

Research Paper

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How journalism advances surveillant technology through weightless criticism

Understanding one way consumers are nudged toward a state of total surveillance

Abstract: The growth of consumer products with surveillant capabilities, in conjunction with the economic pressure journalism is under, has created fertile ground for surveillance capitalism to thrive and journalism to become complicit in that growth. An examination of a corpus of texts containing the products of journalism suggests this complicity can be seen through a style of reporting conceptualized as weightless criticism.

Keywords: surveillance, surveillance capitalism, journalism

In the United States, surveillance is omnipresent but for a small segment of society intentionally living off the grid, i.e., away from public utilities, ignoring banking systems, eschewing technology, and avoiding contact with the government. However, for most, submitting to surveillance in some form or another is required to effectively participate in society, access services, and enjoy the conveniences offered by the internet and technology. If the subject is a person of color, economically disadvantaged, or otherwise considered someone to be suspicious of or fear, surveillance can be targeted, inescapable, and especially robust. Notably and over time, the modes and methods of surveillance which once would have fallen under the rubric of surveillance studies considered »the fuzzy edges of surveillance, paranoia and conspiracy« (MURAKAMI WOOD 2009: 2) are now commonplace. For example, a networked thermostat that can adjust the temperature up or down as appropriate can also record the presence of humans in a space, or a doorbell equipped with a video camera creating and storing footage

is also readily accessible to the police. In fact, the practice of surveillance has expanded so much and has grown so persistent that some theorize we now live in a culture of surveillance (LYON 2018). This is not to suggest a culture of surveillance is equivalent to a state of total surveillance. Many products and technologies are not necessarily created or used for surveillance and for those that are, the scope of that use must be considered through the uneven legal parameters established in each country, the business models of companies behind the technology, and the specific capabilities of each product. However, surveillance as expansive and invasive as networked doorbells and thermostats help form the contours of a culture of surveillance and has to be packaged and sold in a manner which makes the consumer/citizen become excited to engage with it or at least nudged into acquiescence. While it is recognized by this researcher there is a substantial population which is unable to escape surveillance, often because of their race or economic status, the population of interest for this project is the one which *invites* it in. The person who *chooses*, or, perhaps better stated, can *afford to choose*, to buy a surveillant consumer product, put it in their home or on their body, thus inviting the digital equivalent of a spy into their space; what has been conceptualized as luxury surveillance (GILLIARD 2022; GILLIARD/GOLUMBIA 2021).

Literature Review

This study is part of a larger research project which critically examines the discourse used in certain U.S. media products to uncover what discourse is engaged with in order to advance the hegemony of surveillance and surveillance capitalism. Examining this discourse is essential because »discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations« (FOUCAULT 2009: 319) and surveillance is built upon asymmetrical power relationships (ANDREJEVIC 2014). Much of the discourse surrounding how this happens is built on a foundation of values and concepts, what Bourdieu (1977) calls *doxa*, which are often considered durable and enduring, creating the conditions necessary for surveillance to become entrenched, if not welcomed, into public places, private spaces, and society writ large. Leading to what Foucault (1977) might consider the moment »he becomes the principle of his own subjection« (203) on a mass scale. Journalism plays an elemental role in discourse production, and it is necessary to examine how journalism has contributed to creating or sustaining a culture of surveillance. As Habermas noted, »newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere« (HABERMAS 1964/1974: 49) and are influential tools to shape public opinion. However, the effects of declining revenue and other economic pressures, combined with shifting distribution channels and audience fragmentation, has led news platforms to seek other sources of revenue

which can impact how they influence the public. For example, by embedding links – understood as affiliate links – within articles that readers can click on and be directed to a website to purchase a product while also generating a sales commission for the news platform.

This is particularly problematic when the product, often reviewed by a technology journalist, fits into what Zuboff (2015) has called the big other – a network of devices and institutions that records and commoditizes human behavior and thought – and into the larger scheme of surveillance capitalism which »unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material« (ZUBOFF 2019: 8). Moreover, the tension between the news platform that is also functioning as a *de facto* conduit for product sales often results in a type of reporting which situates the negative surveillant aspects of a consumer technology product *de minimis* to features, convenience, or aesthetics. I call this reporting *weightless criticism* and conceptualize it as a type of criticism that can be seen yet offers little force against the logics of surveillance capitalism. Weightless criticism provides a veneer of journalistic impartiality and under that veneer, the text ultimately works to sell surveillance to individuals under the appearance of critique because robust critique is potentially no longer economically beneficial for a news platform if it is also simultaneously selling surveillant consumer technology products through affiliate links. This is illustrative of Carlson's (2015) assertion that »despite the normative rigidity of editorial independence, in practice the forces of commercialism have always compromised journalistic autonomy« (851) for to discourage consumers from buying those very same surveillant products negatively impacts a valued revenue stream.

