

Seeing a Bigger Picture

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Abstract The publication of Gary T. Marx's (2016), *Windows into the Soul*, comes at a good time. As the study of surveillance continues to grow in the social sciences, scholars will benefit from the disciplinary rigor of the book, which encourages a broader consideration of the contexts in which surveillance occurs and a deeper recognition of its dynamism as a social practice. In this brief essay on Marx's grand work, I reflect on how these insights could be extended by more critically considering the cultural contexts of surveillance studies and the potential points of connection with research on materiality.

Keywords Surveillance · Technology · Social Theory · Materiality

Surveillance studies has emerged as an important research area in the social sciences over the last 20 years. With a wealth of studies on a diverse range of topics, a dedicated academic journal, and research centers housing creative minds, the field helps illuminate the impact of innovative information and communication technologies on contemporary social life, especially their effects on privacy, self and group identity, and social control and justice. But as expansive as surveillance studies is, a certain repetition has begun to set in, with newer works often confirming older conclusions about the negative influence of technology. Gary T. Marx's (2016) *magnum opus*, *Windows into the Soul*, comes at an opportune time then. Grounding itself in a view of surveillance as a central aspect of

human interaction, and taking guidance from a range of social science perspectives and empirical sources, Marx's work helps identify points of obstruction in the field. And in doing this, it offers key paths forward for scholars studying surveillance and lessons that any social scientist would benefit from.

In this comment, I reflect on the main contributions of Marx's tome to our understanding of surveillance and highlight the opportunities it provides to expand the field through a deeper sensitivity to both social contexts and the complexity of interpersonal dynamics embedded in surveillance. I then take Professor Marx's advice to heart by suggesting how an expanded consideration of contexts can offer additional insights into surveillance in contemporary society.

Windows into Surveillance Studies

Windows into the Soul is too rich a work to condense into a one or two line summary. The other contributors to this symposium will no doubt shine the light on other dimensions of the work. But for me, the book rests on 3 ideas. First, the field of surveillance studies has been limited by a narrow theoretical orientation, a preference for analyzing certain social settings at the expense of others, and a general lack of cumulative and systematic empirical grounding. Second, surveillance is best understood as a deeply human relationship whose character, quality, and dynamics vary by context. And third, appreciating the dynamism of surveillance requires breaking the phenomenon down into its constituent elements and examining how they vary by situation.

To the first point, Professor Marx contends that the field of surveillance studies can be grouped into two camps, the surveillance essay and the focused empirical inquiry—the former

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attempts to “capture the appearance of new kind of society but without specificity to take us beyond very general statements”, and the latter is “often too narrowing, divorced from larger questions and too unaware of research in nearby fields” (Marx 2016: 13–14). If this distinction sells short key works that make theoretical statements about the changing nature of society based on rich empirical studies of surveillance in particular settings (see, for instance, Zuboff 1989; Norris and Armstrong 1999; Monahan 2010, among others), it does help orient the reader to the field in general. And as evidence of the tendency of the surveillance essay to make larger pronouncements concerning the fate of society, *Windows into the Soul* provides an impressive list of 30 distinct terms that scholars have coined in recent years to describe this new type of society (Marx 2016: 43–44). For Marx, the problem with the proliferation of theoretical descriptors is that they do not go far enough in advancing our understanding of surveillance. Rather, they perpetuate a traditional dystopic tale about the negative impact of technological innovation on individual privacy, identity, and autonomy in society.

The repetition owes in large part to the enduring influence of Michel Foucault’s (1977) seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault’s shadow is problematic for different reasons, not least of which is his focus on one type of surveillance context: organizational control over individual subjects. Foucault focuses on the watchers who, in Marx’s language, “are directly carrying out internal constituency, non-reciprocated, rule-based, organizational surveillance of individuals on behalf of the organization’s goals” (Marx 2016: 64). As a result, “those uncritically under Foucault’s spell, collapse or reduce the more general process or activity of surveillance to just one context—the organizational—and to one goal, which is control, a term often used interchangeably with domination and repression.” But this overlooks a wide gamut of other settings involving surveillance that deserve our attention, including “organizational surveillance for more benign ends” (hospitals), “interorganizational surveillance” (spy games involving intelligence agencies during the Cold War), and “the nonorganizational surveillance by individuals of each other” (people admiring one other at a dance club). As other scholars like David Lyon (2001) have noted before, surveillance concerns care as much as control. And *Windows into the Soul* extends this point, adding to the mix two additional contexts—contracts and public information—to provide a fuller framework for the multiple forms of surveillance.

