Surveillance Realism and the Politics of Imagination: Is There No Alternative?
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 "Someone once said it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism," wrote Frederic Jameson, in a now famous reflection on the stifling parameters of cultural life in late capitalist societies.

Building on this, Mark Fisher advanced the concept of "*capitalist realism*" in his 2009 book of the same name as a way to articulate the peculiar persistence of a system that has proved itself so full of fallacies, so unjust and inegalitarian in its rewards (Fisher 2009). Writing in the wake of the financial crisis, Fisher described the contemporary condition of capitalist realism as a "pervasive atmosphere" that comes to regulate thought and action, limiting the possibilities of even imagining alternatives: "[it is] the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also...it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." (Fisher 2009: 6; italics in original). In describing capitalism in these terms, his ambition was to stress its *contingency* and destroy its appearance as an inevitable "natural" order.

The dominance and resilience of contemporary capitalism has been a prominent theme in debates on the politics of imagination, and linked to that, the field of social and political imaginaries (Adams et al. 2015). In looking at imagination and

imaginaries, we are invited to consider how we make sense of society, instituting and instituted by social practices in their emergence, formation and reproduction. As such, a concern with the politics of imagination is as much a concern with the way in which social institutions and practices are legitimized and continued as it is a concern with the possibilities for the articulation and doing of alternative formations. That is, imagination can both open and close a path to critique (Bottici and Challand 2011).

Capitalism, as a political-economic imaginary in the context of modernity (Adams et al. 2015), is intimately linked to contemporary forms of surveillance. Today, capitalism is said to increasingly progress through an accumulation logic based on the ability to monitor and track different forms of social activity with the view to predict and modify human behavior as a means to gain revenue and market control. An information order Zuboff (2015) has described as "surveillance capitalism", advanced in the form of "big data", and underpinned by a digital economy based on mass data collection and analysis. Turow et al. (2015) have argued that this information order now constitutes what can be described as a "21st century imaginary" in which we see the discursive and institutional normalization of surveillance infrastructures pervading more and more aspects of everyday life. Despite prominent concerns with how these infrastructures might be inherently unjust, Turow argues that ubiquitous and continuous data collection has become "common sense" – a set of practices that people have become widely resigned to.

In this article I engage with this interplay between data-driven surveillance and contemporary social imaginaries, using research based on the aftermath of the Snowden leaks, first published in June 2013, which revealed unprecedented details of contemporary surveillance programs. Drawing on Fisher's use of the term "realism" in relation to capitalist realism, I advance the argument here that public debate and response to the Snowden leaks indicate a similar "pervasive atmosphere" that comes to regulate thought and action, in which the active normalization of surveillance infrastructures limits the possibilities of even *imagining* alternatives – a condition I describe as *surveillance realism*. I also use this to highlight some of the opportunities and challenges in articulating and doing resistance, such as the

kind that has emerged in the form of "data activism" (Milan and van der Velden 2016). Whilst the research is focused on the UK and the Snowden leaks, I also draw here on wider debates and studies to illustrate key developments. By analyzing activities and public response in this way, the point is, in line with Fisher, to "reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency" as a way of advancing an emancipatory politics that can also then "make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable." (Fisher 2009: 21).

I start by briefly outlining the role of imagination in sustaining and challenging social orders before going on to discuss contemporary imaginaries of surveillance and datafication, providing examples from post-Snowden developments. Based on this, I argue that surveillance realism is useful for understanding the politics of imagination in relation to ubiquitous data collection, and I end by considering how resistance might be enacted in such a context.

The Politics of Imagination

Early inceptions of imagination, such as those articulated by Aristotle and later within the Kantian tradition, predominantly viewed imagination in relation to individual capacity. It is with the emergence of social imaginaries as a field that we begin to emphasize the properly social aspect of the imagination, and to grasp it as authentically creative rather than as merely reproductive and imitative (Adams et al. 2015). In his seminal work on the imaginary institution of society, Castoriadis (1987) stresses the collective instituted and instituting forms of meaning and the societal dimension of the human condition. Imagination, for Castoriadis therefore, is linked more to a social *imaginary* that comes to be central for the very existence of society, in that the instituting social imaginary is always at the same time instituted. Coming before both the concept of ideology and utopia as presented in the related work of Ricoeur (Bottici and Challand 2011, Adams et al. 2015), Castoriadis presents a view of imagination as radical, in the double sense that without it there could be no reality as such, and that it can always potentially question its objects by disclosing possible alternatives.

