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Article

The Void of Surveillance: Machine Learning, Psychoanalysis, and the Misreading of Desire

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Abstract

Surveillance studies has long drawn on Michel Foucault's (1977) panopticon and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) assemblage to analyse how surveillance functions and its many societal effects. More recently, there has been a particular emphasis on how profiles, otherwise known as data doubles, have played an increased role in surveillance using artificial intelligence. While this scholarship has explored how data are gathered and analysed, this article problematises the ability for the data flowing from humans to machines to be so revelatory of subjectivity. In doing so, this article considers how adopting a psychoanalytical notion of desire, drawn from Jacques Lacan (2007), problematises the assumption that data stemming from outward affirmations of subjectivity are an accurate reflection of who we are. If desire is bound to lack, instead of being an active, positive force, this raises a host of questions about how surveillance is confronted by cuts, blockages, absences, and exclusions when trying to make sense of an individual. As this article argues, this gap of knowledge between profiles and individuals is not because there is a flaw within surveillance but because surveillance itself depends on a constitutive void: the necessary gap of knowledge between data and desire, in light of machines only ever being able to interpret humans as machines. The void of surveillance is not what merely sustains surveillance, as needing to know more to fill a gap of knowledge, but sustains the necessary failure of total surveillance's goal of knowing everything there is to know about an individual, given there is always more to know. This article shows how paying attention to this void offers new insights into surveillance's misunderstanding of subjectivity.

Introduction

> *The paradox that is so disconcerting for the contemporary subject is not that the machine can fool a human into believing it is a human, as in the famous Turing test, but exactly the opposite: the human subject, given over to its automaticity and exteriorization, is incapable of fooling the machine into believing it is not another machine.*
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> — *Justin Joque,* Deconstruction Machines: Writing in the Age of Cyberwar*, 2018*

State and corporate surveillance rely on what are known as data profiles. Although associated with a specific individual, profiles are a compilation of data points that encompass characteristics, patterns, and associations used to speculate on the past, present, and future behaviour of entire populations. Given the sheer amount of data used on profiles, analytics on surveillance data increasingly uses machine learning, allowing for different types of perception beyond human capabilities to inform decision-making. While surveillance involves the gathering of data based on the observation of populations, analytics involves using tools to interpret the data. Surveillance and data analytics remain distinct processes, although they converge in some types of surveillance (e.g., live facial recognition technology) while being deployed together in others (e.g., text scraping and topic modelling). The increased technological capabilities of states and corporations mean

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that profiles have become increasingly sophisticated. Whether it is police agencies using facial recognition technology to track attendance at protests, social media companies monitoring user data to identify extremism, welfare agencies using risk calculation models to detect fraud, or factories using surveillance footage to analyse employee performance, profiles support the functioning of data analytics, the "successes" of which has resulted in surveillance proliferating throughout the world.

Within surveillance studies, profiles have long been a topic of interest. Over two decades ago, Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson (2000) wrote the highly influential article "The surveillant assemblage" about what they termed data doubles, another way of referring to profiles. In the article, the authors bring the scholarship of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) into the scope of surveillance studies, a disruption to the field's previous reliance on Michel Foucault's (1977) panopticon. According to Haggerty and Ericson (2000: 606), the surveillant assemblage "operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct 'data doubles' which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention." Recognising data moved between states, corporations, and other actors with relative ease, the authors shifted our attention beyond the centralised model of surveillance under the panopticon towards a more decentralised assemblage. One of the most fundamental aspects of this surveillant assemblage was its dependency on the idea of data continuously flowing between different actors: "To dig beneath the surface stability of any entity is to encounter a host of different phenomena and processes working in concert. The radical nature of this vision becomes more apparent when one realizes how any particular assemblage is itself composed of different discrete assemblages which are themselves multiple" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 605). Amidst these flows between various actors, the data double is intentionally formed, dictating how populations are governed, or more aptly, how individuals within a population are governed, favourably or unfavourably. As Haggerty and Ericson (2000) argue, these data doubles are not an attempt to represent an individual using the available, flowing data but a specific form of pragmatics used to inform decision-making. These insights on the surveillant assemblage continue to inform surveillance studies today.

Yet, despite the conceptual power of the surveillant assemblage to illuminate the fact that some data can flow in a rhizomatic fashion, the primary reliance on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) leaves out important insights for surveillance studies. While flows can tell us something about surveillance, cuts, blockages, absences, and exclusions can tell us something too. Even if the surveillant assemblage remains an integral way to conceptualise surveillance, it is worth remembering that specific data, or specific profiles, are always emphasised at the expense of others. In data analytics too, as Louise Amoore (2020: 7) points out, biases, assumptions, and weights play an integral role in machine learning, even if these factors are wished to be "excised." While Haggerty and Ericson (2000) suggest we are broken down into data that subsequently flows into the surveillant assemblage, they do not go further to critique the assumption of this data's revelatory potential, instead focusing on the outcome—the profile—not necessarily being about "real" individuals. As a result, profiles take for granted that data affirms a specific meaning; the very idea is that the gathered data can be analysed because they at least somewhat reflect the individual, even if these data are only analysed to propel the creation of "new" individuals, as Haggerty and Ericson (2000) further remark. The problem is, the *meaning* of data is interrupted when flowing between humans and machines, or between different individuals, or even within the individual.

