

## Introduction Surveying the Field

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On September 29, 2015, Edward Snowden launched his Twitter account with the sardonic Verizon-referencing tweet, “Can you hear me now?”<sup>1</sup> Within one day, the message had been favorited and retweeted over 100,000 times each and the National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower had gained over a million followers.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Snowden has used the platform to advocate for more stringent legislation against mass surveillance and cautioned users to encrypt their data. However, throughout his tenure on Twitter thus far, he has only followed one account: the NSA itself.

The decision to conspicuously follow an agency that covertly follows the digital practices of over a billion people worldwide is both a provocative joke and a sobering acknowledgment of the vexing asymmetries of government surveillance. Snowden’s choice to use social media, one of the epicenters of bulk data collection, to warn of the threats of bulk data collection presents another telling duality. As a result, his Twitter stream encapsulates some of the debates that have enriched the dialogues of surveillance studies in recent years. In addition to Foucault’s oft-cited formulation of “panopticism,”<sup>3</sup> it evokes Thomas Mathiesen’s notion of “synopticism,” the many watching the few,<sup>4</sup> and Anders Albrechtslund’s idea of “participatory surveillance,” the voluntary interaction between observers that can be playful and galvanizing.<sup>5</sup> That these modalities seem to operate concurrently in this case gestures to the challenges of analyzing surveillance in an age of intensely compound monitoring capabilities.

Tasked with outlining the dimensions of such a multi-scalar phenomenon, this *Media Fields Journal* issue suggests turning to spatiality as one compelling point of entry. To map the uneven cartographies of targeting and management, scholars can home in on particular sites and interrogate how they interact with specific technologies, subjectivities, and mediating processes. Moreover, we can consider embodied spaces, especially as computational logics assign differential risks and exert intensifying force upon precarious individuals and populations. Thus, in order to recognize the multiple valences of *veillance*, we should tactically zoom in and out of various ranges and perspectives like the optical devices that are recording our movements.

Using this multi-sited and polyvocal approach, we can also think through the concept of “surveillance states.” This term gestures to the intricate overlays of historical precedents of mass surveillance programs, surveillance implemented in the names of national security and territorialization, the affective conditions of living under supervision, and *veillance* as a dynamic capacity in a perpetual form of flux. At the same time, it also speaks to the fluid state of surveillance studies itself, reminding us that academic discourses are themselves historically situated and prone to their own purviews and blind spots. Consequently, to survey the current state of this field, this issue both builds upon a long theoretical lineage and identifies shifting formations that warrant further inquiry. Across these eleven articles, the authors each explore aspects of surveillance states, scale, and spatiality, and investigate recurring themes that include technology, militarization, power, race, desire, subjectivity, and resistance. Their contributions offer unique perspectives on these topics, but also engage in overlapping dialogues and raise complementary questions.

Lisa Parks and Jason Farman are among the authors that address the material experiences that emergent technologies participate in. Both analyze the IMSI catcher, a largely unconsidered technology that augments the many issues around cellular interception. Because this potent device collects data and eavesdrops on phone conversations at a mass level, it also reminds us that surveillance studies must exceed the realm of *visuality*. In her contribution, Parks provides a historical overview of the global manufacture and adoption of the IMSI catcher. She also points out some of the troubling aspects that its uses suggest, such as the reductive logic of the “nothing to hide” defense and the paternalism of Western liberal justifications of surveillance. Farman examines this interception device as a springboard to develop his concept of “surveillance from the middle.” For him, this vantage point is more suited to addressing the materiality of asynchronous intervention technologies and their mediating effects. He supports this argument by also looking back at an antecedent communications technology, the delivered letter, and its censorship by US military officers in World War II.

Andrea Miller and Alexander Champlin extend the discussions of surveillance within systems of militarization. For them, it is an instrument that can calcify existing power relations, but can also reveal some of the fissures in and failures of dominant institutions. Drawing on the increasingly nebulous boundaries between military and civilian spaces, Champlin describes “swatting,” a genre of prank in which anonymous gamers invent emergencies to send SWAT teams to live-streaming players’ homes. He argues that this leveraging of military spectacle in domestic spaces produces an interactive form of digital media that can be best understood through the terms of banality and play. Andrea Miller’s essay analyzes the Abu Ghraib photographs of ghost detainee Manadel al-Jamadi’s corpse to examine the biopolitics of dead bodies in the War on Terror. For Miller, the photographic record of al-Jamadi points to the state’s inability to exercise full datalogical control over narratives of the dead and its necropolitical impulse to circumscribe certain populations to the domain of the unseeable.

