Article

Undercover Research: Corporate and Police Spying on Activists. An Introduction to Activist Intelligence as a New Field of Study.

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Abstract

Building on previous research published in *Secret Manoeuvres in the Dark, corporate and police spying on activists* (2012), the author proposes a new field of research called *Activist intelligence and covert strategy*.

Using exclusive access to previously confidential sources, *Secret Manoeuvres* showed how companies such as Nestlé, Shell and McDonald's use covert methods to evade accountability. The author concluded that corporate intelligence gathering has shifted from being reactive to proactive, and identified a seriously under-researched area: the state's concern with corporate interests, their close cooperation in collecting intelligence on campaigners, and a shared agenda in dealing with dissent.

This paper encompasses an introduction to the published case studies, a definition of the proposed research field, and an exploration of its positioning in a multidisciplinary area as well as its theoretical embedding. The discussion under Methods: Hybrid Projects makes a case for the fusion of journalistic and social scientific approaches to the subject matter.

Introduction

The spying on campaigning groups by the police has received significant media coverage in the UK during the past few years. In late 2010, Mark Kennedy became the first in a series of undercover police officers in the UK to be exposed as a long-term infiltrator of activist groups. Since then a number of police practices have been identified. These include: the withholding of exculpatory evidence; the tricking of women (and men) into intimate or even sexual relationships with undercover agents; the siring of subsequently unsupported children by undercover officers under false identities (Wistrich 2013); identity theft from dead children (Home Affairs Committee 2013); and active planning of and participation in serious crimes, including arson (Lucas 2012). The dubious practices brought to light so far span more than forty years and raise fundamental questions concerning the proportionality of such intense police surveillance, the ethical basis of political policing and the right of individuals to protection from state interference.

The current undercover policing scandal relates to my on-going research into intelligence and activism. The first part of this paper outlines the key findings of my research on the ways large corporations seek to manage and manipulate public protest—as published in *Secret Manoeuvres*. The case studies—based on exclusive access to previously confidential sources—show how companies such as Nestlé, Shell and

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McDonald's use covert methods to gather intelligence on activist groups, counter criticism of their strategies and practices, and evade accountability.¹

Corporate involvement in political policing, spying and undercover operations is a seriously under-researched area. The second part of this paper explains a new field of research proposed to fill this gap tentatively called 'activist intelligence and covert counterstrategy', which aims to bring together examples of political policing; to map out the increasingly blurred boundaries between public and private intelligence gathering; and to study the subsequent use of such intelligence to silence critical voices in society.

To develop this new field, the current undercover policing scandal that started with Mark Kennedy offers a unique opportunity to address politically-sensitive topics including the ethics of political policing, and the related—and challenged—justifications of secrecy. Hence, my next research project with the Undercover Research Group will set out to map out the state's concern with corporate interests in these recently exposed cases and the shared agenda in dealing with dissent—aiming to provide evidence to the coming independent inquiry (Home Office 2015).²

1. *Secret Manoeuvres*: Case Studies

Secret Manoeuvres is an investigation into intelligence gathering on activist groups and the covert strategy that transnational companies (TNCs) use to undermine criticism. The case studies illustrate unwillingness among TNCs to change damaging business policies and give an indication of the lengths to which companies under attack are prepared to go to evade public protest. They point to a general intolerance for dissent, and a refusal to allow public scrutiny.

Historical examples: Pinkerton's and The Economic League

Corporations aggressively pursuing profit and states robustly organising in defence of their core interests is nothing new; similarly the entanglement of the public and the private to meet the demands of business goes back to the earliest days of industrialisation. The long history of state and corporate actors working closely and secretly together to defend against progressive movements within civil society can be amply illustrated by two examples of how such corporate strategy and political tactics have been deployed in the US and the UK. Of course, today the targets have changed, and the use of armed force has diminished, but there are similarities between the strategies and tactics used then and now.

At the end of the 19th century, the United States saw agencies such as the notorious Pinkerton's provide armed guards and strike-breakers to deal with social unrest. Later, during the Depression and the New Deal reforms of the 1920s and 1930s, employers hired public relations professionals to defend their use of violent confrontations and covert operations such as espionage and infiltration.

In the UK, the government as well as employers' organisations had learned to appreciate the value of propaganda and internal surveillance during the First World War. They continued to use such practices because they were afraid of revolutionary outbreaks in the early 1920s. The Economic League was a long-running project with close ties to the police Special Branch and intelligence services set up by British industrialists to defend corporate interests—most notably through its maintenance of a secret 'blacklist' used to identify potentially troublesome employees (Wrigley 1990); McIvor 1988). This organisation spanned most of the 20th century and existed until it was officially disbanded in the mid-1990s. Recent discoveries reveal that the work of the Economic League continued until—at least—early 2009. Set up

¹ See <http://secretmanoeuvres.org/>.

