Exposure: Exploring the subject of surveillance

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to identify a construct which may be used to frame the subjective experience of surveillance in contemporary society. The central question concerns whether there is a concept to describe the experience of surveillance which can then inform empirical studies. Surveillance practice has consequences for the individual, yet surveillance studies does not have a particular take on the subject. Building on some preliminary empirical observations from the workplace, it is suggested that the notion of ‘exposure’ is a useful starting point. A range of ways in which subjects can be exposed under surveillance are explored, and the concept is located in relation to developments organization theory, new media theory and surveillance theory. Two observations are made which support the centrality of the ‘exposure’ concept to studies of surveillance. The first argument is that the body interior of the surveilled subject is more open to division, classification and scrutiny, either because it is seen as a source of truth, the target of public revelation or fetish. There is now a political economy around the revelation of this interiority, which calls for a non reductive and multi-dimensional approach to the subjective experience of surveillance. The second argument is that the nature and character of exposure is a product of institutional configurations which have consequences at the level of the individual. A research agenda is developed which will frame future work exploring the experience of surveillance.

Biography

Kirstie Ball is Senior Lecturer in Organization Studies at the Open University Business School. Her research interests comprise surveillance in and around organizations and society, data protection and privacy in call centres, and the electronic monitoring of employees. She is the author of a number of scholarly articles and book chapters around these issues. She is co-founder of the journal Surveillance and Society, and co-founding director of Surveillance Studies Network, a charitable company which owns the journal.

For more information about Kirstie’s work please see her personal profile at http://www.open.ac.uk/oubs/people-and-partners/people-profile.php?staff_id=436
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