Journalistic principles, or values, have evolved throughout the existence of the field but can broadly be understood from a few approaches: credibility of message, journalist, or outlet, and quality (MOLYNEUX/CODDINGTON 2020); objectivity, accuracy, and fairness (WALTERS 2021); a servant to and component of democracy (DILTS 2005); all of which exist under an umbrella of professional ethics that compel journalists to report the truth, minimize harm, work independently, and with transparency (Society of Professional Journalists 2014). A simple distillation of journalistic values that most non-journalists and non-academics subscribe to is: »Truth seeking. Truth telling. Independence« (CHUA 2018: 94). Though many individuals in the United States are skeptical of the news media (PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2020), the industry itself has been working to improve transparency (KOLISKA 2022).¹¹ Yet, individuals will often turn to journalistic outlets they trust to educate themselves about current events, politics, sports, the weather, or in this case, consumer products. This can be possible because »the belief in serious

11 Koliska also finds those efforts, as currently practiced, may not increase news consumers trust and recommends transparency information be included as part of the news story.

journalism – whether printed or electronic – is based on trust in the professionalism of journalistic practice« (LIEBES 2000: 295). While factors like trust, belief, or transparency, in respect to news consumers, are complicated and an area of deep focus for scholars of journalism, news journalism still contributes to shaping the discourse around surveillance. How the surveillant aspects of technology are foregrounded or obscured, if privacy concerns are raised, or raised then washed away, present opportunities to examine what role journalism plays in selling surveillance.

A long-standing tenet in the field is the separation between the editorial side and advertising side of the organization as a way to avoid undue influence from business or advertising pressures on reporting; what Bourdieu (1998) reflected on as a tension between two poles: the cultural pole and the economic pole. In practice, this could mean a physical separation, but rhetorically, the tenet is often referred to metaphorically, e.g., the separation between the Church and State in the United States (CODDINGTON 2015). Gans (1980), however, made a crucial observation: »when news firms face higher profit demands, [there] is a breakdown of the long-standing walls between ›church‹ (the editorial side of the enterprise) and ›state‹ (the business side)« (24) and this is more evident now than ever before.

Method

The following research questions are examined in this project to better understand how journalism in the United States contributes to advancing the hegemony of surveillance capitalism:

1. How is surveillance sold in the news media?
2. How does news media sustain the hegemony of surveillance capitalism?

To investigate these questions a corpus of texts was curated containing approximately 300 items² in U.S. news media that were published during a two-year period covering January 1, 2017, to December 31, 2019. This specific range of dates were inspired by the initial Snowden revelation in 2013, which generated a global conversation about unwarranted government mass surveillance (see GELLMAN/POITRAS 2013; GREENWALD/MACASKILL 2013), while coverage over the subsequent years from the files Snowden obtained sustained the conversation in the national and global consciousness. Moreover, it also incorporates an important time when the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal (see CADWALLADR/GRAHAM-HARRISON 2018) revealed mass consumer surveillance and voter manipulation involving the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Both scandals were highly

2 The corpus total is comprised of the following: 91 advertisement/marketing, 235 articles.

impactful, widely covered in the global press, and provided a backdrop against which the sale of networked consumer products grew and grew.

For this project articles were collected from publications ranging from U.S. news media standard bearers including (Table 1): *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Consumer Reports*, and *Fox News*, because of their name recognition, reputation, and reach. Articles were also sourced from tech specific, or niche, publications including: *The Verge*, *Gizmodo*, *Engadget*, *PC Magazine*, *CNET*, and *Popular Mechanics* because of their targeted focus on technology, name recognition within this genre, and the fact that anywhere between 20% and 70% of their traffic comes from online search engines (meaning individuals find these sites while searching for a product), with the average across all of them to be just under 50%.³

These sites are also independent from, or at least claim to have editorial separation from, advertisers or the products they review. I accessed each one, either through their website or the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, and then searched within each publication using the keywords: *Ring*, *Alexa*, *video doorbell*, *smart speaker*, *smart tech*, *smart home*, *Fitbit*, and *fitness tracker*.

In the spirit of Hall's (1975) »long preliminary soak« (15), these texts were examined in order to develop some preliminary understanding of how news articles were grappling with the concept of surveillance and initial notes were memorialized on a spreadsheet. As themes started to reveal themselves, each article was re-visited, sometimes more than once, with a focus on identifying the main theme of the article, which was also memorialized in a column on the spreadsheet. Of the many themes that were identified, this specific paper will focus on weightless criticism. This project applies critical discourse analysis (CDA), as imagined by Fairclough (1985, 1995, 2000a, 2000b) and succinctly summarized by Buoziš (2018) as a method of analysis which, »allows scholars to link texts, the discursive practices within those texts, and the sociocultural practices in the society that produce those texts« (40). Moreover, Fairclough/Fairclough (2018) and van Dijk (1993, 2011) have asserted the value of CDA as a tool well suited for critical social analysis and understanding power relationships. Further, CDA is quite capable of harnessing a multidisciplinary approach to illuminate power relationships and their cultural implications. Because surveillance is, by nature, built on asymmetrical power relationships (ANDREJEVIC 2014), CDA is an appropriate approach.