² (See <http://UndercoverResearch.net> for the first launch of the project blog, and the Undercover Research wiki http://powerbase.info/index.php/UndercoverResearch_Portal).

and paid for by major construction corporations, and staffed with former Economic League employees, The Consulting Association (TCA) similarly filed the details of union members and other potential ‘trouble-makers’ who as a result experience difficulties finding a jobs or holding on to it. Evidence also suggests that TCA exchanged information with the police, in particular Special Branch (Smith and Chamberlain 2015; Smith 2013).

The cooperation between the state and the private sector in gathering information about people potentially posing a risk to the stability of society or of the economy can be dated back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This supports the hypothesis that public and private intelligence derive from the same set of circumstances and represent the same social practice divided into distinct areas of responsibility.

Breaking the boycotts against Nestlé and Shell

The roots of today’s *activist intelligence* can be traced back to the 1980s, when the new phenomenon of worldwide boycotts of multinational corporations required sophisticated corporate plans to counter them. Rafael D. Pagan Jr. was one of the first American specialists to develop such counterstrategies. *Secret Manoeuvres* examines his work for Nestlé between 1981 and 1985, and subsequently for Shell Oil in 1986–1987. Nestlé had been the target of campaigns against the promotion of infant formula in the Third World for many years. Four years after the company hired Pagan, the boycott was broken—though just temporarily as it turned out—and an agreement signed between campaigners and the company. The plan Pagan developed for Shell Oil in 1986, known as the *Neptune Strategy*, was designed to neutralise boycott groups campaigning against Shell’s continuing involvement with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The case study analyses the various elements of Pagan’s strategy. The tactic of dialogue with major constituencies, such as moderate church groups, was of major importance. Each contact with the company’s opponents was essentially an information-gathering opportunity too. The strategy was intended to divide and conquer campaigning coalitions.

The analysis of Pagan’s work for Nestlé draws on an evaluation of the infant formula controversy by Professor S. Prakash Sethi (1994), published as *Multinational corporations and the impact of public advocacy on corporate strategy*. His exclusive access to Pagan himself, as well as to Nestlé’s management, their internal documents and communications gives an extraordinary view on the company’s public affairs strategy. The second part of the case study is based on the *Neptune Strategy* Pagan developed for Shell. This confidential report was leaked to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) in September 1987. (The ICCR is the corporate responsibility office of a coalition of 234 churches and religious groups in the US, engaged in the anti-apartheid boycott at the time). In the publicity that followed, Shell acknowledged the origins of the document and Pagan as its author. The *Neptune Strategy* offers a rare insight into one of the first extended corporate campaigns against civil society critics.

McSpy

The McSpy case started in the 1980s and reaches into the present. The case laid out in *Secret Manoeuvres* regards the comprehensive corporate infiltration operation which fast food restaurant chain McDonald’s set up in order to identify people behind a leaflet critical of the company. Based on slivers of information—but at the time of writing lacking concrete evidence—the book presented several theories of how the operation could have been a joint project set up in cooperation with the police—Special Branch—to infiltrate activist groups, in order to get to more radical animal rights campaigners.

In the late 1980s, McDonald’s hired at least seven private detectives to identify who had been responsible for London Greenpeace’s leaflet *What’s Wrong With McDonald’s?* which was distributed outside many McDonald’s outlets in the UK since 1986. The infiltration was exposed after McDonald’s sued members

of the activist group for libel—which led to the now (in)famous ‘McLibel Trial’. As a result of the persistence of Helen Steel and Dave Morris—who represented themselves—the company was forced to provide many details of its extensive spying on London Greenpeace. Private investigators infiltrated London Greenpeace for varying periods of time between October 1989 and early summer 1991. The court transcripts and notes made by the investigators reveal the lengths McDonald’s went to in procuring information about this small activist group.

The case study documents a range of methods employed in the intelligence operation against London Greenpeace, and considers the close cooperation between McDonald’s, its private investigators, and Special Branch officers of the Metropolitan Police. It describes how McDonald’s’ surveillance was organised, the instructions given to agents, and how they infiltrated the group. The scale of the penetration raises questions about how infiltrators affected London Greenpeace’s activities. The various intelligence tactics are mapped by using trial evidence and interviews with defendants. The activities of the spies are reconstructed from their own notes and their statements at the trial, complemented by the experiences of London Greenpeace members.

