

In the Heart of Liberal Democracy: Whitewashing Authoritarian Surveillance a Decade After the Snowden Revelations

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Practices of authoritarian surveillance are not limited to so-called authoritarian states. Authoritarian surveillance has been increasingly witnessed in countries that uphold liberal democratic principles and institutions in the twenty-first century, along with accelerated automation of mass surveillance. This article situates authoritarian surveillance as a problem in the heart of democracy and capitalism in its materiality and imperial expansion and discusses how mass surveillance has redrawn boundaries of democratic principles. What Edward Snowden has revealed since 2013 is a good reminder of the materiality of the global surveillance networks built under the “War on Terror” that we still live in. They are embedded within digital communication infrastructures by the security agencies in the United States, the self-defined champion of liberal democracy. Nonetheless, a decade after the Snowden revelations, the authoritarian surveillance within democracy has been whitewashed in technological competitions with the Global South, such as China and India, and in tech-savvy culture in the Global North. What is the driving force of this oblivion? In a contrast with the COVID-19 pandemic surveillance, I highlight the exceptional position given to the security intelligence and policing agencies within liberal democratic institutions to generate authoritarian surveillance continuously from the imperial to postcolonial times. It is critically important to deconstruct the binary discourse of democratic states versus authoritarian states because this view tends to only problematize surveillance activities by countries located outside the “West” and sees authoritarian surveillance practiced by self-defined democratic states as harmless or even necessary to counter perceived authoritarian states. It further fuels global dissemination of surveillance technologies, just like the nuclear arms races, and produces more victims of authoritarian surveillance on earth, without borders.

Dialogue

In the Heart of Liberal Democracy: Whitewashing Authoritarian Surveillance a Decade After the Snowden Revelations

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Abstract

Practices of authoritarian surveillance are not limited to so-called authoritarian states. Authoritarian surveillance has been increasingly witnessed in countries that uphold liberal democratic principles and institutions in the twenty-first century, along with accelerated automation of mass surveillance. This article situates authoritarian surveillance as a problem in the heart of democracy and capitalism in its materiality and imperial expansion and discusses how mass surveillance has redrawn boundaries of democratic principles. What Edward Snowden has revealed since 2013 is a good reminder of the materiality of the global surveillance networks built under the “War on Terror” that we still live in. They are embedded within digital communication infrastructures by the security agencies in the United States, the self-defined champion of liberal democracy. Nonetheless, a decade after the Snowden revelations, the authoritarian surveillance within democracy has been whitewashed in technological competitions with the Global South, such as China and India, and in tech-savvy culture in the Global North. What is the driving force of this oblivion? In a contrast with the COVID-19 pandemic surveillance, I highlight the exceptional position given to the security intelligence and policing agencies within liberal democratic institutions to generate authoritarian surveillance continuously from the imperial to postcolonial times. It is critically important to deconstruct the binary discourse of democratic states versus authoritarian states because this view tends to only problematize surveillance activities by countries located outside the “West” and sees authoritarian surveillance practiced by self-defined democratic states as harmless or even necessary to counter perceived authoritarian states. It further fuels global dissemination of surveillance technologies, just like the nuclear arms races, and produces more victims of authoritarian surveillance on earth, without borders.

Introduction

Practices of authoritarian surveillance, or oppressive surveillance, are not limited to so-called authoritarian states. Authoritarian surveillance has been increasingly witnessed in countries that uphold liberal democratic principles and institutions in the twenty-first century, along with the accelerated creations of new surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition systems and predatory spywares. The term “authoritarian state” has been used by the English-language media and scholarship predominantly when referring to countries outside the “West,” especially (former) socialist and communist countries, such as Russia and China. This phenomenon can be understood as a remnant of the “Cold War” mindset—which in fact, has never been “cold” outside of the West and includes the devastating wars in Korea and Vietnam. Recently, the anti-communist and white nationalist discourse has been revived in the face of technological

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competition between the United States and China (Price and Ogasawara 2024; Woo 2024) and may escalate after the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025.

