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a quotidian approach to surveillance studies
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Everyday Deficiencies of Police Surveillance:

A Quotidian Approach to Surveillance Studies

By David Sausdal

Abstract
It has become theoretical orthodoxy to point to and problematise a rise in surveillance. This article contributes to this debate. Following a still marginal yet budding number of studies that focus on the practical, quotidian level of surveillance systems, the article ethnographically examines the daily surveillance work of a number of Danish detectives. What is demonstrated is that whilst the Danish detectives openly acknowledged the need for further surveillance, they simultaneously often refrained from actually carrying out the surveillance practices needed. The article describes why that is. In doing so, it serves as a reminder of how the everyday reality of surveillance work may not necessarily be as effective as much scholarship on the matter may lead us to believe. Furthermore, it shows how these given Danish surveillance actors not only did not follow surveillance policies, they sometimes even actively opposed them. Contrary to the widespread idea that surveillance actors such as the police automatically appreciate new Orwellian opportunities, the Danish detectives commonly saw them as a hindrance to what they truly appreciated about their work. To them, an increase in police surveillance often meant a decrease in job satisfaction.

Keywords
Policing, globalisation, cross-border crime, surveillance, technology, resistance, practice & everyday life.

Introduction

Trust me! I know we need to work more closely together with the National Police, Europol etc. and, hell, even the local post office if we’re to improve our chances of tracking down these cross-border criminals. And, yes, I know that we need to be better at using computers

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and sharing the info we gather. It’s definitely the way to go in the battle against the problems of globalisation. We know that. We need new technologies; something that allows us to better track and identify who and where the suspects are. But ... I must also admit that when it comes to us actually developing and doing all this new and needed surveillance work, it quickly becomes a different story...

- Detective Christensen, Danish Police

This quote from a highly trained Danish police detective goes to the heart of this article’s interest. In it, the detective speaks of well-known worldwide developments in police surveillance. However, he also hints at ‘a different story’ – a story about how a number of Danish detectives acknowledge the need for an increase in surveillance, yet, paradoxically, also a story about how they often refrain from properly participating in these developments.

Speaking of worldwide developments in surveillance, much scholarship has noted how contemporary means of surveillance are becoming increasingly ubiquitous (Aas et al., 2008; Ericson and Haggerty, 2006; Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012; Coleman and Mc Cahill, 2010; Gill, 2018; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Haggerty et al., 2011; Kroener and Neyland, 2012; Lyon, 1994; Mathiesen, 2013; Schinkel, 2011; Simon, 2002). Albeit in different ways, leading scholars here point to how Orwellian possibilities for monitoring the population have been proliferating in the age of globalisation, often singling out an increase in policing collaborations both across international borders and institutional boundaries yet also, and perhaps more significantly, pointing to the expanding implementation and cross-border integration of various surveillance and information technologies.
While Danish politicians and the Danish Police’s management have indeed, much like their colleagues in other countries, been outspoken in calling for an increase in surveillance, my recent ethnographic field study of two Danish police task forces showed me something else. Here, we may again return to the opening quote by Detective Christensen. Being part of Task Force Pickpocketing (TFP), tasked with investigating the increasing amount of organised pickpocketing committed by foreign nationals in Denmark, Detective Christensen and his colleagues were constantly reminded by management of ‘the importance of collaborating with international partners and to check and update computer databases!’. They were reminded of this because such cross-border collaboration and sharing of criminal intelligence was, as management would further stress,

*the only way of making sure that we can keep an eye on and catch these cross-border criminals. If we don’t extend our means of following them across borders, it’s all too easy for these foreigners to escape us in this global day and age.*

Similar words were said to the detectives working at the other special investigations unit, Task Force Burglary (TFB), whose work I was also allowed to observe. At TFB, cross-border criminals were also among their main suspects when it came to the high numbers of burglaries committed in Denmark and, as such, cooperation with international policing partners and the use of information technologies were also seen as imperative. As the TFB management tellingly said to me on one of the first days I spent observing TFB’s work, ‘we need ways of shadowing these cross-border criminals that are as itinerant as they are.’ As such, it wasn’t a big surprise to hear Detective Christensen talking about the importance of working ‘more closely together with the National Police, Europol [and] be better at using computers and sharing the info we gather’. What was
surprising, however, was how the detectives in their daily work often didn’t follow suit. The detectives would openly mirror politicians’ and police management calls for an increase in police surveillance yet, when push came to shove, they would often avoid answering these calls.

Bearing this paradox in mind, the simple question that this article explores is ‘why is that?’ What made the Danish detectives echo the emphasis on making surveillance more ubiquitous only then to circumvent doing so in practice? In the following pages, different examples of why that is are offered. Making up the article’s foremost conclusion, these examples serve as an important reminder that the everyday reality of surveillance work may not necessarily be as efficient as much leading scholarship on the matter may lead us to believe. In noting this, the article adds to the similar findings of the still marginal yet budding number of qualitative studies of ‘the quotidian [or] even banal character of surveillant practices’ (Friesen et al 2012:73). – studies which highlight how the everyday reality of surveillance work does not necessarily match policy statements. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how these particular Danish surveillance actors not only did not follow surveillance policies, but sometimes even actively opposed them. Contrary to the widespread idea that surveillance actors such as the police automatically appreciate new Orwellian opportunities, the Danish detectives commonly saw them as a hindrance to what they truly appreciated about their work.

Empirical Background and Methodological Approach

The empirical material and analyses presented in this article stem from an extensive ethnographic field study which I carried out in and around 2015 as part of my PhD studies (Author 2018a, 2018b). For more than 900 hours, I was allowed to observe the daily work of the two aforementioned Danish police task forces, Task Force Burglary (TFB) and Task Force
Pickpocketing (TFP). At TFB, around twenty highly qualified detectives had been chosen to investigate a dramatic increase in burglaries in Denmark. The detectives were between 30 and 65 years of age, with most being between 35 and 50. They were mostly male but included four female officers and, besides being singled out as particularly skilful detectives, they were in general representative of the average (Danish) police demographic. The same can be said about the TFP, although they were all male and on average slightly younger than their TFB colleagues. Both task forces were located in the greater metropolitan area of Copenhagen. Although differing in what they investigated (TFB mandated with investigating organised crimes of burglary and TFP organised crimes of pickpocketing), the two task forces’ police work had similar emphases as they both focused on ‘cross-border crime’. In other words they focused on types of criminality carried out by similar suspects, namely an increasing number of criminal foreign nationals travelling to Denmark. Furthermore, as already revealed in the article’s introductory quote, another common denominator between the two task forces was the fact that developments in police surveillance were seen as particularly indispensable in the battle against cross-border crime. This included both an increasing use of various surveillance technologies and practices to track these itinerant criminal suspects as well as closer practical and informational collaboration between the task forces’ detectives and other national and international policing partners.

