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5 Surveillance Studies

Abstract: Surveillance is a critical tool of political and social control, employed by both authoritarian and democratic regimes to monitor populations, suppress dissent, and maintain political stability. Despite its widespread use, surveillance remains an understudied and contested concept across disciplines, with political science, sociology, and multidisciplinary surveillance research offering distinct perspectives on its nature, methods, and consequences. This chapter synthesizes existing research and introduces a new framework that categorizes surveillance methods based on two key dimensions: visibility (overt vs. covert) and interface (human vs. technological). By integrating insights from different disciplines, the chapter develops a layered model of surveillance targets and a typology of surveillance methods that highlight the strategic choices regimes make. It further examines the agency problems arising from delegated surveillance, the causes driving state and corporate surveillance, and the consequences of surveillance on dissent and repression. Our analysis underscores the dual function of surveillance as both a deterrent and a potential catalyst for resistance. By bridging disciplinary divides, this chapter offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the evolving role of surveillance in contemporary governance.

Keywords: surveillance, repression, political control, covert operations

In the 1970s, American anthropologist Katherine Verdery went to Romania to study village life; her focus was on the Transylvanian region. Her work caught the attention of the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, who closely monitored her. They assembled a massive 2,781-page file that portrayed her as a spy. One instance of this covert surveillance was when Verdery visited a local priest in Geoagiu. The Securitate interrogated the priest immediately after their meeting and warned him not to disclose any information to Verdery. Years later, after the fall of the communist regime in Romania in the 1990s, Verdery obtained access to her secret police file. She discovered detailed records of her daily activities, private conversations, and relationships. The file outlined how the Securitate had enlisted numerous informers among her friends and colleagues. She learned that the Securitate had intercepted her mail, tapped her phone calls, and meticulously documented her movements. This extensive surveillance revealed the depth and scope of her scrutiny (Verdery 2018).

This real-life account raises several important questions about the nature of political surveillance: How do states operate surveillance? What motivates regimes to choose specific surveillance tactics, such as overt versus covert monitoring? How do these practices impact individuals and society as a whole? These questions form the basis for understanding the multifaceted nature of surveillance and its role in political control, as explored in this chapter.

This chapter has two main goals: first, to review and synthesize the existing literature on surveillance, and second, to introduce a new framework that categorizes surveillance practices based on their political, social, and technological contexts. Specifically, we ask *who conducts surveillance (the agents), how it is carried out (the actions), and whom it targets (the subjects)*.

The chapter begins by examining the object of surveillance in Surveillance Targets and Layers of Political Control (Section 2), discussing the different layers of society and groups that are monitored. It then focuses on the action – the methods used in surveillance – in A Typology of Surveillance Methods (Section 3), explaining how surveillance is conducted, from overt to covert methods, and with either human or technological tools. Finally, the subject – the agents of surveillance – is discussed in Agents of Surveillance and Agency Problems (Section 4), where we analyze the actors involved, including state, private, and non-state entities, and explore their unique challenges. This structure gives a comprehensive view of surveillance practices and helps us understand their broader effects on society. The chapter further addresses the causes and consequences of surveillance, analyzing its broader effects on society and political systems. Finally, the chapter concludes with insights for future research, highlighting areas that warrant further exploration.

It is rare to find a comprehensive review of surveillance research, and this chapter serves as one of the earlier efforts. Beyond merely reviewing existing literature, we contribute by introducing a new typology that organizes surveillance according to two main dimensions: the visibility of surveillance (overt vs. covert) and the type of interface employed (human vs. technological). This classification addresses a gap in current studies by differentiating various forms of surveillance and their specific methods. By elaborating on these distinctions, our framework enhances understanding of the mechanics of surveillance practices and their diverse impacts on society. Moreover, by linking visibility and interface with the agents and their targets, we illuminate how surveillance molds power relations and social interactions.

Understanding Surveillance

What is surveillance? By most accounts, surveillance is a process of monitoring behavior, activities, or information for the purpose of gathering data, managing or influencing individuals, and ensuring compliance with policies or regulations. It involves observing or tracking individuals or groups using various methods such as using human spies or through devices like cameras, wiretaps, GPS, and internet monitoring, either overtly or covertly. The objectives of surveillance vary from enhancing security and preventing crime to gathering intelligence and controlling populations. Entities such as law enforcement agencies, corporations, and governments commonly undertake surveillance, targeting specific individuals or broader populations.