As referenced in the editorial for the special issue “Surveillance and the Global Turn to Authoritarianism” in *Surveillance & Society* (Murakami Wood 2017), critical studies on authority emerged from Marxist scholars of the Frankfurt School when they encountered the Nazi regime (Jay 1973). Contrary to the popular image of an authoritarian state grown outside Western democracy, authoritarianism emerged within the liberal Weimar Republic *democratically* (Bauman 1989). Max Horkheimer (1975), one of the leading sociologists in the Frankfurt School who was exiled to the United States, dedicated his article “Authoritarian State” to Walter Benjamin, who had taken his life during the flight from the Nazis. In his article, Horkheimer (1975) analyzes the prevailing fascism and the death of civil liberties in early twentieth-century Europe as an inevitable result of state capitalism. For him and his colleagues, authoritarianism is the issue of Western democracy, historically developed in conjunction with industrial capitalism that spreads technological rationality and monopoly. Similarly, while critically reflecting on Stalinism, George Orwell (2003) wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with a deep concern about post-World War II Western democracy continuously leaning toward totalitarianism; the novel’s setting Oceania is a transmogrification of Anglo-American Alliance, where contradictory “doublethink” is normalized to concentrate power (Orwell 2003).¹ However, the postwar mainstream discourse has treated the authoritarian state as alien to the Western democracy or as an exception, not a rule, such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and Spain.

Against such a popularized view, in this essay, I situate authoritarian surveillance as a problem in the heart of democracy and capitalism and discuss how mass surveillance has been redrawing boundaries of democratic principles. Yes, authoritarianism, represented by dictatorship; a state of siege; oppression of freedoms of the press, speech, expression, peaceful assembly, and other civil liberties; incarceration; expulsion; and legalized or extrajudicial killing of minoritized people, may be not reported daily in liberal democratic countries. People living under dictatorship experience more immediate and severe consequences of state surveillance. I do not underestimate the differences among regimes and the severity of human rights abuses; every case of oppressive surveillance demands urgent action to stop. Nonetheless, I argue that the problem of authoritarian surveillance stays in the core components of liberal democracy and globalized capitalism, and I will unpack the components in the following.

The Materiality of Global Surveillance

The special issue “Surveillance and the Global Turn to Authoritarianism” (Murakami Wood 2017) grasped a crucial moment of altering the characteristic of the Western democracy in response to real-time political events, such as the election of Trump as president in the US (2016) and the UK’s national referendum that resulted in Brexit (2016). Nonetheless, many contributors to this issue discussed cases from the Global South that had already experienced an authoritarian shift, and some point to the imperial effects brought by the European powers that created the foundations of today’s authoritarian surveillance, such as Uganda (Kizito 2017) or Pakistan (Ahmad and Mehmood 2017).

I provided to the issue an article on Japan’s new legislation to cover up and support the US surveillance activities in Japan, based on an interview with the National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden (Ogasawara 2017). I found a contemporary linkage of authoritarian surveillance between Japanese and US politics as the tactics of “new imperialism” (Harvey 2005). The rapid proliferation and legalization

¹In his “Forward” for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Thomas Pynchon sees Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “a victim of the success of *Animal Farm*,” which most people read as a straightforward allegory about the fate of the Russian revolution (Pynchon 2003: viii).

of mass surveillance are a global phenomenon promoted by the neoconservatives in the post-9/11 US, and the tactics have excavated democratic transparency and constitutional protection in Japan.

To understand this global characteristic of mass surveillance today, what Snowden has revealed since 2013 still exceeds others in documenting the materiality. The NSA secretly coordinated extensive partnerships with telecommunications companies and technology giants and succeeded to embed spying facilities within international communication infrastructures, such as transoceanic cables and servers (Greenwald 2014). It shocked the American people because their government had repeatedly promised that it would *not* spy on its people, but it had collected their private communication data, including telephone calls, emails, and chats.

Though the historical root of the NSA's electronic spying goes back to World War II (Bamford 1982), the Snowden revelations evidenced that information and communication technologies enabled the US to shift its espionage principle from select targets to "Collect It All" in the post-9/11 political landscapes. The logic of the "War on Terror" supported government officials to pick any means, whatever technologically available and marketed by technology companies, and it diffused technological rationality that treats every person as a potential "terrorist" under the PATRIOT Act. There has been pushback and resistance, such as the disputes in the Department of Justice (Savage and Risen 2013) and the civil lawsuits against the telecoms and NSA by non-governmental organizations, including the Electronic Frontier Foundation (n.d.a, n.d.b), because the shift was an unprecedented step toward authoritarian surveillance; the most democratic nation possesses the most extensive networks of authoritarian surveillance. To this day, no other countries, including China and Russia, reportedly possess clandestine infrastructures that are equivalent to scale of the US's.