As often happens, older intellectual battles resurface upon the deployment of new technologies. Ultimately, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) drew upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) approach to desire as an integral force, one that embraces the fluidity of all forms of life, abandoning the idea of a predetermined status to instead find constant movement with other objects in an interconnected web of relation, convergence, and evolution. In doing so, they actively remark that they are *not* using the psychoanalytic notion of desire. Rejecting psychoanalytic insights into desire, the surveillant assemblage was to be a conversation between Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, not scholars like Jacques Lacan. Through relying on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of desire as a positive force, a field of immanence, the very possibility of desire as theorised

by Lacan (1998) around the same time as these intellectuals was not to be included. Data, as the misplaced signifier, became the prized commodity of surveillance, the building block of profiles. Arguably, this occlusion was a mistake, for this is precisely where Haggerty and Ericson (2000) could have challenged the specific meaning attributed to data within the profiles, or even the surveillant assemblage more broadly. For them, data flowed, it did not displace meaning. As a result, subsequent ideas about profiles have all too easily assumed that data affirm a specific, positivist meaning about the individual, even if acknowledging this profile fails to give a full account.

In contrast to desire being a positive force, Lacan (1988: 223) long argued that "Desire is a relation of being to lack. The lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but the lack of being whereby the being exists." We pursue what cannot be attained, realised, or even symbolised. The desire of which an individual is formed is contentless in that there is an impossibility being sought; the impossibility of ridding oneself of their desirous capability. The failure to achieve our desires propels the satisfaction of our drives. While desire assumes the impossibility of gaining what is lost, a means of total enjoyment, our drives involve the continuous, repetitive cycle around an object. Hence, our failure to grasp desire represents the success of our drive. Our acts of desire try to address the lack upon which we remain bound. While acknowledging lack will remain a constant, we keep trying to fulfil it. There is a movement within our desire that allows for new ways of living to unfold. Movement, as opposed to stasis, defines us; we go after what we perceive we desire only to find ourselves incomplete. Once we either get what we want or fail to, we move on to something else to sustain us. To sum this up, desire is the movement between objects; it is not found in the object itself. Lacan (1988) would not reject the idea of our movement within an assemblage theorised by Deleuze and Guattari (1987); the problem is that assuming desire is a positive force ignores the role of the unconscious in structuring our desires. For Lacan (1988), desire makes us continuously move from object to object, never quite satisfied.

While surveillance studies has increasingly explored the extent to what data can reveal, this article takes the opposite approach by focusing on what data *cannot* reveal. As we shall see, acknowledging Lacan's (1988) psychoanalytic notion of desire disrupts the belief that data are revelatory of desire. In light of the growing amount of dystopic narratives about surveillance revealing the interiority of entire populations, it is necessary to consider what surveillance cannot reveal too. No matter how technology evolves or what type of surveillance is deemed permissible, there will be something beyond the data being gathered and analysed within the surveillant assemblage. This could be seen as the *void* of surveillance: the inevitable gap of knowledge between a profile and an individual inherent to new forms of surveillance, in light of machines only ever being able to interpret humans *as* machines. The gap between profiles and an individual exists because, as Lacan (2007) reminds us, there is always an arbitrary relationship between the signified and the signifier. The fact of there being uncertainty means nothing is self-evident between our behaviour and psychological significance, implying there is a fundamental lack in what data can affirm. According to Lacan (1998), the "real" is what resists representation beyond the limits of what can be known from within the imaginary and symbolic realm; the former is full of images, perceptions, and fantasies, and the latter is full of language, signifiers, and the various ways in which a society is governed. Desire for Lacan (2007) is structured by the inability to access the real, our existence beyond the symbolic realms. This means we pursue what cannot be attained, realised, or even symbolised: we may think we want x, but this covers up our want for y. While positive forces may orientate us towards certain ideas, objects, and people, this remains somewhat of a smokescreen. Desire is dependent on a foundational lack instead. While useful for analysing the multiple flows of data within surveillance, profiles rely on what data can be accessed from the imaginary and symbolic realms—as this is all that can be gathered or analysed.

