

Article

The Surveillance Survival Paradox: Experiences and Imaginaries of Surveillance in a Generational and Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Most previous studies on online surveillance have been conducted in long-time liberal democracies with limited experiences of explicit and intrusive state surveillance. This article explores the role of the historical legacy of totalitarianism or authoritarianism, embodied in generational experiences, in the formation of imaginaries of, and attitudes toward, contemporary state and corporate surveillance. We propose a theoretical hypothesis of the “surveillance survival paradox”: firsthand experiences of the past (totalitarian/authoritarian) surveillance regime do not lead to a greater fear or criticism of the contemporary regime; rather, it is the opposite. The article presents results from an original mixed-method study combining a quantitative online survey (N=3,221) with focus group and individual interviews (seventy-one participants) conducted among two generations (born in 1946–1953 and 1988–1995) in three European countries with different historical surveillance regimes (Estonia, Portugal, and Sweden). The quantitative analysis reveals significant cross-cultural differences in personal and mediated experiences of surveillance. Inter-generational differences in attitudes toward contemporary surveillance were surprisingly similar across the countries, with the older groups in all countries demonstrating higher tolerance toward online state surveillance, and the younger groups reporting higher acceptance for corporate dataveillance. The qualitative analysis reveals that perceptions of the past surveillance regime as more direct and dangerous overshadow sensitivities toward more abstract and covert risks related to the extended state and corporate surveillance in the contemporary datafied world. The results led us to formulate the “surveillance survival paradox” as a generation-specific, and probably also country- or regime-specific, phenomenon.

Introduction

Surveillance as a social phenomenon has, from a historical perspective, undergone many changes, having had various aims, forms, and means (see, e.g., Lyon 1994, 2007 for an overview). With the rise of digital media and the interconnected web, the pace of change has increased, and the techniques for surveillance have drastically become more sophisticated (Marx 2002). Furthermore, in the age of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2015), state surveillance and corporate “big data” surveillance through social media (Andrejevic and Gates 2014) have converged technologically (Trottier and Lyon 2012). Besides technological changes, social transformations involving abrupt replacements of political and ideological

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regimes as well as slow-pace cultural changes have an impact on how, to what extent, and with what ramifications surveillance is administered and how it is justified by institutional power holders and perceived by lay citizens. Although all societies are, at least to some extent, “surveillance societies” (Lyon 2001; Marx 2002), (post-)authoritarian or (post-)totalitarian societies conceptualise surveillance measures and government transparency from a cultural perspective (or legacy) that differs from that of societies with longer democratic roots (Nagy 2017). These varying conceptualisations, imaginaries, and perceptions have, however, seldom been studied in a comparative perspective involving two dimensions: social time and space.

This study endeavours to contribute to filling this gap by focussing on two generations with different experiences of state surveillance in three European countries—Estonia, Portugal and Sweden—each representing a specific surveillance regime with its own specific mixture of citizen autonomy and state control (Scott 1999), influenced by different historical and cultural legacies. The aim of this article is to compare surveillance-related experiences, imaginaries, and attitudes of one older and one younger generation of online media users in these three countries, and to explore the relationships between the experiences of, and attitudes toward, surveillance, considering the socio-historical context of the diverse surveillance regimes. Specifically, the research questions ask: How do participants from different generations and socio-cultural backgrounds describe and perceive their surveillance experiences related to various surveillance regimes? How, if at all, are past and present surveillance experiences related to attitudes toward contemporary state surveillance and commercial dataveillance?

Our discussion will proceed in three parts. In the theoretical framework, we will give a short overview of the changing nature of surveillance, expound on the concepts of state surveillance and dataveillance, and frame our analysis within the context of previous research, focusing on surveillance-related attitudes and practices, generational habitus, mindsets and imaginaries, and the dynamic socio-historical context in the three countries. After introducing our mixed-method approach, we will present the empirical narrative, intertwining thematic qualitative content analysis of interviews with findings and conclusions from a quantitative survey. The latter provides statistics-based cross-cultural and generational comparisons of surveillance-related experiences and attitudes, and patterns of relationships between key variables, while qualitative data allow us to analyse personal stories and capture social imaginaries of surveillance and related arguments and thought patterns in a more nuanced and contextualised way. Based on our mixed-method analysis, we will propose a theoretical hypothesis of the “surveillance survival paradox”: firsthand experiences of the past, life-threateningly harsh, surveillance regime do not lead to a greater fear or criticism of the contemporary regime; rather, it is the opposite. We, however, consider this paradox as a generation-specific, and probably a country- or regime-specific, phenomenon. We will conclude the paper by summarising and discussing the main findings.

The Changing Nature of Surveillance and Related Attitudes

To function, all societies must monitor their members and, thus, are characterised by some degree of technology-enhanced efforts to go beyond sensory impressions in information protection and surveillance (Marx 2002; see also Scott 1999). In the era of pre-datafied media, state surveillance has mostly been associated with the repressive “Big Brother” tools and instruments of totalitarian communist regimes, such as the Soviet dictatorship (Weiner and Rahi-Tamm 2012), and fascist or right-wing authoritarian states (Fonio and Agnoletto 2013). However, long-term democracies and welfare states have also engaged in various monitoring measures to secure law and order and to identify individuals who are entitled to social welfare benefits (Boersma et al. 2014; Lyon 2015). Surveillance research in democratic countries has focused, for instance, on CCTV (Grass 2004; Norris, McCahill, and Wood 2003), biometric surveillance or facial recognition (Gates 2011; Introna and Wood 2004), ID cards (e.g., Clavell and Ouziel 2014; Roes et al. 2014), and AI-based welfare surveillance (Zajko 2023), and it has included social democratic welfare regimes such as Sweden (e.g., Gunnartz 2006).