McDonald’s claimed that the main reason to hire the investigators was to identify the protesters responsible for the production and distribution of the disputed leaflet. However, careful analysis of the available documents suggested that there had been other goals, including establishing if there were connections between the group and more radical animal rights activists. Just before *Secret Manoeuvres* went in print in late 2011, a small group of people who had been active in London Greenpeace exposed former Special Branch Detective Inspector Bob Lambert as one of the undercover officers to have infiltrated their group back in the 1980s—when he used the false identity ‘Bob Robinson’—and to have supervised others doing the same. The exposure confirmed that the infiltration had indeed been a joint operation between corporate spies hired by McDonald’s and Special Branch. Moreover, the group had been infiltrated by yet another undercover officer, who had a long-term relationship with Helen Steel. She is now one of the women pursuing the Metropolitan Police for damages (Police Spies Out of Lives 2015).

Lambert has since admitted to have co-authored the disputed pamphlet (Lewis and Evans 2013), and to have had four different relationships with women, two of them long-term, one of which resulted in a child. He explained that he had been tasked to “identify and prosecute members of the Animal Liberation Front who were then engaged in widespread incendiary and explosive device campaigns against vivisection, the meat and fur trades”. By his account his undercover tour within the animal rights milieu led to the arrest, trial and conviction of Andrew Clarke and Geoff Sheppard for ‘ALF’-related offences. (Lewis and Evans 2012) In early March 2014, Clarke and Sheppard announced an appeal against their convictions, alleging that an undercover police officer Lambert was an integral part of their group, and that he had set fire to a branch of Debenhams, causing damage totalling more than £300,000 (Evans 2014).

Lambert’s spying career brings up a wide array of questions concerning the ethics and the reach of undercover policing that need to be investigated urgently.

Cybersurveillance

The internet was adopted early and effectively by anti-corporate campaigners. Their ability to exploit the global reach of the web and bypass mass media has long become a levelling factor in the battle for public opinion between activists and powerful companies. The PR industry recognised this more than a decade ago. The internet was said to reduce the advantage that corporate budgets once provided. Meanwhile, corporations have learned to use the internet as well; and not just to sell their goods and services, to present their business, or to promote their latest corporate social responsibility achievements.

Companies under fire today hire cybersurveillance services to monitor their brand position online. Some of these agencies claim to be much more than a simple digital clippings service. Preparing briefings on

what is happening online and how campaigning organisations are linked is just the beginning. A sophisticated communication plan not only maps sentiments in the blogosphere and scans for future issues, but also may include strategies to undermine the campaigns of online activists, the activities of disgruntled employees or the criticism of experts.

This case study profiles three different agencies specialising in online intelligence services, Infonic, eWatch and Bivings, each with an example of a controversy in which they featured. In 2000, Infonic, a London-based agency, promoted the internet for enabling corporations to get closer to their stakeholders. However, when asked to advise the IT industry on how to deal with a campaign demanding regulation for waste from electronic goods, their advice contained several aspects of covert counterstrategy. Also in 2000, American agency eWatch explicitly promoted its 'CyberSleuth' services. It offered to 'neutralise news' and to identify and 'eliminate' online activists. This example explores the potentially far-reaching consequences of being labelled a 'perpetrator' by eWatch or other monitoring agencies. The third and last profile investigates internet communications firm the Bivings Group, hired by the world's largest developer and producer of genetically modified (GM) seeds, Monsanto. Together they manipulated online discussions and attacked critics of genetically engineered maize. The companies had created online identities exclusively for this purpose. Monsanto used these so-called independent third parties as a covert strategy in an attempt to influence the debate on genetic engineering. As far as is known, this was the first time that the use of (fake) electronic personae had been convincingly proved.

The controversies discussed in this case study took place between 2000–2002. The period is significant as it represents a loss of innocence regarding virtual communities and networks. Today, TNCs have become more aware of online risks—and as a result, online counterstrategies are more difficult to detect. While the importance of online communication and virtual networks is still growing, the monitoring industry keeps pace. More recently, exposures of sophisticated online intrusion—such as French nuclear power giant EDF illegally accessing the hard disks of Greenpeace campaigners—indicate a continued market for inside information on the work of campaigners provided by consultancies specialised in cybersurveillance. Further research could contextualise more recent cases revealed through investigative reporting (Chrisafis 2009).

Hakluyt and the Jobbing Spy

This case study examines how a private intelligence firm linked closely to the British foreign intelligence service spied on environmental campaign groups to collect information for oil companies. The intelligence firm, Hakluyt, prefers to operate in secret but attracted attention when a left-leaning filmmaker was exposed for spying in Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere across Western Europe. Manfred Schlickenrieder's cover was blown after a Swiss activist group published confidential files that proved he was on Hakluyt's payroll. The Schlickenrieder documents provide evidence that intelligence gathering was employed to develop covert corporate strategies for Shell and BP. Confronted with the evidence, Hakluyt reluctantly admitted having employed the spy. After the British press published the story, both Shell and BP acknowledged hiring the firm, but downplayed the importance of the role Hakluyt had played. To create even more distance from the spying the companies that claimed Schlickenrieder was just a freelancer hired only for this case; the opposite was true.

