



What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Surveillance?



"POSTER-surveillance-is-bad" by [Global Voices Online](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

For this edition, I, Noah Wason, wanted to discuss my approach to designing courses that focus on surveillance (something that aligns well with Charles's post below). This semester at Binghamton University, I am teaching an upper division writing course that focuses on the intersections between surveillance and algorithmic technologies. My twenty-five students are Juniors and Seniors, half of which are majoring in either Economics or Psychology (several of them are also minors in the new Digital & Data Studies program). As expected in a writing course, students engage with a variety of forms: they write blog posts, analyze and remediate privacy policies, and even devise their own studies that require them to collect data from social media platforms. These projects and activities are designed to give students an opportunity to learn "through" writing, or to use writing as a way to critically examine and deepen their engagement with surveillance as an area of study.

While the course title "Surveillance and Social Media" certainly captures students' initial attention, I do hope that by the end of the course it's the ethical dimensions that linger with them. I tell students that many of them are well versed with the benefits of the algorithmic infrastructures supporting the social media and streaming platforms they use everyday, and that my course is meant to introduce some cognitive dissonance, a critical perspective that is meant to empower them to view these technologies with much needed skepticism. As a result, students frequently comment that my surveillance course is a little on the cynical side and at times can be a bit of a "downer." Just six weeks into this semester, one of my students confessed that the more they learned about data bias, algorithmic prediction, and surveillance capitalism, the less they wanted to be a data scientist in fear of contributing to the

problem. Others felt like the issue was too far beyond them, that they are powerless to change things. I replied that this hesitation is the very reason they should become a data scientist, for we need people who thoughtfully consider the harm of these technologies rather than those who ignore them. I also stressed that being critical of technology is not the same as being anti-technology or anti-platform, if anything you see their potential to move in a more beneficial direction and believe that they can.

Instances like this are actually moments to be hopeful. First, it tells me that students are not only paying attention but they care about the impacts of data-driven technologies. It also tells me that they want to contribute to the world in ways that make it a better place. Considering their feeling of a lack of agency, I also see it as my responsibility to offer some potential trajectories forward encapsulated in three different approaches for addressing our surveillance-saturated present.

The first approach is to demystify surveillance. This means exploring how the technologies behind surveillance work but also wrestling with how we talk about surveillance (the “discourse” around surveillance). For my own courses, I help students to work through theoretical concepts like Foucault’s *panopticism* and Cheney-Lippold’s *measurable types* in addition to thinking about their practical applications. Considering how integral data collection and algorithms are to our “dataveillance” present, I help students to think about how these technologies work in everyday situations. Showing students that they can understand what these technologies “do” and for “whom” without coding experience. To this end, we focus on the rhetorical dimensions of these technologies: their intended and unintended consequences for the ways we connect and communicate.

The second approach is research and activism. This means doing the slow, intentional work of designing studies, working through theories and concepts, and discovering new ways to think and talk about surveillance. This approach also means taking that knowledge and applying it towards solutions to the real-world problems surveillance causes. This might mean taking extra measures to protect our personal information, voting for candidates that make data and privacy a priority of their platform, or advocating for populations that are over-surveilled and experiencing the worst consequences.

The third approach is policy and regulation. This is developing the laws and legislation that gives us the tools and sociopolitical power to challenge decisions and actions that seem beyond our control. This might mean creating policies that prevent data brokers from selling our personal information to law enforcement agencies. It could also mean creating legislation that requires social media platforms to compensate people for their data or to ban the use of sensitive personal information for targeted advertising altogether. This work does not exist only on the federal level, some of the most impactful and successful work has been in local governments. Part of this means understanding how surveillance systems work to begin with, but an even more important part is understanding the importance of privacy not just for ourselves but for the most vulnerable among us.

You may have noticed that these three approaches are very interconnected. When we think of what it takes to address surveillance systems and their harms, no one can solve this problem alone. It takes collective action across all three approaches: some people will conduct research and studies, some will design more ethically sound systems and technologies, others will teach people about surveillance or contribute to policy creation, and even more will support local organizations in their efforts to directly confront surveillance's ill effects on their communities. In reality, it is not going to be a billionaire and his most ethical employee that immediately changes things for the better. It is going to be the long-term work of many, many everyday people.

For this edition of the DRPC Newsletter, I have organized the readings according to the three approaches outlined above.

Approach 01

Doctorow, Cory. *How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism*. First edition, Stonesong Digital, 2020.

Doctorow's two chapters about persuasion (chapters 5 and 24) along with his chapter about fake news (chapter 21) offer a different way to think about what internet platforms offer and connect really well rhetoric as a discipline. His three larger concepts (segmenting, deception, and domination) give us another way to look at surveillance capitalism and the larger technology companies that drive it. Doctorow focuses on the effects of these platforms instead of their promises (consequences over intentions), thereby providing us different terminology and arguments for discussing surveillance's social, political, cultural, and economic impact. His surprisingly approachable text works well to demystify the rather broad reach surveillance has over our everyday lives and offers some practical ways forward.

