

# Staring Back at the System: Creating a Center for Surveillance Research

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**Abstract.** Creating a surveillance collaboratory within the iSchools organization has the potential to use research to inspire good in a world full of information surveillance.

**Keywords:** surveillance, privacy, collaboration, research center

## 1 Introduction

The study of surveillance is an increasingly important endeavor. As those working in iSchools know, there is a seemingly infinite amount of information that is processed, saved, organized, sorted, and stored at any given moment. For instance, regarding just information classified by the US government, the Government Accountability Office reports, “Approximately 20 million four-drawer filing cabinets could be filled with the amount of classified data accumulated every 18 months by just one international agency” (Safeguarding Our Nation’s Secrets: Examining the National Security Workforce, 2013). Much of this information, from classified and beyond, can be subjected to practices of surveillance, which, as Lyon (2001) defines, is “any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purposes of influencing or managing those whose data has been garnered” (p. 2).

Policies and attitudes differ internationally though. The recent implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation illustrates the European standpoint when it offers control of private information to the individual from which it was taken. Policies and practices in the United States, however, are different than those in Europe. Not only is there no single, large-scale data protection law (International Comparative Legal Guides, 2018), but consumer and privacy protections that do exist tend to favor stakeholders like corporations rather than the individual (Lazarus, 2015). Weak policies in the US, though, can lead to global controversies. As Edward Snowden’s revelations revealed, the US was contentiously monitoring at least 35 world leaders (Ball, 2013). What is needed then, is a research collective housed in the US to address weaknesses in policies but one that has interdisciplinary and international networks which work together to produce an international body of scholarship (from the US, Europe, and beyond) to address increasing surveillance practices within and beyond US borders.

The iSchools conservatory is the perfect location to house such a collaborative. What I propose then, is creating a surveillance center within the iSchools consortium that has the potential to build on interdisciplinary and established relationships to address

historical, contemporary, and futurist surveillance research. It will create a body of scholarship designed to interrogate surveillance systems to identify and extract what surveillance apparatuses are built into information – a biopsy, so to speak, of systems, technologies, documents, and people, all to see how surveillance operates and proliferates within its host. While scholars of iSchools already take up a call for surveillance research in a distributed way, the *iSchools Surveillance Collaboratory* will also draw dispersed researchers together for membership in a surveillance community. This will serve as both an internal organization of surveillance-focused researchers to create academic scholarship, but it will also provide a civic face to bring this research to the public through a public webpage and social media accounts. It can also provide a body of researchers to be used in the justification of grant applications with the opportunity for scholars to join if grants are obtained. I further define the justifications for the school, explore complimentary centers as illustrative examples, and outline potential benefits below.

## **2 Fit Within the iSchools**

What sets the iSchools and their members apart from other disciplines is their interdisciplinarity and the already existing surveillance scholarship conducted within the schools. As such, the iSchools organization is a perfect home for a surveillance center.

### **2.1 Interdisciplinarity**

According to the iSchools' vision, the organization seeks to increase the visibility and influence of its member schools especially concerning "their interdisciplinary approaches to harnessing the power of information and technology, and maximizing the potential of humans" (iSchools, 2018). This assertion was reaffirmed by Wu, et. al's (2012) study of twenty-five iSchools. The group concluded their sample shared the same vision, and that iSchools "have established themselves as the appropriate institutions for researchers from diverse subject areas to study this interdisciplinary integration" (p. 15).

Correspondingly, studies of surveillance are interdisciplinary pursuits without a singular disciplinary core, and almost all threads of surveillance revolve around power and data, making it a compliment to the network of iSchools. Lyon, Haggerty, and Ball (2012) comment that the field of surveillance is really "a complex world made up of scholars who have disciplinary homes across the social sciences, arts, and humanities" (p. 1). Besides studies of information, other common backgrounds for surveillance scholars are sociology, public policy, communications, media studies, geography, and science and technology studies.

A logical place to grow a surveillance research center then in the US would be with the iSchools organization. With an existent, interdisciplinary group of scholars already studying surveillance, a surveillance center could fit right into the overall goals of the organization and offer another, systematized collaboration potential. As iSchool scholars focus "their attention on enhancing the lives of people, the productivity of companies, the innovation cycles of industries, the design of technologies, the policies that

govern technology and information use, information services to communities” (The iSchools Movement, 2018), surveillance fits right over the top of these topics and unites these goals.

