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Article abstract

To comprehend contemporary surveillance in Brazil, especially under Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022), it is crucial to revisit the country's most authoritarian period, the military dictatorship (1964–1985). During this period, the National Information Service (SNI) was established as a state intelligence agency and played a pivotal role in monitoring and suppressing dissent, setting the stage for future surveillance practices in Brazil. The military dictatorship ended in 1985, with the SNI being dissolved in 1990. In 1999, the remnants of SNI were restructured into the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN), which remains operational today. Under Bolsonaro's government, ABIN employed advanced surveillance technologies to monitor opponents of the far-right president. Some of these surveillance practices have been deemed abusive and are currently under investigation by the Federal Police during Lula's administration (2023–2026). This contribution introduces the concept of recursive surveillance, suggesting that state surveillance mechanisms not only reinvent themselves but also do so in ways that create the framework for their examination and eventual exposure. Surveillance structures, particularly those created in authoritarian regimes, leave traces that may reveal the practices and ideologies of the watchers, allowing for their eventual scrutiny.

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Dialogue

Recursive Surveillance and the Persistence of Authoritarian Surveillance in Brazil

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Abstract

To comprehend contemporary surveillance in Brazil, especially under Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022), it is crucial to revisit the country's most authoritarian period, the military dictatorship (1964–1985). During this period, the National Information Service (SNI) was established as a state intelligence agency and played a pivotal role in monitoring and suppressing dissent, setting the stage for future surveillance practices in Brazil. The military dictatorship ended in 1985, with the SNI being dissolved in 1990. In 1999, the remnants of SNI were restructured into the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN), which remains operational today. Under Bolsonaro's government, ABIN employed advanced surveillance technologies to monitor opponents of the far-right president. Some of these surveillance practices have been deemed abusive and are currently under investigation by the Federal Police during Lula's administration (2023–2026). This contribution introduces the concept of *recursive surveillance*, suggesting that state surveillance mechanisms not only reinvent themselves but also do so in ways that create the framework for their examination and eventual exposure. Surveillance structures, particularly those created in authoritarian regimes, leave traces that may reveal the practices and ideologies of the watchers, allowing for their eventual scrutiny.

Introduction: The Emergence of Authoritarian Surveillance in Brazil

State surveillance practices have existed in Brazil since the beginning of its colonisation by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. Like any colonial regime, Brazil was subjected to various forms of surveillance, such as the monitoring of indigenous populations and slaves, control over communication, and oversight of economic activities (Prado Jr. 2011). However, it was only many centuries later that surveillance practices became formally institutionalised within the state framework. One of the first movements towards surveillance institutionalisation occurred during the Vargas Era (1930–1946), particularly in its latter part, known as the Estado Novo (1937–1946). During a period of intense moral anti-communist panic, Vargas executed a coup d'état in 1937, dismantling the Legislature and enforcing authoritarian governance. This rise in state surveillance included the creation of formal institutions aimed at overseeing and controlling political dissent. The Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) stands out among these institutions.

Created in 1924, prior to the Vargas Era, DOPS began to play a significant role in suppressing dissent during the Estado Novo period. The agency was responsible for investigating and repressing political activities deemed threatening to the regime, including extensive surveillance of individuals and groups suspected of opposing the government (Pacheco 2019). This included intercepting communications, infiltrating organisations, and maintaining detailed records of political activities. The agency was instrumental in identifying, detaining, and often torturing political dissidents. DOPS also enforced strict censorship laws,

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ensuring media and cultural expressions aligned with the regime's ideology. It also controlled labour movements by monitoring and suppressing unions and strikes, which were seen as potential sources of opposition.

In 1946, right after the end of the Vargas Era, then-President Emílio Dutra created what can be considered the first Brazilian national secret service: the Federal Information and Counteirnformation Service (SFICI). This service began functioning effectively in 1958 after Brazilian officials visited US intelligence agencies. This visit happened during President Juscelino Kubitschek's administration, when SFICI gained autonomy and was tasked with monitoring subversive activities and political parties and preparing reports for the government (Comissão Nacional da Verdade 2014).

DOPS and SFICI continued to function during the following presidential administrations, including the left-leaning government of João Goulart from 1961 to 1964. Despite its reduced activity, the agency remained a tool for monitoring political activities. Goulart's government, with its progressive reforms and leftist orientation, similar to what happened in the period preceding the Estado Novo, sparked fears of communism among conservative sectors and the military. The political climate became increasingly tense, with conservative forces and the military viewing Goulart's policies as threatening the established order. This growing anxiety culminated in the military coup d'état of 1964, which removed Goulart and marked the beginning of the most authoritarian regime Brazil has ever faced.

