



THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF LEAK-BASED INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE AND PRIVACY: A REVIEW OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM CITIZENFOUR

DİJİTAL GÖZETİM VE MAHREMİYET EKSENİNDE SIZINTIYA DAYALI ARAŞTIRMACI GAZETECİLİĞİN DEĞİŞEN YAPISI: CITIZENFOUR BELGESEL FİLMİ ÜZERİNE BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the evolving structure of leak-based investigative journalism within the framework of the digital surveillance and privacy issue, using the documentary film Citizenfour (2014), directed by Laura Poitras, as a context. A qualitative research approach was adopted in the study, and the film text was analyzed using thematic film analysis. During the analysis process, the scenes and discourses in the film were examined within four thematic categories: the representation of digital surveillance practices, the positioning of Snowden as a whistleblower, privacy debates, and the role of investigative journalism. The research findings indicate that the Citizenfour documentary is a significant media text that makes the functioning of global digital surveillance systems visible. The documents revealed by Snowden in the film demonstrate that government agencies engage not only in targeted surveillance but also in large-scale data collection activities. The film highlights that leak-based investigative journalism plays a critical role in conveying this information to the public. In this context, journalists are portrayed as key actors who bring to light the tension between state surveillance and the public interest. Consequently, it is noted that the documentary presents a narrative that highlights the social and political impacts of digital surveillance systems, and that investigative journalism plays a vital role as a mechanism for public oversight in democratic societies.

Keywords: Digital Surveillance, Privacy, Investigative Journalism, Citizenfour, Wikileaks.

Öz

Bu çalışma dijital gözetim ve mahremiyet sorunu ekseninde sızıntıya dayalı araştırmacı gazeteciliğin değişen yapısını Laura Poitras'ın yönetmenliğini üstlendiği Citizenfour (2014) belgesel filmi bağlamında değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yaklaşımı benimsenmiş ve film metni tematik film analizi yöntemi kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Analiz sürecinde filmde yer alan sahneler ve söylemler dijital gözetim pratiklerinin temsili, Snowden'ın ihbarcı olarak konumlandırılması, mahremiyet tartışmaları ve araştırmacı gazeteciliğin rolü olmak üzere dört tematik kategori çerçevesinde incelenmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, Citizenfour belgeselinin küresel dijital gözetim sistemlerinin işleyişini görünür kılan önemli bir medya metni olduğunu göstermektedir. Filmde Snowden tarafından ortaya çıkarılan belgeler, devlet kurumlarının yalnızca hedef odaklı gözetim değil, aynı zamanda geniş ölçekli veri toplama faaliyetleri yürüttüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Film, sızıntıya dayalı araştırmacı gazeteciliğin bu bilgilerin kamuoyuna aktarılmasında kritik bir rol üstlendiğini göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda gazeteciler, devlet gözetimi ile kamu yararı arasındaki gerilimi görünür kılan önemli aktörler olarak temsil edilmektedir. Sonuç olarak belgeselin, dijital gözetim sistemlerinin toplumsal ve politik etkilerini görünür kılan bir anlatı sunduğu ve araştırmacı gazeteciliğin demokratik toplumlarda kamusal denetim mekanizması olarak önemli bir rol üstlendiği belirtilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Gözetim, Mahremiyet, Araştırmacı Gazetecilik, Citizenfour, Wikileaks.



INTRODUCTION

More than ever, for those people under government control, and especially for corporations and states intent on following their capitalist dreams, individuals' everyday lives are regulated. Capitalist society is primarily characterized by the production and consumption of information as part of the modern economy. Data collection must be more interactive, more clicks lead to data aggregation. That has created a new demand for data. The information economy (Schwartz, 2017) is one of these economic conditions and is a major contributor to the proliferation of social media businesses (Marichal, 2016).

With the ever-increasing demand for information prevalent in modern society, the legitimization of surveillance has become a simplified process, convincing users to disregard fears of the damage to their privacy. For users, accessing social media platforms that allow them to create their own version of reality means that has become far more attractive. Accepting this life without regard to its consequences seems like simply the way things are—to live in a world of data. Surveillance is seen as systematic, direct collection and usage of personal information. According to Lyon (2007): It is systematic, routine, focused attention on personal privacy for a given purpose. It is how contextually-based information is transmitted to the other domain. Surveillance on social media involves all forms of casual and consensual social interaction. Trottier (2011, p. 61) looks at three measurable types of surveillance: (a) Individuals surveilling one another (b) Institutions observing an audience (c) Enterprises observing their marketplaces. He explains that this system requires the interaction and information of individual, corporate, and market surveillance. This means that any personal information which is uploaded or retained can potentially be used for any type of surveillance. All three types of surveillance are rising with social media adoption at breakneck speed. It is this apparent inevitable form of surveillance what propels the evolution of the business model of social media companies. It is said that surveillance (especially data surveillance by social media companies) not only touches upon users' information privacy but also their offline freedoms and behavior (Fuchs, 2017).

Data surveillance has always been a weapon in the hands of those in power. Within some contemporary governments, and particularly among democracies as well as authoritarian regimes, the pervasiveness of surveillance methods has given rise to the term surveillance societies. Due to the surveillance, one risk of social exclusion based on gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and other major categorical data. On the other hand, it has also been criticized for making discrimination possible. More surveillance brings power and privilege to the very people we are supposed to care for, or make the most of; marginalised people less lucky and more disadvantaged.

Surveillance studies literature has grown over and over as the digital media have spread. David Lyon (2007, 2014) highlights that in such a context, surveillance is not confined to security policy in the modern world, it is also inextricably linked to economic and cultural processes. Brown (2014) notes similarly that digital data is now made available which are used to develop comprehensive profiles pertaining to people's identities, behaviours and preferences and have serious implications for privacy. It speaks volumes to the power of surveillance as it has come within commercial and political spheres, as the capability of using data created from social media platforms and services in online environments is not limited to these platforms.

