

ASR Forum on Surveillance in Africa: Politics, Histories, Techniques

Introduction

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African countries are home to dense sociotechnical arrangements of registration, monitoring, and spying that are increasingly transnational as well as digital. Despite decades of work devoted to the politics, histories, and techniques of surveillance and control in Western societies, there is very little work on the local exigencies and manifestations of surveillance in African contexts. This *ASR* Forum on Surveillance in Africa seeks to analyze some of the subtle and diverse political implications of identification and observation across the continent. We move away from the more sensational,

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headline-grabbing moments to the prosaic rhythms and negotiations around surveillance. If “the state” emerges in these collected articles as the locus of observation, it is crucial to remember that surveillance is a phenomenon that exceeds public bureaucracies. In many cases, the most pervasive form of monitoring is quotidian, the peer-to-peer assessment of “eyes on the street.” In other settings, from the Sahel to Somalia, surveillance occurs at a much greater distance; here, the eyes are in the sky, operated by distant geopolitical powers, often under the guise of the Global War on Terror. Increasingly, Africans are also surveilled by corporations, whether through digital technologies or more traditional market research. In other cases, monitoring follows a public health logic whereby surveillance aims to prevent and control disease, usually by tracking bodies deemed problematic. In practice, monitoring often combines each of these modalities: with peers, corporations, and states—foreign and domestic—sharing intelligence, technologies, and tactics.

The contributors to this forum work across the continent and in a variety of disciplines to study a topic that is often difficult both empirically and conceptually. The unprecedented recent attention to surveillance by the media, governments, and civil society very often remains confined to the global North. On the African continent, surveillance has received little attention. The reasons for this are multiple. Political power in Africa, it is often said, is too local, too violent, or too symbolic to necessitate much surveillance. This, we suggest, is the corollary of seeing African states as exceptions to the modernity that underpins surveillance techniques: bureaucratically enfeebled, lacking capacity, or altogether absent. In other cases, surveillance has not received much attention because the term, for many, conjures imagery of advanced technologies that historically were out of reach for many locales. Yet, as the articles below emphasize, political surveillance can and does occur in low-tech ways—for it is a component of vernacular forms of governance—and an increasing number of states have access to digital systems that enable expansive monitoring.

What is known about the rapidly emerging surveillance capacity of African states is often documented incompletely due to the secrecy under which it is undertaken. For example, the central role that non-African technology firms play in providing surveillance systems to states like Ethiopia is now better understood thanks to leaks of confidential documents and the commitment of journalists. In other cases, the work of human rights organizations has been crucial in providing evidence and awareness (e.g., Hosein & Nyst 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014). *Surveillance & Society*, the main academic journal dedicated to the study of surveillance, has published very few articles on African cases.¹ We hope that this forum will serve as an encouragement for other scholars of Africa to take on the topic of surveillance, and for scholars of surveillance to focus their attention on African contexts and controversies.

The articles in this collection demonstrate the fecundity of such an approach. Registration and monitoring are key techniques undergirding

political power and social inequality. Following how they are accomplished reveals the ways state bureaucracies are interwoven with other forms of organization. For example, Mirco Göpfert's ethnography of Nigerien *gendarmes* (39–57) demonstrates how a central imperative of the state—the imposition of internal security—is accomplished through networks of personal contacts. Despite recent investments in high-tech surveillance systems, policing in Niger is largely practiced by street-level personnel and their relationships with informants, chiefs, and acquaintances. In fact, because of the need to verify information gleaned from wiretaps, computer hacks, and drones, new technology may actually further the interpersonal extension of the state. The result recalls Bayart's (2009) conceptualization of African states as rhizomatic, functioning largely through multiple, subterranean, and hybrid assemblages.²