With the spread of networked media technologies—such as smartphones, laptops, and other mobile and personal media—the areas of life that can be subsumed by monitoring practices have multiplied and fostered a new data-driven regime integrated into the general operations of contemporary capitalism at every level (Mejias and Couldry 2019; West 2019). The concept of “dataveillance” describes this juxtaposition of state surveillance with the type of surveillance adopted by commercial platform companies that build their business models on the extraction of data from online media users (Bolin 2011; Giroux 2015). Launched in computer science by Roger Clarke (1988) and reactivated for the social media world by van Dijck (2014; see also Degli Esposito 2014), the phenomenon of dataveillance has been observed for decades (Gandy 1993; Haggerty and Ericson 2000), and there is a growing body of research into this specific kind of “social media surveillance” (Bolin and Jerslev 2018; Fuchs et al. 2011; Trottier 2012) and the new business models that build on the monitoring of media users (Bermejo 2009; Bolin 2011; Kosterich and Napoli 2016; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018).

In such a context, the interest in studying citizens’ attitudes toward surveillance by social media companies has also increased over the past decade. For example, when it comes to online data collection, research reveals that media users often hold mixed or ambivalent attitudes: they express concern about being monitored by surveillance technologies yet simultaneously take minimal action to protect themselves from the tracking of their behaviour in online environments (Jansson 2012; Leckner 2018; Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch 2020; Turow, Hennessy, and Draper 2015). This mismatch between stated preferences and actual behaviour describes what Barnes (2006) calls the “privacy paradox.” In a scenario where individuals experience limited control over being monitored, resignation combined with normalisation may reveal a sense of surveillance realism (Dencik and Cable 2017), privacy apathy (Hargittai and Marwick 2016), privacy fatigue (Choi, Park, and Jung 2018), or privacy cynicism (Lutz, Hoffmann, and Ranzini 2020).

The literature, furthermore, explains that gaps between individuals’ privacy preferences and privacy practices can be related to desirable trade-offs for benefits over privacy (Kesan, Hayes, and Bashir 2016; Turow, Hennessy, and Draper 2015), informational deficiencies (Furini and Tamanini 2015), cultural backgrounds (Trepte et al. 2017), or negative privacy experiences (Sarakakis and Winter 2017). In turn, focusing on the wider purpose of data mining, Kennedy et al. (2015) argue that users actively engage in case-by-case assessments of whether data mining practices are “fair.” In an East European setting, Svenonius and Björklund (2018a) have also suggested ambivalence among citizens who might cognitively accept certain amounts of surveillance (e.g., for crime prevention) but still feel uneasy about being surveilled, illustrating the tensions between legitimate requests for control and the strive for individual autonomy vis-à-vis, for example, the state (Scott 1999).

Generational Habitus, Mindset, and Imaginaries

Considering the rapid transformations of surveillance technologies over the past decades, one might expect differences in attitudes to surveillance among different generational cohorts. Namely, as research on media generations in the tradition following Karl Mannheim (1952 [1928]) has shown, attitudes toward media technological change are related to the media one has been confronted with during one’s formative years, roughly between the ages of 17–25 (e.g., Bolin 2016; Colombo and Fortunati 2011; Kalmus 2020). To conceptualise the phenomenon of generational distinctness, several related, yet clearly distinguishable, terms have been suggested. The concept of “generational habitus” refers to a collective set of dispositions shared by people born around the same time and influenced by the social, cultural, or technological context in which they were socialised (Edmunds and Turner 2002). Inspired by Bourdieu’s (1977 [1972]) conceptualisation of “habitus,” the term “generational habitus” marks a stable phenomenon and can be described as the internalised set of dispositions that structures a generation’s members’ perception of and action in the world.

Besides “habitus,” we have argued for a more dynamic concept of “mindset” (Figueiras, Bolin, and Kalmus 2024). We consider “mindset” as a more malleable disposition, sensitive to new impressions and experiences. Pettitt (2013: 1) defines it as “a wider system of perception and conception,” comprising a mental attitude or inclination that moulds our perceptions of the world and affects our dispositions to act in it. Still, when interpreting new phenomena (for instance, online surveillance), a mindset functions as a filter in integrating novel experiences into its understanding of the surrounding world (Figueiras, Bolin, and Kalmus 2024). A “generational mindset,” thus, would suggest that the ways in which members of a generational cohort perceive or *imagine* the socio-technical landscape, including the surveillance regime, will have consequences for how they act in this space. Hence, we include “imaginaries” in our analytical toolbox. The concept of imaginaries, or social imaginaries, as philosopher Charles Taylor (2002: 106) originally formulated, refers to “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings... in images, stories and legends.” Social imaginaries also provide a capacity to act, to engage in, and to legitimise certain practices.

In the surveillance studies literature, David Lyon (2014) conceptualises surveillance cultures as encompassing both “imaginaries” and “practices.” According to Lyon (2014: 42), surveillance imaginaries are “the ways in which surveillance is conceived and how it relates to other dimensions of social life,” while surveillance practices are “everyday ways of actually engaging with surveillance.” In our analysis, we view a generational mindset as incorporating specific surveillance imaginaries—constructed and internalised by members of the respective generational group—that manifest in distinct surveillance practices. A generational mindset (as well as a generational habitus) is shaped through the process of socialisation (cf. Bourdieu 1992 [1980]). While conceptualising surveillance imaginaries as part of more malleable mindsets, we assume that they are moulded through life-long political socialisation (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Sigel 1989; see also Hurrelmann and Bauer 2018), which involves “a set of *competing socialization efforts*” (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020: 1844; italics in the original) and reflects the dynamics of the respective political and surveillance regimes.