In my day-to-day observations of the task forces, I was thus given the rare chance of witnessing first-hand their daily surveillance and wider investigational routines, be it in the form of street-level stake-outs; wiretaps; CCTV; other forms of audio, video or GPS surveillance; overt but mostly covert house searches; as well as how the detectives managed and distributed the copious amount of information they were gathering and receiving on given criminal suspects. It was through this method of ‘participant observation’ that I gradually acquired an understanding of
what for example Van Maanen has referred to as ‘the reality of police work’ (1973: 5), denoting how participant observation more than other methods allows the researcher ‘to gain insight into the police environment, [by] penetrat[ing] the official smokescreen’ (ibid). In more specific relation to this particular article’s focus, observing the task forces’ working day allowed me to notice the differences between the smokescreen of surveillance policies and the actualities of everyday practices. Or as Monahan has described it, observing the detectives’ working day gave me the chance to make ‘grounded meanings … the primary units of analysis’, allowing for the possibility of going beyond police discourse to ‘challenge current hegemonic organizing frames’ (2011: 503).

**Theoretical Framework: A quotidian approach to surveillance**

Social control has become more specialized and technical and, in many ways, more penetrating and intrusive … There is the danger of an almost imperceptible surveillance creep (Marx, 1988: 2).

Thus wrote Gary Marx in his influential book on undercover police surveillance published in the late 1980s, speaking of what he believed to be an upcoming ‘cult of surveillance’ (ibid). Throughout the thirty years since his work was published, Marx’s warning has been continuously echoed in both police and surveillance research as well as in wider criminological studies. Although studies of contemporary surveillance admittedly differ in both scope and substance, they remain united in arguing that present-day (police) surveillance and control has dramatically and problematically increased. And although applying different custodian concepts to describe and analyse worldwide surveillance and control developments, e.g. ‘panopticon’ (Simon, 2002), ‘ban-opticon’ (Bigo, 2008), ‘prepression’ (Schinkel, 2011), ‘assemblage’ (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000),
‘network’ (Jones and Newburn, 2006), ‘web’ (Brodeur, 2010), or, more to the point, ‘surveillance society’ (Lyon, 1994; Mathiesen, 2013), it is fair to conclude that they all tell a story of governmental surveillance having become both more pervasive and intrusive, inescapable and often inequitable.

Most often, this story entails two specific developments. First, scholars point to how the world has, in practice, witnessed a growth in public and private policing collaborations across both international borders and institutional boundaries. Policing actors are in other words less sectorial than they used to be. For example, different national police forces now increasingly cooperate either bilaterally or via international institutions. Furthermore, police forces increasingly partner with other relevant institutions and organisations, for instance seeking out illegal immigrants via collaborations with Customs or Immigration Departments as well various private and civic actors (Aliverti, 2013; Weber, 2013). In this way, by extending their practical reach by proxy, the police and their surveillance and control mechanisms become more wide-reaching.

Secondly, another and perhaps greater reason why present-day surveillance has become more ubiquitous is the growing expansion and integration of various surveillance and information technologies, including the means of tracking people via, for example, audio or video surveillance, recorded biometrics or via the digital footprints we leave behind when using various forms of electronic devices. Such (both overtly and covertly) obtained intelligence then becomes computerised data which is subsequently shared with relevant policing partners, thereby bettering the police’s chances of surveilling otherwise itinerant criminal suspects in this globalised world. Hence, to reuse Haggerty and Ericson’s conclusion from their seminal text, ‘The Surveillant Assemblage’, contemporary surveillance can be said to be ‘driven by the desire to bring systems together, to combine practices and technologies and integrate them into a larger whole’ (2000:
It is surely with an apprehensive look towards these Orwellian developments that Haggerty, Wilson and Smith recently declared that

Western societies appear to be in the midst of a world historical transformation in terms of the amount and intensity of surveillance. This is an overdetermined development, one that is obviously related to the rise of new information technologies and visualizing devices … As we look to the future it is easy to anticipate that the role of surveillance in crime control is only apt to increas[e]. (Haggerty et al., 2011: 235-236)

In sum, according to these scholarly predictions about surveillance, the future, if the future is not already here, is one where we can expect to be increasingly if not constantly monitored – be it in person or as a ‘data double’ (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000).

A Quotidian Approach: Surveillance as Cultural Practice

The above-mentioned studies have certainly been integral to our understanding of the drastic and often discriminating developments in surveillance practices and technologies. Although studies differ and even at times disagree as to how to conceptualise the developments, they all succeed in bringing critical attention to the sometimes surreptitious, as Marx put it, ‘surveillance creep’ which politicians have ungrudgingly endorsed and which policing actors are progressively employing.

That said, this article is not invested in directly debating the otherwise both important and insightful distinctions drawn by these studies. Instead, the aim is to follow the few yet thought-provoking studies of what Monahan for example has described as studies of ‘surveillance as cultural practice’ (2011). As he explains it,
rather than analyzing surveillance technologies, for instance, as exogenous tools that are mobilized by actors to deal with perceived problems or needs, studying surveillance as cultural practice is an approach more likely to try to comprehend people’s experiences of and engagement with surveillance on their own terms, stressing the production of emic over etic forms of knowledge [and thereby] offering vital insights to surveillance. (Monahan 2011:496)

Here, Monahan foregrounds an approach to the study of (police) surveillance which goes beneath the doctrines of political and police discourses on surveillance in order to examine how surveillance is actually practised and perceived by those tasked with developing it. In short, he promotes a bottom-up rather than top-down approach. The question here then becomes a matter of how surveillance actors actually ‘combine practices and technologies and integrate them into a larger whole’, to reuse Haggerty and Ericson’s words.