Surveillance research spans multiple disciplines. It has been useful to have a common terminology – that is, surveillance – because it facilitates communication and knowledge accumulation among scholars from diverse fields. However, each discipline emphasizes different aspects of surveillance and adopts unique methodological orientations, leading to varied research traditions and outputs. Before we examine key aspects of surveillance research, we believe it is important to give a broad overview of these disciplinary perspectives to understand the comprehensive scope of surveillance research.

Political Science (PS)

Political scientists are fundamentally interested in the behavior of governments and, hence, are naturally drawn to this topic of state surveillance. Over the past decade, we have seen a growing scholarship focusing on either physical (Hager and Krakowski 2022; Mehrl and Choulis 2024) or digital surveillance (Gohdes 2020; Chau et al. 2024). This trend is partly motivated by intensified efforts that many authoritarian governments use to monitor and control their population. Therefore, a large portion of political research on surveillance focuses on the actions of authoritarian regimes, such as contemporary China (Xu 2021), authoritarian Taiwan (Liu 2022), East Germany (Piotrowska 2020; Steinert 2023), and communist Poland (Thomson 2023).¹ Political research often employs quantitative, large-N statistical methods to systemically analyze surveillance efforts and strategies. Given the emphasis on measurement in quantitative approaches, researchers tend to rely on measurable observables, which can be challenging when surveillance is sometimes hard to observe. Behaviorally hard-to-observe surveillance tactics, such as manipulation, deception, and indirect coercion, can sometimes be missed. Additionally, there is an ongoing debate about whether surveillance should be considered a form of state repression. Some researchers argue that nonviolent surveillance is conceptually distinct from violent repression (Hassan et al. 2022), while others view it as part of a broader understanding of repression (Davenport 2007).²

Sociology and Social Movement Studies (SM)

Sociologists share a deep interest in surveillance research. In some ways, contemporary political research on repression and surveillance is inspired by scholars who

¹ The works on surveilling black nationalist movements in the US are few exceptions (Davenport 2005; Sullivan and Davenport 2018).

² Quantitative methods currently dominate mainstream political research. So, this brief overview primarily considers quantitative surveillance research and may miss other qualitative surveillance research published in political science journals.

bridge insights between sociology and political science (Davenport 2007; Earl 2011). Sociological studies often use detailed case studies, focused group interviews, and other qualitative methods to probe the complex and sometimes opaque practices of state surveillance. These approaches offer deep insights into surveillance dynamics, especially when large-*N* data are difficult to obtain. For instance, research on the FBI's COINTELPRO programs by Cunningham (2003*a, b*) illustrates how surveillance strategies were specifically tailored to different dissenting organizations, like the New Left and the Ku Klux Klan, to disrupt movements and enhance political control during the 1960s and 70s. A large portion of analyses is driven by studying surveillance within the US and some western democracies rather than authoritarian regimes. Additionally, since scholars in this tradition are primarily concerned about social movement dynamics, research pays special attention to how surveillance impacts the survival of social movements. Some researchers argue that surveillance can promote solidarity and human rights advocacy (Reynolds-Stenson, 2022), while others believe it significantly hinders the longevity of movements (Starr et al., 2008). Finally, since repression is often conceptualized as something broader than mere violence, scholars share the consensus that surveillance is part of a covert and less violent form of repression involving not only data collection but also manipulation and indirect coercion (Earl 2003, 2011).

Multi-disciplinary Surveillance Studies (MSS)

There is also an emerging field of cross-disciplinary surveillance studies that are spurred on by rapid advancements in technology facilitating massive data collection. This field distinguishes itself by focusing on diversity in methodological approaches, geographical regions, and academic disciplines. Notably, this research tradition does not emphasize cross-field integration as much as other interdisciplinary efforts. Therefore, scholars in this field often prefer to use “multi-disciplinary,” as opposed to interdisciplinary, to describe their efforts given that they emphasize diversity rather than fusion of research (Ball et al. 2012). Methodologically, by browsing through the signature journal of this field (*Surveillance & Society*), most publications seem to prioritize qualitative case studies and sometimes use normative-legal approaches to analyze surveillance and discuss policies and regulations. Social theorists like Foucault and Giddens are heavily referenced in this line of work. Empirical research cares about both the causes and the consequences of surveillance. Repression is not a commonly used concept; security and control are. Therefore, whether surveillance is part of repression is not a debate (or consensus) that can be observed in this research tradition. Table 1 outlines the various approaches adopted by different fields in the study of surveillance.