The Dynamics of Surveillance Regimes in Estonia, Portugal, and Sweden

The socio-historical contexts of the three countries chosen for this study represent distinct *surveillance regimes*—the sum of the strategies and technologies of surveillance in each cultural setting. Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union from 1939 until regaining independence in 1991. During the occupation, Estonia was subsumed by the totalitarian regime of the imperialist Soviet Union, characterised by the surveillance apparatus that was omnipotent and omnipresent in all spheres of society and “included the regime’s dreaded secret police with its vast powers of surveillance, arrest and detention” (Kasekamp 2010: 130). Like other states that subsumed the Soviet-style surveillance apparatus, “most people can be expected to have [had] a relatively clear picture of what secret surveillance entails” (Svenonius and Björklund 2018a: 125). The relationships between citizens, the government, and surveillance mechanisms were, however, complicated: although surveillance became an internalised part of everyday life, spaces for dissent were allowed and performed within the system (Levina 2017). After a “Post-communist” transitory phase (Svenonius and Björklund 2018b), the contemporary surveillance regime of the present EU member state is, in contrast, loose and liberal, with state institutions investing heavily into earning and maintaining public trust, for instance by implementing a data tracker through which citizens can see which organisations have used their data and request more information about those practices when needed (see Männiste 2022).

Portugal lived under a right-wing dictatorship from 1926 to 1974. During these years, the powerful apparatus of surveillance included strategies of intimidation, demobilisation, and repression, headed by the political police with the help of a network of informants (civilians), that promoted a culture of denunciation and values of resignation and obedience in the society (Machado and Frois 2014; Pimentel 2007). The conservative and catholic direction of Estado Novo, embodied in the triangle God–Nation–Family, was extended to all social spheres, imposing its ideology through propaganda and censorship (namely, control

over the media and communication channels) (Machado and Frois 2014). Just like other non-democratic regimes, resistance and dissent, although clandestine and covert to circumvent surveillance, existed in the country, promoting parallel communication networks and planned actions against the authoritarian regime. Fundamental rights of data privacy were recognized by the Portuguese constitution in 1976, and a set of laws on data protection preceded the GDPR (Bacelar de Gouveia 2021). In 2005, and despite the country's low rates of criminality, the Portuguese government announced the implementation of video surveillance in public spaces and a plan to create a universal genetic database (Machado and Frois 2014). If the expansion of the contemporary surveillance regime was implemented without a public debate that involved common citizens, COVID-19 lockdowns fuelled a public debate around the conflicting values of privacy and safety; the increasing use of CCTV, police body cams, and drones by law enforcement units was also questioned. Most notoriously, in 2022, the Portuguese data protection authority prohibited the telecom providers from retaining the geo-location and traffic data of their clients and imposed restrictions on criminal investigative authorities' access to such data (Comissão Nacional de Proteção de Dados 2022).

To contrast these two past totalitarian/authoritarian surveillance regimes with a benchmark, we chose Sweden as a representative of long-time liberal democracies and welfare states. Like many liberal democracies, Sweden has a specific, publicly legitimised surveillance regime, any changes to which need to be justified. For example, the increased presence of CCTV in public places since the mid-1990s triggered public debate (Priks 2015), and the law passed in 2008 to increase the ability for surveillance of all telephone and internet traffic passing over the Swedish territory was also fiercely debated (Bjereld and Oscarsson 2009).

Methodological Approach

In our mixed-methods approach, we combine quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. For the online survey conducted in Autumn 2020, we sampled participants (N=3,221) from two generational cohorts: one born in 1946–1953, having had their formative years during the authoritarian regime in Portugal or the totalitarian Soviet regime in Estonia (or in a liberal democracy in Sweden), and the second born in 1988–1995, with their formative years in post-totalitarian/post-authoritarian Estonia or Portugal (or in liberal democratic Sweden) (see Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). In these countries, we also conducted fifteen focus groups (consisting of two to five participants) and sixteen individual interviews with participants from the same generational cohorts of internet users. Among both cohorts in each country, we composed three mixed-gender groups with different socio-demographic profiles: one with higher education; one with mixed educational levels, living in a small city or countryside; and one with secondary education. Each group involved participants with varying occupational backgrounds. The total number of interviewees was seventy-one (thirty-eight female and thirty-three male), and they were recruited through a combination of “snowballing” (Patton 1990) pre-recruited panels of interviewees run by professional research agencies. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' native language between late Spring and early Winter 2021. The interviews were thorough, lasting for up to 1.5 hours. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus groups were conducted online, which affected the group interaction by making it almost non-existent. Therefore, we have analysed the data from focus groups and individual interviews similarly—as representing individuals' way of thinking. All interviews were transcribed in full, anonymised, and translated into English (for details on our methods, see Bolin, Kalmus, and Figueiras 2023).

Experiences and Imaginaries of the Past and Present Surveillance

According to our analysis of the quantitative survey data (see Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024 for details), the older generations in Estonia and Portugal reported, as we had expected, more actual experiences of past or present state surveillance in their social networks compared to their younger counterparts. The levels of actual experiences of elderly Portuguese and Estonians, furthermore, surpassed those of both generation

groups in Sweden. For instance, more than half of older Estonian and Portuguese respondents (56% and 51%, respectively) reported knowing or having heard about someone who had carried out their political or religious practices in secret to prevent negative consequences, while only one fifth of elderly (and two fifths of younger) Swedes had similar experiences (see Table 1).

