Watching by the People
From Them to Us

When we think of surveillance, what typically comes to mind are the activities of organizations such as corporations or the police. These are enormously important players in the operation of surveillance, but there is an entire realm of watching conducted by individuals that is not coordinated by organizations. This watching undertaken by everyday citizens has expanded in recent years, often with the aid of new information technologies, and it represents yet another broad trend in the contemporary dynamics of surveillance in Canada.

People watch one another, and they have always done so. We watch because it gives us strategic power over others, because people are inherently interesting, and because, as can be seen in the broad sweep of human history, watching others provides an evolutionary advantage. We come to know the world around us and our place in it by interacting with other people. Watching and being watched are also fundamental parts of how we define who we are. We act out roles—child, sibling, parent, employee, friend, spouse, lover—and adopt characteristics depending on how our performances are received by others. We shape our identities based on how other people see us and react to our behaviour.

So people have always conducted routine forms of day-to-day surveillance of other people. In recent years, however, such scrutiny appears to have expanded. We now watch in ways that only a short time ago would have been
impossible or taboo. This change can be explained, in part, by the emergence of new technologies that make it easier for individual citizens to become watchers. It is also a sign of a growing surveillance culture, where watching has become a routine and unremarkable part of social life.

The surveillance conducted by organizations often (but not only) involves the more powerful watching the less powerful. So, for example, the police watch criminals, social workers scrutinize people on social assistance, and employers monitor workers. What makes the surveillance conducted by everyday citizens particularly interesting is that it can involve people from the less powerful echelons of society monitoring people from more powerful levels. So, for example, individuals now use camera-equipped smartphones to record police behaviour.\(^1\) Global media also shine an often intense light on the foibles and indiscretions of celebrities and political figures.

This type of surveillance can involve some of the most intimate realms of our lives. Parents, for example, use new commercially available smartphone monitoring applications and even home drug tests to expand upon their traditional responsibility to watch their children. They also set up “nanny cams” in household objects such as smoke detectors or teddy bears to secretly monitor spouses, children, and caregivers. Canadians involved in the substantial world of online dating have been encouraged to run formal background checks on potential romantic partners. Should the romance go sour, they might hire private detectives who specialize in exposing unfaithful spouses.

Perhaps the most interesting and fluid area of citizen-initiated monitoring can be found in the realm of online social media. Given the ever increasing significance of such media, we focus on them here as an extended example of how citizens are increasingly caught up in the dynamics of surveillance, not just as the targets of observation but also as watchers themselves.

### Individual Surveillance for Connection and Convenience

Given that surveillance can have a negative impact on our political, social, and economic relationships, it may seem strange to suggest that surveillance can also be fun. But there is an unmistakable playfulness in watching and being watched by others, as has become particularly apparent on social networking sites. We post photos and comments on Facebook and Twitter and look at what friends, family members, and neighbours have posted about
themselves because it gives us a window into the lives of others. By making supportive, funny, or crude comments or by tagging photos and “liking” products and videos, we also shape how others see us. While these services can be abused—for example, in cases of stalking and harassment—they also help us to strengthen our sense of connectedness to the people in our community.

Canadians have embraced social networking, and many of us use social media platforms as a matter of course. For example, as of 2011, some 15.4 million Canadians were on Facebook, and Canada had more users per capita than any other country in the world. In a recent survey, 79 percent of Canadian adults reported that they had used Facebook in the past month. Although adults under thirty-five were more likely to have logged on (88 percent), a significant majority of those aged thirty-five to fifty-four (78 percent) and those over fifty-five (66 percent) were also active users. Close to half of them (48 percent) spent five hours or more on social media per week. Canadian schools have been online since 1999, and, from the time that Canadian young people first had access to social media, they have consistently reported using them to try on different identities, deepen their friendships, play, learn about
the world, and express themselves. For many of us, social networking has become an integral part of our daily lives.

We also participate in social media—watching and being watched—to help others. When Hélène Campbell, a twenty-year-old Ottawa woman, needed a double-lung transplant, she posted a video on the Web and tweeted pop star Justin Bieber to ask for his help in promoting the importance of organ donation. Both the video and the tweets spread rapidly among members of the online community, who responded in droves. Campbell documented her illness, transplant, and recovery on Facebook; her site has been viewed over six hundred thousand times by people in 159 countries, and record numbers of new organ donors have registered in response to Campbell’s campaign. On sites such as Patients Like Me (http://www.patientslikeme.com/), people can post the details of their medical condition so that this information can be pooled with data from others and used for health research.