The second part of the story concentrates on Manfred Schlickenrieder's activities. The documents strongly indicate that his spying experience had been built up during years of working for Germany's domestic and foreign intelligence services. (His handler at Hakluyt had been the liaison for MI6 at the British Embassy in Berlin before joining the private sector.) In this context Schlickenrieder's work focused on revolutionary groups such as the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), their supporting network and their connections with similar groups in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

For more than twenty years, Schlickenrieder's secret work was paid for by private intelligence agencies as well as state services. He received assignments from both, alternately or simultaneously. Schlickenrieder's existence as a freelance spy is a personification of what is sometimes called 'grey intelligence' (Hoogenboom 2005) and as such, this case study maps the blurring boundaries between public and private intelligence, state and corporate interests in espionage.

The Threat Response Spy Files

The final case study focuses on the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), a well-respected group that believes in non-violent protest. In the mid-1990s the group was stepping up a campaign against the £500m sale of British Aerospace (BAe) jets to Indonesia. The campaigners protested that the aircraft would be used to crush resistance in East Timor, which was seeking independence. BAe is one of the three largest defence contractors in the world. The *Sunday Times* revealed in September 2003 that the company used a private intelligence agency to spy on CAAT since that time. Six to eight agents infiltrated the group between 1995 and 1999; further research showed the spying went on until the date of the exposure. Evelyn le Chêne, a woman with considerable intelligence connections, sent daily reports on activists' whereabouts to Britain's largest arms dealer. Her intelligence company was called Threat Response International (TRI). Five years earlier in 1998 activists in the Netherlands and France had investigated a related case of someone calling himself 'Adrian Franks' infiltrating European networks of activist groups. We had found out that the consultancy agency he had set up to provide corporate clients with intelligence about activist campaigns had a parent company based in the UK. Five years later, Evelyn le Chêne's private intelligence agency turned out to be the parent company of Franks' French consultancy. Moreover, Evelyn and Adrian were mother and son.

The first two sections of the case study were based on a detailed analysis of Evelyn le Chêne's secret reports. The files show how the Campaign Against Arms Trade was subverted by infiltrators passing on information and manipulating the activists. The *covert corporate strategies* ranged from advance warning on lobbying; to anticipating direct action; to the use of an agent provocateur to undermine the building of broader coalitions.

The next part of the study outlines some of the consequences of the exposure of the spy files for the targeted group. It focuses on CAAT's internal investigation into one member of their small paid staff called Martin Hogbin, his job as the staff action coordinator, and the difficulties some of his fellow activists had in accepting he had been a spy.

The final section profiles Evelyn le Chêne and her extensive history with the intelligence community. Her long time links with the world of covert action and propaganda sets corporate strategy against activism and resistance in a wider perspective. Her secret work can be understood in an ideological context—as a Cold War-type activity, insulating mainstream politics from the influence of the politics of the left. This could offer a framework for research on more recent undercover operations.

Secret Manoeuvres—Conclusions.

The story about Hakluyt and *the Jobbing Spy* is an excellent example of the specific area of intelligence operations under investigation here: former intelligence officials hired by private agencies to do intelligence work exclusively defending the interests of a specific company. In the other case studies too, the people professionally involved tend to share similar backgrounds in police, the military or intelligence agencies. Both Pagan and his colleague Pattakos had had a long career in military intelligence advising various presidents, while his other partner Mongoven studied military strategy in his own time. McDonald's security staff shared a police background and closely cooperated with Special Branch. The data collectors in the other two case studies also had close connections with law enforcement and the intelligence world.

The case studies confirm that most private investigators and privatised intelligence agents see such background as a selling point and do not hesitate to use connections with former colleagues or friends. The result is an informal circuit of information exchange through a form of ‘old boy network’. The high-ranking officials who go private have been privy to classified and top secret information for years. They take that knowledge with them and potentially retain continuing access to it through their networks within government intelligence agencies, at home and abroad. They have knowledge of intelligence programs, covert operations, and the internal affairs of various countries that few can claim. Their experience, knowledge, and networks appear to determine their value in the job market. Theoretically, the profit motive also includes a change of loyalty. The duty of serving the greater good seems to transform into serving the interest of a few (Shorrock 2008). In practice, however, the same collection of people resurfaces in multiple roles, both inside and outside government. Wedel (2004b) emphasises that the movement toward privatising government work has created more opportunities for coordinated groups of individuals to take over public policy agendas in pursuit of their own interests.