Table 1: Experiences of state surveillance by age group and country (%)¹

Indicator	Older (born 1946–1953)			Younger (born 1988–1995)		
	Estonia	Portugal	Sweden	Estonia	Portugal	Sweden
<p>Do you know anyone in [your country] who has carried out his or her political or religious practices (reading books, listening to the radio, attending meetings) in secret to prevent negative consequences?</p> <p>(“Yes” + “No one in person, but I have heard such stories”)</p>	56	51	21	44	35	41
<p>Do you know anyone in [your country] who has been prevented from doing something (going abroad, entering a university, getting a particular job) due to the authorities’ knowledge about his or her past, family history, political views, etc.?</p> <p>(“Yes” + “No one in person, but I have heard such stories”)</p>	60	45	18	36	24	37
<p>Have you seen any movies, series, or documentaries, or read any books or articles about state surveillance?</p> <p>(“Yes, 1 or 2” + “Yes, several”)</p>	65	67	42	69	61	61
<p>Have you heard any jokes or rumours about state surveillance?</p> <p>(“Yes, 1 or 2” + “Yes, several”)</p>	60	72	35	65*	58*	65*

The qualitative study enabled asking more specifically about subjective experiences of, or the stories heard about, surveillance. Although long-term democracies have also engaged in monitoring measures (see, e.g.,

¹All differences between the countries are statistically significant at $p < .001$, except the ones marked with *.

Boersma et al. 2014; Gunnartz 2006), none of the older Swedish participants could recall firsthand experiences of state surveillance. We suggest that, in their imaginaries, past state surveillance is strongly associated with regimes of repression and control related to totalitarian communist regimes or right-wing authoritarian states that they knew of or heard about during their formative years.

Older Estonians had vivid memories of Soviet-era surveillance and repressions, and all welcomed an opportunity to share them in the interview, regardless of its mode (group vs. individual; online vs. face-to-face). Even less talkative and more shy people livened up when they were asked to talk about the Soviet regime. Many elderly Estonians had suffered from Soviet-era surveillance-based repressions (mostly by being disallowed to travel abroad) and/or knew someone in their family or social networks who had faced a more severe persecution (in most cases, having been expelled from a university because of their dissident views or acts). Furthermore, several saw the Soviet regime as having been potentially life-threatening, and many admitted that people were really afraid back then. Most of the older Estonian participants, nevertheless, talked about the Soviet era with some humour, not with awe or dread, and some even bragged about how they outsmarted the system, coped with hazardous surveillance situations, or simply survived the regime by repressing their thoughts when in fear of being listened in on. For instance, Aina, an older Estonian, looked back upon her experiences with the repressive Soviet surveillance regime through the prism of humour: “When you travelled, I remember when you went abroad with a student brigade group, you always had a ‘rat’ [inside spy] in your group. Although I remember we were still young, and we used to joke around. But afterwards they said, well, that [person] was it. Nobody [of us] really got into trouble, but there were still some who did during university [studies].”

Most of the interviewed elderly Estonians had some knowledge of contemporary state surveillance and dataveillance. They used the same terms when talking about past and present surveillance and drew parallels between the two regimes. All except one, however, made a clear evaluative distinction between the evil and dangerous Soviet-era monitoring and a more neutral or even beneficial contemporary surveillance regime. Estonian participants, furthermore, described the contemporary data-based regime as more efficient and omniscient but as less perilous, evidenced in this excerpt from a group discussion, in which older Estonians with secondary education compare their past and present surveillance experiences:

Hans: Well, we were in the army, when we had to go on a six-month trip to the Mediterranean Sea. [...] Then the Special Branch [of the KGB] also went twice and checked you step by step, so they checked your background and relatives and everything. And a number of people were written off the ship. [...] I think even control is maybe greater than it was then, because now, nowadays, if you move a little bit of something, everything is on the computer. You can't hide anything. And when I joined the Komsomol [the youth organisation of the Communist Party] in the army, came back out, resigned, and just didn't give the documents away [to local authorities]. And yet today there is no such possibility.

Moderator: But how do you feel, Greta, is it similar or very different now?

Greta: No, it's different, different. In the old days, [...] it really was, one step here, and it was immediately followed from all sides. [...] There was a lot of stress.

Somewhat differently, elderly Portuguese interviewees could not associate the authoritarian period and contemporary surveillance in their imaginaries. The regime difference clearly stands out: “Before the ‘25th of April’ [the date of the Carnation Revolution that ended the dictatorship] the political system was different. It had nothing to do with what it is today, because I have surveillance cameras in my house to know what goes on there. So, everything is normal. Before politics was different, as we know. There is no comparison” (Rui, older Portuguese).

Portugal, furthermore, stands out due to remarkable gender differences among the older group. Male participants mentioned cases involving family members, friends, or acquaintances, and some mentioned having had firsthand surveillance-related experiences: “Back then I was a faculty student, and I knew that the police were after me” (Manuel, older Portuguese). While, in general, male participants were talkative about the topic, women were very reserved about their surveillance-related experience, having been socialised not to “see” and talk about anything related to the authoritarian period. Most of them did not want to talk about it in the interview, regardless of its mode (group vs. individual). When asked if they knew any stories, the majority answered “No,” followed by silence. Some, however, mentioned that they did not know what was happening back then:

When [the] “25th of April” came I didn’t know what was happening. I remember my husband coming home and saying: “There is a coup d’etat in Lisbon.” And I asked: “Why? What is that?” [...] I was very privileged. I lived in a very, very quiet village. I didn’t know anything about politics and as I knew nothing about politics, the surveillance passed me by. It passed me by. (Helena, older Portuguese)

When I was little my father used to listen to Radio Moscow. And we couldn’t say a thing to anyone about that. No one told me why, but that made me afraid of everything. (Amélia, older Portuguese)

Our quantitative survey data also showed statistically significant gender differences in Portugal, with male respondents reporting more experiences with state surveillance. The same tendency was evident in Estonian and Swedish survey data; the relationships between surveillance experiences and gender, however, were weaker, and no gendered talk on the topic of surveillance was manifest in the interviews with Estonian or Swedish participants.