These points on context go hand in hand with another limitation in the field, which is the tendency to reduce the goals of surveillance to compliance with authority. Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish* was that the prison was a model for a new type of power (discipline) in modern society that operated across social contexts, including schools, hospitals, and other institutional sites. But reducing surveillance in society to this singular goal overlooks the multitude of reasons

why people may engage in personal monitoring, which range from “prevention” (of disease) to “knowing oneself” (measuring one’s performance on a particular exercise).

When a broader array of contexts and goals are considered, what surveillance looks like shifts in simple, but fundamental ways. In the context of care, surveillance agents such as parents may feel a moral obligation and legal responsibility to invade the privacy of their children to ensure their well-being. In the context of public information, the peeping tom has abundant (legal) resources available to him to conduct his monitoring. In the context of contracts, surveillance provides the means for employees to identify unfair work conditions and enforce rules against unsafe work conditions. As well, the seemingly unidirectional power dynamics involved in surveillance relationships can shift over time—“as the child reaches adulthood and leaves home, surveillance declines significantly. The pattern may eventually be reversed as the adult child looks after elderly parents” (Marx 2016: 128). Thus, despite what might commonly be assumed in the US and Western Europe, society is not on a singular path to ever more and stronger surveillance. Even organizational surveillance seeking rule compliance can contract or disappear as authoritarian regimes fall, scandals bring changes in law, counter-surveillance neutralizes the original monitoring activity, or surveillance simply proves too costly.

Windows into the Soul thus serves a key role in diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of the field. As someone with at least one foot firmly and proudly in the surveillance essay camp, I find Marx’s critical approach a refreshing opportunity for self-reflection, even if my initial reaction was somewhat defensive. Of course, when one places an entire field of study in the crosshairs, one would be wise to have some solid alternatives on offer. And here is where I find the book’s strongest contributions.

The Importance of Being Situational

Professor Marx’s work on surveillance over the past three decades is notable for its faithful adherence to and execution of core teachings from sociology as a discipline. Nowhere is this truer than in the book’s theoretical perspective. As a fellow sociologist, I found it refreshing to see Erving Goffman as the primary theoretical inspiration for the work. And reflecting the dramaturgical approach that Goffman popularized, Marx approaches surveillance as an information game, where surveillance agents collect data about subjects, who in turn have the ability to respond to their being observed or monitored. “Humans are wonderfully inventive at finding ways to beat control systems and avoid observation,” Marx (2016: 142) observes. But then, of course, those surveillance agents have the ability to counter the resistance to their monitoring. And typical of its organizing attention to detail, *Windows into the*

Soul notes four types of agent response to resistance: technological enhancements, deception and randomization, use of multiple means, and new rules and penalties. The dramaturgical approach offers a more dynamic vision of surveillance than other approaches. *Windows into the Soul* provides a hint of what surveillance studies would look like if the institutional analysis of Goffman had carried the day instead of that of Foucault.

Any work emphasizing the dynamic qualities of a phenomenon runs the risk of analytical imprecision—that is, the fluidity of social interactions resist simple conceptual classification. But on this score—breaking surveillance down into its constituent elements and detailing their composition—Marx’s work is simply without peer. Each chapter of the book is dedicated to a different broad dimension of surveillance. This includes of course the means of surveillance, the focus of most studies, as well as the goals, types of data, processes, culture, contexts, and ethics. And within each of these dimensions, *Windows into the Soul* drills down to demonstrate their conceptual and empirical richness. One of the most rewarding chapters is that on the processes of surveillance, where Marx maps out seven distinct moments. These are: 1. tool selection; 2. subject selection; 3. data collection 4. data analysis; 5. data interpretation; 6. data use; and 7. data fate. This is middle range theoretical work at its finest. And I could imagine researchers in other fields of study, especially science and technology studies, benefitting from adopting such a rich conceptual framework for analyzing the situational or embedded nature of technology.

