriend broke up and she wanted her friends to know that she was feeling sad. Her first instinct was to post a sappy song lyric to her Facebook, but she decided against doing so out of fear that her mother would take it seriously and think she was suicidal. Instead, she chose song lyrics from 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' knowing that her mother wouldn't recognize the song or the reference while her friends would immediately recognize that this song was sung in 'The Life of Brian' when the main character was about to be executed.

Case #2: Shamika, a 17-year-old black girl living in DC, found that Facebook was often the source of social drama at her school. After a fight in which a girl had taken older posts of Shamika's out of context to justify her bullish actions, Shamika decided that status updates should be ephemeral. Each day, she 'white walls' her Facebook profile, deleting comments left by others after she reads them and removing status updates or wall posts that are more than a day old. In this way, Shamika keeps a living profile on Facebook but undermines the norm of persistence.

Both Shamika and Carmen have accepted that they're being watched. That's part of why they like Facebook in the first place—they want the attention of being watched by people that they know and like. But just because they like being watched does not mean that they inherently want people that they know to hold power over them. Shamika focuses on limiting access to older content. She is perfectly aware of the fact that anyone could save her profile content and that Facebook itself most likely has a record of the content, but that's not the point. She's intentionally making access harder to reduce the drama that can

ensue when it is too easy to access content and take it out of temporal context. She's trying to achieve control, not invisibility.

Carmen is taking a different approach. She's not trying to restrict access to content, but trying to limit access to interpretation. This can best be understood as a 'social steganography' technique; Carmen is hiding in plain sight, assuming that anyone can access what she is saying but that only some people understand the meaning. She relies on the fact that her mother doesn't recognize song lyrics let alone bother to look them up: she takes text at face value. Meanwhile, Carmen also assumes that anyone who knows the Monty Python movie but doesn't know her won't understand why she's posting the lyrics in the first place. In controlling the meaning, Carmen asserts agency over the social situation.

What is at stake in any conversation about privacy or surveillance is not simply power but agency. When and to what degree can individuals assert agency over a situation? Consider the position of celebrities who are under constant surveillance by paparazzi and others who demand that they have the right to access them as public figures. When Angelina Jolie married Billy Bob Thornton, the press frenzy around her was intense. She willingly exposed many aspects of her life, fuelling the fire. At one point, a journalist asked Angelina about her decision to be so public and reject any privacy that she might possibly have. Angelina responded by telling the reporter that the best way to achieve privacy was to appear to be so public that no one bothered looking into areas that she wanted to protect. Celebrities can't escape being watched, but they can divert attention.

Social technologies are undoing the private-by-default, public-through-effort norm that average people have when walking through this world. Participation in digital social media often means public-by-default, private-through-effort. Being watched is simply part and parcel with participating. Rather than opting out or going 'off the grid', many participants are developing techniques to manage the dynamics that celebrities have faced for a long time—life under a constant state of surveillance. What gives them power is not technology or legal regimes, but agency.

In focusing on agency, it is possible to recognize the role of networks. People aren't simply individuals or in groups; they are members of social networks, connected by information, time, and space, and they must navigate life as a series of relationships. When people understand their position in the constellation, they can then achieve the very essence of what privacy is all about. Furthermore, only when they have agency can people respond rationally and responsibly to surveillance.

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