In Sweden, a distinctive pattern of inter-generational differences was revealed: a bit surprisingly, younger Swedes reported significantly higher levels of actual and mediated experiences of state surveillance, compared to their older compatriots (see Table 1; Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). We interpreted this pattern as resulting from the fact that state surveillance has increased in Sweden, both in terms of the extension of signal traffic surveillance through new legislation and the surrounding media debates about state surveillance at the end of the first decade of the new Millennium. This type of surveillance may have concerned younger cohorts more than older people, since the young spend more time on the internet and are, thus, more subject to and aware of online surveillance, which may have made them more observant and critical about various instances of state surveillance.

Among the younger generation, actual and mediated experiences of state surveillance were more similar across the three countries when juxtaposed with the remarkable cross-cultural differences among the older age group. According to the quantitative survey, for instance, there were no statistically significant differences between the younger groups from the three countries in their knowledge of jokes or rumours about state surveillance (ranging from 58% in Portugal to 65% in Estonia and Sweden), while the difference in that kind of experiences reached thirty-seven percentage points among the older generation (ranging from 35% in Sweden to 72% in Portugal; see Table 1).

In the qualitative interview study, younger participants from all countries talked a lot and willingly about their various experiences with contemporary state surveillance and dataveillance. References to the past regimes were rare. For instance, Sille, a younger Estonian, told a story about her grandfather who had been born in a Latin American country and lived there before World War II. In the Soviet era, he was trained as a sailor but was not allowed to serve on ships that sailed to foreign countries, and he changed his profession.

Interestingly, most of the younger participants in all countries could not establish explicit links between the past regimes' surveillance and present-day dataveillance in their imaginaries: "It's more contemporary and I have never made that connection with the past" (André, younger Portuguese). Some interviewees in each country, however, drew comparisons across time and space when talking about surveillance regimes. In Portugal and Estonia, cultural legacy may have played a role in shaping the vocabulary of comparative discourse: "Perhaps now dictatorships collect specific information about their citizens" (Camila, younger Portuguese). Marko, a young Estonian, also referred to the past regime of the country before projecting his argumentation onto the future, technologically driven global developments: "At the moment it [face recognition] is the topic of China, because yes, in Estonia there is no real... communism or anything. But, well, in the future it could come freely or, well, all over the world actually. Because technology is slowly developing, so that in the end all countries want to control themselves as much as possible."

Young Swedes also tended to focus on other countries such as Russia, China, or Belarus when discussing issues of state surveillance. Their experiences, as expressed in qualitative interviews, tend to relate to mere imaginaries of state and corporate surveillance—a sense that one is spied upon, but has no proof of it—and are sometimes based on guesswork. As Yasmine explained: "I actually think the police here do it too. If there's a crime or something, so they can check and see if they find anything.... I think they do this too, but it's not really talked about."

In the formation of such imaginaries, mediated surveillance (for instance, the TV series *Black Mirror*, mentioned by some younger Swedish and Portuguese participants, books such as *1984* by George Orwell, or daily news reports) seem to play a significant role. The overall patterns of mediated surveillance experiences of the younger generation were quite similar across the three countries according to both the quantitative and qualitative studies. Most young respondents in all countries (ranging from 61% in Sweden and Portugal to 69% in Estonia) reported having seen movies, series, or documentaries, or read books or articles about state surveillance (see Table 1). On the individual level, mediated experiences, even when acquired through the same globally spread media product, elicited various responses. For example, the documentary *The Social Dilemma* came up in several focus groups in Estonia and Portugal and evoked a variety of reflections starting from being disturbed yet neglectful, and ending with changing one's behaviour online or even raising awareness about algorithms-based dataveillance among other focus group participants:

I was a little shocked at the time and tried to discuss [it] with colleagues. Is it all real? Would it be possible that this could happen here in Portugal, too? [...] But I confess that I didn't dwell too deeply on the subject. (Marta, younger Portuguese)

[W]hen I saw the documentary, it had a very immediate and lasting impact on me. (André, younger Portuguese)

Very big algorithms are behind there, how and what, how it all works [...] I can right now... wait. [Taps on computer.] In this context, I remembered a doc that I would like to share. Oh, I'll put the link here. [Pasting it to the chat window on Zoom.] [...] And, for you... that kind of explains exactly what I just talked to you about, *The Social Dilemma*. If you're interested, I recommend you watch it; it's very well told and explains it in simple language. (Marek, younger Estonian)

Among the older generation, mediated surveillance experiences varied more remarkably between the three countries. Less than a half of older Swedes (42%) reported having seen movies, series, or documentaries, or read books or articles about state surveillance (see Table 1), and elderly Swedish interviewees also showed truly little experience of, and interest in, mediated state surveillance.

Although most of older Portuguese survey respondents (67%; see Table 1) reported mediated surveillance experiences, fictional references—such as a novel about China by a Portuguese author and a television series—were mentioned only twice in interviews with elderly Portuguese, and these participants did not associate the content with real-world state or commercial surveillance.