The anti-terror measures that mushroomed post-9/11 have globally proliferated new spaces defined to be outside constitutional limits of state power within democracy, which turn people into, in Agamben's (2005) words, "bare life." The detainees in the US's Guantanamo Bay detention camp or other "black sites" represent the extrajudicial maltreatment of people labelled as "terrorists" whose whereabouts sink in clandestine shadow. The popular binary view discussed above may see this as a hiccup in the long tradition of Western democracy, but the Guantanamo military prison has stayed open more than twenty-two years despite public outcries for shutting it down (Pfeiffer et al. 2024). Authoritarian surveillance has grown and been maintained in the heart of democratic institutions. It has fundamentally shaken the democratic values while the exception has replaced the rule.

A Comparison with the Pandemic Surveillance

Crises, such as the War on Terror, keep elevating mass surveillance to the next level, as this was the overarching theme for the 2024 Surveillance Studies Network Biennial Conference. But each crisis is different, and some comparisons between crises unpack who has more of a say than others within a democratic system. Let me compare the War on Terror and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many surveillance scholars were concerned about the rapid implementation of new surveillance schemes in response to the pandemic (French and Monahan 2020; Lyon 2022). Because of the emergency powers governments gain, pandemic policies skipped parliamentary deliberation and public oversight, from contact-tracing apps to vaccine passports. The pandemic surveillance particularly penetrated workplaces and schools as more people remotely worked and studied from home (Lyon 2022). It brought massive business opportunities for technology companies to sell their untested products as part of "new normal."

However, the major tools of pandemic surveillance have apparently not enjoyed as long of a life as the War on Terror. For example, during the pandemic, Asia was seen the "world's surveillance hotspot" (Nazalya 2020; Grant 2020): China implemented a smartphone app called the "Health Code" system that assigned colour codes of green, yellow, or red to an individual's health status based on people's movements (Shi and Ma 2020). While a green code allowed its bearer to access public transportations and buildings, someone

with a yellow or red was required to self-quarantine (Mozur, Zhong, and Krolik 2020). The South Korean government collected GPS data, credit card records, public transportation histories, and other kinds of data on people who tested positive for coronaviruses and posted that information online (Kim 2020; Lee 2021). These are perhaps more invasive than some of surveillance tools equipped for the War on Terror. However, before the World Health Organization declared an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency in May 2023 (United Nations 2023), both governments stopped using the systems. Though the governments do not officially admit it, they encountered public protests and abruptly abandoned the schemes (Choi 2022; Moon 2022; Yeung 2022).

Of course, it is another story how these technologies transformed in post-COVID societies. Massive personal data was collected, and newly networked databases can be used for other purposes than public health as function creep. But when people tangibly feel mass surveillance on a daily basis, they have more troubles and resist the surveillance even if they initially accepted it in the state of emergency. Their negative reactions made the governments difficult to maintain the schemes as a new normal, despite immense expectations from the industries.

In contrast, many of surveillance systems implemented under the War on Terror turned into a new normal, from body scanners at airports to facial recognition systems. Authoritarian surveillance finds a better position to survive and thrive in in the field of national security than in the field of public health. Moreover, it illuminates the exceptional power of national security apparatuses to generate authoritarian surveillance in democratic institutions. Security agencies are the central component of this power, given privileged secrecy and lucrative budgets. The norm of national security, tasked to find and reduce threats to a country, allows them to invest technologies that are otherwise unacceptable in democratic checks and balances and convinces people that surveillance is used to protect them. Though this norm was seriously challenged by Snowden, the NSA has kept reining the global surveillance networks built in digital infrastructures.

But, when security intelligence agencies play a central role in producing authoritarian surveillance within democratic governance, how does this redefine liberal democracy? Does the state remain liberal and democratic while practicing authoritarian surveillance inside and outside the territory?

