Book Review: Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology by Gary T. Marx

In **Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology Gary T. Marx** *offers an in-depth examination of what it means to surveil and be surveilled in the contemporary era and how this is impacting the interplay of security, privacy and society. The book illustrates the slipperiness of the surveillance slope and the difficulty of assessing where and how to draw the line ethically and legally, writes* **Courteney J. O'Connor**.

Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology Gary T. Marx. University of Chicago Press. 2016.

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Windows into the Soul is an in-depth examination of what exactly it means to surveil and be surveilled in the contemporary era. Technological developments are making it more difficult to both comprehend and maintain 'privacy', which itself is a highly contested concept. Author Gary T. Marx, emeritus professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and frequent commentator on the interplay of security, privacy and society, argues that extractive technologies are turning life into series of exploitable data points than can be connected in a multitude of ways to reveal new truths, not just about individuals but also societies and subgroups within them. According to Marx, we are now moving further and further toward the kind of high-tech, invasive surveillance that previously was the bastion of science fiction. Availability of data (or lack thereof) is also recalibrating societal norms: what were your thoughts the last time you searched for someone online, only to realise they didn't have a profile anywhere? *Has* that actually happened to you?
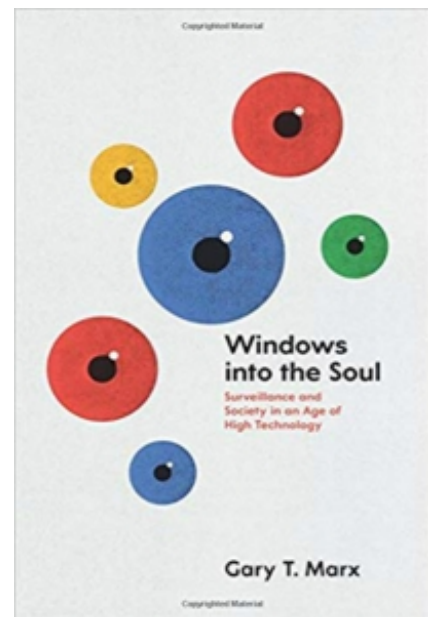
The first four chapters of the book cover the 'social structures of surveillance' (12) and develop surveillance-related sociological concepts and related frameworks for understanding. Part of the purpose of this approach is to attempt to bridge the divide between different fields of research. Given the ubiquitous importance of surveillance, I can only encourage and be grateful for research that attempts to 'cross-pollinate' and get academics to look beyond what Marx terms our own 'patches of grass'.

Early on, Marx differentiates between both 'old' and 'new' surveillance, and 'non-strategic' and 'strategic' surveillance. Old or traditional surveillance refers to that which relies on our own

senses: hearing, sight, touch. New surveillance, on the other hand, 'may be defined as scouting of individuals, groups, and contexts through the use of technical means to extract or create information' (20). This is an important guiding concept in this text: the idea that the more data we create, the easier it is for the surveilling party to both extract or create information through what Marx calls the three 'Cs' of surveillance: contract, coercion and care.