Issues of (in)visibility and race also come to the forefront in Simone Browne and Anirban Gupta-Nigam’s articles. Given the enormous scales of violence and discriminatory tracking that racist systems perpetrate against marginalized groups, race is one especially vital area to study in greater depth. As Browne has argued in her book *Dark Matters*, the historical applications of surveillance against African Americans has not been fully acknowledged in most extant theories of surveillance. In this contribution, she discusses an ancestry testing app that creates new opportunities for digital exclusion on the basis of fixed ideas about racial identity. Browne points to the rise of a new genetic battleground waged between increasingly sophisticated DNA authentication devices and strategies of falsification. Meanwhile, Anirban Gupta-Nigam engages with the cultural fantasies of making blackness visible, and theorizes a blackness that takes the form of ground or medium that occurs prior to public consciousness. In this sense, blackness is a constitutive force in producing relations of power and shaping the ways observers imagine the social environments they encounter.

Mark Andrejevic, Scott Sundvall, and Gavin Smith consider the imaginaries of user engagement as well, focusing on the roles that desire and selfhood play in contemporary experiences of watching and revealing. Noting the dissipating boundaries between surveillance and self-display, Andrejevic discusses scopic drives through the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. His psychoanalytic approach leads him to posit a “total surveillance” enabled by the obliteration of subjectivity—in other words, the obliteration of the lack that generates desire in the first place. Sundvall also focuses on psychic inclinations through his term “desiring-surveillance,” or the desire to see and be seen. He employs Gregory Ulmer’s idea of “electracy” to analyze the contemporary cultural formations that desiring-surveillance enacts and negotiates. Meanwhile, Smith seeks to explain the limited public response to Edward Snowden’s disclosures and users’ reluctance to alter digital media practices. He proposes that quotidian “companion structures” have

routinized cultural processes of digital performance, visibility, and monitoring today and thus, have made widespread resistance to mass surveillance an unlikely prospect.

Relatedly, Thomas Stubblefield, Beth Capper, and Michael Litwack provide ways to complicate and reconceive familiar notions of resistance. They do so by positioning resistance both in response to and achieved through surveillance mechanisms. Stubblefield juxtaposes two cases of disappearance from surveillance: the performative self-erasure of Peter Bergmann and the decades-long evasions of Christopher Thomas Knight, “the North Pond Hermit.” Stubblefield compares Bergmann’s visual and geographical crossing of thresholds to Knight’s bounded space, to explore how the digital sphere may be radically coopted. In their article, Capper and Litwack address how feminist organization Hollaback! frames its smartphone app as a defense against gender-based street harassment. Rather than praising this strategy as an empowering way to mobilize women, they discuss the ways in which Hollaback!’s imperative to map urban geographies dovetails with the carceral and racialized regimes of state surveillance. As such, we are reminded that resistance is not a uniformly emancipatory category, but one that also necessitates its own critiques and counter-resistances.

By collecting all of these articles into one digital space, this issue underscores some of the generative intersections in the conversations about surveillance occurring across disciplines, contexts, and objects of study. It rethinks the ways we situate our investigations and indicates new ways to imagine future interventions and critiques. Ultimately, in doing so, this issue hopes to avow that the state of surveillance studies today is as dynamic, responsive, and multifaceted a field as the spaces and states of surveillance that it surveys.

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## Notes

- 1 Edward Snowden (@snowden), “Can you hear me now?,” *Twitter*, Sept. 29, 2015, <https://twitter.com/Snowden/status/648890134243487744>.
- 2 As of publication in March 2016, Snowden had reached 1.92 million followers on Twitter.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 202–3.

- 4 Thomas Mathiesen, "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited," *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 2, 215-234, 218-9.
- 5 Anders Albrechtslund, "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance," *First Monday* 13, no. 3 (2008), <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2142/1949>.

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