Technologies of Surveillance: The Cold War, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Archiving of Women's History[1]

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Abstract

Canadian state surveillance after the events of 9/11 has raised the prospect of the loss of civil liberties as well as the targeting of racialized immigrants, citizens and travelers; the globalization of surveillance networks; and the expansion of everyday technologies of surveillance. It is important to recognize, however, that state surveillance in Canada has a very long history. My research project spotlights the mid-1960s–1980s, a period synchronous with the Cold War and with the emergence of Canadian second-wave feminism. During this period, the Security Service of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) complied a vast quantity of surveillance files on feminist individuals, groups, and events because of the supposed left-wing threat they posed to national security. These declassified files can be viewed as an archive of technologies of surveillance that I use to study the profoundly gendered nature of state surveillance. This research project, undertaken with Dr. Steve Hewitt, University of Birmingham, UK, is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and lays the groundwork for a co-authored book on the subject.

In a post-9/11 world, state surveillance of known or suspected terrorists has raised justifiable fears over the loss of civil liberties in a democratic society. Alarms have been rung regarding the targeting of racialized immigrants, citizens, and travelers; the globalization of surveillance networks; and the expansion of everyday technologies of surveillance. Thanks to the efforts of whistleblower Edward Snowden, it is now known that the National Security Agency (NSA), a secretive surveillance organization in the United States, has generated massive amounts of espionage data, not only on selected terrorist targets, but also on leaders of state and ordinary

individuals. The NSA collaborates most closely with other 'Five Eyes' countries, namely the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, but also shares intelligence with others, including Austria, in the name of national security (MacAskill & Ball 2013; NSA 2013).

State surveillance in the name of national security is not, however, a recent phenomenon. Former Communist regimes, notably East Germany, are well known for vast spy networks that gave rise to storehouses of records (Miller 1998). Democratic regimes also gathered intelligence on individuals, organizations, and events because of their real or suspected ties to Communism, and to other radical left-wing interests. In the case of Canada, historians have shown that the RCMP Security Service spied upon a wide range of supposed subversives. The RCMP was dominated by a white, male, paramilitary mentality. Its origins lay in the North West Mounted Police, dating back to the 1870s. Its primary roles were to control the Aboriginal population, protect against American invasions, and open up the West to European settlement. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the RCMP was tasked with the responsibility for national security. Women served as clerical staff but were permitted entry as officers only in 1974. As Canada's sole domestic spy agency, the RCMP was involved in espionage until the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CISIS) took over this duty in 1984 (Hewitt 1996).

Over the decades, the force spied upon Eastern-European immigrants, labor union leaders and members, high school students, gays and lesbians, and university faculty and students. Even so-called 'hippies' came under the purview of the Mounties (Kinsman, Steedman & Buse 2000). Indeed, the rise of the New Left in the 1960s challenged the Security Service of the RCMP, which understood subversion mainly in relation to Communist infiltration. The New Left brought radically different protest movements to the RCMP's attention. Quebec separatism, Red Power, Black Power, Gay Liberation, Student Power and Women's Liberation focused on class, ethnicity, language, race, sexuality, and gender as rationales for activism. While women came to women's liberation via a number of different channels, many did so because of their involvement in New Left politics. When some women grew disillusioned with the sexism of male-dominated New Left organizations, they began organizing on their own

(Kostash 1980). They focused their attention on reproductive rights, day care, equal pay for work of equal value, and an end to men's violence against women. Women's liberation activists of all political leanings were fundamentally concerned with achieving gender equality. Their goal of gender equality was subversive in the sense that it threatened, and continues to threaten the gender status quo (Prentice et al. 1996).

By the late 1960s newly formed women's liberation groups also drew the attention of the RCMP's Security Service. I examine the surveillance of several groups such as the Toronto Women's Caucus, the Vancouver Women's Caucus, and the Montreal Women's Liberation Movement in collaboration with Dr. Steve Hewitt, University of Birmingham, UK. We are working with a large number of surveillance files that have been declassified under Canada's Access to Information (ATI) legislation. These declassified documents reveal without a doubt that the RCMP deliberately targeted the women's liberation movement for state surveillance. Our study, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), spotlights the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, a period synchronous with the Cold War and with the emergence of a heightened period of feminist activism known popularly as the 'second-wave'.

We identify women's liberation individuals, groups, and events that the RCMP spied upon; examine the development of Canadian second-wave feminism in the shadow of the Cold War; and treat RCMP spying on women's liberation as a case study to analyze the profoundly gendered nature of state surveillance. Gendering is dependent upon the intersection of gender and other variables such as race, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991). Both Hewitt and I have worked individually with RCMP declassified files in relation to the gendering of state surveillance, and I have written about RCMP spying on high school students who joined the Toronto Women's Caucus (Sethna 2000). Hewitt's longstanding scholarship on the Mounties, national security, and state surveillance is internationally recognized (Hewitt 2002). I continue to do extensive research on second-wave feminist campaigns for sex education, contraception, and abortion while Hewitt delves into the history of the RCMP.