This form of surveillance cannot, Göpfert cautions, be taken for granted. Indeed, multiple articles in this forum emphasize the ambiguities of surveillance in Africa. Andrea Purdeková's study of "everyday forms of presence and monitoring" in Rwanda (59–86) notes, like Göpfert, that monitoring is part of both control and care. The same political formations and techniques may be put to ends that are either extractive or beneficent, repressive or caring. She situates contemporary Rwandan state techniques within a much longer, precolonial genealogy, demonstrating that continuities of means may not imply similar ends. Her article places national identity cards—infamously implicated in the genocide—within the same frame as local state structures and obligatory practices of public participation in ceremonies and collective works. Rwanda has a sophisticated state apparatus, but these forms of social monitoring, she argues, are "a rich terrain" to read for "agency and subversion" (80). As with the case of Niger, that of Rwanda suggests that analytic stances with regard to strong or weak "capacity" are less fruitful than detailed attention to the culturally significant symbols and practices through which officials and individuals negotiate watching and being watched. Similarly, a dichotomous focus on visibility versus invisibility (or public versus private) is misleading, directing focus away from the ways in which signs and practices are not simply hidden or revealed, but rather manipulated and framed.

The politics of surveillance in Africa, then, hinge in part on subtle tactics and interpersonal relations. Sophia Balakian's ethnographic account of securitization in Nairobi (87–111) provides a detailed account of how Somali residents of Kenya's capital city maneuvered a 2014 crackdown. Ostensibly motivated by al-Shabaab, Operation Usalama Watch was launched with government rhetoric of high-tech, targeted surveillance but actually enacted through roadblocks, mass arrests, and nighttime raids.³ In these face-to-face encounters, residents urgently sought to demonstrate their right to remain in Nairobi. The IDs issued by Kenya and the UNHCR were not always trusted, so fluent Swahili, an identity card from a local university, or the presence of a particular inoculation scar from Kenyan hospitals all served as markers of belonging. But most central was a different

token: cash. One resident of a Somali neighborhood of Nairobi told Balakian that the police saw Somalis as “ATMs.” Another said, “My money is my ID.” Subtle gestures, a moment’s notice, and the capacity to pass a bribe became crucial to surviving in the city during this period of unaccountable seizure.

These three articles on Niger, Rwanda, and Kenya also emphasize the importance of understanding surveillance in its “low-tech” mode. In an era of NSA databases and hovering drones, it is easy to forget that an enormous amount of state surveillance, including in the global North, occurs not digitally, but through eyes on the street, backroom gossip, and street-level encounters. From its start, surveillance studies exhibited both an affinity for novel forms of monitoring and for theoretical inquiry; the empirical articles here examine surveillance in the fullest sense of this term, as a politically charged practice of observation, sensing, tracking, and identifying.

In recent years, however, digital technology has become more central to lives and regulation on the continent. The rapid growth of mobile telephony has enabled the tracking and monitoring of many millions of previously unconnected individuals (see Donovan & Martin 2014). Mobile Internet and smartphones only increase the amount of information available at a distance, and technology firms (local and foreign) are energetically enrolling new customers. The so-called Global War on Terror has led to a new generation of military engagements, often forged by American and French forces in partnership with African officials. And aid organizations, too, have supported the increased use of information and communication technology, from mobile money to big data—often with little concern for the surveillance implications.

Africa’s newest nation, South Sudan, shares with many other contexts the centrality of humanitarian organizations to the deployment of digital forms of registering and monitoring. Ferenc David Markó conducted ethnographic fieldwork in South Sudan in the months after independence, and his study of the state registration office (113–32) provides insights into a fundamental infrastructure of citizenship. The citizenship office is responsible for inaugurating the forms of civil registration and documentation that have historically been underdeveloped in much of Africa (see Breckenridge & Szepter 2012). Working their way through paperwork, blood tests, and interviews, would-be documented citizens are defined as both members of a tribe—as verified by a chief—and through kin-relations—as verified by patrilineal elders. As have numerous countries around the world, South Sudan adopted biometric identification technology. These systems are promoted publicly by contractors and donors as apolitical, effective means of objectively identifying individuals; yet as Markó found, those involved acknowledged the weakness of the system, rarely buying into the public promises (see Donovan 2015). Such findings encourage scholars to consider the multiple publics to which states address themselves, as well as recommending the type of ethnographic commitments that facilitate such insights.