During the more than two decades of Military Dictatorship (1964–1985), DOPS was exceptionally active, working as a sort of police force and obtaining information from a vast state surveillance system centred on the newly created National Information Service (SNI), the nation's intelligence agency that replaced the SFICI. This period was marked by an increase in mistrust, with civilians frequently reporting individuals suspected of threatening the military regime (Magalhães 1997). The military dictatorship experienced a sub-period of significant increase in repression and violence, known as the "years of lead" (1968–1974). In that period, surveillance in Brazil ramped up considerably, driven by various factors, especially the Institutional Act Number Five (AI-5), enacted in December 1968.

AI-5 gave the regime extensive powers, allowing it to dissolve Congress, suspend habeas corpus, and impose strict censorship. This legislation laid the groundwork for a network of intense surveillance and repression. The regime increased its intelligence operations, giving agencies such as the SNI and DOPS[1] broader powers to monitor and suppress dissent. In addition to extensive wiretaps and surveillance of mail and other communication forms to compile intelligence on political adversaries, the government heavily relied on informants. These informants infiltrated opposition groups, labour unions, and even universities (Pimenta and Melgaço 2014) to report on their activities. These measures created a pervasive atmosphere of fear and control, significantly curtailing civil liberties and political freedoms in Brazil during that period.

The "years of lead," along with this extensive and intrusive state surveillance, continued until 1974 when, under General Ernesto Geisel's leadership, a gradual process of political liberalisation known as "distensão" (relaxation) began. This happened in response to various factors, including rising inflation, international pressure, and domestic opposition, especially from the more leftist factions of the Catholic Church. In 1979, Geisel's successor, João Figueiredo, enacted the Amnesty Law, which pardoned political crimes committed by both the regime and its adversaries. Although the military regime remained violent, surveillant, and authoritarian, it gradually weakened, culminating in its end in 1985 with the indirect election of a civilian president and the return to democracy. This transition was solidified with the promulgation of the 1988

[1] The intelligence network put together during the military dictatorship period involved several other agencies, including the Sectorial System of Information of the Military Ministries (SSIMM), the Service of Security and Information of the Major States (SUSIEM), and the Sectorial System of Information of the Civilian Ministries (SSIMC).

Constitution, which established a democratic framework focused on individual rights and freedoms, including the right to privacy.

Authoritarian Surveillance in Democratic Times

Some surveillance structures and practices from authoritarian times persisted in less authoritarian times in Brazil. This was the case with the SNI, which continued to exist after the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. SNI was only dismantled in 1990. Nine years later, in 1999, a new agency was created: the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN). ABIN inherited several key elements from its predecessor, the SNI, such as its institutional framework (the organisational structure and many of the operational protocols from the SNI, including the hierarchical setup and the methods for gathering and processing intelligence). Also, many of the personnel who worked for the SNI transitioned to ABIN (Antunes 2002). This continuity meant that the expertise and experience of former SNI agents were carried over to the new agency, creating an inherent bias rooted in institutional and information cultures. ABIN also inherited the extensive network of informants and surveillance systems that the SNI had established. Both agencies shared a primary focus on national security. However, ABIN was also tasked with adapting these practices to operate within the parameters of a so-called democratic society. Its mandate included the protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law, reflecting the changes in Brazil's political landscape.

ABIN remains active today and has received considerable media attention during and after Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022). Since the end of the military era in 1985, Brazil has had a succession of different presidents from the centre-right to the centre-left spectrum, and it was only with Jair Bolsonaro in 2019, a former captain of the Army, that the military regained critical political importance in Brazil. Bolsonaro's presidency saw the appointment of several military officers to key government positions. The election of Bolsonaro brought a renewed focus on state surveillance, particularly targeting opponents of his far-right administration. ABIN, under Bolsonaro's government, employed advanced surveillance technologies to monitor and suppress dissent.

One notable example of ABIN's authoritarian surveillance practices, which evoke memories of those during tyrannical regimes, is the use of the geolocation tool First Mile, developed by the Israeli company Cognyte (Exame 2023). According to an investigation by the Brazilian Federal Police, ABIN employed the software to monitor the movements of political opponents and activists. Approximately 33,000 individuals had their locations tracked using First Mile. Similar to this, many other cases of abusive surveillance have been revealed that took place during Bolsonaro's mandate (de Sousa 2023). In 2020, ABIN received a report from the Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Justice containing the names of 579 law enforcement civil servants allegedly associated with the "Anti-fascist Police Movement," along with four university professors identified as influencers (Cepik 2021). These surveillance practices bear a striking resemblance to those from the military era, raising significant concerns regarding privacy and civil liberties.