Tab. 1: Disciplinary Differences on Surveillance Research.

	PS	SM	MSS
Context	Dictatorships	Emphasis on US and Western democracies	Diverse
Research method	Quantitative	Quantitative and Qualitative	Qualitative and Normative
Primary interest	Governments	Movements	Diverse
Surveillance is repression?	Debatable	Yes	Not relevant (discipline and control is not targeted)

Note: This is far from being an exhaustive list. The categorization can be simplistic, aiming to give a broad outline of disciplinary priorities and orientations on certain aspects of surveillance research.

Surveillance Targets and Layers of Political Control

Surveillance research spans various disciplines and fields, as previously mentioned. Despite the expansive body of work, scholarship across these disciplines often progresses in parallel, with minimal conversation and cross-field coordination. There is a notable absence of efforts to integrate this diverse research into a unified framework. Additionally, in different studies surveillance targets vary widely (both within and across fields), ranging from broad societal levels to specific groups of targets. This variation complicates the accumulation of knowledge due to the lack of a common analytical framework. In response to this challenge, we adopt the conceptual framework proposed by Earl and Braithwaite (2022), which categorizes surveillance research based on the targets of surveillance – ranging from entire populations to specific segments (e.g., racial, ethnic, or religious minorities) and various political and civil actors. This framework helps unify and synthesize surveillance research both across and within disciplines, thereby enhancing theory-building and fostering more robust scholarly dialogue.

Layer 1: Surveilling Whole Population

Research across various fields demonstrates that technological advancements have significantly reduced the cost of society-wide surveillance, enabling both authoritarian and democratic regimes to enhance their surveillance capabilities. Historically, authoritarian regimes have utilized extensive surveillance to maintain control, a trend that persists with modern technologies like CCTV and facial recognition systems. For instance, studies indicate that autocracies face a trade-off between repression and co-optation and using society-wide surveillance technologies help regimes efficiently gather information and precisely target individuals for repression (Xu 2021; Hager and Krakowski 2022; Choulis et al. 2024).

Similarly, democratic regimes often utilize mass surveillance and justify extensive surveillance of their populations as necessary for combating illicit border crossing, terrorism, and crime (Adey 2012; Ruppert 2012). The widespread installation of CCTV cameras in public spaces in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, alongside massive data collection by corporations, illustrates the expansion of surveillance infrastructure. This infrastructure sparks significant concerns about the balance between security and civil liberties. This tension is a central issue in the politics of society-wide surveillance, highlighting the complex challenge of securing society while protecting individual freedoms (Lyon 2007).

Layer 2: Surveilling Subpopulations

Surveillance may be massive and include the entire population, but also sometimes be more tailored to specific subpopulations and demographic groups. Political scientists have developed a keen interest in studying targeted surveillance on specific identity-based groups that regimes consider threats, and how identity-based surveillance or repression may backfire (Rozenas 2020). For instance, research has shown that surveillance has been targeted and intensified against certain racial minority groups such as Chinese surveillance of Uyghurs (Roberts 2021; Topal 2024) and religious groups like the infiltration and surveillance of Catholic churches (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches 2022). Moreover, multi-disciplinary surveillance scholarship extends beyond state actions to include corporate practices. It scrutinizes how companies monitor specific groups of customers, raising concerns about personal integrity and the rights to privacy. (Pridmore 2012).

Layer 3: Surveilling Within Political Institutions

While there is ample anecdotal evidence that governments use surveillance within political institutions to tighten control, systematic research on this topic is relatively sparse across three fields. Multidisciplinary studies usually focus on surveillance of the broader society, while social movement studies are primarily interested in the surveillance of movement organizations. In political science, while there is some work connecting surveillance and institutional control, most research is studied under the framework of elite purges in authoritarian regimes (Sudduth 2017; Goldring and Matthews 2023). Less work directly examines the processes of how regimes exercise institutional surveillance. Other research has indicated that in authoritarian contexts rulers also employ inter-agency competition and mutual surveillance to strengthen control over multiple security sectors and ensure compliance of agents (Greitens 2016). Yet, we do not have a systemic analysis of how this process is implemented, primarily due to the scarcity of data.

