Spaces of everyday surveillance: Unfolding an analytical concept of participation

Anders Albrechtslund *, Peter Lauritsen

Aarhus University, Helsingforsgade 14, 8200 Aarhus N, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article offers a conceptualization of "participation" in relation to surveillance practices. Our aim is to introduce an analytical platform allowing for a non-normative, yet, nuanced understanding of surveillance. The development of an analytical concept of participation in relation to surveillance is at least partially made relevant by a wide range of new surveillance technologies and practices relating to smartphones, social network sites and location sharing. In the article, we introduce and analyze three empirical examples to follow traces of participation in a broad range of everyday surveillance spaces: sports-focused tracking devices and online communities, parental surveillance and CCTV. We conclude that surveillance and its effects is always a matter of how heterogeneous actors are aligned, how their participation is negotiated and how their intentions and actions are translated. Thus, an important task for surveillance scholars is not only to identify participatory surveillance as a specific iteration of surveillance. Rather, the project is to analyze participation in any given situation of surveillance and this includes a careful attention to the ways in which participation is established, maintained and negotiated.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This article offers a conceptualization of "participation" in relation to surveillance practices. Our aim is to introduce an analytical platform allowing for a non-normative, yet, nuanced understanding of surveillance. To construct this platform, we build on Latour's concept "oligopticon" (2005; Latour and Hermant, 1998) that enables us to understand participation as an integral part of all types of surveillance relations. The oligopticon is rooted in Actor–Network Theory (ANT) and this approach provides us with concepts to better understand surveillance as networks in which both humans and non-humans participate (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 2005).

The development of an analytical concept of participation in relation to surveillance is at least partially made relevant by a wide range of new surveillance technologies and practices. For example, recreational athletes keep track of and share their performances using GPS sports watches and heart rate monitors and thereby participate in their own surveillance. Similarly, social websites such as Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter allow users to share photos, locations and other types of personal information. These types of surveillance practices are characterized by a great extent of participation, as the basic premise is that users voluntarily share personal information with a network of people.

However, it can also be argued that participation is already a well-known practice in relation to surveillance. A key element in the Panopticon is for the inmates to internalize the gaze of the inspector and thus participate actively in upholding and automating power relations (Foucault, 1977, 201), just like the "love" for Big Brother is the prime motive driving the citizen participation in the surveillance state of Oceania in George Orwell's 1984 (1949). Moreover, participation in surveillance can take place in much more subtle and mundane practices than exemplified by the internalization of the gaze or the love of Big Brother. In the article, we show this by studying three examples in spaces of everyday surveillance: sports-focused tracking devices and online communities, parental surveillance, and CCTV.

Participation has played a significant role in other academic fields, including development (e.g. Friedmann, 1992) and design (e.g. Ehn, 1989, 2008). In these fields, participation is often used as a normative concept to describe a desired or even necessary element in a process of development or design (Halskov and Hansen, not published; Rahnema, 1992). However, the concept has been explored much less from a theoretical perspective with the notable exception of Gallagher (2008) who uses Foucault's concept of power to analyze participation in relation to children. Callagher argues that participation should be developed as an analytical, non-normative concept, not leading to a "general theory, but a set of tools for analyzing different instances of participation in their unique specificity" (396).

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Aesthetics & Communication, Aarhus University, Helsingforsgade 14, 8200 Aarhus, Denmark.
E-mail addresses: alb@hum.au.dk (A. Albrechtslund), peter@hum.au.dk (P. Lauritsen).

In our opinion, Callagher's argument corresponds to the approach we propose in the article. Our main argument is that an important task for surveillance scholars is not only to identify participatory surveillance as a specific iteration of surveillance. Even though ANT is to some extent inspired by Foucault's work, this does not entail an explicit focus on power. Rather, the project is to analyze participation in any given situation of surveillance, and this includes a careful attention to how participation is established, maintained and negotiated.

The article is structured in the following way: First, we develop an analytical concept of participation. We do this by exploring the network characteristics of oligoptica to unfold the participatory aspects of surveillance situations. Second, we introduce and analyze three empirical examples to follow traces of participation in a broad range of everyday surveillance spaces.

2. An analytical concept of participation

The aim of this article is to bring attention to participation in the context of surveillance. As stated above, it is in a sense already a part of surveillance studies, but few surveillance scholars have explicitly analyzed the concept (Albrechtslund, forthcoming). Our ambition is certainly not to promote participation in surveillance practices, but to develop it as an analytical concept. Thus, participation is not a norm that should be achieved, but an integral part of surveillance practices, and should be turned into a subject of analysis. In undertaking this task we place particular emphasis on Latour's conceptualization of the oligopticon and ANT. Hereby, surveillance is elucidated as a limited, fragile network of participating human and non-human actors.

