

INFO 4250

Surveillance and Privacy

Spring 2025



Jenny Holzer, "Projections" (2007)

TEACHING TEAM

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TIME & PLACE

Wednesdays 11:15-1:45 Snee Hall 1120

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores social, legal, and ethical facets of surveillance and privacy. New information technologies collect and analyze data across contexts and at multiple scales. Data collection is a primary mechanism through which states govern their citizens, corporations make money from their customers, and individuals manage their everyday relationships. Privacy concerns are fundamental to the design and deployment of sociotechnical systems, and all forms of data collection entail choices (often very difficult choices) about how information is gathered, stored, combined, and used.

In this class, we will investigate the history and theory of surveillance from multiple perspectives, in order to understand how privacy is conceptualized and deployed in response to surveillance systems. We'll discuss how surveillance and privacy are situated in law and culture; the emergence of surveillance in law enforcement, workplaces, and institutions; and the relationships between surveillance, power, and marginalization of vulnerable groups. We will consider avenues through which surveillance is contested, including technological and policy-based design strategies to mitigate the effects of data collection.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Understand and explain interactions among legal, technical, social, cultural, and economic aspects of surveillance and privacy.
- Analyze and critique proposals related to contemporary privacy and surveillance debates.
- Evaluate the relationship between surveillance and social inequality.
- Write concise, informed, and persuasively argued analyses of ethical and policy questions about contemporary digital surveillance and privacy.

ACCESSING ASSIGNED READINGS

Links to all assigned readings can be found in the schedule below. PDFs are stored in Google Drive—to access them you must be logged into Google through your Cornell account.

CANVAS

You will submit all written assignments through the course Canvas site: [INFO 4250: Surveillance and Privacy](#). I'll also use Canvas to send announcements, updates, and changes to the syllabus, so *please make sure your correct email address is registered there*. You are responsible for regularly monitoring your email and Canvas; "I didn't see the email" will not be accepted as an excuse for missing or misunderstanding assignments.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Overview

Attendance and participation	20%
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Surveillance journal	20%
Surveillance theory paper	20%
Privacy theory paper	20%
Policy memo	20%

Attendance and Participation

This class will be run as a seminar. The goal is not to memorize and regurgitate ideas; it's to develop a sophisticated, critical analysis of the data-driven world. That will not happen just by listening to me lecture. You have to think, talk, and write about these issues in order to understand and internalize them. To that end, there will be many opportunities for active participation and discussion. In addition to reading the assigned texts, you will be expected to ask thoughtful questions, offer your own arguments, and listen carefully to your classmate's and my challenges. If you come to class but don't engage you will not earn credit for participating.

Since we'll only meet once a week, I expect consistent attendance. Everyone is allowed two absences, for any reason, without penalty. Beyond that, I will deduct 10% from your attendance and participation score for each absence. Note: I don't distinguish between "excused" and "unexcused" absences—you either attend class and participate or you don't; I'm not interested in judging why. If you expect to have to miss more than two meetings (e.g., for athletic competitions, family obligations, job interviews, etc.), you should not take this class, and if you unexpectedly end up having to miss several classes, I'll suggest that you drop it.

Surveillance Journal

One important goal of this class is to make the implicit explicit, to render our everyday, taken-for-granted experiences visible and strange, and in doing so, to subject them to critical scrutiny. The theoretical texts we read will help structure and organize that scrutiny, but it is observations from your own life that will keep our conversations grounded.

Throughout the semester, you will identify, describe, and reflect on your own encounters with surveillance. These encounters can be mundane (walking past a security camera) or profound (being questioned by the police)—as we'll see, both kinds matter. Each week, you'll write 1-2 pages (400-500 words) describing one or two real-world experiences of surveillance, critically reflecting on those experiences, and drawing connections between them and that week's reading assignments. Do the readings illuminate something about your encounters with surveillance? Do your experiences challenge or complicate the readings?

Journal entries are due every Tuesday at 8PM, submitted on Canvas. You are required to submit 10 entries total throughout the semester.