The Hakluyt case study illustrates the intersection of state and corporate intelligence; in fact, it is an example of privatised intelligence and outsourcing. Hakluyt’s first board of directors comprised a gallery of retiring public servants aiming at a new career—word has it the creation had the blessing of MI6 (Overell 2000). Shell and BP played a role in the founding of Hakluyt, supplying high profile CEOs (often with close links to the intelligence agencies themselves) to take seats on the corporate intelligence board or its advising Foundation. The oil companies were also clients and provided a number of assignments for the company, as was illustrated by the work of their freelance spy. The informal links between corporate security and state intelligence increased leading to ‘incestuous relationships’ (as Toffler predicted in 1990). The restructuring of world business sees complex cross-national alliances, while globalisation also adds dimensions to the complicated political issues that corporations have to deal with. In other words, the challenges of the current timeframe increase the need for inside information and intelligence. Schlickenrieder and Hakluyt operated at the forefront of the information wars (ibid.), while their activities exemplify the workings of the network society (Castells 1996, 2003; Sassen 1996).

It is important to include the changing position of the TNC in the globalising world in future research and the growing reputation risks that cause an increase in corporate demand for intelligence on opponents and campaigners. The academic focus on policy by proxy seems too simple a concept to reflect the more complex contemporary security field that protects dominant interests within corporate and state power structures (Johnston 2007).

A corporation does not spy on its critics just to know what is going on: it does so to be prepared and to defend itself. The crucial connection between spying and the gathering of intelligence on the one hand, and the subsequent corporate strategising on the other, was the point of departure for my research. The concluding chapter of *Secret Manoeuvres* proposes to develop a new field of research to study what it tentatively called *activist intelligence and covert corporate strategy*—understood as the means by which corporate actors and their allies undermine public debate and engineer consent. As the case studies show, exposure of covert operations does offer a form of resistance to surveillance, an intervention in these politics, and at the same time a valuable addition to the proposed field of research.

2. Activist intelligence and covert strategy.

The need for a new multidisciplinary field of research follows from the findings presented in *Secret Manoeuvres*, and from the fact that at present no existing discipline engages with the topics involved. Intelligence studies fail to include ‘covert action’ in its definitions, let alone the strategies developed based on gathered information and the subsequent action. Management studies touches upon intelligence gathering, mostly in the context of competition in business or reputation management, but fails to address specifics of strategies to deal with consumer campaigns; engagement with stakeholders is summarised as

corporate social responsibility. The proposed new field of research would address the other side of dealing with critics of corporate policies, the dark and more secret side—as encountered in the case studies. Studies of policing protest focus on the effects of violence used against demonstrations; the question is how crowd control effects the mobilisation of activists and the success of political movements while the less visible strategies to challenge dissent do not get enough attention. The same goes for the fields of politics and social sciences, only beginning to get to grips with the influence of corporate power in democracies. Even Surveillance Studies tends to neglect the topics of infiltration and covert strategies employed to undermine activist groups, the cooperation between government and corporate actors, and the total lack of transparency and accountability in this field.

First outline

Framing activist intelligence and corporate covert action as a specific field of research is a first step to promote greater awareness of activist intelligence. The analyses of the case studies provide an initial plan, and inspired by the work of Judith Richter (1998)—but also by Peter Gill, Gary T. Marx and Janine Wedel—this is a first outline of the research terrain:

Activist intelligence and covert corporate strategy refers to intelligence gathering and assessment of the socio-political climate in which the particular company is operating; activities to manipulate public debates in a direction favourable to the company; and activities to exclude what the industry perceives as diverging or antagonistic voices. Additionally, *activist intelligence* refers to the organisation, and thus the people that collect and analyse the intelligence and are involved in the subsequent (covert) actions, a flex power force of privatised police and intelligence people now working for big business. This field of research focuses on intelligence gathering, the methods used and the people professionally involved. It also includes the processing of the information gathered and the subsequent strategic planning by corporations to make use of it: the *covert corporate strategy*.

The field of research not only covers the gathering of information, but relates to the development of covert strategy as well. The case studies in *Secret Manoeuvres* confirm that the analysis of intelligence informs how the company deals with critics. This could be proactive policy to stay ahead of possible problems, or the taking of preventative action before problems develop—or both. There is a need for research into what these policies entail.

Of course, the wider context needs to be explained too. Why do companies choose to undermine their critics? Are such operations supported by state actors, such as civil authorities, the police or (public) intelligence agencies? And if so, what forms do such joined efforts take: as formalised and regularised interrelationships, or as discrete, ad hoc efforts?

Those who have power also have capital and vice versa (Marx and Engels 1848). In the contemporary economy we need to examine the crucial value of information, and more specifically for corporate intelligence. Exploring *activist intelligence* for (further) options for resistance while failing to address the—asymmetric—power context in which the intelligence is produced seems inadequate. In the setting of TNCs acting against their critics, usually the power—for instance the amount of time and money at disposal—is unequally distributed. Similar asymmetries exist in the context of relations between the state and voices of dissent.

Our analytical framework draws on the tradition of power structure research pioneered by Mills (1956), and developed by Domhoff (2005) according to whom ‘to delineate a power structure and understand its workings’, we need both network and content analysis.