What does this mean for our critical insights into surveillance, especially as it becomes more pervasive through artificial intelligence? Through assuming data are revelatory of desire, the hypothetical concept of total surveillance assumes the premise that the comprehensive monitoring of individuals' behaviours, communications, relationships, thoughts, and every other aspect of their lives is possible, in effect meaning

that surveillance can figure out the interiority of the individual in their entirety, leaving no aspect of subjectivity freed from surveillance. While merely hypothetical, this idea has gained traction within the public imaginary, as made evident with the popularisation of novels like *1984* by George Orwell, or the Edward Snowden revelations. Yet, although efforts are constantly made to enhance what surveillance can know, there will always be a gap in knowledge due to data's inability to positively reflect desire. This void of surveillance is not what merely *sustains* surveillance but what sustains the *failure* of surveillance to know everything. The need to always know *more* reflects the fact that there will always be something behind or missing from the data.

While Deleuze and Guattari (1987) had the final say on desire in the surveillant assemblage, "a surveillant assemblage devoted to the disappearance of disappearance" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 620), it is important to recognise that surveillance has its own lack too, its own void. Surveillance desires and desires but it never quite gets the totality of knowledge it wants. As a result, the void of surveillance invokes this gap of knowledge between profiles and an individual. To riff off Justin Joque (2018), while an individual cannot fool surveillance into thinking they are not just data for their profile, surveillance depends upon a void—based on the gap of knowledge between the profile and an individual—in order to function. What this means is that a void restricts the possibility of various forms of surveillance "understanding" the individual. It may appear simple to claim that an individual exists beyond what surveillance claims to know, yet this is of great analytical importance when understanding the effects of surveillance on society. As opposed to focusing on the degree to which surveillance can gather data from populations based on the identification of outward affirmations of subjectivity, adopting Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of desire as a starting point opens up a different set of questions about surveillance. Our attention shifts from what surveillance can learn to the importance of recognising what cannot be learnt. It also raises questions about how decisions are made when data are attributed with false meaning.

The Abstract Human

What makes profiles so powerful in our contemporary moment? Profiles are formed using analytics to discover characteristics, patterns, and associations within the data. Whether used for risk assessments, law enforcement, service provision, commercial purposes, or merely for gathering data for future or currently unknown applications, profiles include data on behaviour patterns (actions, habits), physical characteristics (appearance, biometrics), digital footprints (social media use, communications), social connections (relationships, clubs, associations, workplaces), spatial information (location, travel routes), temporal information (time spent on certain behaviours, travel times), and historical data (engagement with government agencies, school and workplace data, immigration data). These data develop the profiles used, exchanged, and stored by governments and corporations. Profiles alter how surveillance functions in three specific ways.

> (1) Profiles are constantly updating. Surveillance provides the data to be added to profiles. As surveillance capabilities grow, states and corporations gather more data and add these to existing and new profiles. The constant supply of data, whether willingly or unwillingly provided, means the profiles are constantly transformed in order not only to fit the demands of a specific task but also for other potential tasks in the future.
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> (2) Profiles are fluid. An individual does not have a single profile within surveillance. Instead, there are multiple profiles, full of similar and disparate data, some of which may even be contradictory. As data flow, governments and corporations rely on the available data to arrive at a profile, which is deemed either good enough or not good enough to inform the basis of a decision. This means that, should a specific actor seek particular data, they may ask another whether these data could be shared, such as the police asking social media companies for communication data, or purchasing data from a data broker.

> In other cases, specific databases can be shared. The meaning of data changes across time and space as they move between different actors. As data move between different actors, these profiles grow, transform, and converge with other profiles, recognising data are equally prone to fluid interpretation.
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> (3) Profiles are undeletable. While data can be relevant for a variety of reasons, no data are irrelevant within these profiles. This means it has become incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to remove data from profiles. While a specific actor may be able to delete some data, this does not necessarily mean the data have not already informed another profile. Given profiles are constantly updating and fluid, the gathered data will always risk resurfacing in different ways, or in different places, with varying levels of importance. Although there are concerns about what may have happened to the data, the sheer quantity of data makes it difficult to ascertain what data are forming a profile anyway, let alone what has been removed. In light of the relevance or importance of most data being dependent on their infinite number of associations with other data, the attributed meaning of data within the surveillant assemblage implies the impossibility of escaping what data can be claimed to reveal. Hence, individuals remain bound to the collected data; a profile's memory is infinite, unlike ours. Data are more persistent for machines than what they could be for humans.