Approach 02

Cala, Christina, Vren Stollberger, and LA Johnson. "COMIC: How a Computer Scientist Fights Bias in Algorithms." *TED Radio Hour Comics from NPR*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/14/1085160422/computer-science-inequality-bias-algorithms-technology>.

Computer scientist, scholar, and activist Joy Buolamwini's comic gives a good encapsulation of her research projects, larger findings, and how she uses her scholarship in her work to challenge bias in algorithmic systems. She is a good example of a scholar whose work extends thoughtfully into local activism and informs the policy and regulation work she does with the [Algorithmic Justice League](#) (even speaking before Congress on issues related to AI). Buolamwini is also the subject of the excellent documentary [Coded Bias by Shalini Kantayya](#) (available on Netflix) which examines many of the ideas my students explore in my surveillance courses. Many of the articles we read and podcasts we listen to in class are also developed by scholars and writers doing this work.

Approach 03

Farivar, Cyrus. *Habeas Data: Privacy vs. the Rise of Surveillance Tech*. Melville House, 2018.

Cyrus's thoroughly constructed text walks us through all of the legal precedents informing our current surveillance, data, and, privacy policies. The Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution (what is often shorthand as our "right to privacy") is the focus of his "Telephones" chapter. While the fourth amendment is where the understanding of a "reasonable right to privacy" comes from, Farivar ends on a note we might find a little disconcerting considering the "public facing" nature of social media use: our right to privacy does not protect us in spaces we may think of as private (such as our homes), but it does protect what we actively seek to keep private (even in public spaces). This begs the question: should social media posting ever be considered private? Given what our movements through physical spaces can reveal about us, should similar protections be extended to our digital movements? Is there a post-tracking cookie future for the internet? While his text does explore the heavy lifting required of the fourth amendment, Farivar is essential reading when examining the different legislation that has been proposed in recent years to update our protections in the present moment.

Upcoming for the DRPC

Welcome DRPC Graduate Assistant:

Please welcome Michele Hearn, the new DRPC Graduate Assistant Researcher!



“My name is Michele Hearn and am from the awesome city of San Antonio, Texas. Currently, I serve as an ESL (English as a Second Language) coordinator in the DFW Metroplex. With nearly two decades of experience in the field of public education, my journey began at Texas State University, where I earned my bachelor's degree. Today, I'm enthusiastically pursuing a master's degree in applied linguistics at Texas A&M Commerce, driven by my unwavering passion for language and its practical applications, especially for my Emerging Bilingual Students.

My interest in the research assistant position on the Digital Rhetoric Privacy Collective (DRPC) advisory board stems from my eagerness to explore how we can enhance digital literacy in education. As a person of color, I'm deeply invested in the social justice aspect of the DRC's mission. I also bring to the team the perspective of a public educator who has witnessed students grappling with the ever-changing challenges in public education. My ultimate goal is to ensure that every child, regardless of their socioeconomic status, has equal access to a safe and high-quality education.

I am genuinely thrilled to be a part of the advisory board's mission to promote digital awareness among the general public. My specific focus within this mission is to extend this awareness to students and parents within our public school system. Together, we can empower our community with the knowledge and tools they need to thrive in an increasingly digital world.”

Blog Posts:

Charles Woods offers his thoughts on “[Becoming the Research](#)” in his recent offering through the DRPC Blog. In addition to some insight on the formation of the collective, Charles also shares his experience introducing a privacy and surveillance focused course to Texas A&M-Commerce with Gavin Johnson.

Conferences:

Banville, M., Kalodner-Martin, Elena., and Lindgren, Chris. (2023, October). Show your work! Three methodologies to revise and reimagine quantitative work as communication design [Panel Presentation]. Special Interest Group on Design (SIGDOC), 41st ACM International Conference on Design of Communication, Orlando, FL, USA.

Banville, M., Ringler, Hannah., Oswal, Sushil., and Gresbrink, Emily. (2023, October). ChatGPT and Business Communication [Panel Presentation]. “Surveilling, Ethically Exploring, Exploiting, and Analyzing: Using Generative AI Tools in the Professional Communication Classroom.” Association for Business Communication (ABC). Denver, CO, United States.

Chen, C., Kong, Yeqing, and Lin Dong. (2023, October). Designing crisis crowdsourcing: A dynamic critical interface analysis of crisis response documentation in China. Special Interest Group on Design (SIGDOC), 41st ACM International Conference on Design of Communication, Orlando, FL, USA. [awardees of the SIGDOC Career Advancement Research Award].

Call for Papers

Morgan Banville and Gavin Johnson’s [special issue of Peitho, “Talking Back Through Rhetorical Surveillance Studies: Intersectional Feminist and Queer Approaches.”](#) is currently accepting proposals (500 word proposals due October 27, 2023).