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When former private contractor Edward Snowden shared classified CIA documents with *Guardian* reporters in 2013, he emphasized the need for people—and particularly Americans—to know the depths of the surveillance state. The revelations that followed in a series of articles written by Glenn Greenwald set the stage for global outrage and passionate debates about the need for sweeping surveillance systems to protect the sovereign security of the nation from foreign and domestic threats. As years pass and the debates about surveillance rage on, scholars, journalists, legal analysts, social commentators, and the general public argue myriad positions on the efficacy and need for robust surveillance systems. The Pew Research Center reveals that 52 percent of Americans are concerned about their privacy, with the rest in the study ambivalent about what data the government and private corporations collect (2016). While fields such as surveillance studies, communications and media studies, computer science, history, legal studies, and journalism have engaged in conversations about surveillance and privacy, these topics have yet to become part of mainstream scholarship in writing studies. Of the scholarship available in our discipline, most is produced by computers and writing scholars taking a stand against widespread surveillance and the decrease of privacy protections online.

For the past twenty years, teachers and scholars of computers and writing have addressed issues of surveillance and privacy within writing infrastructures through course-management systems, plagiarism-detection software, and social media use in classrooms. These scholars have attended to the decisions teachers face when using digital tools with surveillance capabilities (Amidon et al. 2019; Beck, Grohowski, and Blair 2016; Hawisher and Selfe 1991; Janangelo 1991) or implementing
plagiarism-detection policies that impact students (Purdy 2009; Zwagerman 2008). The discipline has also discussed the potential harm digital researchers face when collecting data online due to tracking technologies (Hawkes 2007) and how surveillance affects writing program administration and assessment with student portfolios (Crow 2013). More recently, scholarly conversations have focused on the effects of algorithmic surveillance upon identity (Beck 2015); investigations into privacy policies of gaming platforms (Vie 2014); the lasting cultural impacts of doxing private individuals’ personal information (Hutchinson 2018); the sharing of consumer data with corporations and governments (McKee 2011; Reyman 2013); and critical digital literacy interventions with regard to health data (Hutchinson and Novotny 2018). Currently absent from these publications is a book-length project within writing studies focused on surveillance both inside and beyond the classroom.

Certainly, countless books, articles, social media posts, white papers, and news articles exist that advocate for less surveillance online and promote increased personal privacy protections. Many of these mainstream resources point to the inequities, ethics, and problems with an ever-watchful surveillance state. These texts seek to challenge discursive normalizations that support surveillance infrastructures and place the onus on the individual: “Don’t share what you don’t want others to know” and “Don’t do anything online you wouldn’t want your grandmother to see.” As editors, we feel writing studies would benefit from contributing to these conversations with a focused and sustained inquiry into how writing can serve as the vehicle for creating, developing, deploying, and sustaining systems of surveillance. A book-length text examining the impact of surveillance and privacy upon writing and writers makes sense at this kairotic moment because rhetoricians know all too well how close watching impacts social behaviors. It is time, we argue, for rhetoricians to use our training to watch the watchers.1

It seems there is very little we do these days that does not involve some sort of surveillance capturing movement and monitoring activity online; from grocery shopping, to driving
around town, to going to work, to communicating with loved ones through social media or ordering goods and services from online retailers, our everyday actions are constantly stored in the cloud. The absurdity of tracking millions of people’s intimate activities and habits speaks to a late-stage-capitalist increase of large monopolistic corporations controlling economic benefit to the detriment of the moral, ethical, and financial well-being of citizens. And while closed-circuit television technology has been around for some time—and most people accept its presence as a security device—the changing technological landscape of the internet has invited advances in data mining and tracking the creator of the web, Tim Berners-Lee, could have never predicted.

In fact, Berners-Lee’s (see Sample 2019) recent observations of the changing internet reveal a concern of the data-tracking technologies that watch what every person does online. In an announcement of a new technology called Solid—a platform allowing users to choose how their data is collected, stored, and used—Berners-Lee wrote optimistically of the connected World Wide Web while acknowledging how the web has “evolved into an engine of inequity and division; swayed by powerful forces who use it for their own agendas” (para 1). He understands the alienation people experience due to late-stage capitalism, that is, the growing gulf between those in power controlling and creating resources people consume while having little recourse to advocate for protection and change. His work also reveals his beliefs about privacy: it matters, and individuals should feel free to act autonomously for their own pursuits. Berners-Lee’s work reveals that, through collaboration, along with surveillance and privacy education, people can become empowered to remove their data from the tentacles of corporate interests and government oversight.