Nonstrategic or passive surveillance is data which is simply offered up by the world at large: it can be 'collected' through the use of our unaided senses and does not generally have a high value. Strategic or active surveillance, which produces the sort of information valuable to corporations and states, includes information that the subject of surveillance either doesn't offer freely or may have reason to withhold (16). Both of these varieties of data, no matter how anonymised or ambiguated, can now be assembled in greater volume than ever before, thus producing information previously unavailable to interested parties.
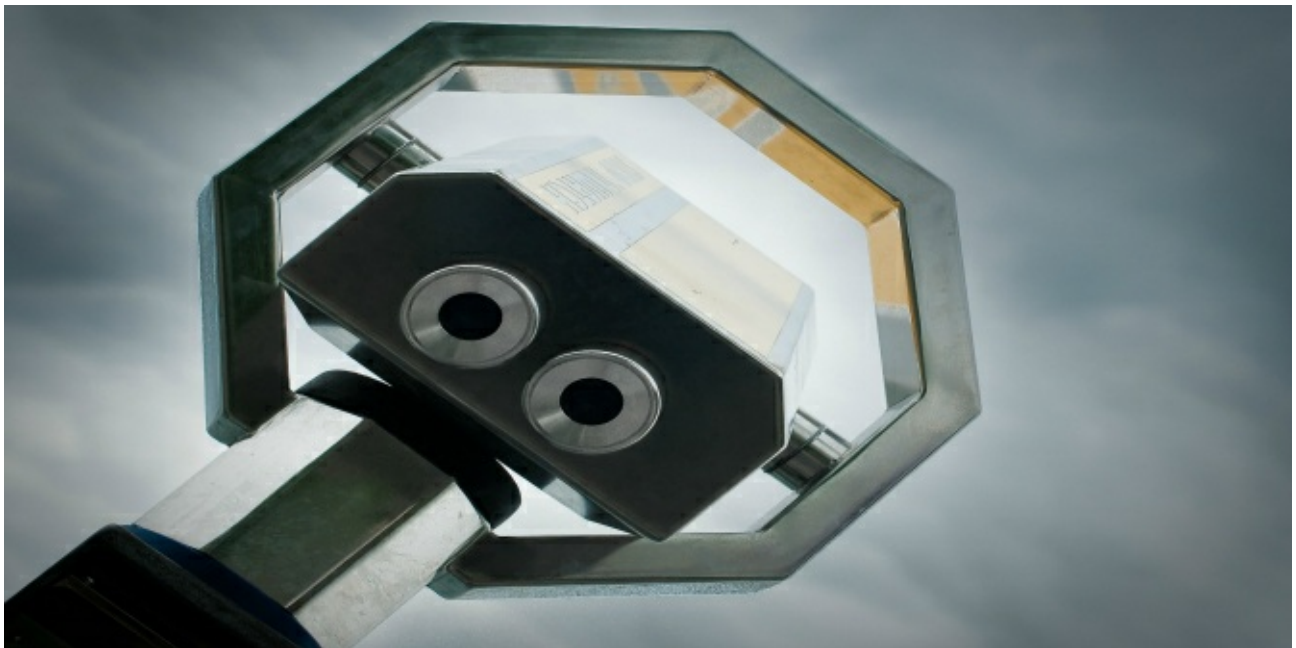

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This new surveillance, and the contributive technologies, have also blurred the lines between the subject and the agent of surveillance, another theme that can be traced throughout the book. Where once there were a few, upper-echelon individuals or organisations to whom intelligence from surveillance was funnelled, the explosion of surveillance-capable technologies and their diffusion to the general public have ensured that surveillance now goes both ways, and this has important implications for security and privacy from the perspectives of both the individual and the state.

As we have seen in recent years, there is an increasing debate over the nature, value and importance of privacy, particularly individual privacy for those that live in highly technologised and thus fairly closely-surveilled societies. In the modern age, in addition to surveillance and intelligence collection by states, there is also a growing body of corporate data-gatherers to whom individuals release their data, whether knowingly or unknowingly. It is mentioned early in the book that commercial use and collection of data (or, surveillance) at this point in time very

likely exceeds that of any government (47). This is not to say the state is not actively collecting private information: democratic states, for example, literally depend on the collection of private information in order to function. States, as well as corporations, are now 'data avaricious', and the continuous innovation of technologies with surveillance applications has made porous the border between public and private information (47). There are many reasons for this collection of public information, not least of which (at least on the part of corporate parties) is that there is now profit to be made from the sale and trade of information on clients and customers.

In later chapters, Marx discusses the innovation of surveillance neutralisation techniques, and the counter-neutralisation techniques that are evolving and increasing in both number and sophistication the further along this road we travel as a society. He also notes that in many respects, even when individuals 'choose' to provide information, the choice may not be as free or voluntary as we are led to believe. If the cost of nondisclosure is significant, is disclosure then a genuine choice? How voluntary is information that was given in order to avoid the negative consequence of not providing it? Marx illustrates the many questions raised about privacy, confidentiality and personal security through four (fictitious) case studies: satirical examinations of the extremes possible in a closely-surveilled and highly technological society. The cases do strain credulity, but they concisely illustrate the slipperiness of the surveillance slope, and the difficulty in assessing at what point surveillance has become too intrusive and entered the realms of the unethical, though not always the illegal. One case, that of Tom I. Voire in Chapter Nine, proves a little too capably that it is possible to engage in extreme surveillance that would be popularly considered a horrific breach of social etiquette, personal privacy and security without ever contravening the law.

Marx closes the book with a discussion of the ethics and policy of surveillance, and an examination of the many questions raised by the level of surveillance we engage in, experience and allow or disallow as both agents and subjects. There are two phrases which I think well represent both the book and the field of surveillance itself. The first is that 'surveillance is neither good nor bad, but context and comportment make it so' (320). The second is that 'modern democratic society is a farrago in a cauldron of conundrums accompanied by myths shielding harsher realities' (309). I most definitely recommend this book to academics, security practitioners and those interested in surveillance and security.

Courteney J. O'Connor is a PhD candidate with the National Security College of The Australian National University. Her research considers the securitisation of cyberspace and the development of cyber counterintelligence policy and practice. Read more by Courteney J. O'Connor.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.