First, the digital surveillance debate entered new frontiers worldwide, particularly following revelations made by Edward Snowden in 2013. These disclosures were the first revelation of the U.S. National Security Agency's (NSA) far-reaching surveillance initiatives spanning global communication networks, the extent to which states could surveil not merely citizens but global communication networks as well. The Snowden leaks set off discussion not only around academic and political analysis of surveillance regimes, but also raised new questions about where investigative journalism stands in the digital age and what this type of journalism needs to do.

Investigative journalism has been essential to covering the secrets of the public record throughout history. Nonetheless, digital communication technology has significantly transformed how information is produced and disseminated. Specifically, the practice of online whistleblowing and leak-based journalism has changed journalists' interactions with data sources and dissemination to the public.

The Wikileaks documents and Snowden leaks are two examples of how collaboration between journalists and anonymous sources has evolved and manifested differently in our digital world.

While research regarding digital espionage as investigative journalism is growing (e.g., research concerning digital surveillance and investigative journalism), the narrative of such a relationship in visual media, notably documentary cinema, is limited. But documentaries are an integral aspect of cultural production that can also shed light on social and political problems. In particular, political documentaries are considered vital in order to explain these political processes for viewers and shape the political conversation. In this context, Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014) — a documentary on the Snowden expose by Edward Snowden (and later the unmasking of the NSA spy programs) — offers a particularly potent model for examining this convergence of digital surveillance, privacy and investigative journalism.

This research attempts to investigate how leaks are altering investigative journalism in light of issues of digital surveillance and privacy by using *Citizenfour* as a case study. Our overarching research question is: *How do contemporary online whistleblowing modalities transform the mediating role of data and public opinion for investigative journalists?* This article seeks to consider the surveillance debates and journalistic practice concerning the Snowden leak in relation to the documentary film narrative. In the way of an understanding, the study constructs a theory that makes use of the knowledge of surveillance studies: Michel Foucault's theories of surveillance and power, David Lyon's theories of the present surveillance social order. As such, the documentary *Citizenfour* is analyzed with respect to its depiction of the functions of digital surveillance and the function of investigative journalism in the enterprise. This study attempts to assimilate two different academic traditions, from which I will draw from the literature on digital surveillance, and the lens on documentary filmmaking. As such, it seeks to contribute a new way to the conversation on digital surveillance through media images, and how that evolution of investigative journalism in the digital age has been narrated in visual media.

Digital Surveillance and Privacy

To provide a better context, diverse theoretical foundations for examining the phenomenon of surveillance in contemporary societies have been proposed through theorization in the social sciences. Of these, Foucault's scholarship on surveillance and power relations and Lyon's analyses of contemporary surveillance society rank amongst the most important. The emergence of digital communication technology means surveillance is no longer confined in terms of its geographical and spatial dimension but with access to virtual communication information sources (networks, databases, algorithmic systems and online communications) has become an all-dimensional concept. Thus we need to comprehend not only classical surveillance theories, but also present-day digital surveillance literature, when comparing modern surveillance practices.

One of Michel Foucault's most significant works on surveillance emerged as part of his analysis of the *panopticon*, as suggested in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The panopticon model is a prison architectural structure which Jeremy Bentham developed, consisting of various cells sitting around a central watchtower. According to this model, individuals under surveillance are compelled to adjust their actions in the belief that they are under constant surveillance, as they cannot see the watching person. Foucault's metaphorical theory of the panopticon describes how power works under modern conditions as a design of architecture. In this perspective, surveillance, then, becomes a sort of power tactic which trains people in discipline of behavior which is aimed at the discipline of their behavior and points us towards self-regulation.

Surveillance, in Foucault's view, is not simply the mechanism to monitor people - but another form of power in which the creation of information production is inseparably bound. This power-information relationship preserves social order, enabling the normalization of the society through the formal documenting and studying of individual behavior on the systematic collection of this data. In this sense, surveillance practice is taken to be seen as one of the key tools of state institutions and other forms of power to exert control over individuals in contemporary societies.

In the era of the dissemination of digital communication technologies, surveillance has changed drastically, too. David Lyon (2007) examines in detail how digital technologies have broadened the ability to surveil in contemporary societies (for modern communities according to surveillance society) and examines how surveillance society (to understand modern societies) through surveillance society. To Lyon, then, surveillance refers to the collection, categorization and analysis of personal information in a systematic fashion for specific public and private institutions. Such processes are not conducted solely by state institutions but also Big Tech firms and commercial corporations. Surveillance, then, had extended beyond security in this case, to include economic or cultural processes as well. Lyon's research particularly studies how contemporary use of big data is redefining modern surveillance today. The digital platforms generating big data can be used to interpret people's behavior and predict future behavior. With this move, surveillance can now become more than just an observation of behavior, but also a prediction of management behavior for people once this transformation occurs when monitoring is no longer merely an inspection but also predictive. So surveillance also produces subtler and more intricate and distant forms of social control. Yet rather than being the only thing that stands out by conventional means of surveillance, this invisible aspect of digital surveillance also lays the groundwork for our understanding of its production of a reconceptualisation of Foucault's panopticon concept in the course of modern life itself. Where surveillance, in panopticism, was restricted to one particular site in the old panoptics, of the information security architecture and global communication tools, this digitized modern world provides in the same time extensive surveillance networks, not just existing in communication systems even into the digital age but penetrate in various areas of daily society. The online traces such as internet traffic and social media interactions and mobile-device location information facilitate the continuous recording of individuals' behavior. That is the rise of a new type of surveillance — what some researchers call the *digital panopticon*.

