

# Kaufmann's Making Information Matter: Understanding Surveillance and Making a Difference

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## Book Review

**Review of Kaufmann, Mareile. 2023. *Making Information Matter: Understanding Surveillance and Making a Difference*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.**  
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One of the joys of reading Kaufmann's *Making Information Matter: Understanding Surveillance and Making a Difference* (2023) is the mastery she shows in connecting not only the arguments of diverse scholars but also the ontological debate of how to conceptualize information. She does this through advancing three arguments: "first, information is not virtual,...[s]econd, information is in-formation, and [t]hird, information is dependent on making" (21).

The distinction between data and information is important and often not maintained by scholars nor practitioners. Kaufmann clarifies her usage from the start, making clear that, "nothing about data is a given" (13). She, "employ[s] the term information because it includes data but refers to more overarching notions of communication and knowledge and their imbrication with processes of shaping and giving form" (13). Though not explicitly stated by Kaufmann, this draws on the representation of a data-information-knowledge-wisdom pyramid that has been used in fields such as information science for some time.

The main argument of *Making Information Matter: Understanding Surveillance and Making a Difference* is that information does not stand on its own but is co-constructed and matters. It is not ephemeral but is embodied and always "becoming." As such, it is possible to consider information as a form of "making." She presents the reader with the "lively and agential materiality of information" (13).

By drawing on the work of Donna Haraway, Geoffrey Bowker, Susan Leigh Starr, Mark Andrejevic, and many others, she demonstrates the agency of information. Some readers may recall an article published in 1991 by the influential library and information science professor Michael Buckland, "Information as Thing," in the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*. Buckland (1991) presented three meanings of information: "Information-as-process," "information-as-knowledge," and "information-as-thing." Kaufmann's treatment of the nature of information harkens back to this earlier dialogue.

Kaufmann presents the "liveliness" of information through the methodology of "life cycles." Traditionally,

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in the fields of library and information science, the primary stages in the information life cycle are creation, processing, dissemination, use, storage, and archiving. Many of these stages are also present in relation to surveillance and have been examined extensively by surveillance studies scholars. Kaufmann draws on these stages and identifies them as imaginaries, generation, storage, curation, maturation/processing, and death/re-use. In each of the stages information is *in-form*ation; it may undergo *reformation*, as well as *transformation* (91). These are exemplified in four practices that show how information matters: association, conversion, secrecy, and speculation. In each of these, Kaufmann draws on empirical work and conversations with hackers, software developers, children, their parents and teachers, and artists to underline the materiality of information. This conceptualization of information is important because it brings to the fore the power of information's different materialities.

Kaufmann first addresses the practice of association as an integral part of surveillance and prediction. Kaufmann draws on Louise Amoore's (2011) concept of the "ontology of association," where different datasets are used to create a data derivative and to derive patterns (66). The tools that are developed from these practices claim to produce "evidence" that may support police activity. They may provide justification for budget requests and troop deployment. An officer may be well aware of the concentration of crime in certain neighborhoods, but hot spot policing technologies and social network analysis provide "evidence." In addition, the tools are purported to uncover risks and other unknowns (50). Although the majority of these tools are marketed as predicting "where" an incident may occur, they still are powerful in identifying "who" as a byproduct of "where." Very real concerns about over-policing particular neighborhoods are about the impact this over-policing has on the people who live in those neighborhoods (50). This would not be an issue if identification of these hot spots resulted more in financial support to address the social disparity that accompanies these areas than in justification for increased police presence. In an ongoing period of neoliberal policies, association algorithms are attractive products for police departments and other agencies within the criminal justice system.

Conversion is the practice of making information matter differently (91). In conversations with hackers, Kaufmann shows the productive and often political way that information matters. Hackers discussed the volatility of information and that—once it is online, for example—it is "uncontrollable" (96). That said, in the death/re-use stage of the life cycle, information isn't destroyed but is in a state of "continuous becoming" (105).

When information is secret, not available, or not seen, it still "matters." Kaufmann writes, "Secrecy is a practice of making information matter" (110). The conversations that Kaufmann highlights in this section demonstrate the way children make "secret information matter" (112). Having and sharing secrets is an important part of childhood. A comment made by one child exemplifies the potential agency inherent in a secret. When asked by Kaufmann how he managed to keep the secret he replied, "I just try not to move my mouth" (117). The implication is that the secret, the information, has its own power. This is a compelling example that moves beyond the common dichotomy of secrecy/transparency. Secrecy can enhance agency. It can provide security for vulnerable populations.

Lastly, Kaufmann discusses how artists deal with aspects of identity and representation. These are active processes and problematizing what happens throughout the life cycle of information, particularly with regard to surveillance practices, occupies their work. That information, as a process and actor in making, is in flux and is a part of the radical potential of artistic inquiry. We can see how, within the process of speculation, new imaginaries are created by the artist, the audience, and information as medium. These depictions are powerful because individuals rarely have the agency to manipulate this information, and ultimately, "it's really about having agency over your visibility and how you are interpreted" (145). "Making" with this information requires education as well as speculation in order to have personal agency (150).

Ultimately, this message is a key takeaway from *Making Information Matter: Understanding Surveillance and Making a Difference*. It posits a dynamic conceptualization of information and would be of interest to an array of scholars who are interested in the ontology of information and the power of information use in our society. The book draws valuable insight from a number of fields including surveillance studies, information science, STS, and philosophy. The book is written to be read in its entirety or as standalone chapters, making it a valuable text to include in university courses.

## References

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