3 These statistics were collected through the data analytics website Alexa.com as of September 7, 2021, and are subject to change over time.

Table 1
Sources and Distribution of Articles

Publication	2017	2018	2019	Total
CNET	1	3	10	14
Consumer Reports	7	4	12	23
Engadget	1	5	18	24
Fox News	8	1	2	11
Gizmodo	0	1	17	18
PC Mag	12	12	8	32
Popular Mechanics	10	6	5	21
Popular Science	0	0	1	1
The New York Times	2	11	15	28
The Verge	1	3	21	25
The Washington Post	8	10	8	26
Wall Street Journal	0	8	4	12

Weightless Criticism

The theme of weightless criticism can appear in a variety of ways and sometimes more than one way in the same text. The subsequent passages organize the findings around some of the ways weightless criticism appeared. This organization is not to suggest a structural rigidity to the concept of weightless criticism, but simply a way to guide the reader through some of the findings. Nor is this to suggest all of the texts contained weightless criticism.

Shifting Blame/Pivoting to the Future

One point of entry into this conversation about and concept of weightless criticism is through a popular surveillant consumer product, the smart speaker, because of its widespread use. As a matter of background to familiarize the reader, the technological centerpiece of a so-called smart home is the smart speaker, also called the voice assistant, virtual assistant, or intelligent personal assistant. This device consists of microphones, a speaker or speakers, computer processing and networking capabilities, and is connected to artificial intelligence in order to respond to queries or execute requests. While several companies manufacture devices in this consumer technology space, Amazon's and Google's products are the most recognizable and, combined, have captured nearly half of the global market share throughout Q3 2016 to Q3 2021. One estimate suggests just over 42 million smart speakers (all manufacturers)

were shipped worldwide in 2017 with over 409 million projected by 2025, an 873% increase in just eight years.

This product is effectively a networked listening device, which can also respond to commands or answer questions. By first uttering a specific word or phrase, known as a wake word, to activate the device a user might say, »Alexa, turn on the kitchen lights« or »Okay Google, what's the weather tomorrow?« and the kitchen lights will turn on or the forecast will be read aloud. While this cursory description is simplistic, there is a complex set of computational activities, surveillance, data collection, storage, and analysis required, along with a convoluted relationship between the user, the device, and the company behind the device, which underpins this technology. It is important to recognize the significance of the wake word because it indicates the device is always listening for, at a minimum, that word.

Against this backdrop, an article on the *Fox News* website (CASEY 2017) described an event involving one of these devices, the Google Home smart speaker, and a commercial for that same product which aired during the 2017 Super Bowl. In short, while showcasing the product during the advertisement, the wake phrase »Okay Google« was used in the commercial, activating an untold number of Google Home devices installed in actual homes. This article went on to describe a similar fact pattern which afflicted Amazon's smart speaker. On the surface, these events might be considered funny or ironic, but they illustrate surveillant capabilities of these devices and demonstrate the lack of control owners of them have over them.

The only criticism in this article of those devices and events was focused on the fact that owners of the Google Home device could not change the wake phrase. The article did not engage with the explicitly visible surveillance capabilities of the device or articulate any privacy concerns beyond suggesting users change the wake word, when possible, i.e., offload risk and responsibility onto the consumer. The piece concluded by proclaiming »Google Home is still a fantastic smart speaker that offers great sound and deep integration with other Google products – let's just hope it gets smart enough to ignore the TV« (para. 7). Here, the criticism is so weightless that rather than engaging with the demonstrated problematics of surveillance in the device, it simply transforms into a hope that the device itself improves.

While this example from the corpus of texts did not contain links to purchase the products mentioned, i.e., via affiliate links, the authorship of the article is worth scrutinizing because it is illustrative of how the wall between advertising and editorial content is permeable. Unlike Carlson's (2015) study of native advertising, this piece did not exhibit any clear indications the writing was sponsored by an advertiser. However, the author for the piece is identified as a staff writer for *Tom's Guide*, a separate tech review website. The provenance of this site is interesting because it reveals a potential business relationship between *Fox News*

and *Tom's Guide* whereby *Tom's Guide* provides technology journalism content to *Fox News*. This relationship can be intuited by examining the fine print at the bottom of the *Tom's Guide* website which explains it is »part of Future us Inc, an international media group and leading digital publisher« (Tom's Guide n.d.). In this case, Future us Inc. is part of parent corporation Future Plc, »a global platform for specialist media underpinned by proprietary technology, enabled by data; with diversified revenue streams« (FUTURE PLC 2021: 2). In other words, Future is a digital advertising and marketing company creating content for their own B2B and B2C verticals e.g., *Tom's Guide*, or targeted placement of the content outside of their own ecosystem, for advertising clients. Thus, a brand, like Google, uses Future plc as a platform to advertise their products, like the Google Home, by writing positive content in verticals produced by Future which appear as if they are independent, separate, online magazines and place that content elsewhere, perhaps by buying space on *Fox News'* website. The content is organized around two thematic genres which are prevalent in technology journalism: product reviews and how to use a product. Moreover, a company like Future plc can also function as a crisis management team when, for example, a Super Bowl commercial inadvertently activates a smart speaker, by blunting negative news with product accolades and hopes for improving future iterations.