When Edward Snowden exposed his NSA surveillance programs in 2013, that really escalated conversations about the breadth and impact of digital surveillance. Snowden's revelations revealed that government agencies engaged in mass data collection that covered not simply specific individuals, but also vast communication networks. These events opened the door to new lines of argument regarding the potential implications of digital surveillance for individual liberties and privacy in democratic societies. The big data issue, which made headlines when the Snowden leaks flared up, also generated public concern about surveillance in many countries around the world. According to Boyd and Crawford (2012), big data is the ability to find, collate, and compare information (p. 663). These two seemingly simple words encompass a variety of ideas, software and techniques. We need to assess how big data exacerbates surveillance trends attached to information technologies and networks — and, by implication those trends and the associated control and power — respectively. The Snowden revelations, Lyon (2014, p. 2) highlights, point in particular to the threat of big data for surveillance. That Snowden reveals the question raised by the publication about its applications and how to apply it to surveillance and fears among the public about the NSA's actions. Edward Snowden leaked a report appearing in the British newspaper The Guardian on June 6, 2013 reporting the NSA's desire that Verizon, the telecommunications company, hand over information from millions of US citizens with their phone calls to itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Greenwald, 2013). Verizon was also banned from publicly revealing the request to keep records of customers, the report also said. Other stories at the Washington Post and The Guardian detailed how the NSA had direct access to computer servers of technology firms like Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Skype, Yahoo and YouTube. Indeed, the UK Security and Intelligence Agency (GCHQ) has access to mass data, it can track all types of internet traffic via cable and network eavesdropping technology known as Upstream, and the access to information is also real time since it is given via a database, XKeyscore (Lanchester, 2013).

These surveillance tricks that Snowden demonstrated vividly show that governments have the right to manipulate, hold dominion over, and exploit the population they govern. Data mining is done by the NSA using third-party data (or "contractors") with which it contracts to share the workload. This sort of surveillance means the NSA watches cookies and login details. Hence, data collected using mobile phones or geo-locating social media platforms can be used for real-time tracking. It means the data that users posted on Facebook or Twitter, or via their smartphones, can be used for national security goals. Better yet, the information about users is all harvested without their knowledge or consent. Thus, this



issue can be attributed to three key actors: government agencies, private firms, and even the average Joe (Lyon, 2014, p. 3). The system filters, analyzes, measures and holds them for specific periods. To accomplish these, the NSA requires codes, algorithms and the collaboration of carriers and internet providers. An architecture that relies on individual users recording themselves—or one another—inadvertently plays a vital role in obtaining this objective (Greenwald, 2013).

Lyon (2014, p. 10) identifies ethical issues concerning big data surveillance as relating to privacy, social stratification and exclusion; she asserts that public debates often concentrate on issues of privacy. Privacy as a human right provides the foundation for democratic governance like freedom of expression. Brown (2014) notes that data generated in digital environments enables the creation of detailed profiles regarding individuals' identities and behaviours, and that this poses serious risks to privacy. With the widespread use of the internet, individuals are unknowingly sharing large amounts of personal data with online platforms, and this data can be used by various organisations for a range of purposes. In this process, surveillance activities often take place in ways that users cannot directly perceive, and surveillance mechanisms are becoming increasingly invisible. In this post-Snowden era, privacy is a value that is under great attack. Privacy is the key concept that should galvanize society against illegal, disproportionate, and intrusive surveillance. These policies violate laws intended to protect citizens' freedom and privacy. While numerous assurances of non-targeting exist in the US and elsewhere, that people are not targeted by such systems does not satisfy privacy advocates.

Snowden and Citizenfour

One of the many forms of progressive political documentary, which flourished in the mid-twentieth century, has been giving a platform for minorities, oppressed and victimized folks to feel seen and heard. Documentary films have dramatized inadequate representations, provided theatrical critique of surveillance regimes and emphasized privacy and anonymity while at the same time aesthetic. A direct and honest rendition of reality has come to be embraced as a kind of political activist action, and documentary filmmakers will be concentrating more specifically on the problematic parts of life. So this has given rise to critical documentaries that are about social issues, like immigration policies, race prejudice, gender discrimination, income disparity and digital surveillance. Therefore, documentary films that illustrate reality, giving agency to the peoples, regions, cultures and various social classes in their life and accounts of their daily struggles, are different from the fictitious productions. Documentary film and influencing public opinion is the subject of much debate, and the question is if documentary films can change the world. Realistic portrayals like anti-war resistance, freedom of speech, and civil rights movements on film can encourage more people to join in the activism of social and political activists, if they're shown.

Documentary films have also gained more mainstream attention in the late past few decades due to the fact that neoliberal agenda became the economic, political, and cultural centre of gravity in the late twentieth century. In *Jargons of Authenticity* (1993), Paul Arthur writes about the rise of non-fiction film citing a rising popularity of documentaries and claims that “there is currently more interest in non-fiction cinema than at any time since the late 1960s.” Drawing on widely-esteemed and controversial autobiographical performative films – like Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985), Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) and Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1990) – Arthur contends that this new genre of documentary either belittles, dismisses, or outright negates traditional documentary norms of authority and realism.

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) is an essential instance of this new style of documentary. Moore's film is a polemical rejoinder to the mainstream news media's confusion as the Bush administration took the US on its first foray into the Iraq War. Moore ironically enumerates one ironic point after another in the treatment of the many disturbing facets of the Bush administration's policies and actions in the press. September 11, 2001, is the date of the worst terrorist attack in United States history. Four US Airlines aircraft were hijacked that day by the al-Qaeda terrorists, two of which crashed into the towers at the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon, and another into a field in Pennsylvania (before passengers picked up). Afterwards, the Bush administration passed the Patriot Act, allowing for surveillance of both foreign and domestic citizens and institutions. We therefore agreed that sacrificing



the freedom of its citizens for reasons of security was the best course. In this regard, the NSA set up its PRISM—a program of direct access to Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, and other major social media platforms. The NSA, by providing records through which the NSA could observe all social media content and collect personal profiles from everyone talking online during an exchange. PRISM was also a tool for world-wide surveillance by exploiting the fact most digital media companies' servers were registered and worked in the US.