The level of older Estonians' mediated surveillance experiences is close to that of elderly Portuguese (65%; see Table 1). Elderly Estonian interviewees, however, demonstrated a remarkable variety of fictional or narrative experiences of the past and present surveillance regimes by mentioning domestic and foreign books (e.g., *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood), films, TV series, and a domestic radio broadcast, and showed a genuine and lively interest in the topic. Some participants also drew parallels between mediated and actual surveillance experiences, both past and present, conveying their omniscient and mildly supercilious position on the subject:

In short, from [the year] '73 or '75 onwards, some data of me has been picked up somewhere in a drawer, some data being collected. And this was very nicely confirmed by the fact that in the year '76 or '77 there was a film called *Three Days of the Condor*—an American film, which was shown on our screens, which showed how computers the size of a room, in other words, were stuffed or scanned full of all kinds of books and newspapers, magazines and all sorts of rubbish. In short, all this stuff has been going on for practically forty-five years. All the time things about myself have been stored in a corner of a drawer that I have absolutely no idea about. And now to start whining that somebody knows my details... It's a good thing if somebody does. I'm going to ask them to tell me what I did or didn't do this year, or what I did wrong, you have it all here. In short, to talk about it here, to guarantee some kind of privacy or something—well, excuse me! (Artur, older Estonian)

Attitudes Toward Surveillance

According to the quantitative survey, inter-generational differences in attitudes toward surveillance were surprisingly similar across the three countries. The younger age groups in all countries were, compared to the older generation, more tolerant toward corporate dataveillance; that is, they were more permissive toward companies collecting and using their personal information under certain conditions (Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). This tolerance, furthermore, strongly correlated with higher diversity of internet use, trust in the media, and self-reported digital skills. While active, trustful, and self-confident usage of digital media explains the younger generation's higher tolerance of corporate dataveillance, it can also stem from a lack of interest in acquiring full awareness of the risks involved, “as it would make their use of datafied media... a worrying practice” (Mathieu and Hartley-Møller 2021: 12).

Furthermore, we see younger people's higher tolerance functioning as an interchange for numerous services offered by social media and online companies, and as the normalisation or naturalisation of dataveillance. This is because users consider such a practice unavoidable, even beneficial, and thus, justified as “the cost of engaging in any number of desirable behaviours... that make modern life possible” (Haggerty and Ericson 2006: 12; see also Mathieu and Hartley-Møller 2021). The qualitative interview data illustrate this interpretation: younger participants predominantly saw dataveillance as increasingly omnipresent, and they were resigned to its inevitability as a trade-off for countless benefits. For example:

[D]amn, there's nothing I can do. What should I do? I'm kind of working on the phone. I must have it. (Jenny, younger Swede)

But well, all this tracking by Google and this targeted advertising, it doesn't bother me that much. So... so, yeah, it seems to me that the benefit that I get from those platforms is maybe bigger than the harm. (Sigrid, younger Estonian)

Other young participants, while being somewhat critical of dataveillance, tended to rationalise their concerns or avoid questioning one's routinized practices, probably as a mode of coping with the cognitive dissonance related to the "privacy paradox" (Barnes 2006) where users worry about being monitored by surveillance technologies yet do little to protect themselves. In some cases, such rationalisation was combined with emphasising individual autonomy, choice, and control over digital platforms' corporate interests—seen as the "ruling paradigm in popular, legal, and economic discourse" (Helm and Seubert 2020: 188) and widely criticized as precarious and illusory within academic discourse on privacy. A quote by Marta, a younger Portuguese, illustrates the internalisation of the individual control paradigm well: "It's for commercial purposes, so we have a saying. I can always say I don't want to buy this; I don't want to consume this and so they can try to sell me something, but I feel that the last word is mine."

In a few cases, young interviewees (some in each country) demonstrated a highly informed, critical, and vigilant stance toward online surveillance and the usage of proactive measures to minimise the risks involved in using digital platforms. We have conceptualised this cognitive and behavioural pattern as evidencing the emergence of the "datafied mindset" that has internalised the logics and dynamics of the digital and datafied media and tends to be suspicious and critical about the business models of social media platforms based on the extraction of data from online media users (Figueiras, Bolin, and Kalmus 2024). Simão, a younger Portuguese, presents a good example: "I stopped using WhatsApp when Facebook bought it. [...] Now I use Signal, which is the social media that Snowden uses... with end-to-end encryption... and it isn't profit-oriented. It has no commercial interests."

In some cases, young people with higher or specialised education in the field of IT displayed features of the datafied mindset; also, lessons learned via a negative personal experience of online surveillance or cybercrime went together with more critical attitudes and personal countermeasures.

The older age groups in all countries were, compared to the younger generation, more tolerant toward online state surveillance. That is, they were more permissive to the state authorities monitoring their citizens' online communication for certain purposes, such as to prevent terrorist attacks (Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). We interpreted this relationship as a pragmatic trade-off for safety and security—conservative and collectivist values according to Schwartz's (1990) system—which are more common to older generations in post-industrial and ex-communist societies and are gradually changing through individualization and inter-generational replacement (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). The qualitative interview data illustrate this explanation: older participants in all countries saw themselves predominantly as ordinary retired persons who have nothing to be afraid of, and who would benefit from the greater safety and security provided by CCTV cameras or other monitoring technologies. That type of social imaginary of the functions of surveillance is in line with, for example, the official discourse of the Portuguese government that has promoted the implementation of monitoring devices as a direct response to feelings of insecurity (Machado and Frois 2014). The related reasoning perfectly illustrates the "nothing-to-hide paradox" (Bolin 2018: 247), expressed by several older respondents, including Carla from Portugal: "I think it's good to have cameras in public space. They must put it everywhere. I'm not afraid of being filmed. I'm not doing anything wrong [laughs]." In the case of Portugal, this attitude can also be read as an example of the "long and social history of citizens' apparently passive compliance with the state's mechanism of surveillance" (Machado and Frois 2014: 65).

Older participants, several in each country, also saw state or online surveillance as inevitable and omnipresent (existent also in other democratic societies such as the US). While some elderly interviewees were more analytical by seeing benefits as well as risks, a few were slightly supercilious about people

fearing contemporary state surveillance or relaxed about their own need to be afraid of, e.g., Chinese technology. For example, Astrid, a retired Swedish lady, had just shifted her phone from a Samsung to a Huawei. At this time, the Swedish newspapers discussed the risks involved in reliance on Chinese technology, and although Astrid was aware of this discussion, she was not worried about possible Chinese state surveillance. We found a similar attitude among older Estonian interviewees: “I feel like it’s a bit of a joke for me if people now feel like they’re being watched. [...] But do I have to be afraid now that I’ll buy this robot vacuum cleaner with some kind of chips and things in it and then it will watch me all the time? Oh no, I don’t have that fear either” (Leida, older Estonian).