Visual Cues

Continuing with smart speakers, *Popular Mechanics* (LINDER 2019) published a comparison of Amazon and Google's products. Unlike the previous example where the article was created by an outside company, this article was written by an in-house reporter. This piece contained five areas of evaluation, comparative analysis, and a so-called winner for each category, plus a conclusion which named an overall winner. The first four categories, and the largest overall focus of this article, evaluated cost, design, and capabilities. The final consideration was a privacy category which is notable in three discursive contexts because they support the notion of weightless criticism. First, the amount of rhetorical heft in terms of the quantity of words in comparison to the remainder of the article, suggests to the reader that this section is not as important as the rest of the other factors. Second, the privacy category of evaluation was located at the end of the entire piece. This was an exceptionally long webpage, with several advertisements embedded within making it even longer. While not a particular scientific unit of measurement, it took nearly seven flicks of the fingers on a trackpad to land near the privacy category. This is an intentional editorial decision which conveys the discursive value of the information through its presentation, i.e., valuable information is presented first, less valuable last. This organization provides a visual index for the reader which indicates what the publication and

journalistic value within the context of the article. Finally, the discourse within the privacy section highlights one event where an audio file maintained by Amazon and requested by a citizen covered by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe was accidentally sent to an unintended individual, and another where unnerving giggling emanated from a device:

The most well-known fail to date is that one time Amazon accidentally sent a whole file of requested voice recordings to the wrong person in Germany. Under the General Data Protection Regulation in the European Union, all citizens in the 28-country bloc can request a complete file of all data a company has collected on them. When one citizen requested all of the audio files Amazon had collected on him through his Alexa-enabled device, Amazon accidentally sent 1,700 voice files to the wrong person. Whoops.

To make matters worse, Amazon has also seen a few other controversial moments. In one instance, when users would say a command, Alexa would misinterpret the signal as »Alexa, laugh,« resulting in many unwanted, extremely creepy giggles. (You just can't make this stuff up.) That isn't necessarily a privacy concern, but still shows that wake words aren't a perfect method for ensuring private conversations aren't recorded. In another situation, Alexa sent a voice recording of a private conversation from one family's device to one of their contacts.

The winner: Google, because it hasn't sent recordings to the wrong people yet, and doesn't start laughing in a scary voice for no reason. (Which Gives You More Privacy? section)

All told, these incidents are presented as random, inconsequential, or humorous, and rhetorically minimized against the greater context of surveillance concerns, data collection, and how that data is or could be used. The article does not land on a strong winner or loser; instead, both are deemed excellent products, and the reader is assured they can be confident purchasing either as a safe choice even though those failings were not isolated incidents. »Aesthetically, both companies put out great looking products, so you can't go wrong« (»Which wins: ...« section) the journalist concludes, assuming aesthetics are a key consideration for a consumer. »The decision will probably come down to which system is easier for you to integrate with« (»Which wins:...« section), which also implies the consumer already has been subjected to and acquiesced to the surveillant tentacles of Google or Amazon. Moreover, affiliate links to purchase both products were readily apparent.

The next pertinent exemplar from the corpus comes from *The Washington Post* (FOWLER 2017) and an article titled, »The skeptic's guide to smart home gadgets.« This title primes the reader to believe this guide will be written to the sensibilities of, and from the perspective of, a tech skeptic. The journalist warns the reader, in the opening sentence, »before you buy any »smart« gadgets, make sure they're not dumb« (para. 1) which, for a skeptic, might be important. The journalist cites a few surveys which suggest smart home devices are popular holiday purchases and are widely used; this potentially nudges the reader to feel as if they might be missing something. Finally, before reviewing the five different smart products

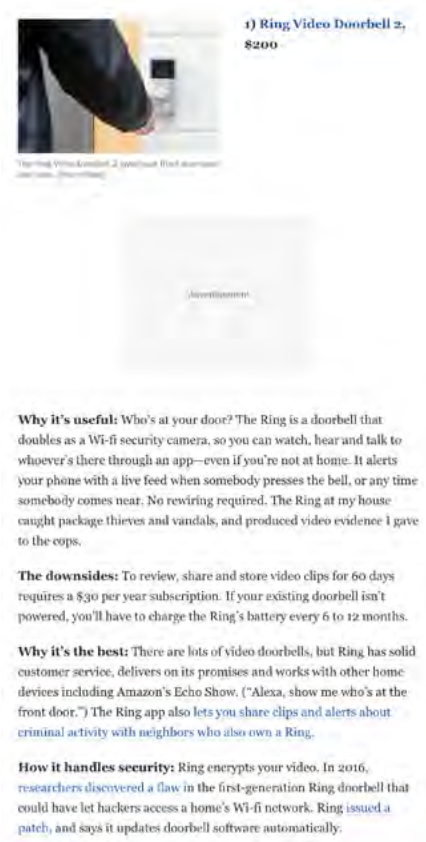
chosen for this article, the journalist shares his bona fides and his own skepticism of the technology, »after reviewing dozens of smart home products, I’ve learned to be skeptical of any gadget that feels like a Star Trek prop – and a little paranoid about things that are listening, watching or collecting data« (para. 4). This language seems appropriate for a concerned tech journalist to write and adds to the other layers of the article, i.e., the headline and opening, which are potentially comforting and assuring the reader that what they are about to read is centered around their skepticism and concern about smart home technology.