Edward Snowden, a confidential informant, reached out to reporters in a bid to reveal U.S. surveillance policies. As long as meetings were safe, he shielded his identity, supplying journalists with instructions about when and where to meet, as well as a plan for how to go up to him to avoid being overheard. *Citizenfour* (2014), directed by Laura Poitras, is one of the productions that depicts Snowden's gradual exposure of government surveillance post-exit from his position of NSA contractor Booz Allen along with more than a million files. The documentary was released on October 24, 2014, and it's based on real hours of on-camera interviews with its main character,

Edward Snowden, footage that uses raw observation as a narrative technique to show how Snowden changed things. Showing the effects of the government's phone tapping program, but not showing or explaining exactly how to fight against the technology or government surveillance activities disclosed by Snowden, *Citizenfour* doesn't serve the viewer in an ordinary documentary, but rather something more like a movie. AO Scott (2014) wrote about the film in *New York Times* "a tense and frightening thriller that blends the fast-paced world tour of the Bourne films with the eerie atmospheric effect of a Japanese horror film." *Citizenfour* is analysed from Scott (2014) two ways. One way to read the film is as journalism because, for him, it's substantial investigative journalism. The second is a cinematographic point of view that we should read the film as a tasteful and clever extension of the new dystopian allegory genre. Rather than explore the NSA program or Snowden's biography and persona, the film focuses on his act of disclosure and how it led to his identity being exposed. Instead of offering information, new facts about the story, *Citizenfour* turns to counter-representational stories such as individual action, identity, citizenship, encryption, and exile.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within a qualitative research framework with the aim of examining the relationship between digital surveillance, privacy and investigative journalism. Qualitative research offers methods that enable the interpretation of social phenomena and their analysis within a specific context. In this context, the study employed a thematic film analysis method to examine how debates on digital surveillance are represented through documentary cinema. The framework of the study is based on theoretical discussions regarding the relationship between journalism, public opinion and surveillance practices. The complexity of surveillance in the digital age and the resistance strategies that could be developed against this issue have been assessed through the lens of the Snowden leaks. From this perspective, the documentary film *Citizenfour* (2014), selected as a case study, has been analysed *descriptively* in line with the study's objectives, and the data obtained has been synthesised and interpreted within *thematic frameworks*.

Research Population and Sample

This study adopts a *qualitative thematic film analysis* method with the aim of interpreting the representation of digital surveillance practices in documentary cinema. It employs a *purposive sampling strategy* by selecting the documentary film *Citizenfour* (2014), directed by Laura Poitras, as a *single case study*. The rationale for this selection lies in the film's unique position as a primary document that captures, in real time, the intersection of digital surveillance, whistleblower dynamics and investigative journalism, whilst offering a depth of observation unparalleled in other documentaries on this subject. Another reason for selecting the film within the scope of the research is that it directly addresses Edward Snowden's revelations regarding the US National Security Agency's (NSA) global surveillance programmes and documents this process through the relationships he established with journalists. In this respect, *Citizenfour* is regarded as a significant media text situated at the intersection of digital surveillance debates and leak-based investigative journalism practices.



Data Collection Process

The data source for this study consists of the visual and audio content featured in the documentary film *Citizenfour*. The film was treated as primary data within the scope of the research and was analysed after being viewed multiple times. To enhance methodological rigour, the coding process was conducted iteratively, and themes were further clarified through repeated viewings of the film. Given the interpretative nature of the study, the analysis does not rely on multiple coders or statistical measures of inter-coder reliability. Instead, analytical rigour is ensured through methodological transparency and theoretical consistency. This approach prioritises *the depth of the analysis over generalisability*. The aim of the research is to offer a theoretically grounded and contextually rich interpretation of the film, rather than to produce universally replicable results.

The coding process was conducted iteratively, and repeated viewings of the film enabled the refinement and consolidation of thematic categories. This iterative approach enhances internal consistency by ensuring that themes are grounded in the data. The study adopts a reflexive analytical stance, acknowledging the researcher's interpretative role in the coding process. Rather than aiming for objective neutrality, the analysis seeks consistency between empirical observations and established theoretical frameworks in surveillance studies. Validity is supported through theoretical triangulation. The identified themes are interpreted in relation to key concepts in surveillance theory—particularly those developed by Foucault and Lyon. This alignment strengthens the explanatory nature of the analysis and situates the findings within a broader academic context.

During the viewing process, themes relating to digital surveillance, privacy and journalistic practices were identified by taking into account the film's dialogue, narrative structure and visual elements. As part of this process, the film's script was systematically examined and the scenes and lines of dialogue required for analysis were noted down.

Analysis Categories

Specific thematic categories were established for elucidating the relationship between digital surveillance and investigative journalism in the film analysis. To identify these categories, we started with the underlying themes that permeated the film. Thematic headings were used to analyze the film that follows:

Representation of digital surveillance practices: The following analysis examines the portrayal of the NSA's global surveillance programs in the film and the role they play in individual privacy.

Edward Snowden's positioning as a whistleblower: The analysis is an overview of why Snowden has chosen to become a whistleblower, his critical appraisals of government surveillance, and how he presents himself as a protector of the public interest.

Discussions on privacy and democracy: Displays reflect the conversation about how surveillance policies impact individual freedom and democratic values.

The role of investigative journalists and journalistic practices: The film looks at the bond that journalists put in contact with information-providers, the ways they check things out, and also how they get information across to the public.

Based on these thematic categories, the film's scenes, dialogues, and narrative elements are analyzed in order to interpret digital surveillance's relationship with investigative journalism. The film text was thus not taken only as a narrative but also, as a media text, it became visible and able to make discussions on digital surveillance into one.

FINDINGS

This section examines documentary film *Citizenfour* (2014) as it is viewed through the lens of digital surveillance, privacy, and investigative journalism. Edward Snowden exposes information about the US National Security Agency's (NSA) global surveillance programs to the public through journalists. It



analyzes important themes in the film, which include visibility of digital surveillance, Snowden's role as a whistleblower, debates over privacy, and investigative journalism. In order to make the thematic analysis more systematic and comprehensible, each selected scene from the documentary has been coded and classified according to a predefined framework. The selected scenes, their narrative content and the corresponding thematic interpretations are presented in the table below.

Table 1. A scene-based thematic analysis of Citizenfour (2014).

