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Pinkerton's National Detective Agency and the Information Work of the Nineteenth-Century Surveillance State

While on a whistle-stop tour to his inauguration in 1861, Abraham Lincoln was briefed by Kate Warne, head of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency's female detectives, about a plot to assassinate him in Baltimore. Allan Pinkerton, however, had a plan to ensure his safety. The President-elect, guarded personally by Pinkerton, raced through Baltimore on an anonymous private train straight from Philadelphia to Washington at midnight. Pinkerton operatives grounded telegraph lines out of Philadelphia and were stationed along the train's route to ensure safe passage. Finally, the press traveling with Lincoln were held in Philadelphia at gunpoint by another Pinkerton operative, who briefed them on all these efforts, on background.[1]

This story is significant for three reasons. First, before this Pinkerton was a private security contractor known to law enforcement and capitalists, but after this he became a household name. Second, foiling the plot required mastery of multiple networks. Pinkerton first learned of the plot because his Agency was working on security for the Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, as sabotage to the tracks was reportedly part of this plot. Pinkerton's own network of agents made easy work of infiltrating the Copperhead terrorist cell, since gaining the confidence of lower-level players led quickly to gaining the trust of leaders. Finally, he was also able to commandeer the railroads and telegraph lines to change the facts on the ground and outwit the terrorists. As Regina Schober has argued, the concept of network has been a crucial ideological formation, as a metaphor for the American state and for the expanding nation itself.[2] A source of Pinkerton's success was his understanding of networks, how they are built, and how they could be exploited.

The third reason to start here is that Pinkerton would spend the rest of his life defending himself against claims the whole thing was a hoax. (Chicago mayor Wentworth wrote an editorial claiming exactly that, and the two men had a fist fight on a Chicago street over it.)[3] Moreover, this early controversy contributed to the launch of a literary career.[4] The first book Pinkerton published was a collection of testimonials about the Baltimore Plot, which was followed by eighteen novels and various shorter pieces between 1875 and 1884, covering exploits of his agency between 1851 and 1880.[5] The novels had titles like *The Mollie Maguires and the Detectives*, *The Gypsies and the Detectives*, *The Professional Thieves and the Detectives*, and *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*. To state the obvious, spies have always dealt in secrets, but Pinkerton was very public, spectacular even, about his spying. Espionage, as Timothy Melley shows in the Cold War era, is always a literary enterprise.[6]

This paper draws on—and tells the story of—two families of documents, Pinkerton's public accounts of his Agency's work and the secret reports and other Agency papers. My focus here is on the principal nodes in Pinkerton's surveillance network, the operatives, and the central technology of the Agency, the report. Along the way, tensions emerge between the representations found in public and private documents.

Studies of the national security state and its information collection practices have tended to begin with the 1947 passage of the National Security Act.[7] For the most part, historiography of the security state tends to fixate on recognixable institutions and technologies of surveillance and thus anything before telephony, the FBI, and the Cold War tends to be treated as prehistory. This is not surprising; as James Cortada notes, the volume of data collection through federal security agencies surged in volume beginning at this time.[8] While the volume of information gathering and the mix of public and private changed and new institutions were formed within the federal government, information collection for the purposes of national security and law enforcement pre-date World War II. In the nineteenth century, more of the work was done by private contractors, including, as we have seen, work that today would be the province of the Secret Service. Although Pinkerton quickly became the preeminent and most famous private security contractor in the United States, he had several competitors, all of whom seem to appear at the same moment in history, before the Civil War. We might point to several reasons for the rise of the detective agency, such as urbanization, the growth of the bureaucratic state, and the lack of a law enforcement agency that could operate outside a single jurisdiction, but the best explanation

might be the rise of the corporation and the rise of workplace surveillance and corporate security. This trend is reflected in Pinkerton's rise, the bulk of his clients, and the work most of his operatives did: tracking embezzlement, security for railroads, night watchmen, and so on. It is also reflected, most significantly, in his use of reports, an information practice he adapted from a form of workplace surveillance his clients used. There are countless examples of spies before Pinkerton's moment, as far back as the ancient world. In his speeches against Cataline, Cicero brags about spies he employs (employed by him, not the state, but for the good of the Republic), who warn him of Cataline's every move. Pinkerton's use of reports suggests a historical transition from the ad hoc methods of earlier spies and informants to the institutional practices of corporation and modern nation-state, and these reports serve as a source and a subject of this article. Throughout the Agency's history, management was preoccupied with strict compliance of operatives, their deployment in a network, and the regular submission of reports.