This bottom-up and habitually ethnographic interest in day-to-day surveillance work is still marginal compared to the aforementioned means of analysis, which focus on the broader brush strokes of surveillance policies and discourses. That said, more bottom-up studies have come to the fore in recent years, including studies of both police actors (Franko and Gundhus, 2015; Fyfe et al., 2017; Kruger and Haggerty, 2006; Loftus et al., 2015; Manning, 2008; Sheptycki, 2004) and, for instance, CCTV operators (McCahill and Norris, 1999; Smith, 2009; Wilson and Sutton, 2003). On an even more encompassing level, Schuilenburg has recently published an excellent summarising treatise on the matter in which he outlines what he terms the daily ‘patchwork’ of the contemporary securitisation of society (2017). By using the concept of patchwork, Schuilenburg
exactly aims at highlighting how panoptic surveillance exists not as a detached and stable *a priori* entity; instead present-day surveillance and securitisation is enacted or, indeed, patched together through daily, routinised social interactions.

Serving as an empirical supplement and sometimes an analytical correction to prevalent readings, these bottom-up studies thus highlight how it is imperative not to automatically confuse discourse with daily life or policy with practice. In short, they illustrate the importance of ethnographically examining how surveillance practitioners actually experience their work – a scientific endeavour increasingly important as, in Friesen et al’s words, a ‘response to the increasingly quotidian, even banal character of surveillant practices in postindustrial societies’ (2012: 73).

**Some suggestive problems in surveillance practices**

The aforementioned studies of surveillance as cultural practice, focusing on the quotidian rather than the doctrinal, make up this article’s theoretical framework. Moreover, they provide not only a guiding framework but also, for this article, a few particularly interesting analytical insights.

For example, in a recent study of Frontex (2015), Franko and Gundhus have explored the everyday practices of the expanding means of police surveillance. In particular, they explored the daily effects of an increasing international police cooperation by interviewing Norwegian police officers engaged at Frontex. While Frontex is an apparent instantiation of how policing is expanding across the borders of the nation-state (both in practice and digitally via the European Border Surveillance System), Franko and Gundhus were simultaneously made aware of the everyday complications of such cross-border cooperation. When the Norwegian officers were interviewed, they did indeed speak of the need for such increasing international collaboration.
However, they also continuously pointed to a range of factors that complicated this cooperation. The Norwegian officers, for example, spoke of how they simply found it difficult to communicate with other Frontex officers as they didn’t necessarily speak a mutual language (ibid: 1). Furthermore, the Norwegian officers also spoke of problematic cultural differences, both in terms of how officers from different countries went about behaving professionally as well as personally, and of how these differences frequently led to disagreements (ibid).

Additionally, Franko and Gundhus point to another particularly important issue that cross-border police cooperation entails, namely the issue of ‘police (dis)trust’. As they remind us, research has consistently shown that police cultures across the world are characterised by in-group trust and out-group distrust (ibid). In other words, it is part and parcel of police culture to approach people with a certain amount of suspicion if the people in question are not already well-known to them. This, ironically, also includes international colleagues. It is for this reason that Lemieux has argued that the ‘cultural heterogeneity inherent in international cooperation introduces the potential to aggravate the ever-present lack of trust in police subcultures’ (2013: 4). In short, what Franko and Gundhus’s study shows us is that, while a well-functioning cooperation between international policing partners is integral to a spread of police surveillance, it is continuously troubled by various linguistic and cultural problems – with one of these paradoxically being located at the heart of police culture itself, i.e. that police officers tend to treat people, including international colleagues not known to them personally, with suspicion (see also Ross, 2004).

While Franko and Gundhus primarily focus their study on the spread of police cooperation, other studies have focused on how traditional police work is being affected by the growing implementation of information and other investigational surveillance technologies (Kruger and Haggerty, 2006; Loftus et al., 2015; Manning, 2008; Sheptycki, 2004). Here research has pointed
to how there indeed is an evident push towards the implementation of technologies in order to better combat developments in crime and other global risks. Still, as with the aforementioned findings, research has also found that there are considerable problems when it comes to everyday practices. For example, police officers often find that the epistemology of information technologies differs problematically from their usual way of thinking. As Gundhus explains, labelling the epistemology based on information technologies ‘knowledge-based policing’:

knowledge-based policing in practice promotes a concept of knowledge that indirectly threatens the police officers’ traditional experience-based knowledge and professional discretion … Knowledge-based policing emphasizes a logic based on evaluation of codified, standardized information-systems, rather than an experience-based, action-oriented, and collegial logic. (Gundhus 2012: 178)

In this way, police scepticism towards knowledge based on information technology echoes the same scepticism found amongst police officers in relation to collaborating with more-or-less unknown colleagues: police officers simply tend to trust and prefer that which emanates from areas where they are personally involved.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that it is not only normative or cultural preferences of this kind that cause problems in relation to the use of technology. As Sheptycki argues, there are inherent ‘pathologies in police intelligence systems’ (2004). In general, these pathologies are due to the hierarchical nature of police organisations and the tendency for knowledge to be generated, and thus also biased, in relation to the interest at hand. Put differently, while the success of information technologies as an efficient surveillance tool is dependent on the horizontal extension
of information, police organisations tend to funnel information vertically up or down their hierarchical structures, generating what Sheptycki calls ‘information silos’ (ibid:320). Knowledge becomes essentialised rather than extensive and surveillance thus risks becoming haphazard rather than holistic (see also Manning 2008). Adding to the problem, police officers tend to have a selective approach to knowledge generation. If you investigate murders, for example, you will find certain information to be of interest. If you investigate property crime, other information might be of greater interest.

In sum, what is suggested by the limited but edifying number of existing studies that focus on the quotidian level of contemporary police surveillance systems, looking at both practical and technological means of police collaboration, is that there is a range of everyday problems. By demonstrating this, these studies direct our attention to the importance of going beyond, or perhaps beneath, the policy level of surveillance. Here, a different reality based on various vocational and subjective partialities interacts and sometimes even interferes. As I will now illustrate, this was also the case among a group of Danish detectives.

