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## HOW MOBILE PHONE SURVEILLANCE CONTRIBUTES TO DIGITAL INEQUALITIES FOR DISADVANTAGED URBAN RESIDENTS

Jan Fernback  
Temple University

Gwen Shaffer  
California State University Long Beach

### Background

Participation in the social world demands disclosure of personal information, and the increasing reliance on mobile devices compounds this reality. Americans routinely communicate through mobile apps such as Facebook, Instagram and Skype. Consumers skip the mall and, instead, make purchases on their smart phones. And more than one-third of all Internet searches originate on a mobile phone (Statista, 2013). Within each of these contexts, Americans willingly disclose—or inadvertently reveal—their political opinions, values and personal interests. And Americans living in disadvantaged urban communities often rely exclusively on mobile devices for accessing the Internet. This study explores the potential for the “digital imaginary” to obscure inequalities. It examines: in what way is social capital for the urban poor impacted by the tracking, storing and possible disclosure of their information? Because private information obtained through mobile surveillance is often used in discriminatory ways, what implications exist for managing digital inequalities?

Specifically, 60% of Hispanics and 43% of African-Americans are cell-mostly Internet users, compared with 27% of whites. These statistics reflect the fact that computer ownership among African Americans and Latinos lags behind computer ownership by whites. Additionally, nearly half of Internet users in households with an annual income below \$30,000 tend to use phones to go online—compared with 27% of Internet users in households with an annual income exceeding \$75,000 (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Communication theorists have drawn analogies between surveillance and the “panopticon” or “Big Brother,” where the state and corporations exert power and control over the masses through ubiquitous monitoring (Foucault, 1977; Gandy, 1993). When Edward Snowden leaked 200,000 classified NSA documents in June, many Americans expressed shock that the government may tap their cell phones. However, data profiling

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is nothing new for members of marginalized groups. Families who access the public benefits system must relinquish detailed personal and financial information, scan fingerprints, and submit to drug tests. New mobile apps purporting to make the assistance application process “easier” now supply agencies with even more electronic data. Immigrants living in Southern California are also familiar with federal surveillance. U.S. Customs & Border Protection operates “interceptor towers” that masquerade as cell phone towers. Placed along the U.S.-Mexico border, these devices capture voice and data transmissions from every mobile phone in the area (Rosenblum, 2014).

Our study will also encompass the impact of tracking by social media sites. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Foursquare, and Yelp are among phone apps that send the names, email addresses and potentially phone numbers from a device’s internal address book to the apps’ own servers. High rates of social media use among young African Americans makes them particularly vulnerable to privacy breaches. Forty percent of 18-29 year old African Americans who use the Internet say they tweet—12 percentage points higher compared to young whites on Twitter. About 38% of online adult African Americans and 34% of online adult Latinos use Instagram, compared to 21% of online adult whites (Pew Research Center, 2013). Finally, disadvantaged urban residents may be targets of corporate surveillance. Experian Marketing encourages retailers to consider mobile payments as “a tactic” for engaging African American shoppers. This strategy enables retailers to store credit card numbers and install “cookies”—pieces of code left on a browser that track shopping and Web surfing habits. Brick-and-mortar stores also monitor customers’ movements by following Wi-Fi signals from their smartphones. Combined with video surveillance, these stores collect demographic information (Clifford & Hardy, 2013). Our interviews will explore whether people living in marginalized communities perceive surveillance as discriminatory and how, if at all, this impacts their privacy practices and decision-making.

## **Significance**

While survey data collected by the Pew Research Center provide useful statistics about mobile technology habits, quantitative research lacks context and detail. By contrast, our study will provide comprehensive empirical evidence. Interviews are a crucial element of this project, enabling us to delve deeper into issues of interest and consider nuances. A qualitative approach will help us obtain a sense of informants’ lived experiences and humanize the impact of privacy breaches. Because qualitative research is, by definition, exploratory, we see an opportunity to define challenges researchers neglected to articulate previously.

## **Methods**

We plan to partner with non-profit privacy rights organizations in Philadelphia and Southern California to recruit subjects, to provide space for interviews, and to help disseminate project findings in the neighborhoods. Potential local partners include the California Public Interest Research Group and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights. In order to address issues of power, inequity and marginalization, we plan to take a “critical” approach to this research. Our data collection methods will include participant observation and interviews, allowing us to gain insights into our informants’

attitudes and concerns. Qualitative studies rely on inductive reasoning to interpret and derive meaning from data. Qualitative analysis involves synthesizing a portrait of a phenomenon; theorizing about how and why particular linkages and relationships exist; and re-contextualizing or developing new knowledge about these relationships and practices (Morse, 1994). By taking a “phenomenological approach,” we will gain an understanding of the crucial structures underlying our informants’ experiences with mobile phones. We plan to tie these experiences to the current (government and corporate) policy environment.

### **Anticipated findings**

We aim to produce a rich descriptive and interpretive account of the lives and values held by low-income, minority and immigrant mobile phone users. We will examine mobile phone surveillance within a broader context of actions (i.e. social media practices, Internet access), attitudes (i.e. toward the government, corporations, apps) and the symbolic meaning of information technologies. By taking a “critical” approach to our analysis, we seek to expose underlying problems and place them within the broader context of digital inequality. We will examine the inherent trade-offs between using devices capable of personalizing information, and the surveillance enabled by this data collection. We intend for our findings to inform policy recommendations for government regulators; suggest best practices for private/corporate entities that monitor and collect mobile phone data; and serve as the basis for a public information campaign meant to help minimize discriminatory practices in the networked sphere.

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