In sum, surveillance relies on profiles being fluid, constantly updating, and undeletable in an attempt to enhance the accuracy of data analytics. As opposed to being just a compilation of data on the past, profiles are used to speculate on the future. This means that surveillance is no longer concerned solely with catching wrongdoing but pre-empting every type of possible behaviour. While profiles depend on the gathering of data, the difficulty of accessing all the necessary data to inform robust data analytics means profiles are used to act upon the world using probability. An individual, then, is reduced to particular data in the attempt to distil the possibility of action, whether to predict a threat or assess suitability for a mortgage. From "algorithmic governmentality" (Rouvroy 2013) to a "machine learning political order" (Amoore 2022), various terms have been used to describe this particular epoch where the algorithms being deployed across society are reconfiguring what it means for individuals to be governed according to the availability of data within a profile. Profiles rely on these data to make certain types of judgements about the future, a means of not representing an individual but who they should become under the regulatory effects of surveillance. Machine learning generates clusters to infer who should come into existence. If profiles surface an idea of the individual to be governed, this prototype becomes an ideal against which other humans are compared. Subjectivity is, therefore, attempted to be reduced to a singular output dependent on how machine learning has identified clusters of data. The output is the "ideal" human, or the pragmatic enough representation sufficient to base a decision, an attempt to foreclose what an individual could be through relying on what they should be. Considering both our data and the data of other populations whom we have been clustered alongside informs how we are governed; surveillance is an ongoing, neverending process of trying to figure us out in order to produce us as something else.

Yet, an individual will always fall short of this "ideal" human propagated by the output of machine learning. A particular orientation is not always followed. Hence, we always respond to the parameters of power in diverse ways, in effect reconfiguring what the ideal is in the first place, as articulated by Judith Butler (1990). As a result, the response to the parameters defines the data gathered from an individual, which feeds back into data analytics; it is a cyclical process of gathering data, analysing the data, and then repeating the process. The use of profiles within surveillance is dependent on this process of learning (it is in the name, machine *learning*!). Profiles provide the necessary data for machines to continue learning until there is close enough accuracy to the desired output. The removal of individuality is necessary for machine learning, given it requires large amounts of abstraction to make sense of and operationalise the data gathered from entire populations. Hence, we keep falling short of the outputs, but the algorithms keep learning. To add to this

confusion, the available data can also be unstable, meaning there is the problem of noise, referring to how variations in the process of machine learning can go awry, such as the inclusion of irrelevant features, errors in prior data collection, or misclassifications, to name just a few unavoidable problems (Joque 2022). All of this can result in the delivery of outputs based on faulty information. Yet, were the outputs ever so true anyway? As we shall see, the limits of machine learning are built into the data already being used.

Many questions remain about the extent to which AI can so easily rid the human of their place as the *subject* of surveillance. If surveillance once depended on the literal following of individuals on the street, has this changed so dramatically? Is the human obsolete within their surveillance? It must be remarked that there is a distinction between what a profile seeks to do and the degree to which this achieves its aims. While machine learning may attempt to "foreclose" what is possible for us (Amoore 2020), "insult" the autonomy of the human (Zuboff 2019), "enslave" us (Lazzarato 2014), or "evacuate" the individual (Rouvroy 2020), there is still a distinct psychoanalytical subject who persists beyond what aspects of their subjectivity are brought into governance; the outputs designed to orientate us are not all-encompassing. As many strands of critical theory attest, power is not totalising; there is an abundance of factors that play a role in determining how one responds to diffuse forms of power, including through acts of resistance. Even in the most obvious cases of subjugation, an individual exists beyond how they are governed, no matter how much certain forms of power dictate the realm of possibility. While machine learning can attempt to act on us through creating a particular path, perhaps sometimes influencing what one says, does, or thinks, this does not mean we are drained of meaning in response.

What does psychoanalysis teach us? If our desire is claimed to be all flows within various circuits of the surveillant assemblage, perhaps it would seem we are governable as mere realisations of power. Yet as Joan Copjec (1994) emphasises, what psychoanalysis reveals is that we may be *effects* of power, but we are not realisations. We shall see later how this disrupts not just Foucault's (1977) panopticon but the assumption that data can represent desire. It is *desire* that represents our existence beyond the reaches of power, for this desire is what bars our complete visibility under surveillance. As a result, a gap will always remain between the profiles used within surveillance and how we perceive ourselves as individuals, so long as we recognise our desire. For all the flows of data that move around the individual, for all the surveillance that attempts to gather data, for all the data analytics that attempt to foreclose, insult, enslave, or evacuate us, the individual must surely remain, even if merely resembling the capacity to desire without being reduced to what an algorithm claims to provide. The insertion of the individual into our intellectual insights on surveillance is not trivial; it is a reminder that machines will only interpret the human as if it were another machine. The point is not simply making a claim for our humanity against the onslaught of technology but embracing the fact that our desire remains bound to forces beyond our, or a machine's, control.

The Gap in Knowledge

While surveillance may grow to comprehend populations in entirely new ways, or even make connections between various data in ways imperceptible to us, there is no direct relationship between data and desire. The link is created within profiles, albeit without reference to subjectivity (Rouvroy 2013). The very nature of meaning behind data is hence ambiguous. This is why Mireille Hildebrandt (2013: 221) argues that profiles "render us transparent in a rather counterintuitive manner. We become transparent in the sense that the profiling software looks straight through us to 'what we are like,' instead of 'what or who we are." There are at least five reasons to explain why this data fails to capture us.