Similar to Berners-Lee, Edward Snowden sees the internet as a mass-surveillance system (Mack 2016). His words ring prescient when more and more employers, retailers, governments, and large corporations are turning to big data analytics for key insights into consumer behaviors. This push for big data has been growing since the mid-2000s and, according to a McKinsey and Company research insight, promises companies billions of
dollars (Manyika et al. 2011). Academia has not kept itself out of this growing business of data collection. As private industry marshals its considerable resources to purchase software and hire teams of data scientists, higher education has increasingly turned to consultants who offer data analytics on both students and faculty. We find it alarming how companies and consultants obtain data—through complex yet often hidden surveillance methods that use computer algorithms (i.e., mathematical equations used for step-by-step procedures) to highlight, segment, and categorize people’s activities into data streams. We also find it alarming how universities continue to participate in similar surveillant practices to validate their brands and also continue to partner with education-technology companies, who often have no oversight in how they use student and faculty data.

For these reasons, we present Privacy Matters: Conversations about Surveillance within and beyond the Classroom, which builds from Berners-Lee’s sense of collaboration, education, and empowerment by sharing a collection of writings from emerging and established scholars in writing studies. Because of the work writing studies scholars have attended to already, which focus on pedagogy and program administration, the conversations in this collection contribute new culturally situated and community-oriented perspectives on data collection. We have found that to offer unique and impactful scholarship on these topics, scholars must continually keep au courant with new research, policies, and technologies, as surveillance and privacy are not issues contained to just one discipline or within the confines of a particular institution. Therefore, several Privacy Matters contributors have specifically responded to our call for interdisciplinary work with surveillance and privacy issues because they recognize everyone—across the globe—is impacted and affected by the erosion of privacy, as well as increased government and corporate surveillance.

WHY PRIVACY MATTERS
As legal and privacy scholar Daniel Solove remarks, one of the problems with defining privacy—especially within legal
reform—is the utter disharmony in views about the many distinctions of discretion due to varying subject positions and life experiences. Whereas one person might not object to Facebook maintaining technological logs on Messenger to ensure its operation, that same person might object to Facebook giving read-and-edit access to all private messages sent and received on the social media platform to third parties such as Netflix and Spotify for targeted advertising. Unfortunately, this exact thing happened in 2018 (Newton 2018).

Even though individuals hold a range of positions regarding surveillance and data collection, beliefs about surveillance are often dampened by singular, universal views regarding the safeguarding of people and property. These views tend to reflect conservative and protectionist ideologies. For example, some people seem to think “I’ve got nothing to hide” when presented with arguments promoting a case for stronger privacy protections. Others seem to think data collection, when experienced online, promotes narcissism because websites and apps deliver personalized advertisements and messages seemingly characteristic of a person’s habits, beliefs, or values. Many of those with moderate to liberal positions remain aware of the surveillance state and express concern but continue on with their daily lives with few misgivings about the actors and algorithms that harvest their data. Others may make efforts to read privacy policies or terms of conditions/use statements but sometimes participate in surveilled apps and sites because the benefits outweigh the perceived risks (benefits such as family and friend connections, ease of access, and saving time). Realistically, we all, in some fashion, participate in the surveillance state that has been designed for our social and professional “betterment.” Each of these positions is a matter connected to privacy and surveillance.

While this collection does not counter each one of these views (some we sometimes hear our well-meaning students and colleagues express), we acknowledge these refrains because conversations about surveillance and privacy are inextricably bound to political beliefs and cultural values. Assuredly, most people do not outwardly have much to hide in that they are not
engaging in criminal activities, nor are they behind the plot of a worldwide revolution. Nevertheless, we agree with Snowden’s argument for leaking the massive troves of documents he collected while working with the NSA: we all deserve the right to (1) be made aware of our governments’ and institutions’ surveillance practices and (2) participate in making, democratically, decisions regarding the data-collection practices that include us, whether we know about them or not.