In advancing a concept of a social imaginary, "reality" and "subject" become intertwined. As laid out by Taylor (2004, 2), the social imaginary is, therefore, not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society. For Taylor, this is central to understanding the nature of modernity and the conception of moral order of society that accompanies it. He describes the relationship as a form of "embeddedness" in that certain self-understandings are embedded in certain practices that are both promoted by the spread of these practices and which shape them and help get them established. It is, as he argues, "both a matter of identity – the contextual limits to the imagination of the self – and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society." (2004, 63). The focus is on the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, shared by large groups of people, if not the whole of society, leading to a public understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.

In that sense, a focus on imagination in this collective form helps to understand how systems come to be legitimized and what comes to be perceived as possible. Whilst the concepts of imagination and imaginary have been used much more differentially than this (including a prominent discussion on socio-technical imaginaries in the field of Science and Technology Studies), my interest in them here is in terms of how people come to make sense of social institutions and practices. I therefore draw on the field of social imaginaries as outlined by Adams et al. (2015, 19) as elucidating "the ways in which cultural configurations of meaning creatively configure the human encounter with – and formation (as articulation and doing) of – the world, on the one hand, and, articulate their centrality for the emergence, formation and reproduction of social institutions and practices, that is, of social change and social continuity, on the other." In particular, I draw on the notion of radical imagination, in Castoriadis' sense, as both the study of what limits our imagination and the study of what expands it. Similarly, Ricoeur's outline of the reproductive imagination as the core of ideology and utopia situates the ideological imagination as that which reproduces an image that society has of itself, whilst the utopian imagination produces alternative images of society that puts ideological images into question (Ricoeur 1986). This can come to serve an emancipatory

politics by approaching the legitimacy of established practices and the accompanying cultural articulations as socially constructed. The way in which we imagine our social surroundings is not necessary or inevitable. Emancipatory politics serves to reveal the power relations that underpin any perceived natural order as a means to simultaneously nurture alternative imaginations of what can be possible.

Although Fisher, in his description of capitalist realism, does not refer explicitly to the field of social imaginaries, he is concerned with what he describes as a "pervasive atmosphere", articulated in the circulation of cultural products and evident in work and education, in which capitalism has "colonized dreams", lowering our expectations into accepting that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher (during the miners' strike) "there is no alternative'. As Fisher states, "The "realism" here is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." (2009, 9). This is closely aligned to more recent debates on the resilience of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism and the relative lack of political imagination as in the articulation of alternatives. There has been a closure of the economic imaginary in the form of depoliticization, meaning the active denial of the need for a political, public discussion of the means and ends of the market economy (Adams et al. 2015, Straume and Humphrey 2010). This also speaks to Foucauldian notions of normalization as the way in which norms of conduct are established and enforced through discursive practices backed up by institutional sanctions (Foucault 1977). However, Fisher's take on "realism" pays more explicit attention to the active marginalization of alternatives, and the dictation of terms of any resistance. That is, the focus is on the construction of the realm of what is considered to be possible.

In thinking about how people make sense of society, and understanding Fisher's use of the term "realism" to articulate a relative closure of cultural articulations of the world as part of an active denial of political debate, I now turn to look at data-driven surveillance through this lens.

Surveillance Culture and Dataism

In analyzing the changing consumer environment of the twenty-first century, Turow et al. (2015) combine Taylor's notion of social imaginary with Gramsci's concept of hegemony to articulate the entrenchment of data-driven surveillance within retail. For Gramsci, hegemony is a way to understand how power is exercised without, or in addition to, coercion. It relies on a "compromised equilibrium", achieved from concessions that subordinate groups gain from the bourgeois state, which is then maintained through the concrete coordination of interests by civil society. Civil society - the public sphere where ideas and beliefs are shaped - in turn comes to reproduce hegemony through the "organic intellectuals" in the media, universities and religious institutions that then enable "common sense" societal values and legitimacy (Gramsci 1971, Wood 2015). Whilst hegemony therefore emphasizes how common sense becomes institutionalized as part of certain social mechanisms and power relations, Taylor's social imaginary captures the nuances of everyday life and practices. Combining these approaches, Turow et al. (2015) argue that, over time, consumers have become institutionalized into accepting a retail environment that has transitioned from broad demographic lenses to one based on their monitoring as individuals who give off streams of data, often in real time. Consultancies and technology firms assist retailers in reshaping the shopper, the store, and the deal so that people (consumers) become institutionalized into what Turow et al. understand as taken-for-granted values, habits and expectations of an increasingly data-driven and discriminatory market-place.