> (1) Not all data is gathered. So long as it remains impossible to gather all the data from an individual (everything said, every act, every thought, etc.), the meaning of the data remains ambiguous given the potential of other data to impose contradictions. Given profiles are constantly updating, the very necessity of profiles growing as more data are gathered means that new meanings always become possible. While this has long been a

problem for law enforcement, social scientists, insurance brokers, and any other profession dependent on data, machine learning is restricted by only being able to work on the available data. As much as machine learning can use techniques such as open-set classification to handle new data or identify when new data does not fit an existing category, it can only learn from the available data, meaning data that are not yet included cannot be accounted for within the outputs. Instead of using intuition to question established parameters, profiles remain limited to the data.

(2) Data have temporal limits. While the gathered data may have a specific meaning at a given point in time, the data used within analytics are never able to keep up with just how much time changes meaning. We are always moving, changing, learning, growing, and adopting new personas, identities, interests, likes, dislikes, and so forth. There is nothing stable about how we engage with the world, meaning data have temporal limitations in terms of their relevance. No matter how much the gathered data may no longer represent what somebody says, does, or thinks, the data are stored somewhere, meaning they can be used within a profile at a later date within data analytics. As mentioned, these gathered data are nonetheless impossible to escape.

(3) The weight of the data is unknown. The importance of particular data for an individual, such as data about a specific hobby, is not necessarily the same importance given to the data within machine learning. In deep learning, which allows for an algorithm to play a role in its training, the ambiguity of bias, assumptions, and weights becomes even more elusive. This allows an algorithm to arrive at certain decisions based on its identification of importance, often stemming from a particular cluster being identified. While our ability to deem something important is dependent on our own logical, or sometimes illogical, reasoning, the importance has to be inferred when used in profiles, hence the weights, leading to the potential for bias or assumptions to inform the decisions made.

(4) Data are flattened into necessary units of analysis. Gathered data are interpreted according to preexisting frameworks of inquiry within data analytics. There may be an open-ended approach, an attempt to assess what clusters come forth, but there is still a reliance on inputting data as particular units. Machine learning relies on the flattening of data into what can be slotted into its own logic. While this can incorporate data that do not fit into an already defined category, this still seeks to characterise the data in a particular way, which means that over time the anomaly is still accounted for, even if the unit of analysis is a distinct set of anomalies. What we say, act, and do is turned into a particular type of data necessary for the analytics to function.

(5) Data have ambiguous meaning. There are many potential meanings behind what we say, act, and do, many of which remain unknown even to ourselves; this is one of the main insights of psychoanalysis. Yet surveillance gathers these data without necessarily knowing their meaning; data analytics is often left to figure this out. The inability to capture meaning means profiles are bound by uncertainty. While machine learning can account for uncertainty within its speculations, the data inputted into the algorithm already have a deficit of assurance; data exist without any particular meaning over why they have come to exist.

While these points indicate surveillance relies on an abstract version of the individual who fails to entirely replicate the individual living under surveillance, the main problem is that subjectivity is not merely the sum of what an individual says or does, or even consciously thinks. The existence of what we negate—all those

denials, avoidances, blame games, confusions, and abstractions—cannot be entirely accounted for by surveillance. If one ascribes to the possibility of there being an unconscious, or at least aspects of subjectivity left unsaid or unacted upon, the persistence of an individual uncovered by surveillance grows stronger. The problem for surveillance is that it relies on outward affirmations of subjectivity, that is, exteriority, in the attempt to find the interiority of the individual behind the data.

What can surveillance reveal; what can it not? Foucault's (1977) panopticon struggled to recognise an individual who incorporates this surveillance into their existing psychic mechanisms. While Foucault (2003) would come to see that biopolitics facilitated the deployment of surveillance at the population level, a move beyond the panopticon, they still relied on the historicist assumption that subjectivity is a mere product of power; the idea that a population will be controlled if they believe they are being watched. However much this panopticon remains outdated given the way in which surveillance has either changed or at least been reinterpreted, leading to a proliferation of scholarship on how surveillance has become diffused or horizontal, as in the surveillant assemblage, there is still the assumption that we are so absorbed by power that transcendence remains impossible. Whereas Foucault suggests this power is totalising, Lacan suggests there is always a gap. Why? Because we model our desire based on the desire of the big Other: the symbolic order that governs our version of reality and its many norms, laws, codes, rules, and expectations, which functions as a form of authority for us, however personalised we make it. While an image of the panopticon may linger within our attempts to regulate our existence according to the uncertain authority of this big Other, the distinction for Lacan (1998) is that our image of how to model ourselves is incomplete. As Copjec (1994: 55) explains further: "The Lacanian aphorism—desire is the desire of the Other—is often taken to mean that the subject fashions itself in the image of the Other's desire… Lacan's answer to this mistaken interpretation of this formula is simply that we have no image of the Other's desire (it remains indeterminate), and it is this very lack that causes our desire." Our fault lines in figuring out our desire beyond how we believe we have been instructed to desire means that our data lack the quality that we ourselves, our own questionable authority, lack too.