Before he had even started an agency, Pinkerton posed as a mail clerk to catch other clerks robbing the mail. This deception became his primary—practically his only—method. To determine whether railroad conductors were pocketing fares, Pinkerton would place multiple operatives in the guise of employees and customers—who could watch employees and each other. This inductive procedure, which he called "testing," became his standard method for finding abuses in the workplace like embezzlement and fraud. Testing conductors led to the first prosecution for embezzlement, and in fact led to the invention of the crime, as Pinkerton's first target was prosecuted before "embezzlement" was codified.[9]

Pinkerton agents did not act as detectives in the manner of Sherlock Holmes or Sam Spade. They were called "operatives," a contemporary industrial term referring to workers who operate machinery or otherwise carry out clearly defined procedures; the term categorized these workers in opposition to the ethos of professionalism associated with skilled artisans. Definitions of both terms, testing and operative, are provided in the Agency's manual for testing train conductors:

It is possible that no class of men, upon whom the agency is to operate, are more on their guard, or in expectation of being watched, than are Railroad Conductors. In operating upon, or "Testing" them, the efficiency of the Operative depends greatly upon his being entirely unobserved and unnoticed, and, as an operation of this kind generally occupies a

period of several months--bringing the Operatives thereon engaged much in connection with those upon whom they are operating, it is deemed necessary, in order to secure success, that the following Rules and Requirements of the Agency, be strictly and implicitly complied with.[10]

The rest of the pamphlet is a list of these "Rules and Requirements," clearly indicating a need to control every aspect of the operatives' behavior. Rule 3 states that instructions (e.g., which car and which seat to occupy, etc.) are to be followed to the letter and all deviations accounted for. The rules cover both what to do and what not to do: Rule 4 instructs operatives to secretly make notes immediately after leaving the train, while Rules 5 through 9 cover procedures to avoid notice. Rule 10 says, "The Operatives are positively forbidden from giving any information . . . to each other." Rules 11 through 16 cover what to watch for and precise requirements about the content and format of operatives' reports.[11]

The thorough-going efforts to control operatives in every way was not limited to testing conductors or the testing manual. Pinkerton published a more general manual for training operatives generally, titled *General Principles of Pinkerton's National Police Agency,* for his agents and apparently for public consumption, affirming the value of full and honest reporting by operatives.[12] This manual went through several revised editions as Allan's sons took on responsibility for the Agency while their father withdrew from active control of the Agency in the 1870s and then died in 1884. In some ways, the changes made over time might suggest a shift in emphasis of control. First the strong prohibitions against consuming alcohol, and against the adage "it takes a thief to catch a thief" (in other words, hiring criminals) were removed. On the other hand, Pinkerton's sons added regulations to make more explicit (and perhaps more complete) the control over operatives' reporting procedures. Multiple rules for the content and submission of reports were revived from the testing manual and added to later editions of *General Principles*. When the publication was replaced by entirely internal training materials, instructions for the preparation of reports was included along with techniques such as pretexting, roping, and how to bypass an alarm.[13]

In 1867, when testing train conductors was still the bulk of Allan Pinkerton's business, the Agency published a pamphlet aimed at executives of railroads who had not yet hired the agency, aggregating the results of tests conducted on the railroads who had.[14] The individual

reports of Pinkerton's operatives were aggregated to tabular data.[15] This marshaling of evidence to demonstrate a threat to capital could have drawn on his Civil War experience estimating the Confederate threat when he ran a "secret service" for General McClellan.[16] The report painted a clear picture of money draining away through embezzlement, mile after mile. This pamphlet argues for the monetary value of surveillance. In the British context, Toni Weller notes that surveillance and the monetization of information, perhaps for its own sake, was a mania for the Victorians.[17] We see an impressive example of the same drive here. Pinkerton presented the data but anonymized his clients. One railroad was named in the pamphlet, the Philadelphia and Reading (this is also the railroad the agency was working for when the Baltimore plot was discovered, which provided the unscheduled train for Lincoln's quick detour; after that incident Pinkerton refunded half the railroad's fees, as so much of the effort turned into security for the President elect). We can assume that the company consented to be named, suggesting a hand-in-glove relationship between Agency and client.

TABLE 2.—Continued.
146 Test Runs made upon Conductors of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad. 1866.