Theory Papers

During the first four weeks of class, we will work toward developing a rigorous theoretical understanding of surveillance—what it is, why it happens, and how it affects us. In the subsequent four weeks, we will turn our attention to understanding privacy—what it is, what it demands, and why it's so difficult to protect. At the end of each of these two units you will write a short paper demonstrating that you understand the theoretical frameworks we've discussed, that you can apply them to concrete problems, and that you can engage with them critically.

Your [surveillance theory paper](#) is due by 5PM on February 21st. Your [privacy theory paper](#) is due by 8PM on April 11th. Papers will be submitted on Canvas, and it is your responsibility to ensure that I can read them. (If you submit a “corrupted” file, or the wrong file, or anything else I can’t read, that’s on you.) I’ll deduct 10% from your total score for each day papers are submitted late, beginning immediately after the deadline.

Policy Memo

In the final unit of the course, we will explore some specific policy areas where researchers, policy-makers, and advocates are currently encountering urgent surveillance and privacy challenges. Your final paper will be a [concise policy memo](#) focused on one of those areas. Adopting multiple stakeholder perspectives, you will distill some of the theoretical insights you’ve developed throughout the semester into a form legible to a broad audience and propose concrete recommendations for tackling the problem.

Policy memos are due during the final exam period—the exact date and time will be updated here when the registrar announces the exam schedule. Like the theory papers, you will submit your policy memos on Canvas, and I’ll deduct 10% from your total score for each day papers are submitted late, beginning immediately after the deadline.

COURSE POLICIES

Accommodations

I am committed to all students succeeding in this course, and I have tried to construct it in a way that is universally accessible by default. But I’m sure it falls short of that ideal. If you believe your individual needs and circumstances require specific consideration: (1) submit an accommodation request through the [official Cornell SDS system](#), so that I receive a formal SDS letter; and (2) schedule a meeting with me to discuss whether and how course policies can be further modified to meet your needs.

Note: accommodations must be arranged in advance—I will not retroactively apply accommodations to absences or late assignments. If new circumstances arise mid-semester that require new accommodations, please submit an accommodation request and schedule an appointment with me as soon as possible.

Academic Integrity

College is stressful. Sometimes we take on too much or otherwise get in over our heads. If you feel overwhelmed or think you might not be able to meet my expectations in this course, please come discuss it with me—I’m 100% sure we can sort it out. If, however, you choose to go the other route, and I discover that you have cheated, plagiarized, or engaged in any other form of [academic dishonesty](#), I will report it to the university immediately and recommend that you fail the course. If you aren’t sure whether something counts as plagiarism, please ask!

Using AI

If used thoughtfully, AI tools (such as ChatGPT) can be helpful supports—like search engines and spell check—in early-stage research. *But using such tools to generate prose and submitting it as your own*

work for class assignments is a violation of academic integrity and will be dealt with accordingly. (See above.) Again, if you aren't sure what counts and what doesn't, please ask!

SCHEDULE

Below are the reading assignments you are expected to complete before class each week, as well as other deadlines throughout the semester. This schedule is an *ideal, approximate*, and therefore *tentative* sketch of things to come. I will adjust it as we go along, in accordance with how slowly or quickly we move through the material. It is your responsibility to come to class and to read the announcements I send out in order to keep up with those changes.

Note: For many of the readings, I've only asked you to read certain pages, or to skim parts and read other parts carefully. Where page numbers are listed, they correspond to the page numbers printed in the text, not those indicated in your PDF reader.