Scene No	Time Code (Approx.) ¹	Scene Description	Frame Description (Visual Analysis)	Key Dialogue / Visual Content	Theme	Thematic Interpretation
1	00:08:30 – 00:15:00	Hong Kong hotel meeting (first encounter)	Low-key lighting, static camera, close-up shots of Snowden create intimacy and tension	Snowden explains NSA programs	Digital Surveillance Practices	Mass surveillance infrastructure
2	00:15:00 – 00:22:00	Encryption and secure communication	Close-up of laptop and hands typing, focus on screen	Secure communication tools	Digital Surveillance Practices	Counter-surveillance awareness
3	00:22:00 – 00:26:00	Snowden motivation statements	Medium close-up, neutral background, calm expression	Public should decide	Whistleblower Positioning	Ethical positioning
4	00:26:00 – 00:35:00	Journalists reviewing documents	Over-the-shoulder shots, documents spread on table	Verification process	Investigative Journalism	Mediation role
5	00:35:00 – 00:40:00	PRISM slides explanation	Inserted digital graphics, documentary overlay style	NSA visuals	Digital Surveillance Practices	Institutional surveillance
6	00:48:00 – 00:52:00	Obama's public statement	Frame-within-frame TV broadcast, mediated image	Snowden as threat	Privacy & Democracy	State vs individual tension
7	00:52:00 – 01:05:00	Global media coverage	Fast montage editing across countries	News spread	Investigative Journalism	Transnational journalism
8	01:05:00 – 01:15:00	Snowden risk discussion	Dark tones, confined space, tense atmosphere	Fear and exile	Whistleblower Positioning	Personal cost
9	01:40:00 – 01:50:00	Moscow meeting scene	Long shot, silence, note passing gesture	Silent exchange	Investigative Journalism	Continuity of leaks
10	Throughout	Data centers / surveillance visuals	Wide shots of anonymous buildings, abstract imagery	Abstract surveillance	Privacy & Democracy	Invisible systems

¹ The time codes provided in the table are approximate and based on the standard version of the documentary. Minor variations may occur across different distributions and viewing platforms. The analysis focuses on thematic and visual consistency rather than exact temporal precision.

The table shows that the documentary is in a systematic way structured to build the narrative from the scenes that align with the four major thematic categories described in the study. Digital surveillance is constructed chiefly around technical documents and Snowden's explanations, while his identity as a whistleblower is established through personal narratives and ethical justifications. Issues of privacy and democracy emerge through political discourse and symbolic imagery, whereas investigative journalism is highlighted through the practices of verification, interpretation, and dissemination of leaked information. This structured mapping also confirms that the film does not only offer a story, but is a multi-faceted media text that reflects the relationship with surveillance, privacy and journalism.

Representation of Digital Surveillance Practices

The big leak by Edward Snowden back in June 2013 that leaked much of the communications in digital networks was available to US intelligence services. Surveillance was thus conducted based on the ability to tap into widespread information technologies owned by MNCs (e.g., Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Apple) and functioning outside local jurisdiction. So it was obvious that the US, which accuses other states of spying, exploits its key location on the global internet to serve its own interest, turning our global communication infrastructure into a sort of global panopticon (Sullivan, 2014; Zuboff, 2015).

As Edward Snowden exposed to the world the extensive surveillance programs of the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the UK's Security and Intelligence Agency (GCHQ), intelligence agencies constantly collect massive quantities of data on us. The programs announced by Snowden range from eavesdropping on personal information that is shared online to infiltrating computer systems entirely. These programs include widespread data-collection and surveillance of governments, companies and non-governmental organizations. Among other things, it has emerged that intelligence agencies harvested metadata on billions of phone calls that had been made to and from Verizon and other large phone vendors. The NSA was also exposed to the data gathered by Facebook, Google, Apple and other tech companies with its PRISM program (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017, p. 257). These revelations led to an unprecedented global discussion about digital surveillance and the challenges that are occurring in the digital age of modern societies — and have also led to a series of political repercussions, among some of the flashpoints being the relationship between the US and other countries. Most critically, it asks basic and even important questions about journalists in these new social and power structures.

Citizenfour is the opening of the scope of digital state surveillance. The documents Snowden distributed to journalists in the film indicate the NSA had carried out massive data collection programs that engaged not just individual members but massive swathes of worldwide communication networks. And it illustrates how the digital communication infrastructure has emerged as an important asset for state surveillance.



Figure 1. Digital communications infrastructure (Citizenfour, 2014).

Citizenfour is one such instance of digital surveillance with regard to the manner in which modern state generates large data collections through their communication infrastructures. We see through Edward Snowden's material and personal communication with the journalists of the film that the US National Security Agency (NSA) is able to not only engage in targeted intelligence operations, but also collects data systematically from global communication networks. This illustrates that it is a structure and not just a collection of single citizens.

Part of the documentary, particularly the disclosures regarding the PRISM program, shows one individual's content of their emails, online communications, and interactions with others may be analyzed on the basis of data mined from the servers of major technology companies. These papers and screenshots in the film that Snowden offers journalists are concrete examples of the technical workings of surveillance systems, and they demonstrate the breadth of the mechanisms at work. The film, therefore, demonstrates how digital communications infrastructures have been utilized as a strategic tool for state surveillance. This representation can be traced back to David Lyon's notion of the surveillance society.

According to Lyon, surveillance today takes place as a consequence of the regular collection and analysis of data on individual behavior. And so Lyon argues then that the control is, indeed, reproduced through the methodical extraction and analysis of personal data. It is no longer that surveillance is just a tool for the surveillance-oriented security policies but that it must be seen as one of the primary forms of governance within digital society. The technologies of surveillance that Citizenfour describes in its documentary also rely on such large amounts of digital information being gathered. This implies that surveillance is not just a security policy but rather constitutes a structural component of digital communication.



Figure 2. Digital communications infrastructure (Citizenfour, 2014).

The film's depiction of digital systems of surveillance and surveillance mechanisms makes it a visible one that, in a sense can also be mapped onto Foucault's notion of the panopticon. Snowden's revelation indicates the existence of a set of systems under observation: digital networks of digital communication environments that are designed to surveil individuals continuously, indicating a digital panoptic order in which people behave for the greater good. Of course, surveillance is anything but novel. Surveillance regimes have always been used by nation-states to monitor and discipline populations. Jeremy Bentham (1791) brought the *panopticon* model of prison architecture -- a form of architecture enabling the continuous and comprehensive surveillance of people to light for all to see. For Foucault (1975), the panopticon is a metaphor for modern social control methods that embody self-discipline and self-governance under the watchful eyes of an authority. What remains novel is how, in a society governed by data (van Dijck, 2014), an all-encompassing, opaque collection of information about everyone is ubiquitous and yet integral to the operation of consumer capitalism. The surveillance of citizens in a particular society, meanwhile, allows forms of classification that enable order and control (Foucault, 1975).