Sharing information in these contexts can be both caring and productive. In the online world, we all watch each other and know that, in turn, others are watching us. Watching and being watched is the point of social networking: the greater sense of connectedness that many of us now feel to the world around us is arguably a result in part of the ease with which we can share our lives and interests with others. Keeping in touch with friends and family, following our favourite shows and celebrities, enjoying our interests, and shopping are all more convenient precisely because we share so much about our private lives with people online. However, when someone else—an employer, a police officer, a fraudster, a stalker, a marketer, or even a nosy neighbour—oversteps the boundaries and submits us to too much scrutiny, we are left feeling both invaded and vulnerable.

In the online environment, there is no simple way to distinguish institutional surveillance from individual surveillance. On the one hand, the consequences can be similar: both the police and an abusive spouse can monitor an individual’s social networking profile for the purposes of control. The individual will experience this monitoring as a form of surveillance in spite of the fact that one watcher is an institution and the other is an individual. On the other hand, we may be willing to accept surveillance from institutions who seek to care for us—public health organizations monitoring social networks to identify outbreaks of contagious diseases come to mind—and yet be uncomfortable with the caring gaze of a neighbour.

At the same time, the distinctions between institutional and individual monitoring can matter. There is a qualitative difference between checking
out someone’s social media profile out of simple curiosity and the kinds of monitoring that governments and businesses conduct using large databases and sophisticated mining, profiling, and analytical techniques. Moreover, individual monitoring may amplify institutional monitoring. Every time we post personal information online, we inadvertently participate in our own surveillance because the information is easily captured by a variety of actors—from marketers, to the state, to identity thieves—who use it for their own purposes.

Laws designed to protect us from unwanted monitoring focus on whether we consent to the collection, use, and disclosure of the information we generate when we use networked communication tools. On social media sites, the fine print suggests that we trade our personal information for free access to the site. However, just because people use social media does not mean that they are willing to give up their privacy. The “privacy paradox”—the fact that people who report a high level of concern about their own privacy continue to disclose personal information in order to gain a benefit of some kind—continues to confound policy makers, who tend to equate privacy with secrecy. But our privacy expectations on social media are far more complicated. Consider some recent statistics. Seventy-two percent of Canadians agreed with the statement “When someone posts something on social media, it is fair game for anyone to search it out and view it.” But almost the same percentage of people (75 percent) reported that they are concerned about other people invading their privacy by viewing their information on social media. Two-thirds (67 percent) agreed that if people were aware of what they were finding out about them through social media, they would be embarrassed or unhappy about it.

**Youth and Social Media**

Young Canadians are perhaps the most sensitive to the problems of online surveillance. In a recent qualitative study conducted for MediaSmarts, Canadian teens lamented the high degree of monitoring to which they are subjected by their parents and teachers. Many of them have incorporated social media into their everyday communications with friends, but parents often fear online interactions and, accordingly, fall back on surveillance to keep their children safe. Most of the teens—and parents—who participated in the study equated this kind of parental surveillance with spying,
and it made the children feel both untrusted and untrusting. As one teen in Toronto said, “My mom trusts me enough to, like, actually bring a guy-friend home . . . but she doesn’t trust me enough to, like, have him up on Facebook, which kind of makes me depressed.”

Surveillance by parents makes it more difficult for teens to use social media to meet their developmental needs to separate from the family, grow up, and take on adult responsibilities. To do that, they need both privacy and trust. Consider the words of another Toronto teen: “There should be a point where parents will just like, leave you alone and not have to know every single thing about you.”

Perhaps most importantly, the teens who were not routinely monitored by their parents were the ones who were the most comfortable going to their parents when they had problems with online harassment and offensive online content. Ironically, children’s participation in social media has made many parents fearful that unseen watchers will prey upon their children. To protect them from these unknown others, parents place their children under individual surveillance, but that action may very well erode the trust that is at the heart of the parent-child relationship. The playfulness of online visibility is, accordingly, closely tied to worry and harmful renditions of caring.
that the streams of information they collect from the children are used to improve their online experiences.¹

Club Penguin, another site originally created by Canadians and since purchased by Disney, encourages its users to sign up to spy on other children. As members of the Penguin Secret Agency (P.S.A.), they receive a special spy phone, the F.I.S.H. (Factual Informative Spy Handbook), and the ability to enter Headquarters. There, they learn that their “duty” is to report any penguin that is mean or rude, uses bad words, asks for or reveals personal information to other children, or breaks any of the other site rules. Children who keep their spy identity hidden and do a good job of spying receive virtual rewards. In this way, children learn that surveillance is fun and useful, and they become socialized into a culture of monitoring. The legal fine print on the site explains that the information that children release while they are on the site—including any artwork, stories, or other original material that they post there—becomes the property of the corporation.