The article goes on to review five different smart devices: the Ring Video Doorbell, a networked light switch by Lutron, the Eero mesh router, an Eco-bee networked thermostat, and a networked speaker by Sonos. Each review is organized around four categories: the utility of the device, the downsides of the device, why the device is the best in the category, and how the device confronts security. Two of these categories, downsides and security, are potential spaces for the journalist to apply his paranoia »about things that are listening, watching or collecting data« (para. 4) to this collection of networked devices because all of them are engaged in some form of listening or watching, and all of them are collecting data. However, the weightlessness of the critique is manifest throughout those categories across all the reviewed products. Concerns about downsides are reflected in commentary related to areas such as: product costs, complexity of installation, subscription fees, or battery life, with no mention of persistent surveillance by these devices or the potential for data collection. Commentary around security focused on the availability of software updates and in the case of the Lutron light switch, the company testing of products for hacking vulnerabilities, »but it wouldn’t say whether its systems have ever been breached« (Section 2, para. 4) which certainly would not assuage any skeptic’s fears. Even the Ring Doorbell, which is rife with surveillance centric issues, does not reference any concerns about data collection or the concerns over the automation of racialized surveillance. The weightless criticism can be seen visually; the sections about utility and why the device is the best are twice the length of the downsides and security sections (Fig. 1).

The Washington Post represents an interesting example of how media ownership can also complicate technology journalism, in addition to or in conjunction with other economic factors, by applying additional pressure on the fragile barrier between advertising and editorial content because Jeff Bezos, founder and then CEO of Amazon, bought *The Washington Post* in 2013 for \$250 million (SABA 2013). This purchase positioned *The Washington Post* to potentially become subjected to additional editorial content pressure because Amazon creates, owns, and sells a host of surveillant consumer products including voice activated assistants, the Ring product line, and Eero wireless mesh routers. Moreover, some articles in the corpus of texts pointed out other products where the artificial intelligence,

named Alexa, exists. Alexa underpins Amazon's signature voice assistants and is also found in a host of other consumer products like automobiles (Barry 2019) to bathroom mirrors and toilets (Moscaritolo 2018), illustrating Amazon's aspiration of expanding Alexa integration into a wide array of disparate consumer products and personal spaces (WEISE 2018).

Figure 1
Ring Video Doorbell Review



Source: Screenshot

The breadth of consumer products touched by Amazon creates myriad opportunities for technology journalists employed by *The Post* to be put in the awkward position of potentially having to moderate their criticism of those products,

either by corporate edict or self-censorship. Moreover, published articles which intersect with Jeff Bezos or Amazon in some way carry a disclaimer pointing out how each company is owned by Bezos. While decades of pressure exerted by a complex set of economic, employment, and technological factors, which destabilized otherwise hardened journalistic norms, may escape the average citizen and reader, a notation in an article that the owner of the platform is also the owner of the company or technology behind a consumer product being reviewed brings into sharp relief the complex relationship.

Weightless Language

The corpus of texts revealed that weightless criticism can manifest in other subtle ways. For example, in a product review for a new Fitbit smartwatch and companion online coaching service, *Consumer Reports* (FOWLER B. 2019) describes how Fitbit collects and stores, on its own servers, the data generated by the smartwatch.

This is a *modus operandi* of the surveillance capitalist and raises a host of concerns for the surveillance studies and privacy studies communities, especially because the data in question are health centric, specific, and ripe for abuse by health insurance carriers and employers. This data is particularly vulnerable in the context of U.S. employment where most working age individuals obtain their health insurance through their employer as a benefit of and conditioned on employment. This unique arrangement creates the opportunity for this very specific, personal, employee health information to be sold back to an employer or health insurance carrier to exert pressure on the employee to behave in ways (inside and outside the workplace) that benefit the employer, e.g., by lowering premiums. However, for the journalist here, this concern is weakened by minimizing the scope of who might be concerned, »for *some* people that can raise privacy concerns [emphasis added]« (para. 1, Fitbit Premium section). This analysis points out the criticism, i.e., privacy concerns, while rendering it weightless by suggesting, without evidence, that an insufficient number of people are concerned. Moreover, the idea that the only thing at issue is a concern, i.e., an imaginary, rather than actual uses of the collected data or the potential harm of Fitbit having this data and what it may do with it, further aids in rendering this criticism weightless.

