

*The Cultures of Vigilance. How to write the history of private attention*

Abstract

Foucault's *Panopticon* and Orwell's *Big Brother* introduced the suggestive, but empirically misleading, idea that we are constantly being observed from above or by a single central institution. Even today, with the most powerful technological tools at our disposal and institutions gathering more data than ever, many fundamental services in our society still rely at least partially on contributions made by ordinary people. The concept of *cultures of vigilance* aims to shift scholarly attention to these contributions and thus to establish an alternative approach. We need to historicize and understand the cultural techniques which shape human attention of potentially everybody to meet a broad range of social, religious and personal objectives and my lecture tries to explore how this might be possible. Such an approach differs from that of surveillance in two regards. First, the concept of surveillance comes with a normative bias, whereas the term vigilance indicates a lasting normative indecisiveness: For being vigilant can be perceived both as threatening (indiscrete, surveilling, disciplining), or as a precondition for eventual gains (in security, predictability, control over oneself and over others). Second, vigilance discharges the idea of a central and superior observer, which is presupposed in the model of surveillance. But in doing so it also raises the question of how to write an appropriate history of private attention.