As I type in a local coffee shop, my web-browsing is being tracked by multiple companies like Facebook and Google (I am ‘signed in’ to both), my credit card purchase will be filed into a proprietary database, and the song I am listening to using the Spotify music streaming service is automatically recorded and published on my Facebook profile where it is accessible to hundreds of people. This last action is part of what has come to be called ‘frictionless sharing’, a growing trend whereby an individual’s actions are automatically and more seamlessly recorded and published to social media sites like Facebook. After initially opting in, no further action is needed on my part other than to go about my everyday business of consuming music and database doubles of my actions populate in my profile and on the screens of others. This sharing is not perfectly ‘frictionless’ because there are the frictions of opting into Spotify, Facebook, giving permissions to both, as well as the frictions involved with changing my listening behavior to match what I want my profile to look like. However, much of the frictions of sharing are indeed lessened; another way to say ‘less friction’ is to say free-flowing, quicker, more nimble, or, best: liquid.

In its title, Liquid Surveillance highlights two themes, each deeply indebted to the authors of the volume. While David Lyon’s work specifically and theories of surveillance in general are well-known to most readers of this journal, what is novel is the application of Zygmunt Bauman’s liquidity thesis, something Lyon made a previous call for (Lyon 2010). In brief, Bauman first popularized the notion of liquidity as a central aspect of modernity, arguing that the world of solid, heavy structures is changing into an expanding set of flows that change form, become more agile, and, as such, are harder to grasp and understand. Bauman has since applied the thesis to many realms, including love, life, fear, time, and much else (Bauman 2003, 2005, 2006, 2010). Here, the concept is applied to surveillance in the form of a conversation with, and under the expert hand of, David Lyon. The result is a more free-form and off-the-cuff back-and-forth that that opens many conceptual doors, breaks new ground, and, at times, may leave readers wanting much more.

The general thesis of this conversation is that as people are tracked more and more via new technologies, as data accumulates to unprecedented levels, ‘surveillance slips into a liquid state’ (vi). Liquid surveillance is described as a softer form of surveillance often found in the consumer realm that spreads in unimaginable ways, spilling out all over. Surveillance has become less attached to spatial observation, like Bentham’s famous Panopticon, and, as such, has also become post-panoptic, contrasting ‘the fixity and spatial orientation of solid modern surveillance with the mobile, pulsating signals of today’s flowing forms’ (15). Social forms change faster now; ‘surveillant assemblages’ turn information flows more quickly into ‘data doubles’ than could the solid, heavy, slower, often panoptic forms of observation. Today, surveillance hangs with things more flexible and fun, seen as entertainment and consumerist, producing an enjoyable, and thus softer, form of surveillance.
The first deployment of the liquid surveillance theory is on social media and drones taken together in a single chapter presumably because they are both new techno-surveillant developments. Bauman argues that social media is a merging of the panoptic nightmare as a sort of dream, the fear of never being outside of surveillance is ‘now recast into the hope of “never again being alone” (abandoned, ignored and neglected, blackballed and excluded); that the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed’ (23). Bauman argues that people joined Facebook for two reasons: they felt lonely and the site provided an outlet to relieve that tension. Lyon brings Simmel and Foucault into the discussion of user privacy on social media, the former to point out that our relationship with others is determined by what we know about them and the latter to describe Facebook as like a confessional where inner-truths are revealed.

Indeed, Facebook dramatically illustrates Foucault’s premonition that people would come to take a more active role in their own surveillance. Bauman argues that we have built a confessional society where publicity is both virtue and obligation. Fruitfully drawing from his previous work on the consumer society, Bauman further argues that social media users are being taught to treat themselves as a commodity, and an attractive one as possible. Social media visibility is cast as an outlet to get the attention needed to stay in the game of socializing. Thus, Facebook users ‘are simultaneously promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote. They are, at the same time, the merchandise and their marketing agents, the goods and their traveling salespersons’ (32). Facebook encourages recasting ourselves ‘as products capable of drawing attention, and attracting demand and customers’ (33). All of society is said to be reshaped as a marketplace with no exception allowed. In this way, it is being a commodity that defines one as a member in this society and as such social media is non-contractual; indeed, it’s said to be a ‘social fact’.

The second chapter discusses the Panopticon and some of the theoretical attempts to move past this famous model of surveillance. As Lyon states, the metaphor is both brilliantly useful, but, at the same time, for many, ‘mere mention of the Panopticon elicits exacerbated groans’ (52). The authors push for a post-panoptic understanding of surveillance that does not make the mistake of forgetting the Panopticon but instead understands it as just part of the overall field; as Bauman states, a problem in the humanities is that we ‘never solve any issues—we only get bored with them’ (55).