Layer 5–7: Surveilling Dissent Movements and Activists

In the layers of surveillance targeting dissent movements and activists, political research, along with social movement studies, actively explores how governments monitor and track dissidents to prevent or quell dissent. This line of research highlights the use of both technological devices and human agents to enhance information gathering through advanced technologies and interpersonal networks. Infiltration is a commonly studied repressive strategy. For instance, research has examined how regimes incentivize insiders within dissent or insurgent groups to defect and provide information (Liu 2022; Lyall et al. 2015). In the context of civil war, effective surveillance enables the precise identification of combatants versus non-combatants, thus minimizing civilian casualties and preserving legitimacy in repression (Zhukov 2015). This targeted approach is crucial for addressing rebellion threats without resorting to indiscriminate repression, which could escalate conflicts.

Moreover, the literature discusses how states not only infiltrate by recruiting inside collaborators but also embed state agents and spies to conduct surveillance (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches 2022). The infamous COINTELPRO operation by the FBI, which targeted leftist movements during the 1960s and 1970s, serves as a historical example of such tactics. The FBI's goals extended beyond mere surveillance; they aimed to disrupt and discredit movements internally (Cunningham 2003a). Current studies reveal mixed outcomes of surveillance, noting that while it can instill fear and disrupt movements (Choulis et al. 2024), it can also inadvertently energize them, giving rise to stronger resistance (Reynolds-Stenson 2022; Hager and Krakowski 2022).

Taken together, by analyzing surveillance targets at various levels, we can offer a more comprehensive perspective that synthesizes contributions from multiple disciplines. It provides a unique opportunity for researchers to communicate findings and engage in theory development. Moreover, analyzing surveillance at different levels – from macro to micro – also provides a structured approach to allocate their explanatory factors, allowing researchers to compare and integrate findings from a diverse set of regime types and historical periods.

A Typology of Surveillance Methods

The previous section provided a structure for categorizing the *targets* of surveillance at different levels. Yet, the literature currently lacks a conceptual framework for outlining surveillance *methods*. Governments (and sometimes corporations) are aware that different surveillance technologies yield different outcomes, and they strategically select their surveillance tools to fulfill certain purposes. We think it is important to recognize that monitoring methods should be conceptualized in plural rather than singular terms to better capture the diversity of approaches. To facilitate inter-field

Tab. 2: A Typology of Surveillance Methods.

	Covert	Overt
Human	Examples: Surveillance done by infiltrated undercover agents, hidden regime collaborators or informers	Examples: Surveillance done by uniformed police, soldiers, or security guards patrolling certain areas
Device	Examples: Surveillance done by hidden machines like secret cameras, phone wiretaps, online hidden surveillance (e.g., spyware, phishing traps without consent)	Examples: Surveillance done by CCTV, public security cameras, police body cameras, online open surveillance (e.g., social media monitoring with consent)

Note: This typology is not intended to be exhaustive. This study is concerned primarily with the distinction between observability and surveillance interfaces. One may divide surveillance using alternate metrics such as effectiveness and surveillance targets.

discussion and theory development, we introduce a 2x2 typology based on two commonly observed dimensions of surveillance: observability and interface. Our aim is to offer a structured framework that enables researchers to categorize their studies within a common context. This typology also encourages scholars to explore the unique functions and effects at the intersections of these dimensions.

It is important to note that the typology described here serves as a conceptual framework, representing ideal types in the Weberian sense (Weber 1978). The categories – useful for dissecting surveillance tactics – may not always be mutually exclusive in practice. For instance, some surveillance might be nominally covert and unobservable, yet the public might still have a general awareness of its existence. Furthermore, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) are likely blurring the distinctions between human and machine-oriented surveillance, especially in the digital realm compared to the physical one. We recognize these conceptual overlaps but also believe there are distinct and non-overlapping conceptual areas worth further theoretical exploration to understand their specific functionalities and impacts. Table 2 outlines these dimensions along with examples of methods that regimes might employ.