No. of Run.	Fares Reported by Operatives.	Fares Returned by Conductor.	Deficit of Conductor.	Excess of Conductr.	Per Centage of Deficit.	Collections per Mile Run.	Deficit per Mile Run.
43	20 80	21 20		40		23—	
44	19 45	15 75	3 70		19+	20+	04—
45	9 30	9 30				17+	
46	3 55	3 55				10+	
47	4 95	4 95				15+	
48	6 35	6 35				12—	
49	6 75	6 75				13+	
50	6 15	4 95	1 20		19+	11+	02+
51	1 25	3 40		2 15		06+	
52	2 15	2 15				04+	
53	5 65	5 40	25		05—	16—	01—
54	11 65	11 65				11+	
55	6 80	6 80				13—	
56	4 65	4 65				09—	
57	5 05	5 05				15—	
58	13 80	12 70	1 10		07+	23+	02—
59	6 95	6 95				19+	
60	2 85	2 85				05—	

Figure 1 about here

Each row of the table represents a single stint by a conductor and at least one operative watching him. The individual theft is placed in the immediate context of losses per mile of that particular route and in the context of the railroad network. In addition, in this case the publication provides average figures for before and after the introduction of Pinkerton operatives. The sample shown in the figure is followed by thirty pages of testing runs of railroads, table after table of them.

The use of reports was central to a newly developed management technique used by railroads and other companies that Allan Pinkerton adopted. Of course bureaucratic reports were not invented in the 19th-century. Markus Fredrich discusses the flow of information through the Jesuit hierarchy, for example, and how the reports were used to inform decision-making and to influence leadership.[18] But there is a difference at the moment in question. The trend that A. D. Chandler identifies in 19th century American corporations is the use of daily reports designed to make everyday business operations the subject of surveillance. Ground-level employees produced daily reports, which were read, analyzed and condensed as they moved up the firm's hierarchy, and, in the case of the railroads and other companies, this process led to mastery or something resembling omniscience at the top.[19] This agency practice may have started as imitation of Pinkerton's clients, applied slavishly and insistently, until it came to define his very agency.

Pinkerton's efforts at workplace surveillance anticipate what Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism. Under this regime, a "'division of learning' becomes more salient than the traditional division of labor."[20] Thus Pinkerton's operatives were expected to act inductively and accumulate a mass of surveillance data. Only as the reports passed through layers of managers or the clients was there a space to form a narrative to make sense of the raw data. We see this process happening here, as the efforts of individual operatives and their reports are extracted, abstracted, and aggregated into tables and finally something like a narrative of massive theft and threat to railroad profits.

The use of reports has received some attention in the history of management, but they also deserve attention as an information practice and an information technology. In Gitelman's history of blank books of forms used by bureaucracy, such as ledgers and reports, she describes them as "meta-micro-genres, one might say, documents establishing the parameters of the rules for entries to be made individually in pencil or ink."[21] She says, further, "The labor of filling [in blanks] was divided from the labor of planning what filling was for and directing how filling

should happen: a 'managerial revolution' wrought in miniature and *avant la lettre*."[22] Gitelman gives the printed forms too much credit here. The artifacts Gitelman studies are records of a cultural process prior to them both chronologically and analytically. Printed forms acted as assistive technologies, ensuring compliance with genres that existed prior to the printing. They made bureaucrats easier to inspect. This division of labor and what Zuboff calls an attending "division of learning" happened conceptually and chronologically prior to the printing of forms, when an employer like a railroad hired some employees (operatives) to watch other employees (conductors) and a contractor (Pinkerton) tells them how to prepare reports.

Mastery of the technologies of writing was an essential skill for Pinkerton's operatives. James McParland, Pinkerton's most famous agent, started in an entry-level job for the agency, posing as a streetcar conductor as part of such a test of whether conductors were pocketing some of the fares they collected. Pinkerton selected him for one of his most high-profile cases: the infiltration of the Molly Maguires, a sort of protection racket associated with ethnic Irish Catholic labor organizing in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region. The organization was targeted by industrialist (and Pinkerton client) Franklin Gowan after the Civil War. When Pinkerton interviewed McParland for the job of infiltrating the Molly Maguires, he assigned him an essay to write, a report on everything he knew about that secret organization, due first thing the next morning. McParland's report was largely inaccurate, inflammatory and ideological, based on the unrelated organization of the same name in Ireland. Nonetheless, McParland produced seven pages in small handwriting, a fact that Pinkerton reported as an important piece of evidence convincing him that McParland was the man for the job.[23]

Pinkerton's thinking in selecting McParland also turns our attention to the importance of ethnic background, putative authenticity, and ethnic stereotypes in the selection of operatives. In the memoir covering this case, *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives*, Pinkerton describes McParland's physical characteristics and revealed character. He is depicted as representing all the virtues, but none of the vices, of the Irish "race."[24] This attention to the ethnic qualities of the operative resonate with Simone Browne's discussion of the contemporary caricature of the "black and sassy" TSA worker (many TSA workers are black and female). Browne sees this stereotype as ironic because black women have unequal access to what TSA protects: they are themselves disproportionately targeted by TSA for invasive searches, but disproportionately found not to be carrying contraband. Thus as a racial group they are both instrument and object

of state power.[25] Similarly, McParland worked for a regime that considered him a racial other. In Pinkerton's own account, we see McParland denied service by businesses because of his Irish identity (his looks). He even suffers a beating at the hand of police who see him as a ready victim.