Snowden's revelations, however, have highlighted the different forms of surveillance people are subjected to in modern societies. These permeate every aspect of life; from online shopping and browsing online, through to social lives, and even our way of transportation and social relations on site, under the gaze of security cameras. As stated by Bauman and Lyon (2013, p. 13) the ominous effect of surveillance is that citizens are more and more desensitized to the fact that surveillance is part of the ordinary landscape.

As they note, much of that personal information that a company squashes for the next few moments is in fact accessible to anyone who uses cell phones, shopping in malls, going on vacation, having a good time, or surfing the internet. Surveillance, therefore, is normalized and under the cover of ubiquity, untrammelled. People live in the state of surveillance reality that is not questioned or challenged.

Edward Snowden's Positioning as a Whistleblower

The second significant finding of the research is Edward Snowden in the film as a whistleblower. Snowden's revealing the documents to the public amounts to an ethical and political critique of state surveillance. In the film, Snowden insists that his disclosure of the covert spying carried out by state agencies is an ethical and democratic responsibility. The Snowden narrative is built on a discursive terrain that frames surveillance regimes as a form of violating both individual freedoms and democratic values. It's something that highlights the role of whistleblowers in the digital age on the issue of transparency of information and public oversight. Data from Artieri, Giglietto and Gemini (2015) further strengthens the claim that the international response of the media to the Snowden documents played a significant role in reshaping the game among investigative journalism. Through this lens, the documentary *Citizenfour* emerges as an important media text that illustrates how whistleblowers' encounter with journalists is implicated in the generation of collective knowledge.

Via Snowden's interviews with Hong Kong journalists, the film demonstrates the inner conflict between private danger and the public interest at work. Snowden leaked the information to the general public, knowing that identifying his name could lead to dire legal and personal consequences. This demonstrates how whistleblowers contribute to the provision of transparency in the production of information in democratic societies. Snowden's perspective can also be seen as a critique of today's surveillance systems. Snowden also argues in the video that state-sponsored government surveillance and mass monitoring programs violate individual rights and freedoms — an affront to those rights. In this light Snowden's story becomes one more addition to a large dialogue on the legitimacy of computerized surveillance systems. Snowden's comments evoke a new kind of consideration for a different lens on how state surveillance impacts people's basic rights and freedoms. As Snowden states, a surveillance system does not deal with one type of threat in isolation, but becomes one with other parts of a society's communication functions. This scenario implies that surveillance policies will need to reconsider with reference to the mechanisms of democratic oversight – it is these mechanisms which are the factors that will need to redo surveillance policies.



Figure 3. Snowden's meetings with journalists in Hong Kong (*Citizenfour*, 2014).

Snowden's role as a whistleblower creates a strong and direct link between investigative journalism and Snowden. The film's depiction of his relationship with journalists illustrates how leak-based journalism practices of journalism, leak-based practices in today's press operates in today's context. Journalists evaluate the documents obtained from Snowden and transmit them to the public under the criteria of both fact-finding and ethical duty. And it's by so doing, the film demonstrates that the dynamic between whistleblowers and journalists matters in the public interest.



Figure 4. Obama's press conference at the White House (Citizenfour, 2014).

In *Citizenfour*, accented language - e.g. the scene of Greenwald addressing an audience who speaks heavily accented Portuguese in Brazil - acts as a metaphor for geographical dislocation and exile. The film's criticism of nationalism, surveillance, and national security is most apparent when Obama declares Snowden an enemy of the state at a White House press conference. That moment in the film's dramatic climax is a dramatic culmination of the characters' actions – they finally show us that Obama is unable to fulfill his constitutional responsibilities to safeguard and defend the civil liberties of US citizens. Here, at this moment of the film, Snowden has actually vanished, visible in symbolic terms – as ES – in the letters he wrote to Laura Poitras. This blackout extends throughout the movie until its closing scene, when we meet Snowden in Moscow again months after his first confrontation with Greenwald. In this closing scene, Greenwald tells Snowden about an NSA whistleblower with an unnamed face. The semi-illegible handwritten notes Greenwald keeps, that he passes to Snowden, but doesn't say anything, finally give an end to a successful cinematic treatment of data collection, surveillance, and leaks.

Discussions on Privacy and Democracy

A major theme in the film is a tension between digital surveillance and individual privacy. Instead of telling it as it is in the context — the film is not a direct account of Snowden's actions, but rather a dramatized behind-the-scenes look at how the story was reported in the press. It has a story line tied to what the Snowden leaks meant for individuals and the world. As a result, *Citizenfour* consistently highlights consequences government espionage initiatives have on people's lives, and what that story should mean for the rest of us. It diverts the viewer's attention away from Snowden, in a way recasting him as a forgotten or invisible person. The film's name, which uses the word citizen, does more than refer to Snowden's code name; it indicates the idea of *citizenship* is important in the film. The code name *citizenfour* — referring to Snowden, who was declared stateless by being accused of treason — makes the idea of citizenship central to the film's consciousness. Thus, in essence, the film is a direct attack on NSA's data collection program but also a reminder of privacy as a constitutional right and is asking what can those revelations portend for our understanding of national identity or whether they serve just one purpose at best.

Citizenfour also foregrounds boundaries. It speaks not only to the frame created by the camera but also to the geographical frame of national borders. Its structure design as an intentional spy story of location jumps throughout Berlin, Brazil, New York, Hong Kong, London, Rio, then back to Berlin, and finally to Moscow, the film's way of trying to shed light on, at its heart, the world's perception of this moment. *Citizenfour* also highlights the importance of a tale about secrecy and privacy being taken up in the public mind. And in doing so, it drives home the tension between publicness and privacy that underlies the NSA's data collection work. In the meantime, landscape sets depicting government surveillance work reveal to us sight lines of data gathering nodes that appear like nothing but there is a world of difference to them from afar. Scott (2014) argues that the most valuable aspect of *Citizenfour* which sets it apart from other films is that it does not persist in its attempts to make tangible state power boundaries.