Location, location...

For this emerging area of research, we need to find a proper location between existing fields, and explore the types of theory likely to prove valuable in terms of questions already raised by the case studies and further issues expected to require theorisation in the future.

The infiltration of political groups fits with a number of areas of social scientific inquiry, including, as Marx (2012) notes: social movement studies on the repression and facilitation of protest, law or criminology on undercover policing and legal restrictions; social control; human rights protections and violations; and mass communication, surveillance, censorship and public opinion. Many of these areas come together in the area of Surveillance Studies (Murakami Wood 2009; Deflem 2008; Hier and Greenberg 2007), itself multidisciplinary in character. 'Thinking about society using surveillance as a concept enables us', as the Surveillance Studies Network (2014) notes, 'to mount an ethical, social and spatial critique' and 'enables us to question and evidence its impact on the social fabric: on discrimination, trust, accountability, transparency, access to services, mobility, freedoms, community and social justice.' While Surveillance Studies involves a variety of different domains (Ball et al. 2012; Lyon 2007; Ball and Haggerty 2005), mass (digital) surveillance and spying are key elements. Their importance has only been heightened in the wake of revelations by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden. By contrast, the proposed new field of research focuses on the social fact that even in the age of digital technology, states and corporations continue to believe that it is necessary to send undercover operatives into activist groups (Lubbers 2012; see also Bonelli and Ragazzi 2014).

Surveillance involves gathering and storing information as well as the supervision of behaviour. It can constrain the exercise of civil liberties (Richards 2013) and affect social progress (Nelson 2013; Starr et al. 2008; Burkhart et al. 2007). The monitoring and labelling of dissent is seen as a prerequisite for strategies to hinder civil society activities through ridicule, stigma, and silencing (Ferree 2004). Recent work has highlighted how state agencies identify targets by constructing them as such (Manning 2012; Brodeur et al. 2003; Brodeur 1983, 2007), and has shown that such constructions are shaped not only by, for example, ethnicity, class, religion or other characteristics of potential candidates, but also by the organisational structure of policing agencies (Monaghan and Walby 2012; Monahan and Palmer 2009; Cunningham 2004). The Church Committee Report (1976) illustrates this in great detail, documenting the FBI Counter Intelligence Programme (COINTELPRO) to undermine and 'neutralise' groups considered an 'enemy of the state' and the dangers of questionable activities justified by such intelligence morality (Churchill and Vander Wall 1988; Churchill 2002; Glick 1999; Donner 1990; Gelbspan 1991; Leonard and Gallagher 2015; Cunningham and Noakes 2008; Boykoff 2007). The field of activist intelligence will map the extent to which the secretive character of police undercover operations and the lack of accountability and transparency add to an apparent culture of complacency and also how links with corporate parties affected the identification of targets.

Dealing with dissent, or what may be perceived as dissent, has traditionally been viewed as the responsibility of the state. That has been changing over the last two decades in several ways. Control of protest is no longer centralised at the national level, the transnational protest has brought increasing collaboration between police bodies, with declining transparency (della Porta 2008). At the same time, spying on behalf of corporations continues 'to be as hugely under-researched as it is legally and ethically problematic' (Spalek and O'Rawe 2014). The proposed field of study will seek to enhance the literature with context-specific, qualitative case studies of police, corporate intelligence and private security agents who are increasingly involved in spying on activists (Blancke 2011; Earl 2004; Toffler 1990; Cronin and Crawford 1999). Building on Walby and Monaghan (2012), Boykoff's 'mechanisms of suppression' model could be of use to analyse the case studies, aiming to supplement existing typologies of repression of social movements by the state (Boykoff 2007) to include corporate influences on the policing of protest.

In his work on the risk society, Ulrich Beck explored issues of agenda setting and engineering of consent in a manner that could offer a way to link our new field of research to mass communication, public relations (PR) and issue management. The point is, Beck argued, who gets to decide, and on the basis of which legally defined norms of liability and proof, what counts as a 'risk', who counts as the 'responsible party' and who, therefore, is to pay if the worst comes to the worst? An important aspect of corporate PR is the promotion of the policies of rational and responsible leaders versus the short-term goals of 'emotional' protesters. Directors of multinational corporations, politicians and governments tend to consider conflicts over risks—such as protests against oil drillings, child labour or genetically modified food—as 'single-issues'-affairs. In weighing environmental costs against economic growth, they consider themselves to be the ones to see the bigger picture and to reach a 'rational' view (Beck 2005).

Activist intelligence will examine several specific aspects of the connection between risk and power, in order to, as Beck put it, 'get some indication how changes in the power relation of definition [...] can influence the political dynamic of risk conflicts' (ibid.). The gathering of intelligence about campaigning groups is an indicator of what the corporation employing the investigators considers as a risk, and how the corporation interprets the balances of power. Subsequent *covert corporate strategy* can be understood as attempts to remain in the position to define what is best for the society as a whole.