Shifting to West Africa, Adam Sandor's contribution explores how international efforts to build local security capacity reveal previously unaccounted for disciplinary dynamics (133–60). His case study of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Container Control Programme in Dakar, Senegal—which aims to improve control over maritime illicit drug trafficking and other transnational organized crime through improved international cooperation and support—addresses the growth of North–South security cooperation (see Frowd 2014) and the dynamics of intra-agency relationships within Senegal's security apparatus. Sandor argues that international organizations and experts use capacity-building interventions as mechanisms of disciplinary surveillance over local law enforcement in attempting to modernize the security practices of West African states. However, his research shows that the disciplinary power that is enacted has not proven entirely effective in achieving the desired effects of inculcating global security norms. Among the challenges for the Container Control Program and similar initiatives are competing security values among local agencies, as well as the “crowded field” of security capacity-building programs that leaves donors with a weakened set of incentives with which to shape the behavior of law enforcement participants. As Sandor observes, this blunts the intended purpose of training as a method of discipline because not being selected for one training does not foreclose being selected for another.

Tessa Diphorn, too, is interested in policing in Africa, but her focus is on the private security industry and its regulation. Through a comparative case study of Kenya and South Africa (161–82), she discovers strong public suspicion toward private security staff in both countries, where concerns persist about the motives and trustworthiness of officers. This has resulted in a patchwork of regulation meant to exercise control over security officers. Diphorn contends that we should view these regulatory measures through the analytical lens of surveillance, and that the effects of this regulation, in turn, should be incorporated within the larger “surveillant assemblage” (Haggerty & Ericson 2000). She argues that “by examining the ‘surveillance of the surveillers,’ we gain insight into the more informal, systematic, and everyday means of control and thereby gain a more holistic perspective of how the private security industry operates” in Africa (177). She also emphasizes the ways in which multinational corporations and economic inequality meet on the terrain of security.

There is a risk of seeing these dynamics as new to the continent, a sort of “catch-up” to other locations where state surveillance is more entrenched. Many of these articles insist otherwise. So, too, does Keith Breckenridge's recent book (2014) on South Africa's “biometric state,” reviewed in this issue. As Frederick Cooper writes in his review (251–52), “biometric identification was not a European technology brought belatedly to Africa, but a mode of governance pioneered in South Africa itself, only later making its way ‘home’ to Great Britain” (251). South Africa remains a pivotal location for securitization on the continent. In her review of Jane Duncan's (2014)

book on the “rise of the securocrats in South Africa” (253–54), Rita Abrahamsen highlights both the increasing police militarization in South Africa and the expanding domestic role for the country’s military, “despite the fact that South Africa does not face any substantive threats to its national security” (253). Working with quite different material, the final book review included in this special forum also interrogates themes of securitization. Stephen Harmon’s review of Jessica Piombo’s (2015) edited volume on the U.S. military in Africa (254–57) makes clear that American policy has bundled together security, development, and governance across a wide swath of the continent.

Attention to surveillance yields analytical payoffs and provides insights into urgent political questions on the African continent. Much more can and will be said, however. To name just a few notable frontiers: In addition to the widespread adoption of biometric technologies such as digital fingerprinting and facial recognition, a number of countries have or are planning to develop DNA databases. Cybersecurity weaknesses mean many digital networks on the continent are vulnerable to exploitation, by a wide range of actors. States and corporations continue to transform their means of monitoring and tracking, and citizens continue to rework and subvert them. As this necessarily interdisciplinary effort expands, we hope this *ASR* Forum will prove a fertile starting point for new research.

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Notes

1. At the time of writing, only four articles on Africa have appeared in *Surveillance & Society*, including studies of closed-circuit television surveillance systems in central business districts in South Africa (Minnaar 2007) and low-tech surveillance in Eritrea (Bozzini 2011).
2. There is a long-running debate in surveillance studies about the metaphors that best grasp the evolving nature of visibility and control. While Orwell's "Big Brother" and Foucault's "panopticon" have a purchase on the popular imagination, we tend to agree with Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) idea of a "surveillant assemblage" which, like Bayart's conceptualization, draws on Deleuze and Guattari to point to a more dispersed, heterogeneous form of control.
3. *Usalama* is Kiswahili for security. Internally, however, the initiative was known as Operation Sanitization Eastleigh, referring to the largely Somali neighborhood of Nairobi.