

SECTION 1

OPENINGS AND DEFINITIONS

How one defines surveillance is vital. Definitions inform the types of research one does and claims one can make. Although it may be true that the specific interests of scholars, which are disciplinarily conditioned, lead them to prefer some definitions over others, the early years of the field saw greater variation in definitions than is typically the case today. This is probably because scholars were dispersed and mostly working in separate areas with few opportunities to form a consensus about key definitions or concepts. With a few exceptions, though, participants in the field quickly agreed that surveillance signified more than passive observation; it was instead, or additionally, about the production of power relations.

One of the first scholars to consider surveillance as a singular phenomenon was James B. Rule (excerpted in Chapter 1). He and his colleagues defined surveillance as “any systematic attention to a person’s life aimed at exerting influence over it” (Rule et al. 1983: 223). This sociologically inflected definition depends on a liberal conception of personhood that sees individuals as sovereign agents shaped by external influences and interactions. Concerns emerge when these external forces might be destructive, unwanted, or unaccountable—as with the bureaucratic surveillance analyzed by Rule. Because this definition derives its potency from a view of individuals’ essential rights

under attack, this framing logically leads to appeals to the law to mitigate such harms.

The modifications that have been made to this type of definition have been predominantly influenced by a Foucauldian conception of power that decenters the individual and emphasizes the ways in which all people are caught in webs of power relations. So, instead of placing the individual human subject at the center, the focus of analysis could be on groups, societies, or even nonhumans. The introduction of the possibility of the nonhuman subject of surveillance has several implications. The first is that nonhuman creatures might be under surveillance, which has been considered at greater length by both Iruv Braverman (see Section 2) and Kevin Haggerty and Daniel Trottier (2015). The second implication is that it might not be human beings directly who are under surveillance, but rather situations, events, or a person’s indirect traces in data, which are the details of one’s “life” in Rule’s sense. This attention to information and personal data is at the heart of Rule’s book *Private Lives and Public Surveillance*, which was published in 1973—a few years before Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*—at the beginning of what was then being called the “database society,” so clearly Rule was negotiating a few different approaches to power. Scholars such as Roger Clarke (see Section 9) and Oscar Gandy (excerpted in Chapter 2) would later pick up this focus on surveillance through

data (or “dataveillance”) and develop it further. Even today, information and data remain central to most contemporary definitions of surveillance and to the field more broadly, as the selections in this reader testify.

By crafting definitions to emphasize populations or groups as the targets, one can focus analytic attention on issues of governance. For instance, in his influential book *Surveillance, Power, and Modernity* (1990), Christopher Dandeker defines surveillance as “the gathering of information about and the supervision of subject populations in organizations” (Dandeker 1990: vii). This definition seems to offer a rather wider sense of who or what is under surveillance—the term “subject populations” both strips out the requirement for the subject of surveillance to be an individual or even to be human at all. Through its explicit reference to subjection, it also draws attention to power, and with the last phrase of the definition, “in organizations,” provides an institutional framework for that power. In some ways, one could argue that surveillance is about making and remaking both subject populations and organizations, often at the same time. William Staples (excerpted in Chapter 3) emphasizes this co-constitutive relationship in his investigation and theorization of “everyday surveillance.”

Likewise, David Lyon’s oft-quoted definition of surveillance—as “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (excerpted in Chapter 4)—retains a focus on the person, but his analysis is further concerned with “sites” of surveillance (both actual and metaphorical) and with processes. Beyond simply “watching,” Lyon’s definition explicitly considers the purposes and qualities of attention that are needed for something to be “surveillance.” One of the dangers inherent in a new transdisciplinary

field like surveillance studies is the “imperial urge” to redefine everything as surveillance, and while some, like Gary Marx (2016), do indeed argue for a maximalist definition that recasts casual observation or just “looking” as somewhere on a continuum of surveillance, a primary purpose of definitions is to clarify the object of study, as well as its social context. Lyon’s highlighting of the “focused, systematic and routine” nature of surveillance separates out surveillance from other, more casual, occasional, and disorganized forms of attention. It does not, of course, say anything about the social significance or morality of either, merely that they are not the same. Gary Marx’s own *modus operandi*, as demonstrated by his excerpt in this section, is to produce comprehensive lists of features and characteristics of surveillance, against which any particular thing can be assessed. He stresses key differences between earlier modes of surveillance and “new” digital surveillance.

These definitions offer different prisms for thinking about the various sites, forms, targets, and functions of surveillance. Some mechanism of control or regulation may be seen as necessary for surveillance to be taking place, but the theoretical frames adopted by scholars color their views of what else matters most (e.g., individuals, groups, contexts). While the goals of those implementing surveillance systems may seem like an obvious focal point, for some time the field has been concentrating instead on conditions, contexts, experiences, and negotiations of surveillance (e.g., Ball 2009; McCahill and Finn 2014; Saulnier 2016). Perhaps with the advent of big data and automated analytics, definitions will have to shift to emphasize the construction of *emergent* purposes in a society in which surveillance is ubiquitous and all data are collected as a matter of course.

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