
Self-surveillance or an adversarial relationship with the self?

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Introduction

Surveillance as a concept tends to have a negative connotation, often paired with images of the all-seeing eye and the panoptic prison. Yet the definition of the concept of surveillance used for this workshop: “the ‘close watching over’ of a person or a group” - removes much of the implied dialectic of the “knowledge/power” relationship that Foucault used to define this term [3]. The workshop themes further distinguish between adversarial and non-adversarial forms of surveillance and yet we would argue that the word surveillance should retain its negative connotation.

Perhaps it is important to differentiate between being watched and being seen and to consider the nature of the relationship rather than a priori classifying forms of surveillance as adversarial or not. After all, “surveillance of the most vulnerable” cannot justifiably be classified as always non-adversarial. Take for example Gilliom’s work on low-income mothers from Appalachian Ohio where surveillance is most certainly an adversarial relationship [4]. Mass surveillance, on the other hand, may not be an adversarial endeavor when the government’s relationship with its citizens is one of significant trust. In our own work with personal health trackers and health promotion campaigns in the workplace we found that employees in the Danish company we studied seemed to trust their employer implicitly. They also expected that their government

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Participant showing Fitbit-tracker and Withings tracker worn on each wrist, and photos from study.



"It stays at home today"

(Participant showing a watch she wanted to wear with her outfit, instead of the tracker)

would intervene if the health tracking information were to be used in an unexpected way and their only concern about data collection by institutional and commercial actors seemed to be advertising [see 5,6]. In our own research and in that of our colleagues we have repeatedly noticed that state mass collection of personal information about citizens is not only often expected and even welcomed but that Danish citizens at times expect the state to know far more detailed information about them than it actually does.

Couldry and van Dijk [2] have recently argued that there is a need to theorize the dialectic of system and practices, primarily focusing on stakeholders (both users and companies) involved in the Western European experience of social media. This call for considering the structural context of technology use is welcome but in its focus on private and commercial actors it tends to overlook the socio-political context of everyday life that is shaped by the way individuals relate to the state and the systems of governance within which they live. Shklovski & Kotamraju have previously demonstrated the importance of paying attention to the role of the state in how individuals make decisions about creating content online [9]. Yet relationships with the state do not necessarily have to be adversarial and these too will structure how people think about personal data disclosure.

Self-disciplined self-surveillance

The idea of "close watching over" implies a kind of relationship – one of care and relational work rather than an expression of power. To regain the imbalance inherent in Foucault's panoptic notion of surveillance here we use Gilliom's definition of the concept [4]: "the very idea of 'surveillance' – roughly translated as *watching from above* – implies that the observer is in a

position of dominance over the observed." This sort of watching and being watched has been increasingly connected with technological advance and scholars have termed much of technology use that involves some sort of watching and monitoring as surveillance. Given this repositioning, however, we must ask what about "self-surveillance"? Can individuals be in a position of dominance over themselves? Is the self so recalcitrant that it needs to be dominated through technological means by monitoring what can be monitored? Can self-surveillance be adversarial?

Those engaged in significant efforts of self-tracking rely on tracking devices (Fitbit, Apple watch, Microsoft band, Jawbone, Nike Fit, etc.) to collect vast amounts of information about themselves – the types of information that are largely impossible to collect otherwise (try counting your steps in your head instead of relying on a step-counter). These devices then change the conditions of access to information about our selves and our worlds. Many scholars have pointed out that this kind of constant feedback on relatively arbitrary parameters can structure the embodied experience of daily practice for device users [8, 10]. Yet structuring experience is not the same as determining it [1] – structuring merely refers to generating a new set of mediation layers and constraints, but does not mean forcing a particular predictable mode of action. Health tracker users integrate these technologies into everyday lives in ways that are messy, heterogeneous and often quite strategic.

We have conducted several studies with personal trackers in different contexts. We found that our participants skillfully manage their devices and self-surveillance activities.

Some participants had “weekend-rules” of tracking, or would leave the tracker behind on vacations, or if it didn’t fit their outfit. Others re-defined their goals as they went along. For example, one participant explained how she was not bothered by her low step-count on days when she has migraine attacks; “*It doesn’t bother me that I don’t get to walk on the days when I’m sick, I’m close to dying if I might say so, and then it’s damn unimportant how many steps I walk*” (Amelia, e-mail). One participant explained how he had been annoyed at the tracker telling him he had been inactive, when he already knew it and there had been perfectly good reasons for it. He took off the tracker, and sought to find other ways of balancing his desired levels of activity with his work, without the tracker (Oliver, follow-up interview).

Semantic discontinuities of self-tracking

Self-trackers mediate the user’s connection to the real in much the same way as any other networked technologies. Haraway spoke of this as a kind of mediation that is “just beyond our conscious awareness” [1, 7]. The rhetoric around self-tracking technologies promotes these devices as empowering users to take control of their lives. Instead of leveraging the tracking capabilities, however, our participants created ways to avoid self-tracking or ignore the built-in nudges at least some of the time. Cohen proposes the notion of “semantic discontinuities” – the gaps, the inherent incompleteness of technical systems – as spaces where the “play of everyday practice” can happen [1]. The people whom we studied artfully created discontinuities in self-surveillance via health trackers to fit the inconsistencies of daily life into the rigidly envisioned counting self-trackers are designed to enforce. These semantic discontinuities

were also perhaps a way to ensure that self-tracking and self-surveillance do not transform into an adversarial relationship with the self.

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