The ties that bind

This approach links *activist intelligence* to the field of green criminology. While many of the activist groups spied upon today are campaigning against transnational corporations such as power companies or airports with extension plans, the probable involvement of corporate intelligence agency has hardly been addressed yet. Likewise, the fundamental question of why the state would want to counter action on climate and rather defend vested business interests needs to be answered in order to challenge the debate about power relations and resistance mentioned before (O'Reilly 2010; Ellefsen 2012).

Mapping the close cooperation of government agencies with the corporations involved aims to provide evidence to initiate and substantiate a much needed public debate challenging both corporate power and state surveillance. Moreover, the on-going disclosures in the UK about undercover units—secret even within the police—that were able to infiltrate political groups without any accountability for the past forty years raise serious questions about the value of undercover policing and 'spying' as tools to protect democratic rights more in general.

As Ellefsen points out, the way protest movements are dealt with fits in with wider patterns in current crime control trends: together with Muslim fundamentalism, drug trafficking, migration and poverty, activists are increasingly being assessed as threats to state security by Western analysts. Such threat assessments he writes, "are characteristics of what Hörnqvist (2003) terms the 'Western public order policy'. The goals of order and security seem to come into conflict with social justice goals and citizens' right to privacy, freedom of expression and assembly, in addition to other liberties commonly taken for granted in liberal democracies" (Ellefsen ibid.).

Beck's work on the risk society also chimes in with the findings that growing reputation risks encouraged corporate demands for intelligence on activists (Lubbers 2012). The exploitation of intelligence as a multiplier of power exhibits a growing fusion between the public and the private sector in intelligence gathering. They are interconnected through sharing intelligence, the 'revolving door' or the arms-length deniability of outsourcing. O'Reilly (2010) calls this a reconfiguration of state-ordered power in which 'closely aligned state-corporate actors have emerged'. In order to move beyond the rather instrumental approach of policing by proxy—as discussed above—O'Reilly and Ellison (2006) reintroduced the concept of 'high policing'. The concept originates in the French Absolutist state, and for Brodeur (1983) it involves the promotion of state authority. But O'Reilly and Ellison detach it from its roots in the public domain and instead propose 'a more complex relationship of obfuscation whereby both public and private

high policing actors cross-permeate and coalesce in the pursuit of symbiotic state and corporate objectives'. They use high policing to reflect the 'more complex contemporary security field in which dominant interests within corporate power structures, as well as in state ones, are protected' (Johnston 2007).

Social network analysis can be a valuable addition to provide further snapshots of the workings of governance and the complex entanglements of formal and informal state and private structures and processes (Wedel 2004a, 2009). While in security governance the concept of network—the relationships between state agencies and those 'beyond the state' in the corporate and community sector—is, yet, under-theorised (Gill 2009), contemporary transformation in security are most effectively viewed through the prisms of networks (Dupont 2004).

So, rather than focusing upon 'who is pulling the strings', we will follow O'Reilly (ibid.) who states that 'it is more profitable to analyse "the ties that bind" these actors together'. These issues are crucial to the proposed research field as they touch on democratic states' responses to participatory political action. The field of *activist intelligence* seeks to map the political economy of these privatised intelligence networks, characterised by secrecy, insider or privileged knowledge and power.

We will reflect upon how sociologists and political scientists can join forces to further develop the emergent multi-discipline of Surveillance Studies (Raab 2013). Subsequently, the findings of our research could be used to develop Barnard-Wills' (2013) concept of surveillance as an inherently political activity.

Methods: Hybrid Projects

In short, there is a need for academic examination of how companies and the state spy on environmental and political activists, if only to support exploring the routes of resistance to undercover operations. Undermining dissent is essentially undermining democracy.

Like any new field of study, *activist intelligence* needs to build on case studies that are well-sourced and investigated. However, original source material is—almost by definition—hard to find, difficult to access, sometimes confidential, and often complicated to comprehend. Intelligence operations necessarily take place in secret, undercover. Data on such operations are confidential by nature, prepared for the client's 'eyes-only'. Such circumstances make research in this area, by its very nature, more demanding than many other areas of research.

Without proper sourcing, however, stories on surveillance and infiltration risk being dismissed as fabrication or paranoia. For this very reason, the set of case studies brought together in *Secret Manoeuvres* was uniquely based on previously confidential documented sources: these included notes taken by spies after each undercover operation, surveillance reports, and communications between private intelligence agencies and their clients. These sources provided an extraordinary insider look at the methods and routines of private spies. Each story was subsequently systematically unravelled to map the different aspects of the spying process. Detailing chronology, agents and strategy, each case is analysed as an actual intelligence operation, creating a new perspective on the events. Further research showed how the gathered intelligence was processed and used in proactive strategies; in other words, how TNCs use the information and act upon the perceived threats.