In his later book on the topic, Turow (2017) builds on his account of "common sense" data collection by drawing on Jackson's 1968 notion of the "hidden curriculum", used to refer to the social norms and rules in education that become accepted through repetition and the implicit values laid out in schools that connects young people to the structures of power in society and defines their relationships to them. This can be broadened to the education that people receive through media and culture about all institutions (Gerbner 1972), including, as Turow argues, the retail space. There is a prevalence of symbol systems that designate, for example, the meaning of trendy clothing, outdoor happiness, and wealth - codes that

shoppers have come to take for granted. We are now, Turow states, "on the cusp of a retailing era that is adding an entirely new layer of routine surveillance activities and that carries with it the accompanying underlying lesson that it is common sense for shoppers to accept individualized profiling and deal making as part of the process of buying things." (2017, 18).

Whilst Turow's focus is particularly on data-driven surveillance in the retail space, his analysis of the normalization of surveillance infrastructures in everyday life finds echoes far beyond it and are pertinent in relation to post-Snowden debate more broadly. Indeed, when the documents leaked by Snowden were first published in June 2013, they both confirmed and surprised prevalent understandings of surveillance practices. The documents detailed a continuation of the development of what had previously been described as the "surveillance society" (Rule, 1973; Lyon, 1994), but they also represent a significant juncture in how surveillance is conceptualized and discussed. Classic conceptions such as Foucault's "panopticon" or Orwell's "Big Brother" struggle to account for these technological developments and later incarnations of surveillance practices (Browne, 2015). Moreover, concepts such as the "surveillance state" and "surveillance society" are no longer adequate for describing the form contemporary surveillance takes. As was made explicit in the Snowden leaks, the state is no longer the only, perhaps not even the main, arbiter of surveillance. Instead, we are confronted with what Harcourt (2015, 66) describes as a new "oligarkhia" made up of an "amalgam of the intelligence community, retailers, Silicon Valley, military interests, social media, the Inner Beltway, multinational corporations, midtown Manhattan, and Wall Street." This "oligarkhia" is the product, in part, of shared interests in security (from foreign corporate espionage, cyber hacking, malevolent actors etc.) among government and technology companies, in conjunction with the rise of neoliberalism and the associated trend toward deregulation, outsourcing and privatization.

For Lyon, the contemporary nature of surveillance also cannot be sufficiently understood in terms of "surveillance society', which he understands as a concept originally used to indicate "ways in which surveillance was spilling over the rims of its previous containers – government departments, policing agencies, workplaces – to

affect many aspects of daily life." (2017, 826). What is missing from these accounts are the active roles played by surveillance subjects, paying more attention to the ways in which citizens, consumers, employees etc. experience and engage with surveillance. Rather, Lyon suggests, in line with Turow's analysis, we need to understand surveillance within everyday practices and in the very fabric of society's culture. By advancing the concept "surveillance culture", therefore, Lyon is seeking to highlight how surveillance is becoming part of a whole way of life: "From being an institutional aspect of modernity or a technologically enhanced mode of social discipline or control, it is now internalized and forms part of everyday reflections on how things are and of the repertoire of everyday practices." (Lyon 2017, 825).

In placing emphasis on subjects as active participants in surveillance, Lyon points to a more complex power dynamic than have previous discussions of surveillance which focused mainly on the ways in which surveillance is exercised from 'outside', by one actor over another. Rather, we need to consider how different "surveillance mentalities and practices" come to be manifested (Lyon 2017, 828). This speaks to the active participation by citizens in how data is generated which marks part of the human interaction with digital environments. That is, data is collected based on what might be described as 'voluntary' activities by 'ordinary citizens', who 'choose' to share data about themselves. Or as Harcourt (2015, 19) argues, perhaps not so much out of actual choice, but rather "a feeling of necessity". Digital infrastructures lure us into participating in data extraction not just in their ubiquity but also in the "seductive surveillance" that marks their technological manifestations (Troullinou 2016). The technologies which end up facilitating surveillance, Harcourt (2015) argues, "are the very technologies that we crave." Harcourt goes as far as to argue that we now live in a society of *exposure* and *exhibition*; an "expository society" that takes the architectural structure of a mirrored glass pavilion in which we are not only seen but in which "we play and explore, take selfies and photograph others" (Harcourt 2015, 107).