So it's fine with landscape sequences of data collection centers. For one thing, it is impossible to distinguish the lines of the power the state gets as it looms in the otherwise invisible void.

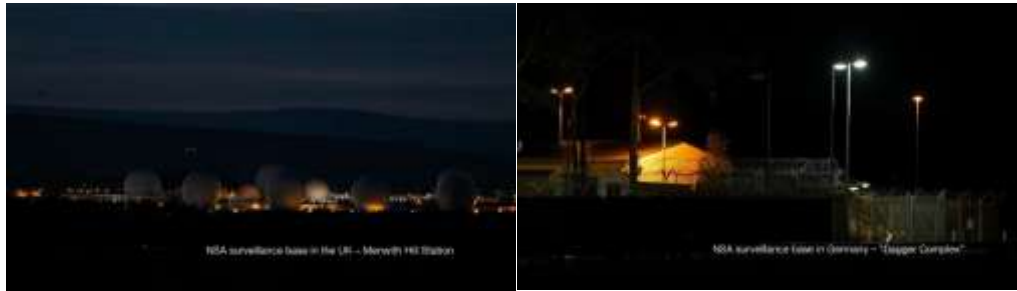


Figure 5. NSA surveillance bases (Citizenfour, 2014).

Snowden shows that government big data collection can pose a formidable danger to individual privacy rights. In speaking in the context of the film, we learn that digital surveillance is not just a matter of technical security for one's information security; it also involves human rights and basic political freedoms and interests of free people. It also shows that the possibilities offered by new digital technologies bring additional hazards to security.

The film deals with issues of privacy, not only for people or individuals themselves but the broader society. A key one, ultimately, that Snowden considers in the film is likely that the very fact that you may be aware and sensitive to constant surveillance, if people tend to change in the company and oversight of an infinite surveillance mechanism is one of Snowden's central things. Snowden points out that in a society in which individuals live under constant surveillance, freedom of expression as well as democratic participation are being deprived. Such situations also influence the ability to exercise people's democratic rights to freedom of expression and political participation. Hence surveillance practices need to be thought of not just as data collection but also as power plays, as a tool dictating the behavior of someone in the public arena. In light of this, the film depicts, on the screen, not just that digital surveillance is a technical security issue but also a political and ethical dilemma.

Data privacy is something the movie talks about as essential to the survival of democratic societies. Snowden says that a culture of democratic debate and the like can be damaged when the communication activities of people are observed at all times. This underscores the importance of assessment of digital surveillance systems both on the basis of security policy and democratic values. Foucault's theory of power and knowledge provides an important basis for these ideas. Data generated from digital surveillance systems generates information about how people behave in ways that can assist in the reinforcement of those social control systems. Accordingly, surveillance is one of the crucial instruments on the work of power in modern societies.

The Role of Investigative Journalists and Journalistic Practices

Citizenfour is investigative journalism's place in conversations about digital surveillance. The film looks at the way journalists Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill and Snowden communicate, showing how they do things. The reporters thoroughly cross-examine, scrutinize and release the documents they are able to access thanks to Snowden. These procedures illustrate the role of leak-based investigative journalism in the 21st-century media landscape. Journalists as mediators are especially pivotal in exposing opaque action of state organs to the wider public. In the movie journalists are the source of information, yes, but also as public players. This presentation reflects on journalistic practice, too, and highlights the role of media in democratic societies that covers the agenda. Investigative journalism plays a role in the operation of transparency and accountability regimes by exposing the activities of state institutions. Citizenfour can itself thus be seen as a vital media text that makes visible the activity of journalism within a surveillance society.

The traditional role of journalists is gatekeeping (Landert & Miscione, 2017, p. 14). It is in journalists' responsibility and authority to determine the public record of what events happen in an official report. But today's whistleblowers have been engaging with the public (by putting such knowledge onto a platform as WikiLeaks) in a different way by putting those who find the material publicly available to them at the top of some agenda rather than relying on journalists as intermediaries. Digital media offers faster, more open access to information, allowing this to happen. The phenomenon of whistleblowing has shifted the balance of power concerning journalists in this light. WikiLeaks spread a series of leaked material in 2010, including videos such as the Collateral Murder, diaries from the Afghanistan War, and diaries of the Iraq War, and it drew focus, as well as debate. The Guardian wrote in print but other newspapers, such as The New York Times took a different approach towards WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks and investigative journalists debate the integrity of WikiLeaks and other media has been about ethical and legal issues. Journalists insist that documents leaked must be edited and rewritten before being published. They also argue that steps should be taken in the interest of the presumption of innocence of those identified in the leaked documents. They point to the possible failures of publishing information from an anonymous, unverified source. While journalists are expected to be biased (as impartial) but also work to avoid restrictions on the publication of leaked information in order to preserve the ideal of press freedom on the one hand, they have their own biases as such, when they read leaked information on the flip side.

If WikiLeaks' approach was primarily about enabling data to do its job, Snowden's leaks seem more typical of classic investigative journalism. These two instances reflect very different styles of the information management; WikiLeaks was more susceptible to the norms of the internet, Snowden leaks seem rather perceptive to journalism as a valid and widely accepted instrument for news reporting. WikiLeaks stressed the release of data as open sharing so that everyone can see it for what it really was and make their own decisions. This approach to source disclosure provided new tools for data journalism, so it fed on itself (Allan, 2013). Snowden's method involved many of the leaks being handled by experienced journalists engaged in investigative reporting. It sought to create a sense of significance, based on the credibility of established institutions like the press and within a context of freedom of expression.



Figure 6. Snowden's meetings with journalists (Citizenfour, 2014).