Recursive Surveillance

In 2011, under the administration of Brazil's first female president, Dilma Rousseff, a National Truth Commission in Brazil was established and operated until 2014. Its primary purpose was to investigate human rights violations between 1946 and 1988, with a particular focus on the period of the military dictatorship, from 1964 to 1985. The document (Comissão Nacional da Verdade 2014: 111) dedicates its fourth chapter to the "organs and procedures of political repression," in which it debunks the intricate surveillance system implemented during the military dictatorship. It is important to note that the traces left by these surveillance systems fed the National Truth Commission researchers with information. Much of what we know today about how DOPS, SNI, and the other agencies worked comes from investigating the data collected by these same agencies. The SNI archives, for instance, provide valuable insights into the

surveillance practices of the military dictatorship. These records not only document the activities of those being monitored but also shed light on the priorities and strategies of the surveillance apparatus itself. This aligns with Stoler's (2002) view that colonial archives serve as more than mere information repositories; the forms, categories, and secrets within them reflect the perceptions and ideologies of those compiling the data.

A similar situation is unfolding now with President Lula's latest term, which began in 2023. During Lula's current administration, the Federal Police is looking into the abuses that occurred during Bolsonaro's time in office, including those committed by ABIN and some of its questionable surveillance practices. That is, the very surveillance tools once employed to surveil Bolsonaro's opponents are now under scrutiny, showing how surveillance structures leave traces that may allow for later re-examination.

To grasp the idea that surveillance mechanisms may foster their own scrutiny and exposure, I propose the concept of *recursive surveillance*. This is particularly noticeable in authoritarian regimes, where surveillance systems and practices are widespread and their traces are equally prevalent. It is not uncommon for authoritarian regimes to be overconfident about maintaining large datasets of regime opponents. However, the data that remain secret during authoritarian times may not remain so once the regime ends.

The term "recursive" here is loosely borrowed from mathematics and computer science, and it describes a process that can refer back to itself or iterate within its own framework. Recursion in the context of authoritarian state surveillance highlights three key dynamics. First, it insists on the fact that surveillance is not necessarily an abrupt development; rather, it often derives from pre-existing frameworks, as exemplified by the Brazilian case. Second, it suggests how these systems, once established, may create the conditions for their own exploration, scrutiny, and reinterpretation. While traditional notions of surveillance involve watching others—especially dissidents or political opponents—recursive surveillance goes beyond this linear gaze. Over time, surveillance systems may turn back upon themselves, revealing not just who was watched but also how the watchers operated, their motivations, and their biases. This self-revealing characteristic is key to recursion: the system loops back, allowing the initial actors and their actions to be scrutinised. Third, the multiple possibilities of revisiting the past highlight that memory is a field in constant dispute. Recursivity in this context does not guarantee the discovery of *the* truth but rather indicates the possible conditions under which *a* truth may emerge, which could later be disputed, especially if new traces come to light. It's important to acknowledge that access to the "archive" of previous surveillance systems will, in many cases, probably remain inaccessible and under the control and restriction of specific authorities.

Recursivity should not be mistaken for reflexivity, even if an element of reflexivity can exist in recursive surveillance. By reflexivity, inspired by Giddens (1991), we mean here a bouncing idea in which surveillance could be used by the watcher to reconsider their methods, ethically speaking, or to refine their approach in terms of efficiency. However, the concept of recursive surveillance uniquely foregrounds the potential revelation or exposure by either those internal to the surveillance institution or by third parties. It may, therefore, involve the internal review and improvement of surveillance practices. Still, its focus is on the risk that these practices might be revealed by both internal and external agents.

The concept of recursive surveillance can extend beyond the specific context of authoritarianism in Brazil and be relevant in other situations. An example is the whistleblower revelations made by Edward Snowden in the US (Lyon 2015). Snowden's disclosures exposed the vast and intrusive surveillance practices of the National Security Agency (NSA), which included extensive data collection from foreign and domestic sources. The traces left by NSA operations were crucial for uncovering its intrusive practices. However, this did not result in a single historical narrative, as different groups interpreted these traces in distinct manners, leading to different scrutinies with diverse political inclinations and implications.

In recursive surveillance, the idea of a trace, and particularly a digital trace today, is critical. Surveillance technologies leave behind records that may later be reinterpreted. These traces are not merely passive records but active components of recursive surveillance. The SNI archives provide data about the system's targets, but they also reveal how the system itself operated—how the watchers made decisions, and what their long-term goals were. Thus, surveillance systems themselves are recursive because they encode information not just about the surveilled but also about the surveillers in ways that later regimes or investigative bodies can decode in multiple manners.

In Conclusion

The persistence of authoritarian surveillance practices in Brazil highlights the enduring burden of the military dictatorship. Despite transitions to democratic governance and efforts to reform the intelligence sector, the shadow of authoritarianism continues to influence state surveillance. Recursive surveillance points to the way surveillance practices are not isolated to one regime or moment in time. Rather, they often build upon and reference past structures, continually adapting but leaving behind traces that can eventually be examined. Recursive surveillance provides a framework for understanding how surveillance mechanisms may expose themselves to scrutiny, offering insights into the practices and interests of the watchers.

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