Counterweight

Another manifestation of weightless criticism comes through the application of a strong discursive counterweight to any surveillance centric criticism in an article. For example, a piece in *Popular Mechanics* (MOSEMAN 2017) covering the 2017 Consumer Electronics Show (CES), an annual convention which is centered

around revealing the latest iterations of consumer electronics across a vast range of product categories, interrogated the burgeoning trend of integrating voice assistants with automobiles. The impetus behind this merging of different technological platforms is grounded in the idea that »car people think your next car is going to get to know you« (para. 5) and »the cyber personal assistant trend that spawned Siri and Cortana and Alexa is moving from your phone or your house and colonizing your car« (para. 5). Colonizing is a term imbued with a long history of extractive rationalities, atrocity, and suffering, which makes it an odd choice by the author, but this is also an interesting way to describe this technological meshing because the word also connotes ideas like control and extraction of resources; concepts which Couldry and Mejias (2018) would refer to as data colonialism, »the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing« (1), and that underpin the logics of surveillance and surveillance capitalism.

However, rather than following the more critical path of this technological evolution the author writes, »the advantages are obvious« (MOSEMAN 2017: para. 7) and goes on to examine and articulate a variety of so-called advantages, e.g., seamless integration between the home and auto, throughout the entirety of this article. The totality of the article is the counterweight to the only surveillance capitalism centric acknowledgement by Moseman, which is then further rendered weightless in the subsequent sentences:

There's another side to this, *and it's not just about companies collecting all this data about you by getting you to talk to a sweet robot voice. If Alexa becomes your friend with a history – your partner – will you leave her behind when your Alexa-equipped car dies and choose a new ride that lacks her integration? Probably not. We don't want to give up that history. If the future brings us a world after car ownership, will you use only Toyota's rent-a-pods and not Honda's because your pal Yui is there waiting for you?* [emphasis added] (para. 14)

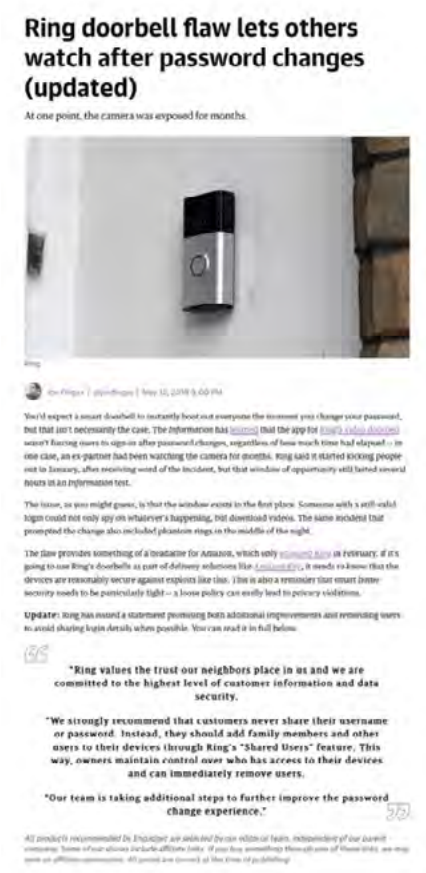
Thus, rather than expand on the harmful potential for exponentially higher quantities of data available for extraction, or the improved quality of the data because it can be even more tightly tied to an individual, or even a hint of recognition that third parties, e.g., auto insurance companies, would be very interested in this data and would pay for it, Moseman foregrounds the reasons why a consumer will want to remain in this panoptic schema. Moreover, the idea a »car is going to get to know you« (para. 5) and why that is most important is brought into sharp focus and renders the criticism around data collection comparatively insignificant. Further, the author identifies himself, by using the pronoun we, as part of the same group of users facing this conundrum together and guiding them with the benefit of his expertise, rather than an independent expert investigating facts and questioning power structures.

Incorporating Public Relations

The relationship between the apparatus of public relations and its influence on journalism is long-standing, studied. As journalistic staff are cut, the power public relations can successfully exert to influence news content is amplified leading some to refer to this phenomenon as *churnalism* or *pr-isation* (JACKSON/MOLONEY 2016; MACNAMARA 2016). In the context of weightless criticism, technology journalists can rely on corporate press releases in their reporting, which has the effect of blunting or obscuring legitimate surveillance concerns. Amazon's Ring products and services appear here for this discussion because Amazon/Ring is particularly aggressive in countering negative press. Two articles in the online technology news and review site *Engadget* showcase how the press release as a source for journalists can elide rightful and valid critique. First, an article describes a security flaw which was discovered in Ring doorbells (FINGAS 2018). In brief, the flaw centers around the fact that if the password was changed on the device by one user, any other users, e.g., roommates or domestic partners, would not be required by the software to enter the new password in order to view footage or the live feed from the device. Requiring all users to use the new password is a common protocol and is common sense, particularly through the lens of domestic abuse. As Fingas reveals, »in one case, an ex-partner had been watching the camera for months« (para. 1) whereby the ex-partner could not only watch a live feed from the camera, but also download any recorded videos. Fingas also, rightly, notes »smart home security needs to be particularly tight – a loose policy can easily lead to privacy violations« (para. 3). In short, the password flaw exemplifies a loose policy on the part of Ring which lead to real-world harm. This is true at the household level Fingas is concerned with, but also, and unmentioned, loose policy on a larger scale, i.e., state or national policy, can lead to privacy violations on a larger scale.