In the book *Paris, ville invisible* (1998), authored jointly by Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant, the generic term "oligopticon" is first introduced to describe a series of fragile, narrow gazes in the "city of light". These gazes are presented in the book as a photographic exploration of different views of Paris from the rooftop of the famous department store La Samaritaine to the office of Ms. Baysal at Ecole des Mines. The oligopticon indicates a specific, grounded view developed partly in critical dialogue with the all-seeing panopticon:

> "Oligoptica [...] do exactly the opposite of the panoptica: they see much *too little* to feed the megalomania of the inspector or the paranoia of the inspected, but what they see, they *see it well*...". (Latour, 2005: 181)

Oligoptica produces invisibilities in the sense that a specific gaze will always be blind to everything outside of the particular focus. The all-seeing gaze is not only a visual impossibility, as the work of Ms. Baysal suggests (Latour and Hermant, 1998). Her job is to coordinate the teaching activities at the university by planning and booking rooms for lecture schedules. She does all this from the confined space of her office without ever attending lectures, only by consulting paper documents and computer files containing information about names of teachers, titles of lectures and availability of rooms. In a certain sense, she sees all that is going on, but Ms. Baysal's view is also quite limited. Even though she knows everything about who will be where, and at what time, she does not know anything about what the students talk about during the lecture breaks, if the teacher might experience technical problems with the electronic equipment in the lecture rooms or even what questions are asked during the lectures.

An important observation concerning these fragile, narrow gazes is that they are produced by networks. Oligoptica are dependent on a chain of actors that need to work together to produce a certain visibility. Thus, surveillance is not established by an individual actor but accomplished by a network of heterogeneous actors working together. To establish such a network requires that relevant actors are recruited or "enrolled" as it is often labelled in ANT (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). This involves a process of translation in which a relation between actors is established. Latour states: "I use *translation* to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents" (Latour, 1994: 32). Thus, if a person picks up a gun, a link is established between the two actors and a new network (or a new actor) emerges. The gun is no longer just e.g. a collector's item but is translated into a dangerous weapon because it is in the hands of a person who is also translated from, say, a caring family father to a potential killer (Latour, 1994). In another example Latour illustrates the process of translation with a speed bump that forces drivers to slow down on a campus to not endanger the students (1994). One could have kindly asked the drivers to slow down or placed a traffic sign showing the speed limit, but that might not be enough to enroll the drivers and make them slow down. However, by placing a speed bump, things would probably change. The bump translates the interest of the drivers from "slow down so as not to endanger students" into "slow down and protect my car's suspension" (Latour, 1994: 38). Thus, a certain program of action is inscribed into the speed bump and drivers are forced to join the program if they want to keep on driving.

Actors can also be enrolled by other means, e.g. "negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion, and violence" (Callon and Latour, 1982: 279), and the result is not always as effective as in the case of the speed bump. Although a network in some instances can become "a machination of forces" i.e. a situation where actors are firmly locked in their positions (Latour, 1987: 128), it might as well be the case that the alignment and coordination of actors is a continuous process that involves both friction and overt resistance (Gad and Lauritsen, 2009). Thus, even if "a constraining network of relationship has been built [...] this consensus and the alliances which it implies can be contested at any moment. Translation becomes treason" (Callon, 1986: 218f). Actors might resist enrollment or suddenly leave the network or behave in ways not anticipated by "the designers" and thereby threaten the existence or at least the effectiveness of the network. For example a computer system breaks down, CCTV cameras are out of order or the bank robber wears a mask or a hood and thus resist enrollment in the surveillance network (Lauritsen and Bøge, 2012). This means that oligoptic surveillance can be a fragile activity, or as Latour states "[e]ven the tiniest bug can blind oligoptica" (Latour, 2005: 181).

The "oligopticon" can be seen as the surveillance concept of ANT. From this position participation becomes an integral part of surveillance. In contrast to the fields of participatory development and participatory design it is however an understanding of participation without normative connotations. Thus, the task of the scholar is not to promote participation, but to analyze how participation is negotiated in the networks where heterogeneous actors produce surveillance. Using the vocabulary of ANT, this includes asking questions such as: What are the strategies used for enrolling other actors in the surveillance practice? Are there any attempts of resisting enrollment? Is there friction because of e.g. malfunctioning technologies? How is surveillance produced by the network; is it for example related to control, care or entertainment or maybe to all of them?

When participation is interpreted in this way, it has furthermore the implication that it is necessary to abandon the all-seeing, "utopian" panoptic gaze:

> "As every reader of Michel Foucault knows, the 'panopticon', an ideal prison allowing for total surveillance of inmates imagined at the beginning of the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham, has remained utopia, that is, a world of nowhere to feed the double