Privacy, in short, is a topic that matters within and outside the classroom because it is a subject that impacts each person’s life no matter their location. We offer this collection at a time when having conversations about privacy means contending with the dynamic complexities of living and working with ubiquitous surveillance. Rhetoricians from a variety of disciplines are well positioned to assess the surge of surveillance occurring offline and online each day. As a result, we hope scholars will be inspired by the chapters in this collection and focus their energies toward persuading industry leaders to reconsider the usefulness of massive data collection, as well as encouraging colleagues to question these practices.

We want to emphasize in our role as rhetoric and writing scholars that privacy matters precisely because everyone remains entrenched in a data-brokerage system that largely goes unchallenged or modified without active, collective resistance and protest. Without knowledge of surveillance functions in our everyday lives, we do not have the means to have a say in how this system appropriates our information. This collection serves as the first book in writing studies to openly call our attention to the importance of starting this conversation.

THREE THEMES EMERGE

In the planning of this collection, the two of us contemplated the scholarly conversations in which our participants were engaging and what specific topics of interest within writing studies their essays addressed. What emerged from our thinking encompassed questions about how surveillance and privacy
impact our teaching, material experiences, and cultural practices. We also noticed these wonderfully smart folks thought outside the walls of academia and looked to their communities. After talking and planning, we organized this book around three separate themes we confidentially feel serve as sites for needed inquiry: surveillance and the classroom, surveillance and the body, and surveillance and culture.

Each chapter highlights the theme of its section and speaks to a specific call for others to consider a particular issue of surveillance more critically. We see the themes of these sections as important to scholars within the rhetoric and writing discipline because we have come to know surveillance’s effects on our personal and professional lives. Surveillance practices within our classrooms and universities not only matter but impact our ability to teach and do research. Part 1 takes up some of those concerns with critical yet accessible commentary. As monitoring and data collection are built into the very digital infrastructures we use every day, the chapters in part 2 speak to how we may benefit from more active questioning of certain normalized technologies and how they impact our bodies. And last, part 3 provides commentary about what happens when surveillance intrudes on our ability to express ourselves both online and offline based on who we are.

While we see these themes as representative of conversations uniquely tailored to scholars in writing studies, we recognize their value within industry, other professional communities, and the public at large. Discussions about ethics and technology regularly abound on social media. Today, for instance, our Twitter feeds are full of academics’ comments on Safiya U. Noble’s book *Algorithms of Oppression*—arguments over whether algorithms are neutral or not (2018). Since neutrality is still a matter of question, our work must continue. And while Google programmers like James Damore can hold the opinion that women are biologically inferior or that facial-recognition software cannot account for dark-skinned faces, our work must continue. The ideologies behind the creation of our everyday technologies reflect the people who make them. Our lives, as rhetoricians, ask that we speak
to these injustices as we experience them. To that end, we offer this collection as one text in which this work continues. The sections and their corresponding chapters offered here are our way of speaking back to the injustices of our specific experiences with regard to surveillance and privacy.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

Section 1—“Surveillance and Classrooms”—takes a survey approach to integrating discussions of surveillance and privacy into undergraduate courses and administration of programs. The chapters in this section describe the concerns students, faculty, and administrators may share when working with technology that surveils or limits privacy. In chapter 1, Colleen Reilly outlines research-based assignments for courses that help students gain knowledge of surveillance in electronic spaces. The assignments in the chapter are based in part on research and tools developed by the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) and are designed to make digital surveillance visible. The projects help students understand their digital data trails and find ways to mask or limit how much data they share online. Next, Jenae Cohn, Norah Fahim, and John Peterson examine, in chapter 2, the collaborative potential of using Google Docs while analyzing the underlying power conditions of teacher surveillance of student activity in those spaces to suggest students can become sousveillers or self-surveillers. Rather than dismissing Google Docs use in the classroom because of surveillance concerns, Cohn, Fahim, and Peterson argue for involving students directly in the surveillance state because it is unavoidable, and such an activity helps students become aware of the surveillance apparatus of Google Docs. Last, Gavin P. Johnson continues the conversation in chapter 3 by discussing the impact data collection has within the university. Johnson argues that grades operate as a technology of surveillance intensified by contemporary neoliberal ideologies and digital infrastructures. By examining previous literature on assessment, evaluation, and big data analytics in writing studies research, he questions how students, teachers,
and program administrators surveil and are surveilled by the grades assigned in writing courses.