It is crucial to recognise that most if not all source material essential to *Secret Manoeuvres* got into the public domain by the—often joined—efforts of whistleblowers, investigative reporters and—most of all—the research of the very activists targeted by the undercover operations.

Joining forces

Secrecy seriously hampers research in the field of surveillance and intelligence studies, as it does in this field—and thus academics need to reach beyond their traditional research toolkit to forge new research methods and collaborations. Investigative research is a method of knowledge generation that integrates two truth-seeking traditions. One is in investigative journalism (as with the Watergate writings of Bernstein and Woodward). The other falls under the rubric of ethnography, case study, and so forth in social science. Investigative research “is particularly suitable for uncovering, understanding, and reporting social phenomena that may be hidden from or not easily accessible to observers” (Ho et al. 2006).

There are lessons to be learned from good journalism in Surveillance Studies, especially in areas of urgent social political concern (Lyon 2007) and about the importance of whistleblowers to which the recent Snowden revelations about NSA surveillance testify. Other investigative research methods to ‘liberate’ information (Scruton 2013) include the Freedom of Information and the Data Protection Acts; evidence presented in related court cases; press and professional press databases; reports of official reviews, Parliamentary Hansard, and so on. Interviews with involved actors to verify details are a further important source of information that is not yet in the public domain. An exceptional and inspiring example of liberating information is documented by Betty Medsger (2014) in *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover’s Secret FBI*.

Why would it not be possible for a social researcher to play a more active role in this field? The time is ripe for collaboration: coproduced research is needed by academics and NGOs, not just to demonstrate impact (Hayman 2012). Ideally, more research on different fronts results in publications that draw from the novelist, journalist, or detective on the one hand, and the social researcher as an academic on the other. As Marx noted back in 1984 on this issue specifically:

Such knowledge shares with the former the need to rely on non-rigorous and questionable data sources, the desire to raise issues, sensitise the public, and document problems, and a frequent reliance on individual cases. It shares with the latter respect for the logic of explanation and the need for empirical verification and generalisation.

Secret Manoeuvres intended to be the first of many of such hybrid publications aimed at understanding activist intelligence and resisting corporate counterstrategies. The intention of my next research projects is to build on that, and find the best ways to work with all those involved: from citizens’ groups, privacy advocates and lawyers to investigative reporters and whistleblowers.

The current undercover scandal in the UK offers a potential new avenue for future research to develop the new field of activist intelligence. The exposure of individual undercover officers and of the overall programme of long-term infiltrators in civil society was the result of investigations by the very people targeted by the spies—supported by the work of two reporters from *The Guardian*—which demonstrates that supervision and oversight from within the police have failed. The situation has not improved since: although more than a dozen inquiries have been announced, most are internal and will remain hidden from the public (Jones 2013). It took three years of revelations about police misconduct and mounting public pressure before the Home Secretary decided to announce an independent public inquiry. The range and remit of the independent public inquiry are yet to be decided.

Working closely with activists who have been the subject of this kind of surveillance as well as instrumental in exposing infiltrators, the Undercover Research project will support in the collection of further evidence of secret spying to provide evidence for the public inquiry. Significantly, these police operations appear to have been complemented by private surveillance of environmental groups and blacklisting of (principally trades union and green) activists by corporations (Gifford 2011a, 2011b; Lubbers 2013)—an issue that has not been addressed in any of the official internal reviews so far.

Through reconstruction of the close cooperation of state agencies with the private sector—such as pharmaceutical companies spying on animal rights groups, or energy companies collecting intelligence on environmental protesters—the Undercover Research project will provide both practical tools and investigative leads for further research as well as evidence to initiate and substantiate much needed public debates on corporate power in the present state of democracy, and openings for resistance.

Conclusion

Globalisation and neoliberal politics are the contexts of research in the field of activist intelligence and corporate counterstrategies. The collection of case studies presented in the first part of this paper highlights the privatisation of intelligence and the growing value of information as capital in power relations. The research reveals increasingly blurred boundaries between public and private in secret work, which represents a potential danger to democracy. *Secret Manoeuvres* sought to broaden the understanding of the policies of large corporations in their pursuit of power, and their efforts to avoid public debate and silence critics, and the shared agenda of the state in pursuing these goals. The Undercover Research project would build on the foundations of research already undertaken, and aims to contextualise the exposed infiltration operations in a manner which will be of benefit not just to academics, but also to activists, civil society actors, the marginalised and the wider public. The importance of the issues at stake calls for a more active role for social scientists, investigative journalists, politicians, NGOs and others concerned about the role of public protest in society.

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