However, this criticism is blunted at the end of this short piece, and in the headline, with a notification to the reader there has been an update to the original article (Fig. 2). In this case, the update is the inclusion of a statement issued by Ring addressing the flaw. Two aspects of this addition are notable. First, the statement is published in full, occupies a third of the overall space of the article itself, and the font is bolder and larger than the article, rendering it visually significant for the reader. Second, the statement follows a discourse found in crisis management which is formulaic in nature: the company values the customers, the company is committed to achieving high standards, the company is taking other steps (often unspecified) to prevent/improve the issue. However, this statement also includes language which subtly shifts focus and blame onto the user. The net effect of both items, the visual format of the company statement and the redirection of blame onto the user, can negate, i.e., render weightless, the criticism within the text of the article.

Figure 2
Engadget article featuring PR statement



Source: Screenshot

The tactic of replicating a corporate press release reappears in another Ring centered article in *Engadget* (Fisher 2019). In this piece, the journalist recounts how and where Amazon's Ring is partnering with local police departments across the United States. This partnership is mediated through Ring Neighbors, the social media-like app for users of Ring products, which connects those users to local police departments. At the time of the story 405 law enforcement agencies were participants. Partnering agencies were able to request, through Ring, video footage from any user of the Neighbors portal. Moreover, partnering agencies were

asked by Amazon to advertise for and give away Ring cameras, subsidized by tax dollars in some cases. This scheme raised concerns on several fronts: privacy and civil liberty, the circumvention of legal process by creating a condition whereby law enforcement can skip the requirement of obtaining a warrant for the footage, and fears surveillance on minority communities would increase.

However, the weight of this concern was not apparent in the original *Engadget* article nor any updated versions. Similar to the aforementioned article by Fingas (2018), this piece contains a visually prominent reprint of a Ring statement which side-steps the broader concerns about this partnership. In addition to the corporate press release reprint, the journalist also quotes from a Ring blog post which touts the effectiveness of this law enforcement relationship.

Moreover, after the reprint the journalist starts the next paragraph with »Some worry that Ring is going too far« (FISHER 2019: para. 4). Again, the use of the word *some* here adds to the weightless criticism about Ring's efforts to expand its surveillance network and deepen its integration into public infrastructure; especially when taken into consideration against the significant concern raised by prominent politicians, rights groups, and journalists. This idea is further bolstered by the fact this article contains an addendum at the end which notifies the reader there was an update to the original article. This is not an uncommon occurrence; the practice can be found throughout journalism and is most often used to correct errors in reporting. However, here, and in the Fingas (2018) article, the update includes information only from Ring supporting its position, not any sources that would further support the criticisms.

Quantity of Critique

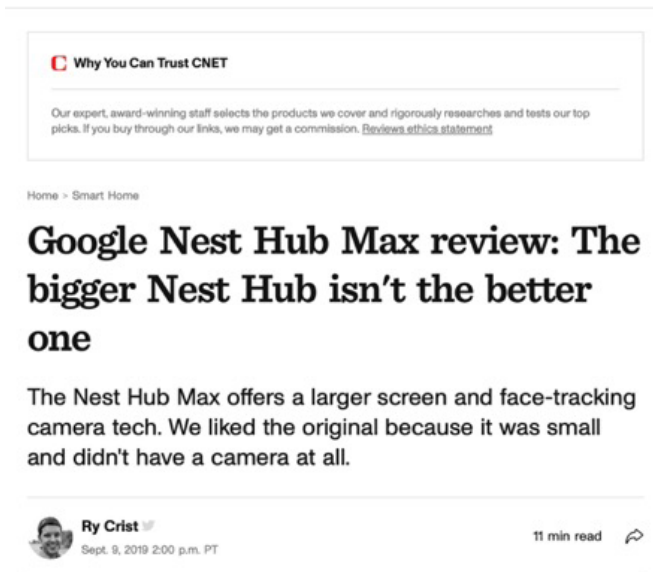
The notion of weightless criticism can also be understood by examining the amount of space dedicated to critique within the content of an article. In other words, the balance between the amount of text that is specifically critical of surveillance and all other text is a way for the reader to visually understand the weight, or weightlessness of, surveillance critique. For example, a product review, from the corpus of texts in this project, published by a leading online tech news website *CNET* (CRIST 2019), provides some illumination. At just under three thousand words, or roughly forty paragraphs, this review falls on the longer size of texts in this corpus.

Before the start of this article, in small lighter shaded print, is the requisite notification that products or services purchased by the reader via the links provided within the article may result in a commission to *CNET*, i.e., affiliate links (Fig. 3).