As a surveillance node, McParland's visible body was a constant point of vulnerability. *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives* offers a through account of how reports from operatives, the novel's source material for all public accounts, were produced. These reports were "compulsory" and "mandatory," even when it put the operative at risk:

> It seemed especially necessary that his correspondence should not be discovered, or even imagined. . . . Men have been murdered from the mere suspicion that they might be guilty of acting as detectives, in Ireland, and the same spirit pervaded the ranks of the Mollie Maguires here—hence matters calculated to excite surmise must be deeply buried.[26]

As he infiltrated the Mollies, McParland's fellow lodgers "seldom wrote anything," and the family with which he boarded for a time "was not literary."[27]

The Molly Maguires and the Detectives offers a detailed account of McParland's tradecraft. He experimented with pencils but the result was illegible, so he preferred pens, but a supply of ink was a constant struggle. It also reflects the living conditions of the communities he infiltrated that ink would often freeze in his bedroom. He sometimes used his landlady's laundry bluing as a substitute for ink. Often he did not have a bedroom to himself. So, he might write his reports by the light of a miner's head lamp in the kitchen of a boarding house very late at night. He would sometimes rent a hotel room in a nearby town and travel there at night just to write reports. When he did have a room to himself, he hung a hat on the doorknob lest a curious lodger should peek. He would also post his letter in the middle of the night. He kept stamps hidden in a secret compartment in his boot.[28]

Daily reports meant the operative was subject to surveillance from two directions. As is clear from the above, constant letter-writing meant operatives had to constantly evade the surveillance of the community members they spied on. At the same time, the "compulsory" letter-writing made the operative the subject of surveillance by Agency management and clients. In ex-Pinkerton Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest*, an operative of a fictionalized

Pinkerton's Detective Agency begins to follow his own agenda, neglects to file regular reports, and knows this will make the Agency suspicious.[29]

This sort of writing, every night, after an exhausting day, did not allow for reflection or analysis. There was no deliberative space to evaluate threats, qualify sources, weigh evidence, combine threads, reach conclusions, or make arguments of any sort. So, who was analyzing and reaching conclusions? Is there evidence of a hierarchical network with an intelligence at the top?

In the public, fictionalized version of the Agency found in Pinkerton's novels, we constantly see him filling the role of the coordinating center of his network. Allan Pinkerton himself is always the central character in his novels, even though he seldom acts. He reads reports, cogitates, and issues orders. He narrativizes the past and future, assembling the facts from his operatives into a theory of the crime being investigated and issuing orders to operatives to construct plans so that his operatives and his targets play roles in plays he has composed. In *The Detective and the Somnambulist*, for example, three operatives spend weeks of effort driving a suspected murderer to the point of confession. Pinkerton, personally reading the reports, decides when the time is right and races to the scene, arriving triumphantly to personally hear the confession.[30]

The picture that emerges from the reports that still exist casts doubt on this vision of Allan Pinkerton as the central processing unit of his Agency's analytics. Virtually all the extant reports were passed on to clients without comment, consisting of the typed reports of operatives wrapped in a letter from a branch manager.[31] In most cases the letter from a Pinkerton manager added nothing to the typed reports beyond a salutation.

New York, Feb'y 14, 1882.

Messrs. Blatchford, Seward, Griswold & Da Costa,

Gentlemen:-

My operative "G.S.H." reports the following relative to Hjalmor Linden:-

Friday, Feb'y 10th, 1882.

"I left the Agency about 1 p.m., to make inquiries at the different steamship offices for Hjalmor Linden of Hamburg, who is described as over 6 feet in height, of slender build, with dark-brown hair cut short, brown eyes, small dark moustache, artificial upper teeth, and said to be good-looking. He left Hamburg on Jan. 26th, having passport over London in the name of Albert Poutan.

"I first called at Kunhardt's office corner of Beaver and Broad streets, and learned that the steamer "Westphalia" had arrived from Hamburg to-day, but that no one bearing the name of Poutan was a passenger.

-2-

tan on board. I went up on the steamer to New York, and searched among the steerage passengers but could find no one of Poutan's description. I then returned to Staten Island, but there were no more steamers from British ports since Jan'y 26th arriving at Quarantine to-day."

Yours respectfully,

Allan Pinkerton,

per Robt. A. Pinkerton,

Sup't.