Entire populations are integrated into systems of tracking and monitoring, continuously and in real-time; what Andrejevic (2017) describes as a shift from panoptic modes of surveillance to "environmental surveillance" – the replacement of selective

disciplinary surveillance with total perpetual monitoring and on-going intervention. Power in such a society, Harcourt (2015) argues, circulates by a new form of rationality, one that is driven by algorithmic processes based on a "digital *doppelgänger* logic" in search of our data double. That is, the continuous collection of data abstracted from the digital traces left behind as we interact with our digital environments is used to identify, classify, assess, sort, or otherwise "control the access to goods and services that define life in modern capitalist society." (Gandy 1993, 15). Indeed, as Van Dijck (2014, 198) has outlined, "metadata appear to have become a regular *currency* for citizens to pay for their communication services and security – a trade-off that has nestled into the comfort zone of most people." We are seeing the gradual normalization of this datafication as a new paradigm in science and society. Such normalization is driven by the ideology of what Van Dijck refers to as "dataism". She describes this as showing

> characteristics of the widespread *belief* in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of behavior and sociality through online media technologies. Besides, dataism also involves *trust* in the (institutional) agents that collect, interpret, and share (meta)data culled from social media, internet platforms and other communication technologies. (Van Dijck 2014, 198).

In outlining dataism as the ideological component of the datafication paradigm, Van Dijck highlights how this paradigm is being advanced on a set of assumptions that are deeply contested. Not only is there an assumption that (objective) data flows through neutral technological channels, but also that there is "a self-evident relationship between data and people, subsequently interpreting aggregated data to predict individual behavior." (2014, 199). These assumptions are further embedded in society through the active attempts to maintain the integrity of the system via government regulation aimed at assuring public trust in (private) data infrastructures by limiting excesses and harms.

Surveillance Realism Post-Snowden

The Snowden leaks and its aftermath are an important component in further outlining the nature of this datafication paradigm. Having served as contractor for the National Security Agency (the NSA), Edward Snowden gained privileged access to information about secret surveillance programs run by the NSA and British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), amongst other agencies. In 2013, he leaked this information to leading global media organizations. Starting in June 2013, organizations such as *The Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel* and *The New York Times* began to publish detailed and wide-ranging stories revealing the unprecedented extent to which our activities and behavior in digital environments are tracked, monitored, analyzed and stored. While the leaks focused on surveillance by state agencies, they also highlighted the "oligarkhia" of state, corporate and commercial actors mentioned above.

Whilst protests were prevalent in the immediate aftermath of the Snowden leaks, in particularly in the United States with the Stop Watching Us protests, and in Germany with the Freedom Not Fear protests, dominant interpretations have suggested that there was little response from the broader public concerning these revelations of surveillance (Cable 2015). Often this has advanced a narrative that people either do not care, or feel that surveillance practices are largely justified in a perceived trade-off between security and privacy (Mols and Janssen 2017). Yet such an analysis is too simple and neglects the complexities of the contemporary digital environment. In this section I build on the above arguments with regards to shifts in the nature of data-driven surveillance, focusing particularly on the immediate aftermath of the Snowden leaks. I advance the concept of *surveillance realism* as a way to articulate the context in which we are to understand public debate and responses to the revelations of mass data collection and analysis. I use this concept to describe the nature of acceptance and resignation in relation to the increasing mass collection of data across social life and the active marginalization of alternatives, despite widespread unease and concerns about these infrastructures and systems.

The justification and normalization of data-driven surveillance has been actively advanced in public debate. When the Snowden leaks were first published, we saw a quick convergence across media, government and security services around a discourse of threat and (in)security. In the UK, condemnation of both Snowden as a whistle-blower and *The Guardian* newspaper for publishing the documents was prevalent across political parties, and state agencies responded with overt force to stop information from being released. This became symbolized in the now notorious confrontation at *The Guardian* where editorial staff was forced to destroy hard-disks and files under the watchful eye of the British intelligence agency, GCHQ, in a feeble attempt to prevent further publications of the Snowden files. Within months of the first publications the sitting director of MI5 made a rare public statement condemning the newspaper, accusing it of "handing the advantage to the terrorists" (Whitehead 2013). This argument was replicated in mainstream media debate with the majority of newspapers advancing the opinion that the publication of the Snowden leaks had compromised the work of the intelligence services (Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett 2017). In fact, editor of *The Independent* Chris Blackhurst went as far as to publish an editorial explaining that he would not have published the leaks had it been up to him, stating "if MI5 warns that this is not in the public interest who am I to disbelieve them?" (Blackhurst 2013).

As Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett (2017) have illustrated, the media debate on surveillance and data collection following the Snowden leaks became marked by an overarching discourse of securitization that situated surveillance firmly within a terrorism context. This is despite the fact that journalists themselves are often critical about surveillance practices, acknowledging not only the increasing normalization of datafication, but also raising concerns about the limited public knowledge of the extent of data collection and critiqueing the media's contribution in providing justifications for it (Hintz et al. 2018). However, as Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett (2017) point out, data-driven surveillance was discursively justified by stories about the Snowden revelations and its aftermath through the reliance on official sources expressing the view that surveillance should be increased or is acceptable/necessary; the most frequently expressed opinion in newspaper coverage. Sources expressing this view suggested that surveillance is crucial to national

security, and is particularly important to strengthen in light of terrorist threats. As Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett state, "the prominence of opinions that justified surveillance in the name of national security in mainstream media is not accidental. Rather, there is evidence to suggest a longer-standing legitimation of state interventions through a reference to concerns about state security in the British context." (2017: 10). That is, as they put it, the idea of national security constitutes a discursive "trump card" overriding all other claims. This narrative was intermittently supported with statements from intelligence agencies which claimed that surveillance played an active role in curbing terrorist attacks (cf. Bakir 2015).

In such a context, a widespread logic that this also means mass surveillance is primarily a concern for those who have "something to hide" (i.e. terrorists, criminals, and other social deviants) became manifest. As Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett (2017) suggest, the "nothing to fear" position "offers a common-sense articulation of the idea that being under constant surveillance is not only a fact of life in contemporary societies but also entirely acceptable given the constant terrorist threat." Whilst the Snowden leaks constituted a global media event in which coverage differentiated across social, historical and political contexts with reference to national and geopolitical interests (Kunelius et al. 2017, Hintz et al. 2018), the "nothing to hide, nothing to fear" pretext as a way of describing public responses and attitudes has been prominent across national contexts (Lyon 2015, Mils and Janssen 2017). Although blogs and alternative media provided a space for more critical arguments that highlighted a lack of transparency surrounding intelligence agencies and violations of privacy, "the mediated public debate on the issue has, in the longer run, contributed to rendering such concerns less visible and marginalized" (Hintz et al. 2018, 77).

Research on public attitudes to post-Snowden data collection highlights that whilst many people actually have these concerns, the justification for surveillance is often widely internalized (Dencik and Cable 2017) along with a trust in institutions that collect data, as pointed out by Van Dijck (2014). This is not to suggest that people are either passive or apathetic in relation to their digital environments, but rather that attitudes and practices are continuously negotiated in relation to

the way data-driven systems have become integrated and mediated in society. In fact, numerous studies have shown that people feel a "lack of control" over how information is collected (Eurobarometer 2015) and are "bewildered and fearful" about the use of their data (Gompertz 2016) but do not necessarily act according to such concerns. In explaining the "privacy paradox", for example, Hargittai and Marwick (2016) emphasize pragmatism as a central component. This is the paradox that emerges from a prominent concern with privacy in the digital environment that is not manifested in actual online behavior. Focusing on young people in particular, they outline how people experience "privacy fatigue" and confusion about the data-driven systems in place, which leads to an acceptance of their data being collected as a pragmatic response in the negotiation with digital infrastructures. Moreover, research has shown that, despite an increasing awareness of surveillance and a prevalent unease with the implications of such systems, people feel largely disempowered to fundamentally challenge the nature of data collection (Dencik and Cable 2017). Rather, they come to negotiate their own position and vulnerability as part of an everyday practice within what they recognize as being relatively limited parameters, such as adjusting privacy settings on social media, or refraining from sharing certain content or not engaging in particular searches (Marthews and Tucker 2015, Penney 2016, Hampton et al. 2014).