The first dimension that is commonly used to describe surveillance is its observability. Surveillance is often associated with covert forms of repression because it typically involves less direct violence and more subtle, indirect threats and coercion, making it less observable. While extensive research has focused on the concealed nature of surveillance, including its functions and impacts (Sullivan and Davenport 2018; Earl et al. 2022), less attention has been paid to more overt forms of surveillance (Starr et al. 2008). Understanding the intended observability of surveillance and its anticipated impacts is crucial. Covert surveillance is designed to remain hidden from public view, gathering information without influencing the behavior of those being observed or alerting them to its presence. In contrast, overt surveillance, such as the use of CCTV cameras in public spaces, is easily noticeable and typically aims to deter

disruptive actions. Overt surveillance can be seen as performative, designed to be visible as a deterrent and less effective in preventing crimes and misconduct if unnoticed. This observability dimension prompts scholars to explore not only the substantive but also the performative functions of surveillance, and the strategic decisions regimes make regarding whether they want surveillance to alter the behavior of those being watched.

The second dimension is the surveillance interface, which refers to the primary tools that regimes use to surveil targets. A growing body of research is dedicated to understanding the causes and consequences of digital surveillance performed by devices (Gohdes 2020; Earl 2022; Pan and Siegel 2020). There is also a separate line of literature on surveillance conducted by secret police, informants, and spies (Hager and Krakowski 2022; Mehrl and Choulis 2024). However, less discussed are the strategic choices between these two tactics: why regimes might prefer device-based surveillance in some situations, while in others, they opt for human surveillance. The gap in discussion obscures the fact that these two methods have fundamentally different functionalities. Surveillance by human agents often involves not only passive observation but also active information gathering through manipulation, deception, and coercion. Agents build relationships, trust, and intimacy with their subjects, often leading to higher-quality intelligence that is difficult to obtain without interpersonal intimacy and trust. Moreover, human agents can make on-the-spot judgments and decisions, adjusting their actions based on the situation due to their mobility and agility. In contrast, device-based surveillance employs technologies such as cameras, drones, and digital algorithms to efficiently monitor and collect data. While these methods excel at processing large volumes of information and providing broad coverage, they lack the capacity to establish intimate interpersonal relationships or manipulate trust, especially in the physical world. Additionally, devices themselves cannot make instant decisions regarding where, when, and how to surveil, as they are typically fixed in place and lack adaptability to different information environments. Understanding this distinction helps explain why regimes sometimes prioritize human agents over digital devices, especially when nuanced information gathering and adaptation are critical.

Intersections

Here we list surveillance practices that sit at the intersections of these two dimensions. In each cell, we list specific methods and research questions that we can study:

- Human-Covert surveillance involves monitoring subjects without their awareness using human agents. The goal of this type of surveillance is to ensure that the subjects being observed do not change their behavior, while also manipulating their trust in some cases. This includes undercover officers infiltrating suspect groups, informers secretly providing information, and agent provocateurs influencing and inciting actions that give the regime a pretext for repression. A nota-

ble example is the FBI's COINTELPRO operations in the 1960s and 1970s, where agents infiltrated groups like the Black Panther Party, manipulating trust to provoke internal conflicts and illegal activities without alerting the subjects to their monitoring, which then justified arrests and crackdowns (Churchill and Vander Wall 2002). Despite its significance, this type of surveillance is less studied, likely due to the lack of accessible data.

- Human-Overt Surveillance involves monitoring subjects with their awareness, using human agents. Examples include uniformed police or soldiers patrolling public areas to maintain order, as well as security guards visibly monitoring specific locations. The goal is to deter and prevent subjects from misbehaving through the visible presence of authority figures. Human agents contribute to this deterrence not only through their visibility but also because they are mobile and capable of making real-time decisions about where and when to surveil. For instance, during the protests in Bangladesh in July and August 2024,³ the government used police and military forces for real-time decision-making and adjustments, such as deploying additional forces, imposing curfews, and using live ammunition to reduce unrest. These actions demonstrate how human agents can deter escalation and make immediate judgments based on evolving situations, highlighting their flexibility in maintaining control during crises.
- Device-Covert surveillance involves monitoring subjects using devices of which the subjects are not aware. This includes hidden cameras in dissidents' homes, wiretaps on phone communications, and online techniques like spyware and phishing traps that collect information without the user's consent. A notable example is the use of Pegasus spyware,⁴ developed by the Israeli cyberintelligence firm NSO Group. Originally marketed as a tool to combat crime and terrorism, Pegasus has been used by governments to secretly infiltrate mobile phones and extract data such as messages, photos, and calls from journalists, activists, and political opponents. This type of surveillance ensures that the observed subjects remain unaware, allowing them to continue their usual behavior while the regime gathers critical information without manipulating trust or prompting changes in actions.
- Device-Overt surveillance involves monitoring subjects using devices of which the subjects are aware; this allows information to be gathered and deters unwanted behaviors. The surveillance includes technologies like CCTV cameras in public places, security cameras in streets and parks, police body cameras recording pub-

³ *Bangladesh: Witness Testimony, Video and Photographic Analysis Confirm Police Used Unlawful Force Against Protesters*, Amnesty International (2024). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-witness-testimony-video-and-photographic-analysis-confirm-police-used-unlawful-force-against-protesters/>.