Institutional Surveillance via Social Media

Sometimes the process is transparent. The visibility that comes with online participation makes it easier for information to cross lines: photos, videos, and text posted in one context can be used in another to hold people to account publicly for how they behave in their private lives. For example, on rare and controversial occasions, an employer looking to hire new staff has asked for a potential employee’s Facebook password so that the employer can see everything that has been posted on the site before making a hiring decision. And a number of professionals, including teachers, have been disciplined or fired for their postings on social media. These cases remind us that the boundary is very porous between playful publicity and more conventional, top-down forms of surveillance.

More typically, however, the information flow is hidden, and we are unaware of how our information is used by others to shape our experiences and limit our opportunities. Again, the statistics are revealing. Eighty percent of Canadians surveyed believe that they have a say in what happens to their personal information, and the vast majority are opposed to corporations being able to scan email messages for information about people’s interests (96 percent), to track the content of their Internet searches (88 percent), to share information about the websites they visit (90 percent), or to share the information they post on their social media sites (90 percent). Yet all of these practices are common, driven by a business model that profits from the information we reveal as we go about our online lives. The specifics are hidden in terms of use agreements and privacy policies that are continuously criticized for being difficult to understand and are fuelled by data-mining technologies that seek to divide people into categories so they can be offered services and targeted with advertisements.

The multidirectional visibility associated with social media is the direct effect of the operation of algorithms that are designed to categorize people in accordance with the logic of the marketplace. Through Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and other social media, we contribute to the classifications made by other agencies that use our data. When we post our preferences, habits, musical and food tastes, political viewpoints, or religious commitments, this places us in categories. Using privacy settings does not stop others from assessing and judging us; corporations can tell a great deal about us just by looking at the “friends” with whom we are linked online.
Most people assume that this kind of information is only used to determine which ads we are “served” when we are online. The fact that advertising is now embedded into our social world is interesting in many ways. Although most people (mistakenly) assume that they are immune to the influence of ads, advertising has a significant impact on our relationships, our view of the good life, and the kind of people we want to be. But advertising is just the tip of the iceberg. Corporations use the information they gather about us to reconstruct the social environment itself in order to promote certain kinds of identities and relationships that advance corporate interests. Online playgrounds collect children’s personal information and use it to embed the brand into their sense of who they are. Sites using social media to sell tampons offer “advice” to teenaged girls and encourage them to talk to the corporation when they cannot talk to their mothers as they did when they were children. Facebook suggests to users that they add certain products to their “likes” to help them express their individuality. All of this shapes and constrains the kinds of people we are, often without our knowing it.

In addition, social media do not always make us visible in the ways we prefer to be visible: that is, the categories into which we are placed do not necessarily fit with how we see ourselves. This is particularly problematic for people who are marginalized in some way. For example, profiling is used to determine which group of people is likely to spend the most on certain goods. Stores seeking to sell furniture, electronics, and household goods have moved out of poorer areas in Ottawa because the people who live there do not fall into the demographic category that the store is seeking to attract. Because of this, those left behind may now have to take public transit to a store farther away just to buy food. The freebies offered to individuals who are profiled as desirable consumers are based on a system in which others who are more vulnerable get less.

The same is true for those of us who come to the attention of the authorities. Social media make it much easier for governments to identify and monitor people who are collecting employment insurance or social welfare benefits or are participating in political dissent. The traditional standard for state surveillance—reasonable and probable grounds to suspect that a crime has occurred—is side-stepped when policing agencies can simply go online and watch citizens. Ironically, privacy laws have made this easier by permitting organizations like Facebook or Google to disclose personal information to police and intelligence agencies upon request, and without a warrant,
in the course of an investigation relating to the enforcement of any law of Canada, of a province, or of a foreign jurisdiction. This is a low legal threshold for an extensive surveillance capability.

These kinds of practices raise significant concerns about the democratic relationship between the citizen and the state. Access-to-information and privacy laws were passed in the 1970s to ensure that the state would be transparent to the citizen so that the citizen could hold the state to account for its actions. The citizen, however, was entitled to privacy from the state because privacy is what enables citizens to enjoy autonomy. Today, it is increasingly easy for the state to access information about the private lives of citizens. For example, one Alberta man was convicted of an assault after he posted “I superman punched a guy” on his Facebook status; when he testified in court that he did not hit the victim, the judge did not believe him because of his online comment (R. v. Tscherkassow, 2010 ABPC 324). In another case, three
also directed anger toward visible targets. Suspected rioters were embroiled in a virtual witch hunt, and many people were stigmatized as a result. Camille Cacnio, a local university student, was caught on video looting a clothing store. She was publicly identified, which, in addition to prompting the normal legal responses, offered her up to a city looking for a scapegoat. Cacnio became the target of hateful speech, much of it racist and sexist. This hate campaign spread elsewhere on the Internet and had an immediate impact on her quality of life. She was fired from her job and is now permanently visible on the Internet for what will probably be the most shameful incident in her life.