In other words, the sheer ubiquity of surveillance infrastructures and their embeddedness in ordinary aspects of social, political and cultural participation make it difficult to think they can be challenged. Adjusting to this "reality" pragmatically is a key tenet of what Draper and Turow (2017) term a "sociology of digital resignation". Crucially, for Draper and Turow, a sociology of digital resignation suggests that these developments are not natural or inevitable, nor that people are simply passive agents in the process. Rather, in addition to the nature of public debate discussed above, they stress the ways in which resignation to mass data collection has been actively manufactured through a number of different practices, such as obfuscation in privacy agreements between users and platforms, or simply by making services inaccessible if personal data is not shared. These defaults are ingrained in the general standards and design of digital infrastructures and are advanced in the operations of data mining practices. At the same time, people continuously

navigate this environment, negotiate costs and benefits, adjust settings where pragmatically possible, but with the recognition that any actual control over the environment is limited. In recognizing the extent of a prevalent "surveillance culture", as Lyon (2017) suggests, such resignation also illustrates the increasing struggle to actually imagine alternatives. Rather, in line with Fisher's "realism", expectations become lowered, and data-driven surveillance, along with its perceived infringements upon civic rights, becomes a small price to pay for being protected from terrorism, or for being able to participate in society through digital means. This *surveillance realism* is a realism that speaks to a hampered imagination where datafication and surveillance is seen as the only legitimate response to social ills.

Whilst the Snowden leaks provided opportunities for reflection and substantial reform on data collection, any substantial overhaul of digital infrastructures was kept at bay. Although new legislation was introduced in places like Brazil with the Marco Civil Act, and changes to the Freedom Act in the US intended to curb surveillance powers, any fundamental questioning of surveillance, and indeed of a data-driven digital economy underpinning contemporary surveillance culture, was undermined. In fact, several countries have extended surveillance powers and enabled further data collection following the Snowden leaks, with the UK's Investigatory Powers Act leading the way (Hintz and Dencik 2016). The political discourse on surveillance in the aftermath of the leaks restricted the policy debate within very limited parameters and served to advance hegemonic powers. Disputes circulated around definitions of surveillance (e.g. at point of collection vs. point of analysis), infrastructure security and the need for encryption, and the nature of state-corporate relations in the sharing of data (Hintz and Brown 2017). However, political consolidation around the justification for mass data collection marginalized possibilities for fundamental opposition. In what can be considered atypical fashion, digital rights and civil liberties groups were invited to the table through consultations, and were allowed to participate in the policy process, but their participation became predominantly token in nature, being allowed to provide expertise and winning some battles on specific aspects of surveillance policy at the expense of any fundamental review of surveillance practices and mass data collection. In what can be considered a "compromised equilibrium", in Gramscian terms, that

comes to stabilize surveillance as "common sense", Hintz and Brown point out that the recognition of campaign groups and advocacy organizations as legitimate actors "has enabled civil society to participate in a key policy process, but it has also risked the normalization of surveillance as principled opposition is replaced by collaboration, and it has exposed differences in civil society agendas." (2017, 794).

These developments speak to a context in which the Snowden leaks, and their aftermath, whilst creating awareness and unease with digital infrastructures, also illustrate the perseverance of surveillance culture and dataism. When Fisher described capitalist realism, he wrote of the credit crisis of 2008: "The speculations that capitalism might be on the verge of collapsing soon proved to be unfounded. It quickly became clear that, far from constituting the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive re-assertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative." (2009, 78). In this spirit, the aftermath of the Snowden leaks, in terms of both policy and technology developments (just think of the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things, "smart" cities and "smart" homes), largely enabling further and wider data collection and data sharing, has made clear that Snowden's revelations did not constitute the end of surveillance. In fact, the Investigatory Powers Act was, to use Fisher's words, a massive re-assertion of the surveillance realist insistence that there is no alternative.

Beyond Surveillance Realism?

So what power does imagination have in a state of surveillance realism? Imagination has the potential for both oppression and emancipation; it may limit or expand that which we see as possible. As Castioradis as well as Ricoeur and Taylor make clear, a concern with the creative and collective dimensions of imagination as social imaginaries is also a concern with the ways the instituted order of society is problematized in the search for "the possible" as opposed to "the given" (Adams et al. 2015). Any established social order always includes resistance, and the aftermath of the Snowden leaks also included continued and new challenges to surveillance realism. However, the nature of resistance in any instituted order is also partly

generated and shaped by the circumstances of that society. In his analysis of the anti-capitalist movement at the time of Fisher's writing, he describes the staging of protests as "a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism" where the suspicion was that the actual aim was not to replace capitalism but to mitigate its worst excesses (2009, 13). Although Fisher has been criticized for succumbing to "Left melancholia" (Hoffman 2016), an interesting aspect is his concern with the rejection of political organization in formulations of resistance at the time, and a turn to moral critiques of capitalism that only reinforce capitalist realism. In discussing the limits of confining critique to the moral realm, he states: "Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naïve utopianism." (Fisher 2009, 20). Capitalist realism, therefore, according to Fisher, can only be threatened "if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort." (ibid.).