Democratic but Imperial States

Surveillance studies has increasingly revealed how democratic nations have been simultaneously imperial powers in modern history (Breckenridge 2014; Browne 2015; Cole 2001; McCoy 2009; Zureik 2016). Former imperial powers innovated various surveillance technologies for the purpose of colonial management, such as Britain's fingerprint identification in India and South Africa, the US's policing agencies oppressing Filipino revolts, or Israel's colour-coded identification cards classifying Palestinians. For the imperial pursuit to expand global markets and extract populations and resources, surveillance technologies have kept evolving in colonies. The colonized people were forcefully exposed to authoritarian surveillance and its necropolitical consequences (Mbembe 2003) while the Western powers accumulated wealth through violent extractions and developed democratic institutions inside. The military intelligence and policing agencies have been the driving forces for such colonial projects. The double faces of Western civilization need to be recognized to redefine liberal democracy.

Furthermore, these studies demonstrate that authoritarian surveillance practiced in colonies tends to remain in post-colonial times. Authoritarian surveillance was normalized or even officialised as the means of modern governance and labour management after the colonies gained their independence. Japanese imperialism is a case in point. After the defeat of the Japanese empire, Korea, Taiwan, and China implemented national identification systems mirroring the colonizers' schemes. Post-war Japan also institutionalized a biometric identification system as the Alien Registration System (Ogasawara 2008). In other words, there is a continuation of authoritarian surveillance, rather than a discontinuation, since the

colonial time in East Asia, and Japan is responsible for the normalization of present national identification systems regionwide.

In a global context, Breckenridge (2014: 17) states, “the most powerful biometric surveillance systems are being developed in the poorest countries, the former colonies of the European empires.” It suggests that authoritarian surveillance fostered by security agencies to subjugate colonial populations are entering a new level in the Global South and are continuously marketed by technology companies in the Global North. Alternatively, authoritarian surveillance has been whitewashed in tech-savvy culture in the Global North, where security agencies have justified “modernizing” the means of monitoring the internal and external populations. In settler-colonial states like Canada where I live, the agencies have continuously targeted the Indigenous activists and racialized persons as security threats in ongoing forms of colonialism, and they have utilized facial recognition systems and predatory spywares against them (Chartrand 2019; Crosby and Monaghan 2018). Israel’s infamous “Pegasus” spyware has been exported to forty-six countries (Fuchs 2023), and postcolonial India has sold the Aadhaar biometric technology to African countries (Trikanad and Bhandari 2022). Despite democratization’s struggles all over the world, security agencies have clung on to the imperial legacies, racist biases, anti-communist sentiments, and political privileges and hunted dissidents. Accordingly, the issues of data justice and digital neocolonialism arise (Dencik et al. 2019; Mejias and Couldry 2024).

Conclusion

My discussion above is intended to deconstruct and overcome the binary discourse of democratic states versus authoritarian states, which blocks our view of globalized practices of authoritarian surveillance across national borders. I do not intend to give any immunities to abusive surveillance practiced by non-Western governments. I remind readers of the materiality of authoritarian surveillance, disclosed by Snowden and highlighted by the exceptional position security intelligence and policing agencies have occupied within liberal democratic institutions to continuously generate authoritarian surveillance from the imperial to postcolonial times. In the post-Snowden era, it is intellectually dishonest to ignore the global infrastructures of mass surveillance built by the United States, the most militarily powerful country and settler-colonial state that upholds liberal democratic principles. Surveillance studies researchers face this conundrum.

Overcoming the binary of “We the democracy” versus “They the authoritarian” is urgently important because the binary only problematizes surveillance practiced by “them” and acquits surveillance practiced by “us.” As a result, authoritarian surveillance in self-defined democratic states is seen as harmless or even necessary to counter perceived authoritarian states, which justifies and fuels the global competition over AI-powered surveillance technologies, just like the nuclear arms races. These dangerous competitions produce more victims of authoritarian surveillance on earth, without borders.

The intelligence agencies in the Five Eyes countries have been disseminating this binary in the contexts of wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and the technological competition with China. In the very heart of liberal democracy, the agencies have conserved and passed the imperialist view onto twenty-first century conflicts. To counter such a harmful trend, more scholarly work is needed to address how unique authoritarian surveillance is to liberal democracy in global perspectives. To change, more collaborative imagination is needed, including defunding security agencies and divesting the military-tech-industrial complex.

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