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# Authoritarian Surveillance: An Introduction

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Résumé de l'article

Authoritarian surveillance is no longer an exceptional or rare practice. In many parts of the world, we are witnessing an increase of pervasive government monitoring, of curtailing privacy protections, of stringent control of information flows, and of intimidation towards self-censorship. These hallmarks of authoritarian surveillance are not confined to authoritarian or undemocratic regimes. In a political landscape that favours strongarm authoritarian leaders, the boundaries between authoritarian and democratic regimes, the liberal and the illiberal ones, are blurrier than ever. The increasing availability of advanced technologies for analyzing (big) data, particularly when integrated with artificial intelligence (AI), has heightened the temptation for governments to adopt authoritarian surveillance tools and practices—and has amplified the potential dangers involved.

This Dialogue section introduces the multiple dimensions of contemporary authoritarian surveillance, going beyond a dichotomy between “democratic” and “authoritarian” regimes to identify and map authoritarian surveillance in diverse geographical and political contexts. We focus on surveillance beyond the exceptional and beyond the rule of law to examine an increasingly mundane but dangerous practice undermining the limited democratic spaces that remain in our world. The seven articles in this special Dialogue section explore different angles of authoritarian surveillance— the technologies that facilitate it, the laws that govern it, and the legacies that precede it or linger thereafter—and the social and political consequences that emerge as a result. Together, this collection revisits existing literature on authoritarian surveillance, calls for a renewed scholarly focus on its consequences, and proposes new directions for future research.

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Surveillance & Society

# Dialogue | Authoritarian Surveillance: An Introduction

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## Abstract

Authoritarian surveillance is no longer an exceptional or rare practice. In many parts of the world, we are witnessing an increase of pervasive government monitoring, of curtailing privacy protections, of stringent control of information flows, and of intimidation towards self-censorship. These hallmarks of authoritarian surveillance are not confined to authoritarian or undemocratic regimes. In a political landscape that favours strongarm authoritarian leaders, the boundaries between authoritarian and democratic regimes, the liberal and the illiberal ones, are blurrier than ever. The increasing availability of advanced technologies for analyzing (big) data, particularly when integrated with artificial intelligence (AI), has heightened the temptation for governments to adopt authoritarian surveillance tools and practices—and has amplified the potential dangers involved.

This Dialogue section introduces the multiple dimensions of contemporary authoritarian surveillance, going beyond a dichotomy between "democratic" and "authoritarian" regimes to identify and map authoritarian surveillance in diverse geographical and political contexts. We focus on surveillance beyond the exceptional and beyond the rule of law to examine an increasingly mundane but dangerous practice undermining the limited democratic spaces that remain in our world. The seven articles in this special Dialogue section explore different angles of authoritarian surveillance—the technologies that facilitate it, the laws that govern it, and the legacies that precede it or linger thereafter—and the social and political consequences that emerge as a result. Together, this collection revisits existing literature on authoritarian surveillance, calls for a renewed scholarly focus on its consequences, and proposes new directions for future research.

## Authoritarian Surveillance: An Introduction

A long-held assumption suggests that there is a negative correlation between coercion and information (Apter 1965; Graeber 2012): that in mostly democratic and liberal regimes, there is an abundance of information available to the state, as citizens frequently engage with political authorities, making their demands and explaining themselves. In contrast, in more authoritarian and repressive regimes, people have fewer reasons to share any information with the government. As a result, these regimes depend heavily on different forms of authoritarian surveillance—monitoring, tracking, informants, and spies—to gather information. In today's world, this assertion seems incomplete at best. The main hallmarks of authoritarian surveillance, including pervasive government monitoring, curtailing of privacy protections, stringent control of information flows, and intimidation towards self-censorship, can be found in abundance within nominally liberal democracies. These are either used extensively in secret, or, at times, celebrated as legitimate tools in the defence of democracy itself. When it comes to surveillance practices and technologies, the boundaries between the authoritarian and the democratic regimes, the liberal and the illiberal ones, are blurrier than ever.

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One way to explain this crisscross of authoritarian practices and technologies from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones, and vice-versa, is that liberal democracies do not habitually engage in authoritarian surveillance but might adopt specific instruments within a state of exception. Yet, as Agamben (2008) argues, these states of exception are less and less exceptional, with basic laws routinely suspended, ignored, or circumnavigated not only in counter-terrorism or anti-radicalisation programmes but also in pacifying political opposition or in targeting more mundane offenses such as welfare fraud or irregular migration. To understand contemporary authoritarian surveillance means we must move away from simplified and schematic ways of understanding political forms of governance and account for the myriad ways in which surveillance not only marks but also shapes the "hollowing out" (Mair 2023) of liberal democracy and the shift towards more authoritarian and disciplining forms of governance.