Our project bridges the scholarship on state surveillance and women's studies. Scholars of surveillance studies and women's studies agree that

state surveillance is profoundly gendered. The concept of national security itself is said to be masculinist. Iris Marion Young (2003) contends that a 'security regime' functions in a gendered fashion: it adopts the 'role of protector toward its citizens, and the citizens become positioned as subordinates, grateful for the protection afforded them' (225). The language of national defense in regard to bombs, missiles and air strikes is rife with references to masculinity, femininity, and heterosexual sex (Cohn 1987). Moreover, 'hegemonic masculinity' promotes dominant heterosexuality that allows for strong homosocial bonds. The police, military and spy agencies are understood similarly (Connell 1995).

In popular media, male spies like the iconic fictitious British secret service agent, James Bond, have often been stylized as cool and controlled. Although female spies have been characterized as patriotic heroines, they are also stereotyped as disreputable old maids, or sexualized as exotic sirens threatening both manhood and nationhood. Such gendered tropes are apparent in real life situations. Nearly a century after her execution, Mata Hari is well remembered for being not just a female spy, but also a seductress. In the 1950s, the RCMP suspected Gerda Munsinger, an East German immigrant to Canada, of prostitution and espionage. She was considered a security risk because she fit 'an ideal profile of a female foreign agent successfully infiltrating Canadian government circles by trading on her "feminine wiles"' (Van Seeters 1988). Individuals subjected to state surveillance were gendered as feminine, regardless of their sex or gender (Capp 1993). Canadian civil servants suspected of sexual misconduct were gendered as queer and identified simultaneously as a menace to national security and to heteronormativity (Kinsman and Gentile 2010).

Research on women as targets of state surveillance during the Cold War reinforces the notion that anxiety over the transgression of gender norms was high during this period. As Marie Hammond-Callaghan (2010) has found, Irish women came under state surveillance because of their peace activism. In Canada, Julie Guard (2000) and Mercedes Steedman (2000) highlight the ways in which women involved in the Housewives Consumer Association and the Mine Mill Women's Auxiliaries caught the attention of the RCMP because of their presumed support for Communist ideology. Franca Iacovetta (2006) shows that the RCMP was

one of the most powerful 'gatekeepers' of post-war European immigrants to Canada, surveilling female immigrants for signs of sexual misconduct that could compromise national security and immigration policy.

Feminists were also caught in a net of surveillance, and on this topic, the American literature is the most developed. Active in the women's liberation movement, Americans Robin Morgan (2001), Karla Jay (1999) and Brenda Feigen (2000) detail the influence of state surveillance on their lives. Betty Friedan (2006), a leading figure in the American second-wave feminist canon, argued that the FBI had infiltrated feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW). That infiltration was intended to destabilize them, especially when it came to debates around sexual politics. FBI and CIA financial support for and/or infiltration of progressive groups, including those connected to feminism, is common knowledge thanks to the efforts of scholars like Hugh Wilford (2009) and Helen Laville (2002). Most notable is Ruth Rosen's work. Rosen (2001) makes the case that the FBI, which spied on and infiltrated the women's liberation movement in the United States, was stuck in a Cold War mentality privileging male-focused political change. Ultimately, the FBI could not recognize how truly radical the women they targeted were because they did not understand their demands for gender equality.

Most people who associate state surveillance with technology think about gadgets used to conduct espionage, like cameras in cigarette cases and audio recorders in wristwatches and briefcases. The STASI museum, now housed in the former organization's headquarters in Berlin, displays an array of recording devices hidden in neckties, watering cans, birdhouses, and artificial logs and rocks. Similar items, which are the stuff of both fact and fiction, have appeared in many a James Bond film. In practice, state surveillance is far less exciting or amusing. I prefer to think of technologies of surveillance as an art form that involves the prosaic gathering of intelligence data and the systematic classification, storage, and retrieval of that data, most often in the form of documents.

Those surveillance files that Hewitt and I are working with are divided into two sets:

i) Cross-referenced surveillance reports, including information from informers and stakeouts. Notably, these informers would have been female when spying on closed-door meetings of women's liberation gatherings. At open door sessions they could have been either male or female. One of the biggest problems of these reports is that they can be very heavily censored, resulting in a fragmentary quality that frustrates researchers. Yet at times, other reports can yield a considerable number of details.

ii) Material appended to these surveillance reports. Unlike the reports, this material is rarely censored via ATI protocols and is a rich supplement to the former. Consisting largely of open sources, it includes articles appearing in newspapers and magazines, pamphlets, newsletters, position papers, announcements and minutes of meetings from mainstream sources, women's groups, and left-wing organizations. Some of this material can be categorized as 'ephemera'.

Surveillance reports have revealed that the RCMP Security Service first opened a file marked SECRET on Women's Liberation Groups—Canada on September 26, 1969: 'During recent months we have noted the emergence of Women's Liberation Groups in Canada. These groups are being organized to publicize the role of women in society and to stop so-called exploitation of women.'[2] Despite acknowledgment of this lofty goal, the RCMP Security Service suspected that Communists or Leftists of various types had infiltrated women's liberation groups. The Mounties were not completely incorrect. Some women's liberation activists did have some political ties to socialists, Trotskyists, and Communists, and Canadian feminism has traditionally been sympathetic to the Old and New Left. The RCMP remained convinced that women's liberation groups might be used as Communist fronts.