PART 1 — SURVEILLANCE: WHY WATCH?	
Jan 22	Welcome! - Introductions, table-setting
Jan 29	What does watching do? - Jeremy Bentham. Panopticon: Or. The Inspection-House. 1791. (Letters I, II, V, and VI) - Michel Foucault. "Panopticism" in <i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i>. 1971.
Feb 5	Who's watching? - Oscar Gandy. "Coming to Terms with the Panoptic Sort" in <i>Computers, Surveillance, and Privacy</i>. 1996. - Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy. The Ordinal Society. 2024. (Read Chapter 1; Introduction optional) - Woflie Christl. "Corporate Surveillance in Everyday Life." Cracked Labs. 2017. (Skim)
Feb 12	Why collect data? - Philip Agre. "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy." <i>The Information Society</i> 10(2). 1994. (pp. 101-117) - Gilles Deleuze. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." <i>October</i> 59. 1992.
Feb 19	Why participate? - Bernard Harcourt. "The Expository Society" in <i>Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age</i>. 2015. (pp. 13-28) - Chris Gilliard and David Golumbia. "Luxury Surveillance." <i>Real Life Magazine</i>. 2021. - Zachary Loeb. "The Magnificent Bribe." <i>Real Life Magazine</i>. 2021.
Feb 21	 Surveillance theory paper due by 5PM!

PART 2 — PRIVACY: WHO CARES?	
Feb 26	Is privacy a right? - Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis. "The Right to Privacy." <i>Harvard Law Review</i> 4(5). 1890. - Sarah Igo. "Introduction" to The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America. 2018.
Mar 5	What is privacy a right to? - Lowry Pressly. "Photography and the Invention of Privacy" in <i>The Right to Oblivion: Privacy and the Good Life.</i> 2024. - Priscilla Regan. "Privacy and the Common Good: Implications for Public Policy" in <i>Legislating Privacy: Technology, Social Values, and Public Policy.</i> 2009. (pp. 212-231)
Mar 12	Is privacy a duty? - Anita Allen. "Privacies Unwanted" in <i>Unpopular Privacy: What Must We Hide?</i> 2011. (Skim pp. 6-26) - Helen Nissenbaum. "A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online," <i>Daedalus.</i> 2011. - Nathan Malkin. "Contextual Integrity, Explained: A More Usable Privacy Definition." <i>IEEE Security & Privacy</i> 21(1). 2023. (Skim)
Mar 19	Can information be controlled? - Daniel Solove. "Privacy Self-Management and the Consent Dilemma." <i>Harvard Law Review</i> 126(7). 2013. (pp. 1880-1893) - Solon Barocas and Karen Levy. "Privacy Dependencies," <i>Washington Law Review</i> 95(2). 2020. (Read pp. 555-605, skim rest) - Salome Viljoen. "Data Relations," <i>Logic(s) Magazine.</i> 2021.
PART 3 — POLICY: WHAT'S NEXT?	
Mar 26	How has digital surveillance changed policing? - Sarah Brayne. "Big Data Surveillance: The Case of Policing." <i>American Sociological Review</i> 82(5), 2017. - Eric Umansky, "How Police Have Undermined the Promise of Body Cameras," <i>ProPublica</i>
Apr 2	Spring break— no class 🙌
Apr 9	Who is privacy for? - Khiara Bridges. "Informational Privacy" in <i>The Poverty of Privacy Rights.</i> 2017. (Skim pp. 133-149; read pp. 149-169) - Jonas Lerman. "Big Data and Its Exclusions." <i>Stanford Law Review Online</i> 66. 2013. - Alvaro Bedoya. "Big Data and the Underground Railroad." <i>Slate.</i> 2014. - Optional reading: Virginia Eubanks. "High-Tech Homelessness in the City of Angels" in <i>Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor.</i> 2017.
Apr 11	 Privacy theory paper due by 11:59PM!
Apr 16	Should we have privacy at work and at school?

	- Karen Levy. “Introduction” to Data-Driven: Truckers. Technology. and the New Workplace Surveillance. 2023. - Esther Kaplan. “The Spy Who Fired Me.” <i>Harper’s Magazine</i>. 2015. - Elana Zeide. “The Structural Consequences of Big Data-Driven Education.” <i>Big Data</i> 5(2). 2017. - Cornell University Code of Conduct. Part 1, Section C, No. 3, “Unauthorized Recording and Classroom Policy.”
Apr 23	Is the future of privacy local or global? - Anu Bradford, “Introduction” to Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology. 2023. - Henrik Skaug Sætra, “Technology, Empire, and International Relations: The Battle for Digital Sovereignty.”
Apr 30	Wrap up
May 14	 Policy memo (final assignment!) due by 4:30PM