While rioters should be held accountable for their actions, the way they were pursued and vilified on social media marks the rise of a troubling kind of online vigilantism. The mob mentality that fuelled the riot was matched by an online mob mentality. All of the harm associated with surveillance—including profiling, prejudice, and the curbing of life chances—was effectively surrendered to the crowd. This online crowd was not held accountable to any professional standards. Although users might have believed that they were helping the police, such crowds can actually be a burden to police because their responses can lead to further social harm (suspected rioters receiving threats, families having to move out of town, etc.). Police are experimenting with techniques and technologies to monitor social media content, including open source intelligence, lawful interception, and social engineering. One has to wonder what kinds of surveillance will occur the next time hockey fans take to the streets.

Teens in British Columbia were suspended from school after participating in a fight that was videotaped and posted on YouTube, even though the fight was consensual and no criminal charges could be laid. The teen who posted the video was also threatened with suspension. In both cases, incidents unlikely to have attracted official sanction were brought to the attention of authorities because of social media.

At the same time, the processes through which the government collects information about citizens often take place behind closed doors, without any judicial oversight, as data are mined, matched, and run through algorithms to determine risk. This switch—from state transparency and citizen privacy toward citizen transparency and state privacy—threatens to upset the democratic balance.

But visibility is a two-edged sword. Social media have also played a role in calling the state to account for abuses of power. The video of Stacy Bonds’s
strip search by members of the Ottawa police and another of a police officer pushing a disabled woman to the ground in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside spread rapidly on YouTube, mobilizing citizen concerns and demands for accountability. And cellphone footage of police actions posted during the G20 protest in Toronto helped to bring questions about abuse of power to the forefront of the debate over globalization.

Our complicated relationship with surveillance makes it both easier and harder to hold powerful institutions to account. Certainly, we can expect more struggles in the future over who will control the products of all of this monitoring. Some American jurisdictions have already made it illegal for citizens to take videos of police, and Apple has recently patented a device that would let the police disable the recording function on wireless devices within a defined area. But backing away from social media may no longer be an option. Not only does refusing to disclose information about ourselves make it more difficult to find out about upcoming events or to participate in public...
have always been highly visible as uniformed representatives of the justice system, the affordability and availability of cameras over the past decade has allowed citizens and activists to significantly enhance their visibility. Portable cameras have given citizens the opportunity to document interactions with officers like Constable Josephs and to expose their questionable behaviour via social media websites.

Furthermore, cameras and social media have given the public opportunities to review and critique the behaviour of officers while voicing their concerns with policing institutions. It follows that police officers are susceptible to novel surveillance regimes that encourage public discussions about police incidents and to a new form of performance review. The political implications of these surveillance regimes are ambiguous and complex, encouraging questions like, Will this surveillance hinder police officers’ ability to serve the public? And will the public’s ability to monitor police officers deter deviant policing practices? There are no simple answers since the implications of this new visibility in policing are often ambiguous and require in-depth research. That said, one reality of policing’s new visibility is that information about police is more available than ever before, creating new challenges for police organizations and their ability to manage their public image.1


Conclusion

Social media, then, have at least two faces as far as surveillance is concerned. We use networked technologies to watch—and be watched by—our friends, neighbours, and family. But because of that, it becomes harder to separate the social flow of information within the community from the instrumental use of that information by governments, employers, and businesses. Even though very few of us amass huge databases on others, we all contribute to those databases by posting the details of our private lives, and the lives of others, online.

It is likely that social media will continue to be a means of connecting, sharing, and keeping in touch. They will also help us to “watch out for”—care
for—others in an increasingly fragmented and anonymous world. Many stories—like that of Ottawa's Hélène Campbell—circulate about how people struck by accident or illness have been helped by distant others, connected through social media. But new issues related to watching and the implications of social media surveillance must be addressed.

The challenge here goes beyond the fact that you never know who might be watching, or why, or with what consequences. If surveillance is practiced in a context considered “fun,” it not only renders “harmless” what might actually be the opposite for some, but it also helps to domesticate surveillance, to make it more natural and taken for granted.18 It might embarrass or hurt others if they knew we were monitoring them, but we still do it. What government departments or corporations do, always with the potential for harm, we now feed into without blinking. In a profound sense, the call to be our brother’s and sister’s keeper has to be rethought for a digital age. In a world where we routinely monitor others and know that they are monitoring us, we must ask whether our surveillance is of others or for the benefit of others.

Notes

5 Angus Reid Global, “Privacy and Surveillance: June 2012 Globalization of Personal Data Follow-Up” (Vancouver: Angus Reid Global, 2012).

9 Lyon and Smith, “Surveillance, Social Media and Participation.”


11 Ibid., 19.

12 Ibid., 18.

13 Lyon and Smith, “Surveillance, Social Media and Participation.”