While the Panopticon is said to still be a useful metaphor for how modern societies manage the “unmanageable” margin of societies’ (56), the main thrust of modern surveillance isn’t the prison model. As Bauman says, ‘everything moves from enforcement to temptation and seduction’ (57); surveillance society no longer chases its victims but finds its volunteers. To move past the Panopticon, the authors draw heavily on Bigo’s ‘ban-opticon’, that is, how profiling technologies are used to determine who is placed under surveillance through the use of language, architecture, laws and much more to provide different surveillant outcomes for different people. The authors also draw on the notion of the ‘Synopticon’, initially put forward by Mathiesen (1997). If the Panopticon was the few watching the prisoners, the Synopticon is where the many watch the few. This may be a better model of surveillance within consumer society, where, for instance, the many television consumers watch the few cultural gatekeepers, newsmakers, and celebrities; a topic Bauman explored in Liquid Modernity (2000).

Chapters Three through Seven provide shorter takes on a various set of related issues. In Chapter Three, Bauman looks at how war is increasingly fought at a distance, paradigmatically exemplified by the rise of combat drones. This distancing is said to be part of the project of modernity, from Bentham’s Panopticon to Ford’s assembly line, to remove all the messy and unpredictable aspects of humanity in order to create a ‘a complete, incontestable and unchallenged order’ (79-80). Bauman draws on his earlier work in Modernity and the Holocaust (1989) to look at how distancing is a particularly troublesome aspect of
modernity where bureaucratic regulation meant that individuals do not need to be close to the atrocities being committed, but were instead distanced from any agency and responsibility over the outcomes of their actions. Thus, the Holocaust was not a rebellion against modernity, but its perfect realization. The authors agree that little has been learned since World War Two because we are still living within ‘the modern victory of technology over ethics’ wherein we do things not because we really want to do them but because technology makes them possible. Despite the best intentions, Bauman argues, technologies always have unintended consequences.

Drawing more explicitly on unintended consequences, in Chapter Four, the authors discuss security and its unanticipated outcome: insecurity. Lyon notes that the justification for surveillance is often in the name of security; to watch over. However, the result is often more insecurity and more risk. Airport body-canners, for instance, come into existence in the name of security but quickly and ‘accidently’ create more insecurity for those subjected to them. ‘We fall over ourselves trying to make life-with-fear livable, but each attempt produces more risks, more fears’ states Lyon, concluding that this modern quest for eternal peace is ‘a false quest for an impossible guarantee of security’, which is ‘palpably mistaken and, fatefuly, closes off other options’ (102; 119).

In Chapter Five, the authors turn their attention to new media and consumerism, which rely on a highly liquid process of social sorting. Lyon suggests that consumerism might be as important a sphere as the military when it comes to contemporary surveillance. The conversation takes off from Bauman’s insistence that consumer society is less and less about fulfilling needs but instead more and more about creating desires, piggybacking on his larger claim that power is increasingly less about coercion and more about seduction. With this in mind, Bauman argues that consumer society has created the desire to be watched, what is known as scopophilia; for instance, part of Amazon’s success is that it allows for consumerism with ‘a little impression management on the side’ (122).

In the final two chapters, the authors conclude on the topics of agency, hope, morality, and ethics as they relate to surveillance. They worry, following Gary Marx’s work, that surveillant technologies change so fast that it is difficult to respond. Remembering that this book is a ‘conversation’ rather than a traditional study, these final chapters are especially casual. However, the authors do still make a strong case for why Surveillance Studies needs to move past its tendency to see individuals as prisoners, bound up in bureaucracies, or, now, mobile phones. Where’s the agency? Where’s the hope? Bauman states that, ‘we may be “bound” and “caught”, but we also “jump in”, plunge and dive in of our own will, in our hope’s last stand’ (145). Lyon agrees, ‘another way is possible, pregnant with hope’ (146). Thus, the book ends on this cautiously optimistic note (Bauman less optimistic than Lyon), a far cry from popular technology books that are often overly utopian or dystopian.

The format of the book, as a more relaxed conversation, gives the authors more flexibility to be brief, clear, and provocative. This generally succeeds, however, at times, the book moves quickly past issues that desperately cry for deeper insight. For instance, the authors are right to move past the few-watching-the-many model of the Panopticon to the many-watching-the-few model of the Synopticon to better capture surveillance in the television age; however, this misses a big opportunity to tackle the how the many watch the many on social media. Indeed, one might make the case that on sites like Facebook the many-many surveillance is almost (or maybe more) important than the Panoptic or Synoptic gazes. Further, this many-many gaze might also be more liquid because the few are more removed from the surveillant equation, the old, heavy, panoptic towers and synoptic cultural gatekeepers would be less important than the more fluid masses. How power, control, resistance, and hope work in a many-many model are all questions the liquid surveillance perspective begs for but are not systematically addressed because of the conversational format of the book. However, even this shortcoming is productive, creating important new theoretical work to be done and providing critical theoretical tools to do it.
References