We were intrigued by the question of whether past experiences of state surveillance, especially among the older generation, lead to specific attitudes toward contemporary online surveillance. According to the quantitative survey, actual or mediated experiences of state surveillance did not predict tolerance toward either contemporary state surveillance or commercial dataveillance in any of the three countries (Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). Tolerance toward online state surveillance was predicted by older age, tolerance toward corporate dataveillance, and trustful, obedient, and less individualistic attitudes toward state authorities and other institutions. Tolerance toward corporate dataveillance was predicted by younger age, tolerance toward online state surveillance, and indicators of active and self-confident (online) media use. We can conclude that imaginaries, mindsets, and the dynamics of attitudes and values—including intergenerational value shifts (Inglehart and Welzel 2005)—rather than actual or mediated experiences of authoritarianism and surveillance, play a role in the acceptance of state or corporate surveillance under certain conditions.

Qualitative interviews with elderly Estonians, however, add an interesting nuance to this generalisation. We could observe in several cases that the more severe negative experiences one had had with Soviet-era surveillance and repressions, the more relaxed and tolerant they were about contemporary surveillance. For instance, Artur, the older Estonian who reflected upon his past and present, both mediated and actual, surveillance experiences, and expressed an omniscient and even arrogant attitude toward contemporary surveillance (see the quote above), had been banned from leaving the Soviet Union for seven years. Another participant explicitly attributed her calm emotions about contemporary surveillance to her generational belonging and experiences, contrasting these with other, presumably younger, people’s feelings, and connecting this line of explanation to the “nothing-to-hide” argument:

I think that if my conscience is clear and I haven’t caused any trouble, I have no reason to be afraid of anyone checking where I was on this or that date. Of course, this is controversial again, a very large number of people think that it is not suitable anywhere and that it is harassment. I feel calm about it, probably age matters here too, because I remember that other time too. And I also remember how people were surveilled back then. And I don’t see that kind of thing right now. On the opposite. (Johanna, older Estonian)

We may call this generation-specific phenomenon the “surveillance survival paradox”—likely coming from the underlying implicit reasoning “if we survived the harsh authoritarian regime, we could easily cope with current ‘harmless’ surveillance in a free and democratic society.” The conceptualisation of this paradox builds on what Marina Levina (2017: 531) described as the development of “doublethink” in the Soviet Union: “Survival in a corrupt authoritarian regime, which long ago stopped believing its own lies, required a suspension of dis/belief.” In the case of elderly Estonian interviewees, this “suspension of dis/belief” has been temporary, and the traumatic generational memories of the Soviet period (Wulf 2016; see also Sztompka 2000)—including those of perilous state surveillance—are now juxtaposed with a much more tolerant and pragmatic disposition toward contemporary dataveillance in their surveillance imaginaries. The case of the elderly Portuguese evidenced this paradox in a distinctive way: while representatives of this group declared having surveillance-related experiences, they could not associate the authoritarian period

and contemporary surveillance in their imaginaries. The analysis of qualitative data revealed that elderly Portuguese were not familiar with dataveillance, and even those with some knowledge about the business models of online platforms were hesitant in considering dataveillance as a form of surveillance: “I don’t think it is surveillance. I think it is a way for them to sell products” (Amélia, older Portuguese). Our interviews showed that the meaning given to “surveillance” was shaped by elderly Portuguese’ past experience: for this group, surveillance is inseparable from the authoritarian state regime. Furthermore, this internalized thinking pattern and assessment, crystallised in time, may prevent them from recognizing any form of surveillance, distinct from the type of monitoring they experienced or learned about during their formative years.

The type of reasoning behind the “surveillance survival paradox” may make people feel resilient toward potential risks of contemporary surveillance, especially if combined with the “nothing-to-hide-paradox,” a lack of personal strongly negative experiences with dataveillance, and/or a lack of knowledge about the type of surveillance adopted by commercial platform companies. Such a sense of resilience may, however, be illusory.

Conclusions

In this article, we have used one quantitative and one qualitative dataset to explore the role surveillance experiences, acquired in different socio-historical contexts and surveillance regimes, play in forming attitudes toward contemporary state surveillance and corporate dataveillance. Our mixed-methods analysis revealed cross-cultural differences in experiences of state surveillance among older generations: quite expectedly, elderly Portuguese and Estonians had more extensive experiences compared to their Swedish counterparts. When it comes to inter-generational differences in attitudes toward contemporary surveillance, the patterns were surprisingly similar in all countries: the older generation groups in three countries demonstrated higher tolerance toward online state surveillance than their younger compatriots, and the younger groups reported higher acceptance for companies to collect and use their personal information as a trade-off for services and benefits. Furthermore, personal, or mediated experiences of state surveillance did not lead to a greater intolerance toward either online state surveillance or corporate dataveillance (in any country). We conclude that generation-specific attitudes toward contemporary surveillance can be explained with distinct generational mindsets (see also Figueiras, Bolin, and Kalmus 2024). Such mindsets, which also encompass surveillance imaginaries (Lyon 2014), are shaped by global cultural and technological developments. These developments, together with individual-level trade-offs, are likely more influential in producing generation-specific attitudes than past experiences of authoritarianism and state surveillance. Thus, to comprehend the legacies of the “socialisation project” of an authoritarian regime, we suggest considering its interaction with the “agendas of various meso- and micro-level actors” (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020: 1844), as well as with broader societal transformations, in shaping the belief systems of different generations.