Three years after Assange, Edward Snowden invested traditional investigative journalism with both space and attention for its focus, selection, and dissemination. He did indeed connect with The Guardian reporter Glenn Greenwald in December 2012, albeit using the pseudonym Cincinnatus after a former Roman statesman and farmer. Journalist and filmmaker Laura Poitras helped him, together with The Guardian, to go to that location in April 2013 where journalists met Snowden physically. In a tactic reminiscent of the tales of Cold War espionage, Snowden went from Hawaii to Hong Kong, where he met with trusted journalists. He gave his data and information out to newspapers, including The Guardian and The Washington Post, guaranteeing publication after editorial treatment. Snowden's data was not (initially) published online, unlike the Wikileaks leaks.

Notified of the leak, Snowden was widely regarded by the public as a rational, sensible and credible source, despite all the NSA's efforts to undermine him.

Not that the data itself can be said to be leaked, per news coverage for the Snowden revelations. Instead, the expression according to a confidential document obtained by The Guardian is used. That means The Guardian contacted a confidential source. One of them has to do with the need to protect the anonymity of its news source. In fact, Snowden's identity as the whistleblower behind the NSA leaks emerged long after the first news got out. Overall, the coverage of the NSA and PRISM reported in The Guardian is more classic investigative journalism than the data journalism approach applied in the coverage of the Wikileaks case. Snowden carried out the process with investigative reporters whose history of supporting public interest cases — especially when it comes to civil rights or the curtailment of government power — was reliable. He counted on journalists to vet the data for accuracy and relevance and then transform these leaks into narratives the public could understand.

In other words, Snowden was indeed an important force for the dynamic of investigative journalism on leaks, establishing large-scale media cooperation from collaboration with media in many countries and with journalists whom he could choose but with certain institutional connections in one's organization specific to the country. For Snowden, reporting documents on their publication through journalists was essential. Worked in partnerships with the media was a more effective way to do things to him than to just publish data. This permitted him to publish articles that established links between the data and offered information to help put the materials in context. He also consulted and advised on the extensive data and materials he leaked before taking away the final journalistic choices and the capability of carefully editing and defending the findings to reporters and organizations. Understanding the danger of legal repercussions, Snowden made space for journalists to work by holding himself in the public spotlight. By contending that the legitimacy of his leaks depended upon public opinion, Snowden developed a form of protection against the backlash of being branded an irresponsible hacker.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how contemporary forms of digital whistleblowing reshape the mediating role of investigative journalism between data and the public, using the documentary *Citizenfour* (2014) as a case study. The findings suggest that leak-based journalism in the digital age is no longer limited to the disclosure of hidden information but has evolved into a complex process of data interpretation, verification, and narrative construction.

The analysis demonstrates that digital surveillance operates not only as a security mechanism but also as a structural component of contemporary information societies. In line with Lyon's concept of the surveillance society and Foucault's notion of panopticism, *Citizenfour* reveals how surveillance has become decentralized, continuous, and embedded in everyday digital infrastructures. This transformation shifts surveillance from a targeted practice to a pervasive system of data extraction and behavioral monitoring.

The film highlights a significant transformation in the relationship between whistleblowers and journalists. Unlike earlier models of investigative reporting, where journalists acted as primary gatekeepers, the Snowden case illustrates a hybrid model in which whistleblowers actively shape the disclosure process while still relying on journalistic institutions for legitimacy, verification, and public communication. This indicates that investigative journalism has not been replaced but reconfigured in the digital era. The findings underline the growing tension between national security and democratic accountability. *Citizenfour* frames this tension not merely as a legal or political issue but as a fundamental challenge to democratic participation. Continuous surveillance environments may lead to self-censorship and reduced civic engagement, thereby reshaping the conditions under which democratic discourse takes place.

The documentary *Citizenfour* has been found to be a significant media text making digital surveillance systems visible, according to research papers. According to Snowden's film, government agencies are collecting large amounts of data and digital communication networks are used for spying.

David Lyon's notion of a surveillance society echoes this; digital technologies reconfigure the institutions of social governance. A key discovery that the movie finds is the presence of investigative journalism in the digital surveillance debate. That the Snowden documents were exposed through journalists is also another important reminder to the democratic society that investigative journalism makes a huge difference in information transparency in the news. So news organisations, journalists in fact, in the present case are depicted not just as providers of information, but as implementers, monitors of state organs, protecting the public interest.

However, the complexity of surveillance in the context of the digital age and the resistance mechanisms that can be constructed against this issue are still areas that journalists fail to provide a satisfactory account of. Interest has been somewhat up since the Wikileaks and Snowden leaks, but there is too little depth in this reporting. But journalists themselves are surveilled in multiple ways. Journalists experience a deterrent effect as a result of targeted surveillance. Because of the associated fear of surveillance and sanctions, journalists will not always report sensitive stories and voices that are critical. In this landscape, protecting sources is paramount as well. The situation currently threatens to isolate many news sources, except the most committed, from speaking to journalists. Thus, the looming threat of surveillance can wipe out confidential sources and make it difficult to investigate as investigative journalism according to the facts may be stopped due to leaks.

The research highlights documentary cinema's role in publicizing social and political issues. This is something the documentary *Citizenfour* accomplishes by directly recording Snowden's revelations, shedding light on the topic of digital surveillance for a wider audience and raising public awareness on this issue. And in this sense, the film functions as something akin to a documentary narrative, but also a piece of critical text in the media about policies of digital surveillance.

Overall, as such, in the field of investigative journalism and documentary filmmaking, this research aims to contribute to the research with respect to discussions surrounding digital surveillance and privacy. In this research more than ever it can be noted that surveillance practices are becoming increasingly complex and invisible in digital times and by scrutinizing it with the public investigative journalism adds to these dimensions. The study argues that leak-based investigative journalism in the digital age should be understood as a socio-technical practice situated at the intersection of data infrastructures, political power, and media institutions. By combining surveillance theory with documentary analysis, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital media represent and mediate contemporary power structures. Future research may expand this analysis by comparing multiple documentary films or integrating audience reception studies to better understand how such representations influence public perception of surveillance and journalism.

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