This is not to suggest that surveillance fails to capture anything about us. Indeed, surveillance gathers data on the outward affirmations of who we are, such as our communications, relationships, attitudes, claims, traits, and so forth. While there has been a shift towards surveillance trying to capture our interiority (Ball 2009), a fissure remains: however many data we put into the world, do these data actually reflect *us*? Does these data say anything about our unconscious? To what extent can we assume the positivist meaning of these data? If we recognise that our desire resists representation, instead reflected by our movement from one object to the next, our lack, questions remain about what we keep absent, opaque, silent, imagined, or any other way of avoiding an easy explanation. Although data may infer meaning to try reveal something about us, what can be inferred about desire, if anything? Even if advanced forms of surveillance attempt to capture data otherwise imperceptible to humans, such as making links between shopping purchases, or even using MRIs to capture neural activity, for everything said, for every act, for every thought, the affirmation of what *is* has an underside kept banished, the Lacanian "real" that resists the possibility of representation, of which existed before we moved into language. Surveillance, then, in the words of Copjec (1994), is illiterate in desire, not only facing the difficulty of accessing the unconscious but also the impossibility of grasping the real. Perhaps this is especially the case in surveillance using machine learning, for the reliance on data about an individual assumes a peculiar hyper-facticity of these data (Weiskopf 2018). If anything, machine learning's claim to compute the incomputable moves even further away from desire by basing itself on outward affirmations of subjectivity to govern the individual. Our interiority may become exterior, but surveillance remains uncertain on how, the same as us.

While many aspects of data remain imperceptible, leading to different aspects of ourselves becoming what Amoore (2020) would describe as "unattributable" within machine learning, desire is *the* thing that most eludes us. We are structured by lack, as opposed to this being an attribute of ourselves that might be figured out with more advanced data analytics. Whether new forms of machine learning may be used to understand

the unconscious is not necessarily the point; certain aspects of subjectivity are unattributable given surveillance depends on the gathering of data surrounding outward affirmations of subjectivity. No matter how many data may be attributed to an individual, leaving one vulnerable to influence, the unattributable remains, meaning the capture of interiority remains an impossible task. Although surveillance depends on the gathering of data, there remains a difficulty in giving a definite response as to what this reveals about an individual, or if it can reveal anything at all.

The Materialisation of Incomplete Data

What does this mean to be governed by profiles that, no matter the depth or scope, will always fail to reflect us? Given machine learning relies on probability, the materialisation of surveillance depends upon the likelihood of an output aligning with the specific task of the algorithm. This is not a matter of having the right hunch. The profile, no matter the gap of knowledge, is the new basis upon which decisions are made. The use of probability involves this complex balancing of false positives with false negatives; for example, while surveillance may over-target a population for heightened policing and occasionally get it wrong, they could also under-target a population and miss out on what it is trying to achieve. In effect, this raises questions about whether, and under what conditions, the void of surveillance over- or under-speculates in its materialisation. While probability may not always have the final say, knowing a human is sometimes there to override the decision, the materialisation of surveillance is heavily influenced by these games of chance within the void, no doubt further problematised by the automation bias, an assumption that individuals can feel more comfortable making choices when deferring to outputs from a machine. While based on questionable data, the profile is what gives surveillance the basis of action, however much a gap of knowledge persists; an activist is turned into a terrorist by a tiny amount of data abstracting data's meaning. As Mireille Hildebrandt (2013: 226) explains, individuals "count only as a resource of data or as a locus of application… real life events can be translated into computational formats in different ways and that what matters is to what extent alternative translations produce alternative outcomes." In this way, new aspects of the world are brought into governance. For example, the length of a romantic relationship, how many times somebody emails the city, and whether someone plays sports could become a precursor for having your home torn apart by the police (see Constantaras et al. 2023). Data analytics relies on these data to inform the basis of decisions. The profile, while distinct from the individual, is used as the basis to materialise onto the individual. While an individual is reduced to their data within a profile only for such data to be used against an individual again, the demands of surveillance to gather data means that an individual is momentarily left behind only to emerge again once there is sufficient data within a profile to materialise on them later. Though these data do not always represent who we are, the decisions rely on the assumption that data have a *correlated* meaning. This means the individual is governed by a void. As much as our critical insights can reveal about surveillance, this void must remain one of the conceptual starting points when considering what it means to live under surveillance.