Figure 2 about here

The raw intelligence data are what is passed on, not so much analysis or conclusions. A common genre of report is simply a list of names of employees who attended a meeting. Passed directly on to clients, they named people who would find themselves fired with no explanation, just as today one might find oneself on a no-fly list with no explanation. Other correspondence

tends to focus on the mechanics of selecting operatives for particular clients, tradecraft to ensure secrecy, precise instructions for operatives, even specifying the physical characteristics of the operatives to be assigned. The reports, it seems, were mostly taken to speak for themselves.

One set of reports I've found, interesting partly because we can see the routing of the reports through a bureaucracy, is from operatives working in mining towns around Scranton, Pennsylvania, at the time of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. While Pinkerton's published accounts depict the investigations as focusing on drilling into criminal conspiracies, it is clear from these reports that the operatives were focused on union activity and strike preparation. The treatment of these reports by management is an exception to the general pattern of minimal engagement by management with operative reporting.[32]

These reports really do make for interesting reading, offering a kind of analysis found in early sociology and ethnography. Only later, in the 20th century, do many of the reports profile individuals. Most of these early reports focus on communities such as a workplace or a company town. Pinkerton agents were conducting ethnographies of working-class communities at the same time Jane Addams was studying the working-class communities in Chicago. While Pinkerton's published accounts depict the investigations as focusing on drilling into criminal conspiracies, it is clear from these reports that the operatives were concentrating on union activity and strike preparation. Their reports are fragmentary, but fascinating, covering such topics as which community members seemed to carry the most weight, opinions as to how long workers would stay out on strike, which businesses were contributing to strike pantries, and how one operative had his cover blown and fled.

This last incident is the subject of one of the more interesting individual reports I encountered, which only confirms the genre. Operative T.H.G. narrates the day of 17 November 1877. He narrates that he went to work at his cover job, speculates that the letter of reference for employment might be what raised suspicion, and then says, "In the evening John Roach went into Casey's Tavern and told everyone there that I was a detective. . . ." and that T.H.G. was told "a crowd of men . . . would take great pleasure in seeing me strung up." After reporting that he immediately caught a train back to Philadelphia and speculating that this probably ends his assignment, he closes the letter by noting that he corrects the misspelling of some names in last report. Even though this is a rare report of an operative who is the hero in the story, it is written to look as much like the others as possible. The single sentence of speculation as to how his

cover was blown is one of the clearest examples of analysis I've found, while the corrected spellings reflect the Agency's avowed commitment to factual accuracy. But most noticeable is that the report follows the day from the start of work and ending formal notice of when the operative ended work for the Agency that day. This is to be found in every report, as a primary function of the document is to account for the operative's time and confirm adherence to the assignment. They are themselves a form of workplace surveillance, keeping tabs on the operative himself.

Probably what the agency considered most noteworthy in this set of reports were two finds: a description of the signs and counter-signs of the Molly Maguires, and of rituals and ceremonies at a meeting (this is not at all how meetings are described in Pinkerton's novel *The Molly Maguires*); and a second-hand account of Prosecutable crimes during a riot.
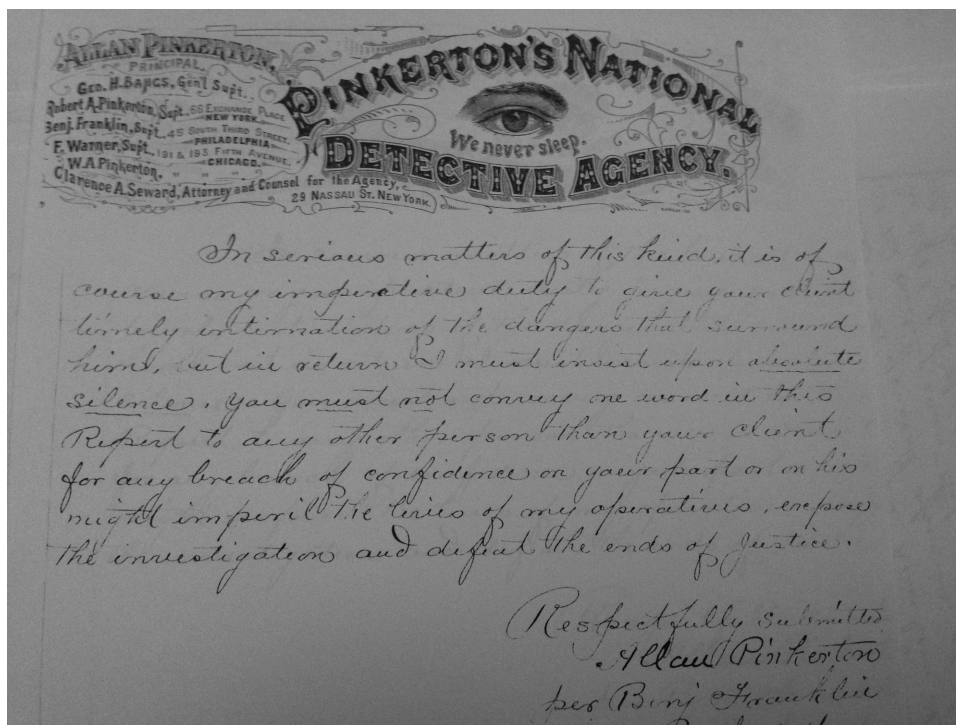