The analysis of qualitative data from Estonia and Portugal led us to posit what we call the “surveillance survival paradox”: in both countries, the older generation makes a clear distinction between the past and contemporary surveillance regimes and perceives the latter as rather harmless or even beneficial in some respects (e.g., in increasing security on the streets), while the past regime is seen as dangerous and terrible. We have thus observed that having “survived” (in the sense of experiencing) the past authoritarian or totalitarian surveillance regime has not led to a greater fear or criticism of the contemporary regime (when compared to the younger generation groups with no harsh surveillance experiences); rather, the opposite is true. In the social imaginaries, as revealed in our interviews with elderly Estonians and Portuguese, the past authoritarian/totalitarian surveillance regimes are perceived as more direct and potentially life-threatening. This perception may overshadow sensitivities toward the more abstract and covert risks associated with contemporary data-driven worlds and their state and commercial surveillance regimes.

While posing this generalisation, based upon two different political surveillance regimes and distinct surveillance-related experiences, we also contend that the “surveillance survival paradox” is a context-sensitive concept—it is an expression of specific relations between experiences and knowledge of the past and contemporary surveillance in articulation with other socio-cultural logics. Thus, we suggest that the historical legacy of past political regimes, embodied in generational experiences and attitudes toward surveillance, leads to variations of what we call the “surveillance survival paradox.” The cases of elderly Estonians and Portuguese illustrate that such legacies are expressed in distinct ways across different contexts, underscoring the importance of accounting for both “varieties of authoritarianism” and “individual heterogeneities” when studying “authoritarian attitudinal legacies” in the context of political socialisation, as also emphasised by Neundorf and Pop-Eleches (2020: 1841–1842).

We observed a few other relevant cultural differences between the three countries. Sweden displayed a distinctive pattern of inter-generational differences: younger Swedes, a bit surprisingly, reported significantly higher levels of actual and mediated experiences of state surveillance, compared to their older compatriots. A plausible explanation is the fact that state surveillance has increased in Sweden in the new Millennium and become politically more prominent in discourses on privacy and data protection (Priks 2015). Moreover, as the young spend more time on the internet and are more subject to and aware of online surveillance, they may have become more observant on various modes of state surveillance. We also propose another potential explanation, related to the “surveillance survival paradox”: while elderly Swedes have lived through the times of the totalitarian surveillance in the neighbouring Soviet Union and are aware of the harshness of the regime, young Swedes have no such experience to compare with, which may have played some role in their higher sensitivity to state surveillance. Furthermore, the younger generation groups in Sweden, as well as in Estonia and Portugal, are less tolerant toward state surveillance compared to their older compatriots, and this also lends support to the “surveillance survival paradox” thesis.

Portugal stood out due to remarkable gender differences, with male survey respondents reporting significantly more experiences with state surveillance and male interviewees being more inclined to talk about this topic. The gender dimension in Portugal, a Catholic country for people born in the 1940s to 1950s, is of crucial importance: politics, in general, was the realm of men and not of women, who were relegated to the private sphere (Pimentel 2001). The fact that female participants did not talk about their past experience may be an expression of a larger cultural/religious context where women learned not to have a voice or agency in political matters. This reflects the persistent mark of the authoritarian legacy of the dictatorship, which continues to have a paradoxical impact on Portuguese life, especially on mentalities (Machado and Frois 2014).

Estonian interview participants, especially representatives of the older generation, were distinctive due to their extensive use of humour or irony when talking about the past surveillance in Estonia: some of them told jokes and/or mouthy stories about how they outsmarted the regime. Furthermore, elderly Estonian interviewees stood out due to their ample and varied mediated experiences of the past and present surveillance regimes, and their expressions of a genuine interest in the topic. These discursive characteristics may, on one hand, indicate a cultural feature inherited from Soviet folklore, “infused with a strong oral tradition of surveillance narratives” (Astapova 2017: 299). On the other hand, these features may function as a cognitive coping strategy with even deeper cultural roots, as Estonian common people have, over the course of centuries, used humorous and derisive folklore to cope with the oppressive hegemony of Baltic German landlords, Russian “chinovniks” (officials within the Tsarist or Soviet administration, associated with a rigid, hierarchical bureaucracy), and other representatives of foreign power holders.

The main limitation of our study lies in its scope being restricted to three countries from the same continent. Furthermore, the survey sample consisted exclusively of internet users and was not representative of whole generation groups (especially the older generation), and the interview sample was relatively small (see also Bolin, Kalmus, and Figueiras 2023; Kalmus, Bolin, and Figueiras 2024). As a theoretical generalisation of

our findings, subject to testing in further research, we may, nevertheless, postulate that, besides global cultural and technological developments, the layers of a specific cultural-historical context matter in moulding the nuanced imaginaries of surveillance (Lyon 2014) and the regimes behind it. Surveillance, thus, is not “just surveillance” in an abstract sense that could be detached from its dynamic political and ideological framework: in the life-long process of political socialisation (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Sigel 1989), people draw comparisons across time and space in actively making meaning from, and forming their attitudes toward, particular forms of surveillance.

Our study contributes to the existing literature on surveillance cultures, post-authoritarian societies, and generational theory by showing that although the “generational effect” is important, the “institutional effect” (cf. Svenonius and Björklund 2018a, 2018b)—encompassing transformations at both global and national levels—also plays a significant role in explaining the variety and dynamics of surveillance imaginaries in society. We also agree with Veronika Nagy (2017: 450) who has argued that “‘cultural legacy’ should be problematised as a historical variable that denotes the transcendence of collective experience to form frames for interpretation that are detached from their original context.” Our analysis has shown that cultural legacy, while being incorporated into generational mindsets, is actively re-used and re-worked in a transforming social context and may manifest in unexpected or even paradoxical forms.

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