Examples of Danish Detectives’ Resistance to Surveillance

In 2010, the Chief of the Copenhagen Police proclaimed that Danish citizens were to ‘expect more surveillance in the future’. His statement has subsequently been echoed by many Danish politicians and police representatives. For example, the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Rasmussen, recently said that even though ‘we don’t want to live in a surveillance society’, there should be a discussion of how ‘we can extend the space of surveillance’ in order to ‘keep a keen eye on some of the forces in our society that constitute a risk’. It was therefore with great satisfaction that Police Commissioner Svend Larsen in February 2017 was able to warn criminals and reassure worried
citizens by declaring that the police had acquired a new ‘super weapon’. This super weapon, which was also – and has been since – termed both a ‘revolution’ and ‘a quantum leap towards a modernised Police’, was a new pre-crime computer system named ‘Polintel’ with the ability to store, cross-reference, share and use big data and thereby both solve crime by analysing existing data and prevent future crime by predicting where offences might occur.

Moreover, as was mentioned at the beginning of this article, it was not only the politicians and police management who thought in this way. The view that police collaboration of a both practical and technological kind constitutes a necessary part of future police work was repeatedly echoed among the frontline officers whom I spent time with during my study. For example, when I asked Detective Madsen how he viewed the future of police work during one of my first fieldwork days at TFP, he told me the following:

_In this new global world, we need more global means of policing. When crime and criminals move more, then we also need to be able to do that. That’s why we need to have systems that can trace such movements. If we don’t develop new methods, we’ll be left behind._

Having heard both the Danish police management and Danish frontline officers routinely expressing their fear of being left behind and, thus, their desire for a, to paraphrase the police commissioner, ‘future of surveillance’, I was therefore rather baffled when the detectives’ daily activities did not work towards this future but at times even seemed to go against it. Indeed, throughout my field study I frequently observed that detectives would speak of the importance of developing panoptic policing capabilities only to subsequently act in ways that contradicted their own words.
As I experienced it, the reasons for this gap between the panoptic ideal and practical everyday considerations were many and ranged from the more openly explicit to the unconscious and rather banal. Bearing this in mind, in the next section I aim to provide a number of ethnographic examples of some of the main reasons why the Danish detectives didn’t easily appreciate these policing and surveillance developments. Some examples have been left out, but I believe that the following will be sufficiently convincing to persuade the reader of their importance. Specifically, inspired by the aforementioned research, I have divided the ethnographic examples into three explanatory categories. These are ‘cultural problems’, ‘technological problems’ and ‘private problems’ – problems that all stemmed from workday considerations rather than doctrinaire demands or desires.

**Cultural Problems**

What I refer to as the ‘cultural problems’ of police surveillance are largely related to the issues mentioned earlier when discussing the problematic cultural aspects of international police cooperation. These problems relate to how both international police cooperation and information technologies run the risk of igniting the inherent distrust of police officers towards people and phenomena that they lack substantial personal experience of, be it foreign colleagues or “foreign” data on a computer screen.

The fact that proximity and personal experience were preferred over the perceived detachment of information technologies and international cooperation was made clear to me when I, as part of my PhD study, was given the opportunity to visit the Danish representation at Europol in The Hague, also known as ‘The Danish Desk’. The Danish Desk consisted of a group of Danish police officers representing Denmark, who acted as the link between the Danish Police and the
other Europol members. It was during my very first exchange of words with one of the Danish Europol officers, Officer Poulsen, that I was told that one of the biggest challenges to functional international police cooperation was what he called ‘the cousin police’.

*The Cousin Police*

*Let me tell you, the problem when it comes to securing a well-functioning international police cooperation is that policing itself is based on suspicion if not downright distrust. You only trust that which you have experienced first-hand yourself or the people you’ve met. We call this ‘the cousin police’. You know, you don’t really trust the stranger on the phone even though he might also be police.*

The problems described by the Europol officer in relation to what he termed ‘the cousin police’, and the major hindrance these placed in the way of police cooperation, resonated well with the observations I had made during my time at TFB and TFP. It was apparent that the TFP and TFB detectives often reacted with hesitancy towards both information technologies and collaborations with policing partners who were not experienced as being part of their immediate working day. Below I present telling examples of, first, the detectives’ hesitancy towards computer-based intelligence and then, secondly, of their unwillingness to work with more-or-less unfamiliar colleagues.

*The cousin police: information technologies*
You just don’t readily believe some numbers you see on the screen. Nor do you simply buy everything that’s written that you haven’t yourself had a chance to double-check. You always treat such information with caution.

Reading a report from the National Police, this was one of the conclusions drawn by TFB Detective Andersen. She was venting her frustration to me, as she had spent most of the day going through the report. The TFB management had ordered her to read it, but according to her, she was ‘not really getting anything out of it besides a headache’. As she told me, the report outlined current developments in serious organised crime. ‘It’s not that we don’t understand the value of these things, but we often experience a disconnect between the practical reality and these general illustrations’, she continued. The other detectives in the office agreed. In general, they weren’t easily swayed by the increasing amount of digital intelligence they were receiving. The following examples provide further evidence that this was the case:

For a long time, the detectives at TFB had been complaining about the lack of ‘good intelligence’ as they put it. Then suddenly, Detective Jensen received an email from Europol. The email, as I was shown, contained intelligence about a suspected Romanian burglar on his way to Denmark. It contained a name, photo and a scanty description of the burglar’s MO. ‘This could be what we’ve been waiting for’, Detective Jensen said, whilst explaining to the others what he had received. However, neither Pedersen nor Jensen appeared to do much more than agree that it ‘could be’ what they had been waiting for.

Later, after lunch, I asked Detective Jensen what they planned to do. ‘You seemed pretty thrilled about the Europol intel you got earlier...?’ I said, in an inquisitive tone.
‘Hmm... yeah ... there’s some decent intel here ... but then again ... here’s the thing; where should we start? I often feel like this when we receive intel from Europol’, Detective Jensen concluded whilst looking at the picture of the suspect. ‘When you haven’t yourself got any real experience of these people, like who they are and how they work, but only this scarce, generalised info, it becomes hard to work with. It’s like a bone without any flesh on it.’

Detective Jensen’s hesitation ended up leading him and his colleagues to conclude that their resources were better used elsewhere. And in my experience, even though the detectives were yearning for good intelligence, they often had a hard time getting themselves to react to intelligence received from external policing partners since they experienced this intelligence as being too far removed from their own daily experience. ‘We also call this the snowball-method – or the snowball-problem’, I was later told by Detective Pedersen:

There is definitely a tendency in police work to simply work from case to case, using one case as the starting point for the next. So, if potentially good but unknown intelligence comes along, detectives will be a bit apprehensive about taking it up. Maybe that’s stupid but it’s the truth.