⁴ *The Battle for the World's Most Powerful Cyberweapon* NY Times (2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/magazine/nso-group-israel-spyware.html>.

lic interactions, and drones monitoring large areas from the sky. A prominent example is the extensive surveillance network in Xinjiang, China, where tens of thousands of CCTV cameras,⁵ many equipped with facial recognition technology, are installed in public spaces, streets, and key locations like mosques and schools. This type of surveillance is extensively studied due to its widespread use by countries like Russia and China. Because devices are fixed, immobile, and unable to make real-time judgments, the primary goal in this intersection of device-overt surveillance is to provide a form of fixed deterrence. This means that device-based surveillance creates a constant, visible presence that discourages unwanted behavior in certain monitored locations, but it lacks the adaptability and decision-making capabilities of human agents, who can more dynamically adjust tactics based on the evolving situation.

It is worth noting that states with sufficient resources can employ these methods simultaneously. Governments are not limited to deploying overt-human or covert-device surveillance in isolation; rather, capable states frequently implement a combination of overt and covert, human and device-based surveillance concurrently. Surveillance that is nominally covert can often operate in ways that resemble overt surveillance. For example, the East German Stasi maintained control not solely through covert operations but by cultivating widespread awareness of their activities. Although the full extent of their surveillance remained concealed, the general knowledge of their pervasive presence functioned as an effective deterrent.

Moreover, with the advent of artificial intelligence, the boundary between human and non-human surveillance likely becomes ambiguous. Algorithms and bots now perform tasks traditionally reserved for human agents, such as building trust and influencing behavior in online spaces. This technological evolution challenges conventional distinctions between surveillance types. In practice, surveillance frequently involves hybrid approaches, wherein human operatives utilize AI-driven systems and digital platforms to enhance their monitoring capabilities. For instance, human agents may employ AI tools to track individuals with greater efficiency, blending human insight with the expansive data-processing power of technology. This typology acknowledges the fluidity of such integration, viewing it as a dynamic category that merges human oversight with technological precision.

Furthermore, while surveillance is predominantly associated with observation and the collection of information for relevant authorities, it can extend beyond passive monitoring. In certain cases, surveillance includes deceptive practices, where undercover agents deliberately provide false information to the groups they infiltrate. This strategic deception is designed to manipulate targets into engaging in criminal

⁵ *China's Algorithms of Repression* Human Rights Watch (2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/magazine/nso-group-israel-spyware.html>

activities, thereby facilitating their apprehension by the state. Such practices highlight the multifaceted nature of surveillance, and the diverse range of tactics employed in intelligence operations.

This typology illustrates how surveillance methods, far from being monolithic, are strategically tailored by regimes to meet diverse goals and respond to varying levels of perceived threat. By systematically distinguishing between observability and interface, the typology provides a comprehensive framework for examining how overt and covert tactics – whether human-led or device-based – serve distinct yet complementary roles in social and political control. By proposing this typology, we hope that it organizes the study of surveillance practices and opens avenues for examining how technological advances reshape the balance between covert manipulation and overt deterrence in statecraft.

Agents of Surveillance and Agency Problems

Existing literature often assumes that surveillance is exclusively conducted by the state. However, this perspective overlooks the significant role of non-state agents in carrying out delegated forms of repression.⁶ These agents encompass a range of entities, including government security agencies, law enforcement, military intelligence, private security firms, technology companies, informers, and digital surveillance platforms. While the regime establishes the overarching framework and objectives for surveillance, it is these agents who execute the actual monitoring and reporting tasks. This delegation process often leads to principal-agent problems, characterized by misaligned interests and information asymmetry. Such discrepancies can cause agents to act in ways that contradict the state's intentions, leading to unintended consequences such as moral hazard and adverse selection (Tyson 2018).