The presumed threat of Communist infiltration of women's liberation groups led the RCMP Security Service to shadow women's liberation individuals, groups, and events. For example, an informer provided the names of persons attending a closed-door meeting of the Women's Liberation Group-Toronto on January 13, 1970 on the University of Toronto campus. Her account revealed that group members wanted to learn about

the 'Quebec situation,' and were considering sending a representative to Lakehead University to discuss plans for the upcoming protest against Canada's restrictive abortion laws. Chunks of this surveillance report are censored but the Investigator's final comments refer to the troubling possibility that the group 'continues to show considerable attention to the Quebec separatist situation and is attempting to have their members indoctrinated to that line of thought.' He also remarks that information about abortion law protests might be 'of interest' to the Mounties in Thunder Bay.[3]

It is significant that the RCMP Security Service tracked the first national action of the women's liberation movement in the country. Dissatisfied with the abortion law the federal government passed in 1969, women's liberation groups organized an 'Abortion Caravan' to take their protest to Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada's capital city, in early May 1970. Using a combination of informers, stakeouts, and newspaper reports, the force spied upon large numbers of protesting women as they travelled from Vancouver to Ottawa. However, when the Caravan reached Ottawa, the protestors managed to outwit the local police. Despite the close monitoring of the Caravan, the protestors were able to occupy the front garden of the Prime Minister's residence and to sneak into the House of Commons where they expressed their demand for abortion law reform (Sethna and Hewitt 2009).

Material appended to the surveillance reports provides a fascinating window into second wave feminist concerns. I offer random samples here. A hand-lettered poster stating confidently: 'ALL WOMEN ARE OPPRESSED' and inviting women, housewives, students and faculty to a women's liberation meeting where coffee would be served was stamped 'CONFIDENTIAL' by the RCMP. Poems, often politically heartfelt but of limited literary *and* espionage value, were also collected. One poem read: 'Rancid am I with anger/sour as a green grape/If you bite into me/you'll get a mouthful of acid—/that's the bitter flavour of hostility/buried just below the soft skin/of feminine servility.'

Items from the mainstream, university, women's liberation, and the alternative left-wing press figured prominently amongst the material. A clipping in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* announced that thanks to the ef-

forts of the women's liberation group at the University of Saskatchewan, students would receive a *Birth Control Handbook* that McGill University students had published. An article in *The Silhouette*, McMaster University's student newspaper, praised the establishment of the 'McMaster Woman's Liberation Front' because it decried a 'double standard' that led university women students to question whether or not to lose their virginity before marriage. A letter published in the *Canadian Tribune*, a Communist newspaper in Toronto, discussed women's equality by quoting Lenin in conversation with Clara Zetkin.

Many scholars agree that the ATI process, through which declassified documents are released to researchers, is deeply flawed. The process is, according to George S. Rigakos and Stephen R. Worth (2011), 'riddled with inconsistencies, bureaucratic bias, and the potential to stunt rather than liberate future policing scholarship' (651). Nevertheless, they remain committed to the ATI process, believing that it 'still has the potential to further critical inquiry' (651). On the one hand, both sets of declassified documents are an undeniable record of state surveillance of women's liberation groups accessed through the ATI process. On the other hand, both sets of declassified documents can constitute an archive of Canadian women's history that was created inadvertently by state surveillance. This point of view serves as another path of critical inquiry.

Antoinette Burton asks: 'What counts as an archive?' (2003, 4). Scholars of archives assert that they do not refer merely to physical institutions that house records, but also to a set of technological practices that are intimately related to power and memory (Schwartz & Cook 2002). The surveillance reports can be examined with a critical eye just as all primary sources should be. Why intelligence was collected, how trustworthy it is, what biases are evident, and what remains censored all need to be taken into consideration. The wide range of material the RCMP appended to the reports could prove useful to historians of social movements, especially when publicly available information is sparse and/or the historical record is spotty (Rosswurm & Gilpin 1986). This situation is especially true for scholars researching second-wave feminism in Canada.

No matter how valuable the declassified documents are either as a record of state surveillance or as an archive of primary sources, it must

be remembered that RCMP surveillance destroyed lives, tarnished reputations and spread paranoia. Similarly, NSA data mining of information from ordinary individuals' telephone calls and social network platforms like Facebook challenges the ethics of supposedly exchanging privacy for security. Therefore, it is incumbent upon scholars to ask and answer challenging questions about how documents procured under the ATI process can and should be used in research.

Notes

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2 Library and Archives of Canada (LAC) RG 146 Vol. 2972 Pt. 1 Vancouver Women's Caucus p. A0204871-1-000041

3 LAC RG 146 Vol. 2974 Women's Liberation Group Canada Pt. 2, pp. 000034-35.

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