These links exemplify the breakdown between Church and State, what Gans (1980) and Coddington (2015) described, in the digital age. Further, these affiliate links manifest what Hanitzsch (2007) articulated when describing how the

media can relate to the people, »in their role as citizens or consumers, with the former being increasingly displaced by the latter« (374). What is made clear by CNET is the reader is understood as a consumer. In this case, the product under review is a voice assistant by Google called the Nest Hub Max, with affiliate links directed to three different retailers. With the content of this article falling into the product review genre, it is worthwhile remembering Hamami's (2019) assertion that positive product reviews impact consumer behavior as CNET provides a purchasing outlet for the reader.

Figure 3
CNET affiliate link disclaimer



Source: Screenshot

In short, this product is a voice activated assistant which can control other smart home devices and respond to queries or commands, but also has a display screen and camera. The addition of a camera to this type of device was not new at that time, but it was new for this product offering from Google. Moreover, layered with the camera is facial recognition software capable of face tracking and recognizing some rudimentary gestures. Like other product reviews on other platforms, this one contains a succinct good/bad/bottom line section. The only surveillance specific item listed under bad is the lack of a physical shutter, which the

user could use to cover over the always on camera. Within the forty paragraphs in this article a mere six paragraphs confront the privacy and surveillance implications of this device. Within those six paragraphs there are several times the phrase *Google says* appear; uncritically repeating claims by Google spokespeople meant to assuage privacy centric consumer's concerns. Further, some of the content within this brief section instructs the reader on ways to secure the device from unauthorized use by other people, e.g., two-factor authentication, which has no influence on what Google is, can, or might in the future, collect from the device. In other words, there is a tacit approval of Google's statements rendering even this small section devoted to privacy further weightless in its impact on the reader.

Conclusion

Surveillance and surveillance capitalism are threads stitching throughout much, if not all, of the conditions surrounding human existence. The infinite stream of data produced by individuals is under the constant, persistent, and ever-expanding extraction by a growing number of surveillance capitalists and concentrated into the coffers of a few very large technology companies. Further, it is well established that there is a diminishing barrier between corporations who broker this information and government agencies seeking to purchase it in order to circumvent existing laws and regulations, specifically in the United States. The notion a government or law enforcement agency, intent on surveilling and collecting data about its citizens, is restrained by laws protecting those citizen's rights can overcome that constraint by simply buying the data from a surveillance capitalist should raise alarm bells for citizens in democratic systems of governance. Broadly speaking, at best, legislative bodies are seemingly unprepared to or incapable of regulating, modulating, or constraining the worst aspects of surveillance capitalism. At worst, legislative bodies are disinterested or even unwilling because the root of surveillance capitalism, the data, can be coopted to serve broader national interests, e.g., the Snowden revelations of 2013, or individual political ambition, e.g., the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica revelations of 2018. Moreover, porous u.s. campaign finance laws and secretive funding mechanisms allow for enormous amounts of nearly unrestricted and often invisible money to flow into politician's pockets. A revolving door between technology companies and legislative bodies creates lucrative employment opportunities, bolstering future lobbying efforts and influence. Taken together, the effect can certainly shape a positive view of the technology industry by the very body capable of regulating it. It is critical to recognize that the underlying logic and *raison d'être* for surveillance is control. The important question becomes control of whom, by what, and from where does that power derive?

It is against this backdrop where the inspiration for and the seeds of this project are found. While much of the activities referenced in the preceding paragraph were hidden until whistleblowers came forward and dogged investigative journalists became involved, this project centered around the notion of surveillance in plain sight and how individuals are persuaded to be comfortable with it and are encouraged to be active participants. Moreover, as this study has illustrated, media products, tech journalism in particular and news journalism more broadly, play an integral role in sustaining the hegemony of surveillance capitalism. This study forces a recognition of this role and illustrates the various ways by which journalism contributes discursively, and directly, to a dangerous situation: the collection and monetization of human behavior in all forms, i.e., surveillance capitalism.

While difficult, it is imperative news journalism resists obscuring, through its discourse, the destructive nature of surveillance capitalism and abetting the growth of it by profiting from sales of the technology it purports to be independently covering. It is clear news journalism, when reporting on surveillant products, must recognize and fulfill its role as a watchdog for the protection of human rights by confronting, interrogating, and clearly reporting the adverse effects of a society being persuaded into a state of total surveillance under the guise of weightless criticism. At a time when authoritarian regimes are on the rise around the globe and a surveillance infrastructure built on consumer products is rapidly expanding and supplementing existing robust government surveillance networks which will ultimately be used for control over citizens by those regimes, it is categorically important to focus attention on this phenomenon. This is a matter of utmost urgency and journalism must respond accordingly.

About the Author

Robert McMahon (*1967), Dr., earned his Ph.D. in Media and Communication from Temple University where he continues to work in an administrative role. His research resides in the field of surveillance studies and is informed and underpinned by a broader schema of topic areas including: power, how power manifests in and is exercised through society, particularly through the logics of capitalism, politics, governance, and technology, as well as media complicity in producing and reproducing the ideologies that buttress that power. Contact: robert.mcmahon@temple.edu

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