For example, Dragu and Przeworski (2019) discuss moral hazards in preventive repression, where security agents might prioritize personal gain over effective surveillance, potentially leading to corruption. Similarly, Tyson (2018) highlights the challenges in autocratic regimes where inadequate compensation for repressive forces can exacerbate agency problems, resulting in surveillance agents misusing their power or targeting less threatening groups for ease of monitoring. The Chinese government's delegation of surveillance tasks to local "grid managers" during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies these issues. While tasked with monitoring and enforcing

⁶ This review focuses exclusively on non-state actors who are delegated repression tasks by state or institutional actors, as this falls within the scope of our analysis. However, we also acknowledge the existence of other non-state actors who engage in repression independently, without delegation from state authorities.

regulations, some grid managers shirked their duties, reported false information, or fabricated data, compromising the effectiveness of the surveillance system (Zhu 2023).

Governments are often aware of these principal-agent problems and attempt to mitigate them through agent-monitoring mechanisms, such as information verification processes. For instance, Liu (2022) explores how authoritarian regimes often check information quality, ensuring that defectors provide accurate intelligence by verifying and reviewing the tips informants submit. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms varies. In some contexts, rigorous oversight successfully mitigates issues like corruption and shirking, while in others, these problems persist due to failures in implementation.

The effectiveness of agent-monitoring mechanisms is shaped by institutional, spatial, and temporal factors. Variations such as the robustness of oversight bodies, the geographical spread of surveillance operations, and shifts in political leadership or policy priorities all influence the success or failure of these mechanisms. Analyzing these factors is essential for enhancing our understanding of surveillance practices and misconduct in the context of repression. This area of study is rich with complexities and deserves further exploration to better grasp how these variables impact surveillance outcomes.

Causes of Surveillance

We now turn to discussing the causes of surveillance. Existing literature offers a range of explanations for why states deploy surveillance, with perspectives differing across disciplines. In political science (PS), surveillance is primarily viewed as a mechanism for political control, especially within authoritarian systems, where regimes employ surveillance to resolve information deficiencies and gauge citizens' true sentiments. Surveillance aids in preventing uprisings by enabling targeted repression and increasing the perceived costs of dissent (Choulis et al. 2024). Additionally, it ensures regime longevity by tracking dissident activities and discouraging opposition (Hager and Krakowski 2022).

Conversely, Sociology and Social Movement Studies often consider surveillance as a type of repression and study how surveillance is driven by predictors such as perceived threat to social order (Davenport 2007; Earl 2011). These threats are often subjective; shaped by state vulnerabilities such as geographic or demographic weaknesses (Earl 2011). Additionally, dissidents may amplify these perceptions of threat, intentionally or unintentionally, which further motivates the use of surveillance alongside broader goals such as promoting security and regulating populations. Scholars focusing specifically on surveillance, such as Rule (2012), emphasize its role in fulfilling institutional needs, whereas others, like Ceyhan (2012), argue that it operates as biopower, leveraging technology to control populations. In the context of social move-

ments, surveillance functions to manage dissent and disrupt activist networks, often serving as a covert form of repression (Cunningham 2003a). Sociological research also examines how surveillance affects social movements' endurance, with some studies suggesting it fosters resistance and others indicating it erodes solidarity and weakens cohesion within movements (Starr et al. 2008).

Multi-disciplinary surveillance studies (MSS) provide a broader lens, focusing on the transformative role of technology in facilitating comprehensive data collection for security and social control. MSS scholars, rather than centering on whether surveillance qualifies as repression, are chiefly concerned with its implications for privacy, civil liberties, and governance. Building on theorists like Foucault, MSS interprets surveillance as a tool of social regulation, embedded within broader systems designed to mitigate risk and enforce compliance with societal norms.

Despite these insights, the existing literature often views surveillance as a binary choice, overlooking its diversity. We believe that expanding discussions to include the causes of various surveillance tactics and methods would enrich the literature. Our typology, which classifies surveillance by observability (overt vs. covert) and interface (human vs. device), can advance this discussion. It provides a framework for understanding the combinations of surveillance tactics and decision-making processes within regimes. Additionally, it prompts new questions about the substitution and complementarity of different methods, focusing on the tactical choices involved in surveillance.