The cousin police: police cooperation

The detectives not only had what they would also sometimes call ‘a healthy scepticism’ towards intelligence that they themselves had not been involved in producing. Their scepticism also included potential colleagues whom they hadn’t had the chance to work with before. One way of appreciating this is to recount what the detectives answered when I asked them if they knew the
names of relevant colleagues who worked with cross-border crime issues at the national level and at Europol, and, if so, how many? During my fieldwork, I had interviewed these international colleagues and – bearing in mind what Europol Officer Poulsen had told me – the two things that I had consistently been told were that further cooperation was necessary but also that the parties involved had limited contacts with each other. The local level, such as TFB and TFP, tended to work largely independently of the national and European levels and vice versa. Thus, in asking the detectives about whom they knew, I expected them to be unable to provide many names. And sure enough, one detective was able to give me the names of two colleagues, another detective one name, but most were unable to recall a single name when it came to their (inter)national colleagues. The detectives uniformly explained this (away) by saying that ‘Yeah, we should be better at working together. Tracking cross-border criminals becomes difficult if we don’t. Yet, we honestly never hear from them. And when we ask them for help, it often turns out to be unproductive.’ While there might be some truth to this, what was curious about this statement was that the officers at both the National Police and Europol said the exact same thing when I asked them why they didn’t work more closely with one another.

Thus, while a lack of coordination and productiveness might explain some of the noted hesitancy towards collaboration, it cannot explain it in full. Here, we once again return to the police’s vocational preference for what and whom they already know. I saw one evocative example of this when I was at TFB. TFB was running a large-scale investigation into a suspected Romanian criminal group. Due to the cross-border nature of the investigation, which in this case took the form of involving several people living in Romania, TFB had established contact with Europol via the Danish National Police, to seek help from Romanian authorities. During my stay at TFB I frequently heard the TFB management and its detectives talk about the importance of securing
assistance from the Romanian authorities. Meanwhile, I also overheard a constant scepticism about the possibility of such a collaboration. The general feeling at TFB was that ‘it would be awesome for the case but we’re afraid that our efforts will be futile. To be honest, I’m quite doubtful when it comes to the Romanian authorities’, as one officer from the TFB management put it. On another occasion, he underlined his scepticism by reminding his colleagues that:

*We shouldn’t get our hopes up. It’s not the most well-run country down there. Corruption and stuff, right? And then there’s the question of why they should want to help us... I mean, is it really in the Romanian authorities’ best interest to help us catch Romanians?*

Indeed, statements like ‘they probably don’t want to help’ were common.

The TFB wariness may be viewed as the perfect example of the general distrust they had of policing partners whom they didn’t personally know. As TFP Detective Madsen explained to me, describing why he did not reach out more often to Europol or the National Police despite the fact that he recognised the importance of building up these relationships:

*I don’t really know these guys. Maybe if I’d worked with them before I’d contact them more. But when you don’t know them it feels a bit weird. You don’t know what to expect. It feels a bit like you’re losing control of the situation ... So, instead, we often just reach out to people we already know. And if we don’t know anyone, it kind of ends there to be honest...*

*The Police Nose*
This brings us to the next, and related, ‘cultural problem’. This problem is that of ‘the police nose’. Stated briefly, this emic concept denotes the way in which the detectives’ predilection for knowledge that has been personally embodied rather than technologically disseminated is not merely a preference but also linked to how police assess their professional worth. Here is an example:

*I’m sitting in the foyer of one of Copenhagen’s larger hotels with Detective Larsen. We are undercover, looking for ‘breakfast thieves’ who steal hotel guests’ bags whilst the guests are enjoying the breakfast buffet. The TFP detectives have told me that it is difficult to know exactly where these breakfast thieves will be, thieves who are, I’m told, most often from Chile. ‘How do you know where to look for them?’ I ask Detective Larsen. Detective Larsen doesn’t take much time thinking about my question as he instantly points to his nose. ‘This. That’s how. You know because of the experience you get from having done this for a long time. ‘But’, I ask in a slightly critical tone, ‘Wouldn’t you be able to know better if you did some sort of analysis of the data you have?’ ‘Nah…’ he replies, ‘These criminals don’t follow a specific route. Like, the only thing we know is that they travel from Chile to Denmark somewhere during summertime. And then we know that if they were here yesterday, then they’re probably not coming here today. ‘But’, he says, pausing for a second, ‘then again, because it’s so obvious maybe it’s actually the smart thing to do, right? So, the only thing we can do is to follow this [pointing to his nose again].’* 

Pointing to their noses, or in other ways referring to having a well-developed, embodied sense of where criminals might be, was a normal way for both the TFB and TFP detectives to explain how
they worked. It was also a habitual way of explaining the limitations of the technologies and wider intelligence that were otherwise available to them when going on surveillance stake-outs. They would frequently receive intelligence analyses from Europol, the National Police or from their own district, in which crime patterns were described. The detectives would even themselves speak of how they at times even longed for ‘good analyses that can optimise our surveillances and investigations’. However, when they received such analyses, the normal thing for them to do was to only briefly skim them, if they looked at them at all, and then ignore them.

‘Shouldn’t we get the Department of Analytics to look at these Polish pickpockets?’ the TFP management ask the detectives. ‘Sure! If they can put something together about who the Poles work with, their MO etc., that’d be amazing’, Detective Larsen answers.

About two weeks later, Detective Larsen receives the requested analysis. He prints out a copy to read and share with the other detectives. He comes back from the printer quickly flipping through the pages. He looks at it some more and then he puts it to the side. None of the other detectives ask for it. Surprised by his lack of enthusiasm, remembering how keen they had all been on getting such a report, I ask him what he thought of it. ‘Hmm… first of all, we got it a bit late. Secondly, it just outlines how some of our suspects might be connected, but it’s really not that different from what we already know. So… I can’t see how this helps us. The other detectives concur. The report is then placed on top of another stack of papers on the window shelf to collect dust with other documents that are apparently deemed unfit for actual police work.
Were the detectives right in their reading of this report, and much other intelligence they received, as being practically useless? It seems fair to note that a report that is not received until two weeks after criminal activities have been detected – criminal activities which involve suspects swiftly leaving the country – is unusable and that the reports thereby often fell short in terms of what the detectives needed. However, the detectives’ reluctance to use intelligence analyses and other surveillance reports went beyond such explanations.