Figure 3 about here

Like all reports, these were first written by operatives in letters sent to the nearest Pinkerton office, Philadelphia in this case, where they were typed and reviewed by the director of the Philadelphia branch. These reports include a cover memo from the director of the Philadelphia office, Benjamin Franklin, and then another from general manager George Bangs.

Then, probably because of the particularly sensitive material, they were sent to Allan Pinkerton himself in Chicago, so that he could associate himself with the intelligence:

> In serious matters of this kind it is of course my imperative duty to give your client timely intimations of the dangers that surround him. You must in return insist on <u>absolute silence</u>. You <u>must not</u> convey one word in this Report to any other person than your client, for any breach of confidence on your part or his might imperil the lives of my operatives, expose the investigation and defeat the ends of justice.

Here we see Pinkerton inserting himself into the investigation in a rather literary way. There is not much analysis here. Pinkerton's note does not so much analyze the intelligence as brand it. One can imagine branch managers being told to watch for reports that were interesting enough to be marked with Pinkerton's own signature. In the Agency's correspondence with clients and routing of information, we see a clear pattern of compartmentalization of data collection, of research questions, of reporting, and no time or space for analysis.   The reports seem intended to feed into the information flows of the corporations employing Pinkerton's Agency rather than to be digested and analyzed within the Agency itself. The production of information is fractured by design and narratives cannot be other than incomplete. The entire process is dominated by the twin imperatives of secrecy and the hording of information.

Another sort of uncertainty is that this history makes us uncertain about the category of the surveillance state itself. Two things we learn from Allan Pinkerton's career are the story of the rise of the American surveillance state, and just how problematic the category of "state" is in this context. In 1875 for example, when the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, a miners' union, settled the Long Strike by accepting a twenty percent pay cut, Franklin Gowan, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, had more in store for them. For two years he had Pinkerton operatives, most notably Jame McParland, infiltrating the miners' communities, and building a case against the Molly McGuires. When the strike was settled he had the Pinkertons ready to implicate union leadership in criminal conspiracy, his own Coal and Iron Police arrested the suspects, and he volunteered to act as prosecutor. Aside from the gallows, all of what we might call state action was conducted by private actors.

Blurring the lines further, Pinkerton's early work as a detective for local and federal law enforcement was as a contractor. This was common practice, better-established than public police at the time. In fact, Chicago Mayor Wentworth's editorial and the fist fight after the story of the Baltimore plot broke was part of a longer argument, in which Pinkerton was involved, going back more than a decade with Wentworth arguing for a public option in law enforcement, "the Independents" in competition with "Public police."[33] And James McParland's first job in Chicago was as a private policeman for another detective agency. Pinkerton's methods were developed as private workplace surveillance. Likewise, his work for General McClellan, running a network of spies in the Confederacy as the "Secret Service" was really as a private contractor.

There were of course many spies employed by military and civilian entities, each with their own mandates and reporting lines, with varying degrees of legitimacy, secrecy, and notoriety. Allan Pinkerton is generally credited as the first to form an intelligence service for the federal government, and this is true, but only by a few months. George McClellen commissioned his work in July 1861 to form a "secret service."[34] He ran a spy network in the south during the Civil War and produced threat assessments for General McClellan, grossly overstating Confederate strength and arguing against committing the Army of the Potomac[35] (in an odd parallel to Dick Cheney's commissioning intelligence to overstate the threat from Iraq, in that case to argue *for* action). In September 1862, Secretary of State William Seward arranged for Lafayette Baker to form the "Union Intelligence Service."[36] Thus intelligence work was always carried out, as it is now, by multiple government agencies guided by administrative fiat. This fragmentation is not unlike the situation today, when surveillance is carried out by various state and corporate entities. Questions asked and information produced are state secrets or proprietary, and these efforts are so fragmented that it is easy to see how ambiguity can be multiplied rather than reduced.