That being said, it is impossible to say which profiles are used on the individual and how. Given surveillance depends on a void, we remain unaware of the degree to which this gap of knowledge between data and desire persists. Of course, this is an old problem, not a new one; the individual is restricted to their interpretation by somebody or something else. While the means of profiles may be new, there is a similar logic in how certain norms dictate how one is treated (race, sexuality, gender, etc.). Perceptions are formed without the individual coming forth; stereotypes do the work of profiles. The difference is the difficulty of the individual knowing how profiles operate given the reliance on machine learning, a step more difficult to figure out than norms. While we learn about how society treats us, there is uncertainty over how our data are interpreted within machine learning. This is what prompted Haggerty and Ericson (2000), Amoore (2020), and other scholars to emphasise how these new norms, or "new individuals," are coming forth through advanced forms of technology. Accordingly, we are supposed to adhere to these altered parameters of social life without knowing what they are. Instead of this leading to a decreased chilling effect of surveillance, as Rouvroy (2013) argues, this means the individual must continue trying to figure out what it

means to adhere to the diktats of power based on the availability of other information—a point our relationship to the big Other already makes clear, as Lacan (1998) posits. There is not a particular stable norm or an idealised conforming subject position under the panopticon or within the surveillant assemblage; we may try to figure this out, but we will fail to perfect the image along the way. The resulting failure to appease power is precisely what leads to surveillance materialising on the individual, for we fail to live up to the uncertain image of the big Other, perhaps especially so now that many of its effects are materialising through machine learning. The limited means of figuring out the required norm for ourselves means there is a deferral to other assumptions, not a decreased risk of inducing conformity. The difference is now we simply have to contend with being governed by forces that operate on probability, not just the norms. While Foucault's (1977) panopticon depended on adherence to norms, the power of inducement is now built upon probability.

Where does this leave us? If profiles remain ambiguous, the individual always remains unaware of how their data are used for and against it. The void of surveillance implies there are multiple gaps of knowledge within surveillance based on the uncertainty of data; the multiplicity of profiles means the individual does not know, cannot know, and perhaps would wish not to know all of the data gathered by surveillance. Profiles rely on data in ways that leave us uncertain about what has become known about ourselves, meaning the fuel of surveillance's void remains highly ambiguous. The inability for us to access this information about profiles means there is a data asymmetry, of course. Yet, while this asymmetry persists, it would be a problem to assume if the individual had control over their data that the profiles would be accurate. For what the individual does not know they are, claims to not possibly be, or wishes they were not, holds the possibility of informing at least some of what they may be too, another lesson of psychoanalysis. Hence, there is nothing to say the individual will be able to accurately contest the truisms of the data within their profiles, as they remain just as bound by uncertainty as the profile. While, rightly so, there may fears about surveillance capturing our data, we remain bound to what we keep barred from machines, other people, and ourselves too. Instead of democratising uncertainty, this only makes the probability of linking data to desire all the more problematic.

If the data are ambiguous, our interpretation of surveillance will remain limited too. Ultimately, we are left not knowing what data could even be used, let alone how. Neither knowing which profiles are used nor which data are gathered, we are now faced with heightened degrees of uncertainty about the pervasiveness of surveillance in our everyday lives, meaning the depth and scope of surveillance can only ever be understood as ambiguous. If we are left with uncertainty about what data are gathered or analysed, any reaction to surveillance surrounds not only whether one accepts or rejects this particular type of power, or offers a response somewhere in the middle, but also the uncertainty as to whether they can, if ever, *not* be under surveillance. This is especially a problem when our interpellation under surveillance impacts the opportunities given to us in both the present and future (Rouvroy, Athanasiadou, and Klumbyte 2022; Hildebrandt 2013), meaning the very ability to opt out of surveillance is made less tempting given the material consequences of doing so. Even if one finds a way to reject an element of surveillance (e.g., using encrypted communications), the attempt to opt out risks becoming data itself; an absence can be just as telling as a presence. Yet the fact remains that, despite its effects, surveillance does not *realise* us as either conforming or resisting subjects. In light of its proliferation across society, we contend with surveillance as we do with many other aspects of power; it is an ongoing, constant negotiation.

Conclusion

Surveillance depends upon trying to figure out what an individual or population is saying, doing, or thinking, or what they could do in the future. While gathering data is what fuels the existence of surveillance, for every attempt at analytics, no matter the inclusion of machine learning, it is a problem to assume subjectivity is the realisation of power. While Foucault (1977) argued that surveillance attempted to create "docile" bodies by constant observation, allowing for the state to manifest its power onto populations by ensuring its