This injection of disciplined sociological practice into surveillance studies is important as it serves to emphasize the enduring tension between structure and agency. This philosophical concern might seem dated, or simply wrong from the beginning, given the ways in which different structures are said to empower individual agency (Sewell 1992; Latour 1993; Bourdieu 1977). But when one considers the difficulty with which the individual is able to take action in our contemporary world without the mediation of information and communication technologies, most of which possess a surveillant capability whose scope is not readily apparent to users or agreed to in any meaningful way, it is difficult to dismiss the structure and agency divide as irrelevant. As Marx (2016) rightfully claims, “the issues that generate concern for us in the twenty-first century, and that preoccupied Huxley and Orwell in the twentieth century, Mill and de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, Burke and Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and Locke in the seventeenth century endure” (xvii). For this reason, as the last chapters of the book spell out, effective policy and sober research are needed to ensure that new technologies might engender rather than inhibit the effective exercise of agency and development of the self. In sum, by heeding the lessons offered in *Windows in the Soul*, the social scientist has in her hands an invaluable

resource for asking the right questions of digital monitoring in our contemporary age and understanding its complexity across contexts.

Taking these Lessons to Heart

But beyond offering praise, let me turn to some critical thoughts. More than critiques of Professor Marx’s ideas, the following can be viewed as applications of the book’s lessons. In offering these views, I hope to demonstrate the payoff of the book’s analytical approach.

A first point, admittedly minor, concerns the challenge of making distinctions. With any conceptualization work, the trick is striking the right balance between breaking a phenomenon down into its component parts while having the distinctions be parsimonious. As noted above, *Windows into the Soul* provides an authoritative account of the integral elements of multiple dimensions of surveillance. But some of these distinctions overlap, which would make applying them to the empirical world difficult if an example fits several categories. For instance, in the chapter describing different forms of resistance, “piggy-backing” and “switching” both refer to efforts to mask one’s own identity or data as someone else’s. “Distorting” and “masking” both involve moves to block the transfer of information. In the chapter on goals, “strategic advantage” feels a lot like “discovery”, in that both deal with “obtaining information that is unavailable”.

One way to demonstrate the usefulness of conceptual distinctions is by testing their grip on the real world. And this is perhaps the biggest gap in *Windows into the Soul*. While the book encourages researchers to conduct studies that are “empirically grounded and attended to factors that allow for a more realistic assessment of utopian or dystopian predictions” (Marx 2016: 5), there is little evidence that the conceptualizations offered in the book would necessarily grant us deeper purchase on the world. This is understandable. A single book cannot do everything, and the goal of *Windows into the Soul* is to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for conducting better empirical research and indirectly improving practice. The five enjoyable narrative “true fictions” in the book serve that purpose to an extent. But even without data of its own, the work might demonstrate the utility of its conceptual arsenal by applying it to an existing dataset, or well-known accounts of surveillance, such as Edward Snowden’s saga as told in *Citizenfour* (Poitras et al. 2014), to bring to light new aspects of stories we thought we already knew.