To move towards a conclusion we can ask: what is at stake here? Claude Shannon's foundational definition of information is that it functions to reduce uncertainty.[37] Engaging the history of Pinkerton's Agency suggests that information can be produced and aggregated while uncertainty increases. Another Pinkerton case illustrates nicely. In the case recounted in *The Detective and the Somnambulist*, a bank teller was murdered while working late in the bank, leaving a bloody scene to be discovered in the morning. Pinkerton personally examined the scene

and, based on circumstantial evidence, declared he had found the killer, a local planter. He determined, however, that no sheriff would ever arrest him on such a basis, so he concocted an elaborate plan. One Pinkerton agent became a close friend with the planter's wife, staying in their home, where she could plant evidence trails of blood to and from the suspect's bed. Another agent quickly became the planter's close friend, and habitually invited him on night-time horseback rides, where a third agent who looked a good deal like the murder victim would appear, made up to look like his head had been bashed in. Perhaps out of a guilty conscience, perhaps merely driven mad by these apparently supernatural visions, the planter eventually confessed to the murder, and when asked by Pinkerton how he came to commit the murder, he replied, "I can't tell…it all occurred like a dream.[38] According to the novelized version of the case, he then immediately shot himself. Reviewers of the novels called his methods cruel. The point here is that his investigation is barely worthy of the name, and profoundly calls the guilt of his target into question, as the methods used might cause an innocent person to believe he was guilty. Likewise, the spectacular success of foiling the Baltimore plot to assassinate Lincoln could obscure the fact that there is no confirmation of a single particular outside of Pinkerton's word. No one was arrested in connection with it, let alone charged with any crime. Pinkerton dealt in information of course, but he was also comfortable with uncertainty.

To return to the effort to uncover the Baltimore plot with which we began, the investigation started as private security work for the Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, and in the end Pinkerton refunded half the money he was paid for the job. Sabotage to rail lines was a significant part of the plot, at least as important as the assassination plot itself, but from Pinkerton's perspective, Lincoln became the client when the information produced was reported to him before the railroad, so the retasked investigation was redefined as a public service.

Thus the information he produced was always relative to the client. Spying starts with specific questions for specific clients, conceived in secret, leading to assignments of operatives from which they are not expected to deviate. And the information produced is expected to remain secret. Even as it accumulates, the information will be held discrete. A common term in intelligence is compartmentalized information, meaning restricting secrets to only some members of an organization with a need to know, thus holding information both *discreet* and *discrete*. To resort to the parable of the three blind men who examine an elephant and conclude that it is a snake and a tree trunk and a wall: the raw intelligence they produce is accurate in

terms of reporting sense data, but fractured and their conclusion is therefore suspect. They could collect as much information as in Amazon's database, but it will be inherently flawed because fractured. As more information is aggregated, the ultimate result might be a complete picture of reality. It might only result in a bigger collection of fractured information, but with the prestige of a massive collection. Information produced through surveillance, even assuming it is all true, is fragmented and fractured in multiple ways and therefore conclusions are always suspect.

One of the most pointed examples of the ambiguity and potential irrationality of the putatively rationalized production of information is the Pinkerton Agency's kidnapping and rendition business. District attorneys who did not want to deal with extradition hired them to seize defendants and witnesses, perhaps coerce confessions, and render them to their jurisdictions. When Pinkertons did not make enough effort to massage relations with the local authorities, arrests of operatives occasionally ensued for offenses including kidnapping, assault, and intimidation. Working with the state but not in public and without accountability to the public led to these kinds of ambiguities, inefficiencies and disparity between public and state perceptions of reality. The surveillance state, whether by the name of the Secret Service, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, the NSA, or Google, is always compartmentalized, entrepreneurial, and other-than-public. The post-WWII security state as described by Timothy Melley and others, fractured and unknowable and wrapped in fictions literary and otherwise, has its analog in the nineteenth century.

Notes

[1] Disagreement about the reality of the plot and the size of the alleged conspiracy has persisted since the events in question, though the fact of Lincoln's flight to avoid an assassination attempt based on information provided by Pinkerton is well established. For a more detailed account of the reports of the plot and Lincoln's movements, see William C. Harris, *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 316-318. For a collection of the

primary documents, see Norma B. Cuthbert, ed., *Lincoln and the Baltimore Plot, 1861, from the Pinkerton Records and Related Papers* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1949).

[2] Regina Schober, "Transcending Boundaries: The Network Concept in Nineteenth-Century American Philosophy and Literature," *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 493–521.

[3] *Weekly Chicago Democrat*, 9 March 1861; *Chicago Post*, 30 March 1861.

[4] While Pinkerton seems to have written some of the books published under his name, it is certain that for some of his books, he or his publishers employed ghost writers who worked from outlines and case notes provided by Pinkerton. Pinkerton's biographer estimates that five books may be regarded as wholly Pinkerton's work (James Mackay, *Allan Pinkerton: The First Private Eye*, Wiley and Sons, 2007, 208–209).