disciplinary were internalised, the expected docility of the panopticon could never be totalising, for indeed desire slips away at every attempt to hold onto it, whether for surveillance or ourselves. The power of surveillance may have been conceptualised but not how this type of power alludes to its own inability to function when confronted with an individual. However much discipline promised our subjugation to power, surveillance has always had to grapple with the problem of never knowing it all. Conceptualisations of the panopticon (or even the surveillant assemblage) have focused on what is captured, but not what continues to elude. Why is this the case? This is due to the assumption that data are *always* revelatory of desire, of who we are. Interiority is not a positive reflection of exteriority, even if the former can be used to probe the latter. Foucault (1977) may have assumed power had the ability to control populations, leading to them adopting certain behaviours based on their perception of being watched, but a new set of problems emerges once we recognise that this surveillance itself is marked by its own void. From recognising how profiles rely on an abstract individual to exploring how this leads to the materialisation of surveillance using incomplete data, this article has mapped out this void of surveillance: the necessary gap between profiles and individuals. Surveillance is structured by this void; the void justifies the need for analytics on data in the first place. In effect, this means the human is only ever able to be interpreted by a machine as if it itself were another machine (see also Joque 2018). Given surveillance depends upon this void, what can be learnt about subjectivity is foreclosed by the structural impossibility of knowing it all.

As much as surveillance is structured by this void, the growing hype about AI has brought into existence various discourses about the degree to which surveillance can know it all, an idea of total surveillance: the fear of technology becoming so advanced that perhaps one day, surveillance will know everything about an individual. This is generally told as a dystopian tale in which a government, or sometimes a corporation, has complete control of the population. Yet, if surveillance is structured by a void, the concept of total surveillance becomes paradoxical; for the claim to know everything, in real-time, means there is no gap between the profile and an individual; it means there is no *subject* of surveillance. Even if one claims total surveillance is about the process of learning everything about an individual, there is a gap, for the gathering of data is a process too, meaning there exists a version of a human whose data are yet to be gathered. The problem of total surveillance is especially paradoxical if everything an individual says, does, and consciously thinks (or any other outward affirmations of who we are) is assumed to be all there is to subjectivity. Yet, the unconscious can override meaning, or the data may simply be unattributable, as Amoore (2020) puts it. Machine learning may rely on an abstract individual within its inner workings, but its effects are reliant on how the individual uptakes this new form of power. Hence, the psychoanalytic subject continues to exist without their being evacuated or any other euphemism for their disappearance. To put this another way, a government or corporation may encourage our desires to flow in a particular direction with the use of surveillance, yet it is our act of interpretation that moulds our response to its reach. The symbolic order guarantees us no finite instruction; we only have our interpretation to guide our behaviour. Nothing satisfies us as a result because the big Other fails to provide the image we want it to. Surveillance depends upon this void, meaning total surveillance does not exist.

Yet, it is important to recognise that the *idea* of total surveillance does exist, an idea that folds back into the materialisation of surveillance, as Foucault (1977) argued: the idea of being surveilled is one important way of surveillance materialising. While the threat of total surveillance is unsubstantiated, it exists as an idea. Uncertainty looms, for indeed surveillance operates most powerfully by demanding we engage in our own surveillance. The impact of total surveillance, or even surveillance, then, is the fact that while nothing may be happening, it could be. The void of surveillance means not just debunking the potential hypothesis of "total" surveillance but also recognising how the threat of total surveillance manifests within society: not because surveillance could monitor everything there is to know about an individual but because this idea of surveillance's totality has been affecting entire populations by the very proclamation that this *could* happen. Hence, while an individual may not know the profiles being used, or whether they can opt out of surveillance, or even how they remain bound to data, the *idea* of power overriding who we are is what fuels the chilling effects of surveillance. Given surveillance does not "understand" the human, instead its many

machines only understanding humans as other machines, there is substantial reason to query the idea of surveillance overdetermining us. Again, we may have to contend with its effects, but it does not realise us.

Besides, if total surveillance were possible, it would paradoxically negate the need for surveillance altogether. This is because, under total surveillance, the observed individual or population would already be conforming to the expected behaviours, eliminating the need to surveil them. Such a scenario would render obsolete not just the individual under surveillance but also the very existence of surveillance. Indeed, surveillance fundamentally depends on there being an element of unpredictability in the human being surveilled. While machines may learn things about subjectivity that the human does not, cannot, or wishes not to know, both impacting and, perhaps sometimes, leaving the human alone, the machine will always be bound by its inability to "understand" the human. Surveillance may seek to understand individuals as a means of controlling populations, demanding an ever-greater amount of data in order to do its job more effectively, but the machines now deployed will remain forever stuck by a gap in that they can only read other machines; the machine will loop around the human as much as possible but never quite ascertain it. Surveillance, then, desires total knowledge of the human without acknowledging the necessity of its void, meaning it continues wanting to fully know the human even if fully knowing the human would render itself obsolete. The void of surveillance is structural, not a flaw in design or something that can be overcome with new technology. Surveillance relies on the abstract individual because it knows it can never quite accomplish what it seeks: total surveillance. In an era where fears of surveillance are growing, it is important to remember that surveillance is all data, no desire.

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