Similarly, for its emphasis on the importance of contexts, *Windows into the Soul* in places feels like a book specific to the United States, or perhaps the Global North, and the histories, values, and concerns making up those cultures. The book is not unaware of this. In the chapter on ethics, Professor Marx (2016) is careful to note that, “the perspective

I offer applies to conventional domestic settings in a democratic society for those with full adult citizenship rights” (278). And the work also cites literature on how geopolitical change can shift monitoring activities in places such as South Africa and Eastern Europe. But a broader consideration of how surveillance changes across cultures and times would bolster the book’s arguments. When I read phrases such as, “the erotic looks that lovers may grant each other in public are usually not acceptable when offered by others” (Marx 2016: 235), I found myself agreeing, but also thinking of the other places in the world where the absence of wanting looks in public is cause for concern, understood as the devaluation of that person looking to make a favorable, even indelicate, impression. Similarly, the book’s historical claim that “while people had less personal information to protect in the past, they also perhaps had less reason to protect what was there, at least within the small village” (Marx 2016: 304) lands awkwardly, since the relation between protection of information and the size of one’s social world would seem to move in the opposite direction. In smaller communities where out-migration is uncommon or impossible, as it was in pre-modern times, defending one’s honor, which involves managing personal information, carries more weight than in modern societies, where escape is more readily an option. One thinks here of “honor killings” in strongly patriarchal societies today, where the limited opportunities offered to women makes information concerning their reputations potentially lethal.

If some parts of *Windows into the Soul* could be taken deeper, the book also suggests other avenues of inquiry that future work on surveillance might explore. Consider for example points of connection with science and technology studies on the importance of materiality (Pickering 1995). Surveillance in the book is very much a human affair, involving moves and counter-moves between agents and subjects. Technology is intimately involved in these dynamics. But it does not fundamentally change the name of the game, which is individuals and organizations trying gain an upper hand over, or play with, or enjoy, one another. I have no profound disagreement with this view. But post-humanist perspectives encourage us to consider material objects not merely as tools reductive to human intentions, but as co-constituents with humans in an evolving “becoming” in the world (Pickering and Guzik 2008). In the same way that the introduction of the rail travel (Schivelbusch 1979) or salt (Kurlanksy 2003) brought about new experiences of the world, it would be interesting to reflect on how technological devices allowing digital visibility and monitoring produce new dimensions of human pleasure (quicker communication, new modes of interaction, unprecedented audio and visual experiences) or discontent (the perceived need to check one’s device constantly, a quickening of the pace of life, a reduced ability to focus, etc.).

We might also reflect on the ways in which materiality impacts upon surveillance beyond the technological device. We (still) live

in a material world, and agents have long understood that material conditions can be worked to arrange things in their favor. Such was the case with Bentham’s prison, as well as in the creation of Paris’s main arteries to allow visibility of possible insurrections (Mumford 1961), or the construction of electrical and communication grids to permit the extension of administrative centers over rural areas (Hughes 1983). Such material settings have long been central to the power of agents to conduct surveillance. While the novelty and rhetoric surrounding digital technologies (“wireless”, “clouds”, “mobile”) give an ethereal air to the new surveillance, these technologies co-exist with or are embedded into these older infrastructures. And disruptions in new surveillance can occur when the fit between the digital and analog worlds fails, when wireless devices stray too far from the servers, routers, and relays that connect them to the older infrastructures, and so on. These systemic interactions require our attention as well.

Finally, we might consider the extent to which the self, the center of surveillance in *Windows into the Soul*, represents a historical artifact of its own. Foucault’s genealogies of course looked to historicize the formation of the modern self. In a recent work on surveillance in Mexico, I examine how forms of self-identification, from naming conventions enforced by the Spanish during colonialization to national identification numbers introduced by the post-revolutionary state, have shaped the self in Mexico (Guzik 2016). So, the self and the monitoring of the self are reflective of larger social conditions. In this sense, what will become of the self in our digital future is an open question. Many young adults today have matured without needing to know how to sign their names, a central material practice for identifying oneself. One wonders how the self will continue to evolve as identification practices continue to migrate to the digital realm. Thus, a broader reconceptualization of humans’ place in the material world is needed to more fully understand the impact of surveillance.

Again, none of the preceding points is an argument against the central claim of *Windows into the Soul*—that surveillance as a social phenomenon varies across contexts, thus requiring both analytical rigor and dexterity to make sense of it. Rather, they are meant add to that rigor and dexterity. In other words, they are intended to help realize what Professor Marx’s work would have us do, which is to see a bigger picture when we look at surveillance.

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