In her analysis of environmental movements in late capitalism, Naomi Klein (2014) has posited a similar critique. Whilst there has been an increased awareness of climate change and a substantial normative overhaul in media and political debate on the crisis of the environment (Castells 2009), there has also been an ongoing concern with ways in which to engage public response and resistance. A key issue has been the marketization of environmental concerns such as the notion that it is possible "buy yourself green" through more environmentally ethical consumption. This has, at one and the same time, attributed socio-economic status to environmentalism as an aspirational consumerist lifestyle whilst also individualizing the response. That is to say, the onus is on the individual consumer as the emblem of environmental resistance (Scott 2010). More broadly, Klein (2014) highlights the limitations of engaging with the environment as a question of moral conscience, or to frame it as an opportunity for competitive advantage in a market economy, instead of linking it more directly to questions of economic justice. "A different kind of climate movement", Klein contends, "would have tried to challenge the extreme ideology that was blocking so much sensible action, joining with other

sectors to show how unfettered corporate power posed a grave threat to the habit-ability of the planet." (Klein 2014: 20).

In thinking about resistance to data-driven surveillance post-Snowden these concerns can inform a useful critique. Whilst there has been an increased awareness and important prominent developments in activism that has sought to challenge dominant trends of datafication (Milan and van der Velden 2016), resistance in the aftermath of Snowden has also been pursued through particular avenues. Most notably, these have been technological pursuits to self-protect against surveillance (what Milan and van der Velden refer to as "reactive" data activism) and lobbying around policy pertaining to privacy and data protection (Dencik and Hintz 2017). Forums to provide secure digital infrastructures proliferated in the wake of the Snowden leaks, with "numerous digital rights and internet freedom initiatives seizing the moment to propose new communication methods for activists (and everyday citizens) that are strengthened through encryption." (Aouragh et al. 2015: 213). Increase in the use of privacy-enhancing tools such as the TOR browser, GPG email encryption, and encrypted messaging software such as Signal, indicate a rising consciousness and concern with surveillance practices. Alongside this, digital rights and civil liberties groups, such as Open Rights Group, Big Brother Watch, Article 19 and Liberty in the UK, have regularly issued statements regarding their concerns about surveillance, organizing public debates and lobbying legislators particularly around the Investigatory Powers Act and data protection regulation. This has been accompanied by litigation activism where groups have taken governments to court over particular policies, and made concerted efforts to change technical standards and protocols within relevant institutions and bodies, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) (Dencik et al. 2016).

These efforts have been significant in creating a contested environment for advancing mass data collection and for pushing back on certain surveillance practices. However, resistance of this kind has also struggled to challenge the wider social imaginary and provide a substantial threat to surveillance realism (Dencik et al. 2016). Partly, an issue with technological responses to mass data collection is the risk that they come to advance individualized understandings of resistance in which

the onus is on the individual to change their own behavior. This means that challenging data collection becomes an individualized act based on perceived skill and ability to engage in privacy-enhancing digital practices, such as downloading encrypted software, using anonymised browsers, and changing security settings. Lobbying for policy reform and engaging in litigation activism, meanwhile, is often bounded by technical and issue-specific expertise that confines the debate to a small constituency of experts (Hintz and Brown 2017).

Moreover, resistance to data-driven surveillance following the Snowden leaks has often focused on trying to mitigate the excessive harms of datafication rather than questioning developments at a fundamental level. Gürses et al. (2016) highlight how this has led to digital rights campaigns centred on 'targeted' surveillance as a more benign alternative to 'mass' surveillance, and an emphasis on proportionality as the overarching goal. As Gürses et al. argue, this constitutes depoliticized framings that are unable to account for the ways in which surveillance has been historically central to the control of particular communities and as a way to limit and suppress dissent. Furthermore, such framings serve to entrench the constructed trade-off between privacy and security that underpins the surveillance realist narrative that mass data collection is, indeed, a necessary and inevitable part of contemporary society. Although these responses are shaped, in part, by what is perceived as possible, what is missed in these efforts is a form of resistance that explicitly highlights how datafication and data-driven surveillance relates to dominant economic interests and political agendas in advanced capitalist societies. These processes are neither accidental nor inevitable but serve a particular form of social organization. In such a context, identifying infringement upon individual privacy as the core harm produced by mass data collection may do little to reveal the power structures that shape digital infrastructures. And individual technological self-protection may do little to overcome or change them.