This was also known to one of the primary producers of such reports, a detective working at the National Police’s Centre of Investigations, Detective Gustavsen, whom I interviewed. He and the team of which he was part were working to collect intelligence on cross-border crime at a national and international level. In relation to this, they had written a small and, according to Gustavsen, accessible pamphlet on what Danish officers should do when they encountered suspected cross-border criminals. The pamphlet included what information to acquire in order to ensure that the police had accurate and useful data on the matter. Among other things, this included descriptions of how to read a Romanian ID card to ensure that police officers didn’t write down the suspect’s last name as his/her first name or vice versa:

> Making that mistake is common. And if they make a mistake, we won’t be able to recognise the person in our systems the next time we meet him.... Seriously, this pamphlet could be understood by your grandma. I’ve been on a tour around the country, telling officers how important it is that our data are generated correctly. But... yeah ... I know I’ve done it in vain. They’re stuck in their ways.
Hearing this explanation from the National Police, the detectives’ reluctance to positively engage with intelligence and intelligence gathering suddenly made more sense. Their reluctance wasn’t purely based on whether or not the reports were actually useful. It also had something to do with how the reports clashed with ‘their ways’ – ways that they were stuck in for some reason, or rather, as I would argue, that they consciously chose to stick to.

As Punch, amongst others, has noted, when describing what the police recognise as ‘a nice piece of work’, the police often invoke bodily concepts such as ‘a ‘feeling’ or a ‘nose’ for the unusual or suspicious’ (1979: 46). In Denmark, the former Head of National Murder Investigations, HJ Bonnichsen, confirms this in his book on police investigation and interrogation methods, where he describes how murder detectives refer to having ‘a nose for such things’ (2012). However, as Gundhus has demonstrated in her study of how Norwegian police officers have reacted to the increasing use of information technologies, these technologies at times clash with normal police perceptions of what constitutes a ‘nice piece of work’ or ‘real police work’ (2012). Police officers, she explains, are used to work using ‘traditional experience-based knowledge and professional discretion’, whereas ‘a logic based on evaluation of codified, standardized information-systems’ is not only different from their normal vocational practice but threatens to undermine the individual police officer’s feeling of professional worth (Gundhus 2012:178). This is closely related to Smith’s argument, based on his study of CCTV operators, that information technologies might ‘empower the watcher’ whilst simultaneously ‘disempowering the worker’ (2009). As Smith cleverly notes, though surveillance technology may grant practitioners a bigger perspective, there is a risk that this will also streamline and thus simplify the very practical engagements which many practitioners find to be specifically meaningful.
In short, panoptic means of increased monitoring, such as intelligence reports, are not necessarily on a par with workaday notions about what constitutes good and gratifying police work (Author 2018a, 2018b). Stated differently, when officers feel that they have less discretion as a result of the mechanical nature of information technologies, and that their police nose is being made somewhat obsolete, they become sceptical. Pointing to their noses or refusing to read a pamphlet should therefore not only be read as a simple conservative preference on the part of some police officers who revel in and romanticise the past. Nor should it only be understood as a simple scepticism towards computerised data. It should also be understood as a manifestation of a general apprehensiveness towards the way in which new developments in policing and surveillance might negatively affect what detectives understand as being at the heart of their profession, i.e. individual(ised) intelligence and personal sensibility rather than electronic intelligence and directorial strictures.

**Technological Problems**

Another everyday hindrance to surveillance practices which I observed was of a more technological kind. In general, the detectives exhibited a dual appreciation of the various information technologies with which their working day was increasingly being filled. They were outspokenly excited about the use and promise of new surveillance technologies or new data programs, for example, whilst at the same time frequently admitting that they had a hard time both operating them and truly understanding what they were ‘actually good for’. In this section of the article, I will focus on the reasons for the latter whilst acknowledging that these technologies were certainly also used and appreciated by the detectives.
Technological Overload

- **KR** - The national crime registry, POLSAS – The police’s case management system
- **PED** - The police’s investigation database
- **FR** – The national population registry
- **CRM** – The national motor vehicle database
- **POLMAPLITE** – A search engine which combines POLSAS with geographical maps and graphs
- The informant registry
- **TARGET360** – a surveillance system
- The firearms registry

‘Those are the most relevant ones. But there are many others. And new ones are being developed all the time’, TFB Detective Jensen told me when I asked him to list the computer systems they were supposed to be using on a regular basis. ‘But’, Detective Jensen revealed, ‘most days we only use a couple of them.’

As he took the time to go through all the different systems, I was given an immediate understanding of the challenges posed by the existence of such a large number of systems. To a novice it felt overwhelming. Of course, using the systems was part of the detectives’ job, meaning that one would expect them to have a better understanding of them. Even though they were not themselves novices, however, it was obvious that the sheer number and differences between systems also overwhelmed them. This was what sometimes made them ‘rely on the old systems that we do know’, as they themselves said – one of these systems being the KR-registry (i.e. the national crime registry), which was developed for the 1980s’ MS-DOS operating system.
The quantity and constant introduction of new systems was no doubt also why the detectives were not easily persuaded when management encouraged them to use a new intelligence computer program named POLKON. Here, a computer screen pop-up window designed in the form of a slot machine sought to playfully encourage the detectives to use this new-fangled intelligence and investigation system if they, as the pop-up window said, ‘wanted to catch an internationally wanted criminal!’.

However, although I was studying the work of detectives whose job was precisely to catch international criminals, I rarely if ever experienced them using this system, as is revealed by the absence of the system from Detective Jensen’s list. This also means that one should remain somewhat sceptical of the Danish Police Commissioner’s previously mentioned prediction that yet another computer program, Polintel, is going to become an investigative ‘revolution’ or a form of ‘super weapon’. It certainly seems unlikely if its primary users, Danish police detectives, don’t really use it.