[5] Allan Pinkerton, *History and Evidence of the Passage of Abraham Lincoln from Harrisburg, Pa., to Washington, D.C., on the 22d and 23d of February, 1861* (Chicago: Republican Print, 1868).

[6] Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012).

[7] As an example of a political history that begins with the National Security Act, see Douglas T. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State* (Princeton UP, 2008). Within information studies, see Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (MIT Press, 1997), which uses both World War II and computing to define the era with which it is concerned.

[8] James Cortada, *All the Facts: A History of Information in the United States since 1870* (Oxford UP, 2016), 246.

[9] Frank Morn, *"The Eye That Never Sleeps": A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1982); Robert P. Weiss, "Private Detective Agencies and Labour Discipline in the United States, 1855–1946" *The Historical Journal* 29, no. 1 (1986): 87–107.

[10] Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, *Special Rules and Instructions to be Observed in Testing Conductors Designed for Operatives of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency* (Chicago: Fergus, 1864), 1.

[11] Ibid., 2–7.

[12] Allan Pinkerton, George H. Bangs, and Clarence Seward, *General Principles of Pinkerton's National Police Agency* (Chicago: Geo. H. Fergus, 1867).

[13] "General Principles and Rules" and related policy statements, 1873–1881, 1916, 1645, 1960, undated, Box 54, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[14] Allan Pinkerton, *Tests on Passenger Conductors Made by the National Police Agency* (Chicago: Geo. H. Fergus, 1867).

[15] The emphasis on statistical data is typical of the era (Cortada, *All the Facts* 139).

[16] Edwin C. Fishel, "Pinkerton and McClellan: Who Deceived Whom?" *Civil War History* 34, no. 2, (1988): 115–142.

[17] Toni Weller, *The Victorians and Information: A Social and Cultural History* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009).

[18] Markus Friedrich, "Government and Information Management in Early Modern Europe. The Case of the Society of Jesus (1540–1773)," *Journal of Early Modern History* 12, no. 6 (2008): 539–563.

[19] A. D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), 103.

[20] Shoshana Zuboff, "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization," *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015), 76.

[21] Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 23.

[22] Ibid., 24.

[23] Beau Riffenburgh, *Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland* (New York: Viking, 2013), 28–45.

[24] Allan Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives* (New York: G.W. Carleton, 1880), 24–26.

[25] Simone Browne, "Surveillance at the Airport, and Other Matters," Symposium on Secrecy and Publics, Sponsored by Trowbridge Initiative in American Cultures and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, Urbana, IL, Oct. 14, 2016.

[26] Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives,* 127–128.

[27] Ibid., 128–129.

[28] Ibid*.,* 128–131.

[29] Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929). Hammett worked for the Pinkerton Agency under the management of Pinkerton's sons, William and Robert Pinkerton, from 1915 to 1922, with a hiatus for his military service during World War I.

[30] Allan Pinkerton, *The Detective and the Somnambulist; The Murderer and the Fortune Teller* (Chicago: W. B. Keen, Cooke & Co., 1875).

[31] The bulk of the Agency's records were destroyed in the Chicago fire of 1871. Records were also culled in various ways. When the company was acquired by Securitas AB and all remaining Pinkerton papers were turned over to the Library of Congress, the Agency stated that all reports relating to union-busting activities had been destroyed after being sent to clients. We can assume that other files were consciously destroyed. Conversely, the Library of Congress collection includes materials that should have been destroyed in the fire of 1871 as well as materials apparently preserved by the Agency because they confirmed the Agency's narratives of itself (a product of William Pinkerton's obsession with preserving the Agency's history). Some reports can be found elsewhere: the Scranton reports used in this article found their way to the library of the Pennsylvania State University from the estate of an attorney of a mine owner by way of an autograph dealer and are particularly useful, as they include a transmittal note that would not normally be in the Agency's files.

[32] Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, Report from operative E.J.D. and 14 other reports, 1877-1878, box 013, Special Collections, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

[33] Morn, 26–34.

[34] Mackay, 199.

[35] Edwin C. Fishel, "Pinkerton and McClellan: Who Deceived Whom?" *Civil War History* 34, no. 2, (1988): 115–142.

[36] Mackay, 122–23.

[37] Shannon, Claude. "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." *The Bell System Technical Journal*, 27, 379–423, 623–656, July, October, 1948.

[38] Pinkerton, *The Detective and the Somnambulist*, 99.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Page from *Tests on Passenger Conductors*. (Allan Pinkerton, *Tests on Passenger Conductors, Made by the National Police Agency* [Chicago: G. H. Fergus, 1867]). Courtesy of Hathitrust.

Figure 2. A typical report as transmitted to the client. (Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.) Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 3. Allan Pinkerton's handwritten cover letter for a set of reports. (Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.)