## **2.2 Existing Research**

Further, there is already work going on with surveillance in the iSchools. For instance, Catherine Brooks and Kay Mathieson at the University of Arizona have conducted public seminars about surveillance (School of Information University of Arizona, 2018), information schools scholars Milton Mueller, Andreas Kuehn, Stephanie Michelle Santos, Jeffrey M. Stanton, Kathryn R. Stam, and Steve Wright have published in the premier surveillance journal *Surveillance and Society* (Surveillance & Society, 2018), and the University of Texas Austin has the Master of Science in Identity Management and Security degree (University of Texas Austin, 2018) featuring courses that correspond to concerns of surveillance studies. Thus, there is already surveillance work being conducted, and a center would bring more attention and attract new scholars to the area of study, further strengthening the connections between dispersed scholars, and providing young scholars with the chance for mentorship.

## **3 Current Need and Value of Surveillance Research**

There is both a current need for a surveillance collaboratory especially in the iSchools, and a need for surveillance research in general. First, there is a need for a surveillance collaboratory within the iSchools due to one of the iSchools’ goals to “attract strong support and have profound impacts on society and on the formulation of policy from local to international levels” (iSchools, 2018). Contemporary surveillance practices can have profound impacts on society (e.g., the example of Edward Snowden), so if the iSchools began a collaboratory, they would have a chance to make that impact by providing research to influence policy and shape the public understanding of surveillance and privacy. Second, as surveillance moves beyond a duty relegated to law enforcement or others in power to a ubiquitous gathering in everyday activities by almost anyone (Andrejevic, 2012), surveillance has never been more important. Surveillance research attracts financial support, and current complimentary grant calls illustrating the need for research are those like the Department of Defense’s call for studies of classified information, security clearances, and other information policy matters (Defense Human Resource Activity, 2018) and Intel’s partnership with the National Science Foundation (NSF) on Cyber-Physical Systems Security and Privacy (NSF, 2018). CORDIS (2018) offers a list of funded surveillance research in Europe.

## **4 Research Examples**

There are various threads of surveillance research such as those focusing on surveillance intensity, surveillant assemblage, surveillant agents, social sorting, prediction, identity, and technology (Young, 2017). Within these larger threads are the focus on more specific areas of surveillance like: surveillance theory, classified information and

FOIA, public and corporate policies, surveillance workers, privacy and transparency, pedagogy, law enforcement and social justice, technologies, war and weapons, (inter)national security rhetoric, histories and futures, etc.

## **5 Value of Collaboration and a Research Center**

Research centers are useful in advancing both research and organizational goals. For instance, Mallon (2006) comments, “Centers can aid in faculty recruitment and retention, facilitate collaboration in research, secure research resources, offer a sense of community and promote continued learning, afford organizational flexibility, and focus on societal problems and raise funds” (p. 19). Kumar (2017) also adds centers can create focused research environments, an interdisciplinary outlook, collaboration, impactful research, and can increase organizational reputation.

## **6 Illustrative Examples**

Examples of existing surveillance research centers are The Surveillance Studies Centre (SSC) at Queen’s University in Canada (SSC, 2018), CENSUS Center for Surveillance Studies at Aarhus University in Denmark (CENSUS, 2018), and the Centre for Research into Information, Surveillance and Privacy (CRISP) (CRISP, 2018) in the UK. Sample research ranges from the SSC’s current work on big data, to surveillance in childhood at CENSUS, to CRISP’s SmartGov project. Overall, the examples illustrate what can be accomplished with surveillance centers and show the need and potential for a similar center located within the iSchools in the US.

## **7 Collaboratory Administration**

The center would be hosted by the iSchools organization but could be housed in one institution. I can provide foundational work in the development of the center; one person could serve as the director, and other scholars could be partners with the program. Other possible affiliations include grad students. The Collaboratory could serve as a center of affiliation to unite related scholars, a home to pursue grants, offer a platform to publish research in a more personable forum like a blog, eventually move to publish a quarterly journal, and offer a place of mentorship for up-and-coming scholars.

## **8 Conclusion**

Overall, the iSchools’ unique interdisciplinary connections and body of existing surveillance research, coupled with the organization’s goals, the overall need for surveillance research and a center based out of the US, and the availability of grant potentials, make the iSchools organization a perfect place to house the *iSchools Surveillance Collaboratory*. Such a center would facilitate interdisciplinary research, increase the visibility of the iSchools organization, and have the potential to provide information to be included in the public policies to inspire good in the world of information surveillance.

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