Indeed, the hindrance produced by an overload of computer systems – in relation to getting officers to use systems that are otherwise described as constituting the indispensable future of worldwide police surveillance and investigation – is one of the aforementioned ‘pathologies’ noted by Sheptycki. He singles out this pathology when describing how the ‘multiple recording of data on multiple systems and at multiple levels is a contributing factor’ underlying why intelligence systems do not necessarily function (2004: 316). Elaborating further, Sheptycki notes that the tendency to systemic overload in the intelligence system is exacerbated by its voracious appetite for data. Intelligence-led policing predicated on widespread system surveillance has a tendency to demand ‘more data’ rather than ‘better data’ (ibid.).
Quite simply, this almost ravenous appetite for data quantity rather than quality is propelled, Sheptycki explains, by a perceived need for the police ‘to do something[!]’ in order to counteract believed runaway societal risks (ibid.). Unfortunately, as was often the case among the Danish detectives I worked with, the shared notion that something needed to be done, and done ‘now!’ gave way to developments which at times left the detectives dumbfounded, and with the counterproductive feeling that can be the result of having too many options.

*Technological Idiocy*

The feeling among the detectives that they were sometimes overwhelmed by the overabundance of information technologies can be said to provide a foundation if not a ready-made excuse for the recurrence of the following statement amongst the detectives: ‘All that computer stuff is just not for me. I’m not that tech-savvy.’

In general, the detectives shared a sense of lacking the necessary skills to operate computer systems, especially when it came to those that are most important for the increase in, and effectiveness of, contemporary surveillance. For example, the detectives knew that using PED (the police’s investigation database), and thus building up and sharing criminal intelligence and evidence, was important for keeping track of cross-border crime. At TFB, the management more than once ended the morning briefing by stressing that ‘it is extremely important that you use PED when registering your investigation progress. It’s the only way for us to get a consistent overview.’

Yet, although encouraged/ordered by their bosses, few of the detectives really used PED, or at least used it properly. This was either because they didn’t prioritise it or simply because they didn’t know how to. For instance, on leaving one of these morning briefings, with the echo of the management’s words still ringing in his ears, Detective Axelsen stepped out of the meeting room.
and, having gone far enough for the management not to hear him, he whispered to Detective Thorsen: ‘Shit, I’ve been doing it differently from how they want it. Honestly, I’m kind of lost when it comes to this thing.’ Detective Thorsen was on the same page. He too obviously wasn’t sure how to use this new computer-based investigation technology.

The lack of a general aptitude amongst the detectives was particularly evident in the way that officers at both TFB and TFP identified a single person as being ‘our PED expert’, thus also admitting their own inability (see also Manning 2008). At TFB, when I asked about the use of PED, I was told to contact Detective Sørensen, who was jokingly but respectfully referred to by her colleagues as ‘the Queen of PED in the Danish police’. In talking with her and observing her work, I was shown how she had built up folders and categories in PED which she used to go through reported crimes, and if a known suspect could be identified, she would make sure to make a data entry. In this way, she explained,

> **we make sure that we don’t only get cross-border criminals for the crimes they just committed. By electronically tracking and cataloguing cases we can make a case against a cross-border criminal that includes 150 charges instead of just one or two. In doing this, we make sure that we get them with a harsher sentence. Doing what I do is the future.**

Her colleagues tended to agree, as they often experienced frustration at having to sift through the many folders that they kept on the shelves behind their desks, searching for crimes that they were certain a given suspect had committed but that they couldn’t easily find.

In this way, given that that all detectives agreed that a greater and more systematised use of computer systems was the future, it was almost absurd to see that the detectives were not more
invested in using these systems. One simple explanation for the detectives’ lack of tech savviness had to do with the minimal amount of training they received. The introduction of different computer systems and other electronics obviously demanded that the detectives acquired at least a basic understanding of them. Of this, management were well aware. The detectives were therefore sent on various training courses on which they were introduced to new technologies. ‘How-to manuals’ – such as that written by NCI Detective Gustavsen, as described above – were also produced and distributed. Even though the detectives had attended courses and read, or perhaps skimmed through, the manuals, they felt ill-equipped to fully engage with these often quite complex computer systems. As Detective Clausen explained to me the day before he was to attend one of these courses:

Tomorrow, I’m attending a course on this new Israeli surveillance programme the police have just bought. It sounds like something we can use to track the criminal networks beyond the streets and outside of Denmark’s borders. However, I also know that a two-day course is close to being useless if we don’t end up using it in our everyday work. And I bet you, that’s how it’s gonna be.

His colleagues also frequently experienced the lack of usefulness of the different courses they attended in a similar way: ‘We get this simple introduction and then the expectation is that we’ll go ahead and use it – but the reality is that we don’t.’

Furthermore, I repeatedly observed cases where the detectives were supposed to attend a course only to have their attendance postponed indefinitely because they were needed elsewhere: ‘That’s just how it is’, the TFB management told me, ‘That’s the reality of police work. We have
to start with the base of things, crimes that suddenly occur etc., before we move towards the more complex parts.’

Another reason for what they also sometimes humorously but also rather proudly called their ‘technological idiocy’ had less to do with being overwhelmed or untrained and more to do with the vocational partialities described earlier. It was obvious that the detectives often used a proclaimed lack of interest in information technologies to signal what they, by contrast, believed to constitute ‘real police work’ (see also Manning, 1996). Here, we return to the notion of ‘the police nose’ and the penchant for police discretion, which was echoed in a comment made by Detective Larsen, for example, when the management, as always, had reminded him of the importance of using the computer systems: ‘Sorry boss. I’m a very old man. It’s not really something I know how to do. I’m much more about doing real police work, getting out there and shipping criminals to prison.’ Detective Larsen was only in his late thirties and in other ways he was more than capable of using modern day technology, having the newest iPhone, for example. As a result, and as he himself also admitted, his comment should be read more as an expression of preference rather than of a real lack of proficiency.

Private Problems

A third and final reason for the everyday surveillance deficiencies dealt with in this article has to do with something that we researchers rarely concern ourselves with, namely the more ‘quotidian’ (Friesen et al., 2012) or ‘ordinary’ (Fassin, 2017) matters of policing and surveillance such as issues involving the police officers’ private or personal sphere.