This shift is not only political but also technological. New technical possibilities in the processing and analysis of big data enable several new modes of authoritarian surveillance. First, we witness the integration of state surveillance with that of commercial actors, who already possess much of our personal data; the growing power of a small number of tech conglomerates raises the question: can we think of authoritarian surveillance beyond the state? Second, and perhaps most worryingly, we face the dystopian spectre of the further integration of surveillance technologies in war and violence, as evidenced in Israel's "AI-powered" genocide in Gaza (Abraham 2024; Katibah 2024). When the most minute details of our lives are fed into algorithms that determine our own life or death, as well as that of our families, neighbours, and communities, we can only begin to understand the gravity of authoritarian surveillance and its (mis)uses.

One area that is certain to keep surveillance scholars busy is the integration of surveillance with artificial intelligence (AI), a process that extends "smart" surveillance (Volinz 2018) to a new level. Automated data collection is increasingly contributing to automated and datafied decision-making in settings such as policing, health, migration management, counter-radicalisation, and the criminal justice system. The most basic surveillance paradox, that of the contrast between the massive amount of information collected and the limited human capacity to handle this overload and turn it into useful data (Harris and Harris 2009), is rapidly (and perhaps, wrongly) resolved by AI systems. The implications for authoritarian surveillance are significant, with unbridled power to analyse personal data in the hands of governments risking a totalitarian future of control that dwarves the Orwellian imaginary (Giroux 2015).

The social and cultural consequences for this spectre should not be under-estimated. The transformation and growth of authoritarian surveillance ushers in a range of new understandings and imaginaries of authoritarian surveillance by providing new faces for an old phenomenon. In much of the twentieth century, authoritarian surveillance was imagined as an exceptional measure—one happening beyond the Iron Curtain (Glajar 2023) or targeting radical groups (Leonard 2022), as the preserve of political dissidents, underground rebels, terrorists, or spies. It elicited the imagery of secret agents, stakeouts, and wire-tapping, and a perception of individual attention from the state captured nostalgically in Daniel Kahn's (2012) song, "Good Old Bad Old Days":

> I remember those nights down in old east Berlin
>
> With the microphones listening under the floor [...]
>
> Now nobody cares who you are anymore and nobody cares what you say
>
> It's liberty's curse, but was it really much worse
>
> In the good old bad old days?

Contemporary authoritarian surveillance perhaps does not have the flair of Cold War-era wiretapping, but it is not less dramatic. State and corporate surveillance is almost omnipresent, embedded in our everyday life, and relies increasingly on automation and AI-assisted analysis. It has become so normal and widespread that it is often no longer noticed: the practices of surveillance, once shocking or extraordinary, are now accepted and expected parts of everyday life in a "surveillance society" (Lyon 2001). Our discipline has changed with the times, as well. The "naive phase" of surveillance studies, where we were "surprised by evidence of surveillance" is long past (Murakami Wood and Webster 2009: 259). We are now playing catch-up with new surveillance technologies and practices, aiming to understand their social and political ramifications while maintaining a critical distance from their developers and operators.

In May 2024, at a special roundtable at the Surveillance Studies Network (SSN) conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, several authors in this Dialogue section began a conversation about how we can best approach contemporary authoritarian surveillance. In this special Dialogue section of *Surveillance & Society*, we seek to problematize and re-conceptualize authoritarian surveillance, to locate it and address it in different geographical contexts and within its relations with new political realities, new technologies, and new understandings of surveillance. The special issue of *Surveillance & Societ*y on "Surveillance and the Global Turn to Authoritarianism" (Murakami Wood 2017) captured some of the processes and nuances of the nexus between surveillance and authoritarianism in a global context. However, a lot has happened in the past eight years: the rise and rule of populist and authoritarian figures such as Trump and Bolsonaro; the growing role of semi-authoritarian data-hungry corporations engaging in "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019); the exceptional surveillance measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the increasing use of authoritarian surveillance techniques (such as spyware) by "liberal democratic" countries in the Minority World (aka the "Global North").

In this Dialogue section, we address these and other perspectives on contemporary iterations of authoritarian surveillance from a global perspective. This diverse set of articles unpacks the contours of authoritarian surveillance, including its diverse technologies, practices, and materialities. We draw attention to how authoritarian surveillance re-shapes political arrangements and governmentalities while contributing to the emergence of new political subjects—and then attend to its political and social consequences. Lastly, we discuss what possibilities exist for tackling or resisting authoritarian control measures. Together, this Dialogue section brings out scholarly voices at the forefront of research on authoritarian surveillance and state surveillance, aiming to strike a balance between different geographical contexts, different theoretical approaches, and different methodological tools, all aiming to address the same issue from different angles.