Section 2—“Surveillance and Bodies”—moves from classroom and program-based instruction into discussions about the material effects of frequently used technologies like fitness trackers and smartphone games. While the authors in this section do consider how these technologies may collide with instruction or with institutional initiatives, the purpose of this section is to address the underlying infrastructures that affect the body. Since surveillance and privacy are topics limited to a discipline or to instruction in higher education, we believe educators and researchers bear responsibility for critiquing the systems that we communicate within or, in effect, that write our lives and our bodies through data. In chapter 4, Dustin Edwards describes how a popular fitness application, MyWellness Cloud, used by his local YMCA, functions in a deep ecology of data brokers, business strategies and policies, proprietary algorithms, and material infrastructures. Edwards analyzes privacy policies and spatial infrastructures to attempt an unraveling of the circulatory activity of bodies in motion that produce data. Chapter 5 continues the conversation about fitness trackers and also integrates a discussion of Canvas, the learning-management system, to assess how big-data mining and academic-learning analytics impact students in different ways. Jason Tham and Ann Duin examine how Oral Roberts University required members of its student body to use fitness trackers. The action raised questions of student privacy. The last chapter in this section addresses privacy policies and ethical considerations. In chapter 6, Stephanie Vie and Jennifer Roth Miller consider how surveillance and privacy play out in social media and gaming spaces by examining Pokémon Go. Their case study offers compelling evidence for how written textual information from policy statements provides a means for surveillance of gamer activity.

The chapters in section 3—“Surveillance and Culture”—respond to a need for action globally on matters affecting communities and large segments of populations. In chapter 7, Christina Cedillo examines how surveillance re(inscribes) racial
vulnerability in online spaces through three high-profile cases in which academics have spoken out against racism on Twitter, leading to a troubling amount of harassment and public censure. Cedillo presents the experiences of Steven Salaita, Saida Grundy, and Daniel Brewster as case studies that reveal the logics of new racism and the consequences of writing and communicating online under a real-life identity. In chapter 8, Santos Ramos analyzes the rise of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within the context of mass surveillance to highlight the shifting dynamics of community organizing among migrant communities post-9/11. Ramos’s results show how Homeland Security substantiates a racially driven narrative about legality and how a protectionist state oppresses Latinx communities and Latinx cultural practices. As the closing chapter of section 3, Ramos’s piece offers ways to reread or examine the themes emerging from the book. Finally, Dânielle Nicole DeVoss closes the collection with thoughts on the significance of surveillance and privacy for writing studies scholarship and offers a number of questions for future research—questions we hope readers will take up as book-length and article-form projects.

We offer this book as our discipline’s first summative academic inquiry into the conversations surrounding surveillance and privacy within rhetoric and writing. As established surveillance studies scholar Mark Andrejevic posits in his forward to Feminist Surveillance Studies, “There is no neutral record keeping—all forms of data collection have imperatives built in—and the power of the work assembled here lies in disembedding and exposing these imperatives, the interests they serve, and the uses they enable” (2015, xii). The chapters in Feminist Surveillance Studies certainly do the powerful work Andrejevic says they do, and it is in this spirit and purpose that we seek to present our collection. The three sections of this book represent critical perspectives on the topics concerning data collection and often address how surveillance practices disproportionately affect people from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds. We had hoped to include chapters that consider surveillance’s effects on ability, gender, and sexual identity but
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We did not receive submissions focusing on these needed conversations. We look forward to scholars in the future speaking to them, as we know our collection serves as just a beginning of a vast site of research and intellectual inquiry.

With much enthusiasm, we present this collection to you all in the hopes that you find a spark of a question here and continue the work we are both so passionate about. We thank you for reading and engaging with this book.

NOTE
1. A nod to Simone Browne’s Twitter name and in support of her work in sociology.

REFERENCES