In police research, the relationship between the private and the professional, including the way in which it affects the people involved, has only received a limited amount of research
attention. When this issue is examined, it is most often viewed from the vantage point of how the strains of job might (negatively) affect police officers’ personal life, including the risk of stress, depression, substance abuse and marital issues (Brown et al., 1996). However, what is of interest here is how non-work matters affect police work, an area which has received even less interest.

Bearing this in mind, the TFP and TFB working day, much like anyone’s working day, for example consisted of the detectives needing to leave early to go grocery shopping, as they were responsible for that evening’s dinner, or the detectives coming in late because they had to attend a school meeting. Indeed, my observations of TFB and TFP were filled with such private matters that, at first, seemed rather humdrum and thus scientifically irrelevant but which, on reflection, heavily influenced the detectives’ work and, in the case of this article, influenced their engagement with the development of coherent surveillance systems and practices. The following examples demonstrate this point:

‘Gotta pick up the kids’

_The detectives have just brought in a group of suspected Polish pickpockets and placed them in custody. While two of the suspects have prior convictions in Denmark, which means they can be prosecuted for a violation of their entry-ban, the detectives don’t have sufficient grounds to charge and detain the remaining two. Knowing this, management comes into the office to tell the detectives to ‘cut them loose’. The detectives know that this is their only option, but it nevertheless heavily frustrates them._

_Later that day, management comes back into the office. ‘You know, these two assholes you just released, remember to register and upload the info you got on them. Then_
our international colleagues will keep an eye out for them.’ Detective Larsen concurs, and he lets the management know that he ‘will do it straight away, boss!’

Five minutes later, however, he gets up, puts on his jacket and walks out the door. ‘Did you update the system?’ his boss asks, as he walks by. ‘Nah, didn’t have the time, gaffer. Gotta pick up the kids. No worries though, I’ll do it tomorrow.’ A week later, the paper with the information on the Polish men is still lying on his desk. Another week passes and the paper is now either gone or, at least, hidden beneath other papers that have been stacked on top of it – one of the papers being the aforementioned report drafted by the Department of Analytics.

Fairly ordinary examples of this kind occurred frequently during my stay at both TFP and TFB. At TFB, for instance, Detective Jensen was a divorced single dad and during the weeks when he had the kids, he couldn’t stay late at the office irrespective of how urgent a given situation might be. His colleagues respected his situation. They themselves had young children and were also often forced to leave work to pick them up, cook dinner, attend meetings at school or for some form of activity at the local sports club, etc. On another occasion, one of the few single detectives left work early as he was going on a date.

Admittedly, the detectives’ private and other personal matters might be viewed as a comparatively insignificant matter. When talking about Leviathan issues such an increasing amount of surveillance, who cares about certain Danish detectives’ private lives, or lack thereof, or the fact that they have to leave work to pick up their kids from kindergarten before it closes? Scholars often don’t care, or we at least don’t think about these things. But, even though they appear rather humdrum when compared with the drives of an expanding means of police
surveillance, they are something that the detectives have to care about. In the context of their everyday lives, picking up the kids is not simply more important, it is necessary. Surveillance is not. So, although the detectives readily admitted that such preferences might appear ill-advised, they nevertheless commonly chose – out of obligation or desire – to prioritise their private lives, even though they knew this was not optimal in relation to the chances of tracking and apprehending suspects. ‘We just got our second child’, as TFB Detective Christensen explained it, describing why he couldn’t work over the weekend, even though surveillance intelligence indicated that pickpockets were becoming increasingly active Friday and Saturday night, ‘so I have to be at home with the family. That’s how it is.’

The fact that private and personal matters had such a bearing on the detectives’ work serves as a useful reminder that even the most doctrinal discourse, in this case that of police surveillance, inevitably competes with the banality of people’s quotidian existence, a quotidian existence in which the pedestrian often trumps the principled.

**Concluding Remarks**

What can be learned from this article’s description of Danish detectives’ lack of participation in various developments of surveillance?

Before answering this question, it is first and foremost important to remember that it is true that there are many policies that are promoting an increase in police surveillance and that many steps have already been taken to realise these policies. It is also true that the police themselves, in this case a number of Danish detectives, speak of the necessity of such developments and that they even dream about the ways they will help them catch, for example, otherwise hard-to-apprehend cross-border criminals. Even though this is true, and while it is therefore understandable that the
convention is to point to and at times warn against a proliferating means of surveillance of this kind, *it is not* necessarily true that the everyday practices of police surveillance neatly follow this narrative. At least amongst one group of Danish surveillance practitioners, the reality was different. As this article has demonstrated, amongst Danish detectives, cultural, technological and private workaday issues often outweighed the otherwise outspoken importance of developing contemporary surveillance practices. Indeed, the detectives’ daily work revealed how police surveillance is perhaps not so ubiquitous and systematic after all.

Importantly, this article is not just an exception to the rule. As outlined earlier, a growing number of studies of surveillance actors’ quotidian work life substantiates this point. In the search for empirical and analytical precision, future studies should therefore keep this in mind and (continue to) study how surveillance is actually carried out before automatically accepting policy as practice. Indeed, as Monahan has similarly argued, studying the everyday cultural practices of given means of surveillance is theoretically ‘encouraging […] because it directs attention to local, grounded meanings as the primary units of analysis, which can implicitly challenge current hegemonic organizing frames …’ (2011: 503). Put differently, if we don’t empirically validate our theories, there is a risk that we scholars will ourselves become the hegemonic fearmongers we often accuse protagonists of more surveillance and policing of being.

Lastly, while it is undeniably true that police surveillance has grown – increasing police and governmental capacities to surveil and control the population – this article has also demonstrated that this logic similarly applies to the individual police officers involved in this Orwellian apparatus. Albeit for different reasons, police officers also feel the presence and pressures of the expanding surveillance apparatus, and they too look for ways in which to escape – finding ways to avoid having their sense of professional discretion and worth constrained by the
threads of this spreading web of police surveillance. Hence, just as Smith has argued that surveillance technologies might ‘empower the watcher’ yet ‘disempower the worker’ (2009), it is fair to conclude that, at least for a number of Danish detectives, more police surveillance sometimes meant less professional satisfaction. Or to put it in the more indigenous words of TFB Detective Jensen, ‘We detectives don’t wanna become computers! There’s no fun in that!’


Van Maanen J. (1973) Working the street; a developmental view of police behavior. *Working paper (Sloan School of Management)*.