The first contribution is Topak's article on "Authoritarian Surveillance Trends: Legacies of Racism and Transnationalism" (this issue), in which he argues that authoritarian surveillance is "driven by structural racism and implemented through the involvement of various transnational actors." Drawing on examples from Turkey, Israel/Palestine, and the EU external borders, his article makes a strong case for a renewed focus on the transnational dimension of authoritarian surveillance, especially the mobility of technologies and practices that enable new forms of totalitarian, even lethal, surveillance to emerge. This surveillance, Topak argues, is embedded in structural racism, where vulnerable groups are recast as a security threat and are subjected to enhanced surveillance, often as a precursor to state violence.

Arun's article, "Communications Under Siege: Colonial Legacy and Authoritarian Surveillance in India" (this issue), makes the case that the lingering legacy of colonialism in the Majority World makes possible a fusion of authoritarianism past and present into a modern form of authoritarian surveillance, rooted in a highly constrained legal, political, and cultural landscape. Arun explores the stranglehold that Narendra Modi's BJP Administration holds over all types of communication in India, suggesting that it allows the government unfettered and unchecked powers of surveillance, leading to (self) censorship and a suppression of political opposition.

A focus on authoritarian surveillance in "liberal" democracies is advocated in Ogasawara's article, "Authoritarian Surveillance within Democratic States" (this issue), where she situates authoritarian surveillance as a "problem in the heart of democracy" and traces its role as an actant that re-draws the boundaries of democracy, eroding it into a mere formality. Ogasawara highlights the globalized prevalence of authoritarian surveillance. Drawing on example from the US, Canada, and Japan, her article calls for a deconstruction of the binary discourse separating authoritarian regimes from liberal democracies, highlighting and warning of the authoritarian practices of the latter.

The question of the legacy of authoritarian surveillance is brought to the fore in Melgaço's article, "Recursive Surveillance and the Persistence of Authoritarian Surveillance in Brazil" (this issue), in which he argues that the records and histories of authoritarian surveillance open up spaces for review and scrutiny. Drawing on the case of Brazil, where the regime has re-invented itself multiple times in the last decades, Melgaço traces the state surveillance of political opposition in Brazil from the military dictatorship through to the democratic present. His subsequent conceptualization of "recursive surveillance" demonstrates the lingering legacy of authoritarian surveillance, and the constraints of democratic regimes in renouncing, reinterpreting or reusing authoritarian surveillance tools, structures, and practices.

The most detailed analysis of real-life authoritarian surveillance is undertaken in Jiménez and Farias's article, "Liberal governments, authoritarian policing: Infiltration and surveillance of the political left in contemporary Spain" (this issue). Their article makes a pungent point about the extensive Spanish state surveillance against Catalan, leftist, and Basque parliamentarians, arguing against the dichotomy between nominally liberal and authoritarian regimes, and highlighting how state surveillance can quash political opposition and devoid citizens of their fundamental rights. Their article makes explicit the link between authoritarian surveillance and authoritarian policing, suggesting that authoritarian surveillance by the police can be punitive by and of itself, following in the footsteps of Fassin's (2019) work on extra-legal police retribution.

An apt conclusion to this section can be found in Akbari and Wood's article, "Re-visiting the 'Global Turn to Authoritarianism': In Further Pursuit of a Theory of Authoritarian Surveillance" (this issue), which proposes a new model for understanding digital authoritarian surveillance. Akbari and Wood revisit the literature on authoritarianism to suggest that we must move beyond schematic descriptions of "liberal" vs "authoritarian" and focus instead on the myriad spaces, forms, materialities, and systems of authoritarianism. Using their call to "return the digital to Authoritarianism," we are presented with a roadmap for future research to address the political economy of authoritarian surveillance and the potential to resist it.

## Conclusion

Read together, the contributions to this Dialogue section paint a worrying picture of contemporary authoritarian surveillance on both a global and local scale, and of the grave social and political consequences that follow in its trail. This section provides a detailed account of authoritarian surveillance in diverse contexts, and of the technologies, practices, and legacies that characterize its contemporary form. Each of the articles in this section posits a new challenge to our understanding of authoritarian surveillance: revisiting our long-held theoretical assumptions, locating its emergence beyond the authoritarian state, calling into question its legacy across generations and political forms, and cautioning of its future in an era of automation and datafication.

Dialogue sections open up spaces for discussion—first, among the contributors themselves, and then among the wider community of academics and practitioners in the field. In this section, we sought to re-start a much-needed conversation about authoritarian surveillance. We encourage our colleagues and readers to draw attention to authoritarian surveillance beyond geographical boundaries, beyond the exceptional, and

beyond the rule of law to examine an increasingly mundane but dangerous practices undermining the limited democratic spaces that remain in our world. As such, this Dialogue section is an invitation to continue to critically engage with the myriad authoritarian technologies, practices, and materialities that increasingly and differently affect our lives, from the quotidian and the mundane to the question of our collective future.

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