Rather, an analysis of data-driven surveillance as a "realism" invites a more systemic critique of datafication in which resistance is intimately linked to questions of social and economic justice; what has also been referred to as a "data justice" movement (Dencik et al. 2016). In advancing such a framework, the aim would be to

situate data-driven surveillance in the context of the interests driving such processes, and the social and economic organization that enables them. For example, this involves engaging with the ways in which data collection and analysis embodies historical institutionalized forms of discrimination and exclusion that limits opportunity and participation for certain communities in society (Gangadharan et al. 2015, Eubanks 2018). Similarly, the asymmetries of power between those who collect and analyze data and those who are subject to such data collection and analysis as an inherent feature of datafication (Citron and Pasquale 2014), are seen as an expression of the increasing concentrations of power in fewer hands and related to a wider trend of privatization and deregulation (along with a shift in decision-making away from the public realm). Or, the corporate and centralized nature of data systems is understood in relation to the organization of the digital economy and the labour relations and governance that sustain it (Scholz 2017). In this sense, questions of economic and social justice precede any analysis and development of data infrastructures and their position in society.

Although there is not the space to outline it fully here, resistance, through this lens, would involve dynamic collaboration between different groups and movements in civil society that combine economic, social, cultural, ecological and technological dimensions in articulating both problems and solutions (see also Hintz et al. 2018). Pointing to surveillance realism in this context is therefore about inviting a more active politicization of data processes that, to borrow from Ricoeur's (1986) assertions, articulates the ideological imagination as a way to nurture the utopian imagination (here I also take inspiration from writings on "real utopia" such as those of Olin Wright 2010). As Fisher notes, "nothing is inherently political; politicization requires a political agent which can transform the taken-for-granted into the up-for-grabs." (2009, 79). Surveillance realism identifies contemporary (often undesirable) mass data collection as a *contingency* that has been *actively constructed* as an inevitability, which can therefore also be challenged and reconstructed.

Conclusion

In drawing on Fisher's notion of "capitalist realism" as a way to understand the contemporary social condition with regards to data-driven surveillance, and the datafication paradigm more broadly, this article posits a way to reveal the contingency and construction of our current digital environment. The perceived necessity and inevitability of mass data collection is one that has been advanced partly through a compromised equilibrium, to use Gramsci's term, in which the normalization and entrenchment of a surveillance culture has stabilized the nature of contemporary digital infrastructures as "common sense". This, in turn, has established a social imaginary of resignation to ubiquitous data collection despite prevalent feelings of unease and recognition of discriminatory and suppressive effects. In a context of surveillance realism, the injustices and fallacies of the system become a small price to pay to fight off inefficiency, threats and terror.

The Snowden leaks constitute a significant moment in the advancement of surveillance realism. They provided unprecedented insights into the extent of datafication and created increased awareness of surveillance practices. This led to outbursts of resistance, which focused particularly on what we might think of as techno-legal solutionism. Such a response, however, has been unable to transform the social imaginary and pose a substantial threat to surveillance realism. Rather, it has struggled to overcome enclosed expert discourses and individualized acts of resistance that have been confined to mitigating the worst excesses of mass data collection, sometimes even advancing the inevitability of the model through its suggested compromises. The UK's Investigatory Powers Act in the wake of the Snowden leaks has come to symbolize the re-assertion of the surveillance realist insistence that there is no alternative.

The inability to articulate a coherent alternative to surveillance culture and dataism speaks to the politics of imagination that is played out in the kind of "realism" that Fisher described. It is one in which our aspirations and hopes are formatted to fit the hegemonic system. In advancing a critique, therefore, suitable for an emancipatory politics, it becomes essential to destroy the "natural order" of surveillance

realism in order to make what seems impossible attainable. That is, the challenge becomes one in which the issue is not simply to harvest the resources available to mitigate the excessive harms of the current datafication paradigm, but is one in which we have to expand the limits of our imagination and reassert the possibilities of another world, another way of organizing society.

Acknowledgements

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Biography

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