Consequences of Surveillance

While the literature is still at its early stage, research on the consequences of surveillance is gaining more traction, particularly in the ongoing debate over whether surveillance suppresses or incites dissent. This debate closely aligns with the broader discourse on the repression-dissent nexus (Reynolds-Stenson 2022).

Some scholars argue that surveillance reduces dissent by fostering fear and increasing the perceived risks of mobilization. For example, Choulis et al. (2024) suggest that secret police effectively lower protest levels through intelligence gathering and by creating a climate of uncertainty. The mere presence of secret police deters citizens from participating in anti-regime activities, as the threat of being watched discourages mobilization. In contrast, Hager and Krakowski (2022) present a more complex picture, showing that increased surveillance by secret police can trigger higher levels of public protest while reducing sabotage. According to their findings, surveillance provokes anger and collective action by infringing on privacy and generating mistrust within communities. Citizens may protest to distance themselves from being perceived as collaborators, while dissident groups refrain from sabotage to avoid giving the regime a pretext for violent repression.

Beyond direct political repression, surveillance also has profound effects on social movements and their organizational capacity. Starr et al. (2008) highlights how state surveillance creates a chilling effect, deterring people from engaging in political activities due to fear of being watched. This fear undermines social networks, isolates activists, and fosters paranoia and distrust within movements. Surveillance forces organizations to shift their focus from proactive activism to defensive strategies, such as countersurveillance and legal protection, which weakens their ability to coordinate and execute strategic actions.

Conversely, Reynolds-Stenson (2022) shows that a range of state repression methods – from overt actions like police violence and arrests to covert tactics such as surveillance and infiltration – does not produce uniform outcomes. In a study of activists in Arizona, participants from diverse backgrounds, ages, and levels of political involvement, all of whom had experienced some form of state repression, exhibited varied responses. For some, these experiences proved emboldening or even radicalizing, deepening their commitment to activism and motivating further action. For others, repression had a deterrent effect, discouraging future participation. Through in-depth interviews and quantitative analysis, the author demonstrates how these contrasting responses – persistence versus disengagement – often depend on social support. Activists with strong community backing were more likely to stay engaged, even under repression, while those who felt isolated or unsupported were more inclined to withdraw from activism.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The chapter examined the multi-disciplinary landscape of surveillance research, integrating perspectives from political science, sociology and social movement studies, and multidisciplinary surveillance studies to develop a nuanced understanding of how regimes deploy surveillance as a tool of social and political control. Focusing on the objects, the subjects, and the actions of surveillance, the chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of surveillance practices. Beginning with the targets of surveillance, we explored how regimes strategically target diverse social and political layers, tailoring monitoring practices to manage compliance and suppress dissent across societal strata. We then discussed the methods of surveillance by introducing a new typology based on visibility (overt vs. covert) and interface (human vs. digital). In the following sections, we discussed agents of surveillance and the associated agency problems and laid out the prominent accounts of the causes and consequences of surveillance practices.

For future research, a topic that is worth pursuing is the protection of sources in covert surveillance operations. Existing literature often assumes that surveillance and repression will occur without investigating this blackbox-like process of how it occurs.

One important topic that is currently missed is how states acquire, protect, and use surveillance-derived information. The effectiveness of informants and undercover agents, who are vital to these operations, relies heavily on preserving their anonymity. This process intersects with various layers of political control. In Layer 5 for example, the surveillance of social movements often depends on information from within opposition organizations, raising questions about the vulnerabilities of informants embedded in activist networks. Similarly, Layer 4 highlights the role of civil society groups, which may serve both as subjects of surveillance and as potential informants, complicating the dynamics of political control. In Layer 3, institutions such as courts and the judicial system may influence how states balance protecting anonymity with maintaining transparency and accountability, particularly when judicial actors require disclosure of sensitive information.

Future studies can also explore the strategies employed by states to protect the identities of these sources, ensuring a continuous supply of valuable intelligence without compromising their safety. Lessons can be drawn from historical practices, such as those of the Allies during World War II, who meticulously safeguarded source information, sometimes acting selectively on gathered intelligence to avoid compromising their sources. Similar situations can apply in scenarios involving state repression, where decisions about how information tips are translated into state actions can critically influence agent safety. Additionally, scholars could investigate how modern states integrate advanced technologies to better secure and manage their intelligence operations, addressing the challenges posed by institutional and societal pressures at these various layers.

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