

Obfuscating Biopolitics: A Theoretical Primer for Cyborgs and Other Concerned Citizens

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Introduction: This article is adapted from a scholarly paper I'm working on. In the paper, I suggest that security practices that attempt to reenforce state and corporate control by making people live "healthy lives" and forces populations to reproduce — practices which have been collectively theorized as "biopolitics" by philosopher Michel Foucault— may be subverted using tactics of digital obfuscation.

This is based on the understanding that the particular substrate of biological life is becoming increasingly meaningless: our bodies are now data farms or soon will be. Many of us are undeniably cyborgs. Thus I uphold obfuscation (which creates meaningless data) as a way to subvert/problematicize/hack biopolitics: creating meaningless data now means creating unproductive life, and unproductive life is a big problem for biopolitics.

This piece outlines the "why," but not the "how." So far the "how" exists in the realm of the speculative imaginary, although it is almost certainly a more interesting matter.

The subject of biopolitical securitization has no identity, at least according to the typical understanding of the term. The identity-conferring features, the distinguishing characteristics of the individual, are irrelevant: they only becomes meaningful as part of a system within which they generate life. Biopolitics is that which secures (and ensures) this ability to produce life — to fructify and proliferate; to heal and be well. The biopolitically-secured entity is always and only understood to have any meaningful characteristics insofar as they assist this pro-life program. The biopolitically-secured system is threatened by anything that can not be appropriated toward the end of its own perpetuation: that which marks a biopolitically-secured subject as existing with a life beyond that of its system is a danger to be immediately destroyed.

Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero illustrate this point in the introduction to *Biopolitics of Security in the Twenty-First Century* when they note that

From a social constructivist perspective, identity is in effect to be written. From a biopolitical perspective, contingency is underwritten [secured] through a whole variety of calculative practices, not least of which are those that financial markets call securities...Biopolitics is therefore not a politics of identity — enacting a self-other dialectic through discursive practices of identity production. It is a complex array of changing mechanisms concerned with regulating the contingent economy of species life. Identity may follow from this, but identity production is not its initial driver. (Brackets added) (p. 268)

I believe that institutions that rely on biosecuritization (which can be governmental or corporate) can be meaningfully subverted by their subjects using tactics of *obfuscation*, a counter-surveillance technique proposed by technologists Helen Nissenbaum and Finn Brunton. However, in order to make this claim, I will first need to argue for an understanding of selfhood that distinguishes “identity” from “biological life” — life as organic matter, blood and bones. In the present day and age, substance of both is becoming translatable across substrates to the point where they may be ultimately unified: this phenomenon is carefully explained by Eugene Thacker in his book *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics and Culture*. Because of this it is altogether too easy to advance arguments in a conceptually nebulous space that conflates the two and thus risks misrepresenting the aim of biosecuritization. Obfuscation as a means of counteracting surveillance and data gathering — specifically, as I will apply the term, as tactic of resistance to biosecurity practices that rely on data gathering — may be understood as a means of generating ambiguity and confusion around “identity” as a phenomenon categorically split from “biological life.” I don’t believe that “identity” and “biological life” should be seen as exclusive categories by anybody, anymore: this binary only serves the aims of those who seek to exploit bodies for data. Indeed, entertaining the conceptual unification of identity and biological life is essential to understand digital obfuscation may be used as a tool against biosecurity practices.

What practices constitute “obfuscation?” In “Vernacular Resistance To Data Collection and Analysis: A Political Theory of Obfuscation,” Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum define obfuscation strategies as “producing misleading, false, or ambiguous data to make data gathering less reliable and therefore less valuable” as a means to resist surveillance and data-gathering (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2011). Examples of obfuscation include the provision of false information about oneself in cases where such information may be included in a database (including, always, when using the Internet); clicking on online advertisements in which one has no genuine interest as a means to introduce noise into ad-suggestion algorithms, and swapping store loyalty cards with other customers in order to produce a useless shopper profile. A timely example involves the social media “check-in:” on Facebook (as with other social media websites including Twitter, Instagram and Foursquare), users may reveal their physical location by “checking in” to a specific site such as a shopping center, city, or park. Although the websites listed do not reveal all of the ends to which they put the data they collect, the potential applications for such information as that given by the location check-in are numerous and potentially very powerful.

Speculation from Facebook users who “checked in” at Standing Rock, North Dakota, in Fall 2016 alleged that the website may have complied with legal authorities to reveal possible involvement in the defense of land against government seizure. As a counter-tactic, Facebook users across the world who supported the defense “checked in” to Standing Rock, an action designed to problematize the process of discerning which users were actually in Standing Rock as opposed to those simply on Facebook in another part of the world, legally publicizing their support. This is an exemplary use of obfuscation principles.

The applications of obfuscation that I have listed, however, fall into a specific category: each could be considered as constitutive of identity in assorted conventional senses of the term, but not necessarily of biological life. This may be more apparent in some cases than in others. For example, one’s name is a fiat identity marker; thus the provision of a false name is an obvious

subversion of identity but not necessarily of life itself. Conventionally understood, identity markers can be more readily manifest digitally than expressions of biological selfhood. The fact that a wide array of obfuscation tactics can be found on the Internet is no coincidence. Obfuscation is a tool that is largely available via digital networks¹, and digital networks rely on “dry” data, inorganic information that on first consideration seems categorically very different from the blood and bones that constitute our bodies.

Reading Luis Lobo-Guerrero and Michael Dillon in conjunction with Eugene Thacker’s *The Global Genome* provides a theorization of developments in the conceptualization of “life itself” sufficient to establish obfuscation as a tactic in the fight against data-based biosecritization. What is demanded in order to make this establishment is a reconsideration of what we consider “natural” or “biological” life, a point which is critical to the arguments of both *The Global Genome* and the introduction to “Biopolitics of Security in the Twenty-First Century.” Squaring Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero with Thacker leads to a more fruitful, timely understanding of life that helps to understand how obfuscation may be used as a means against biosecritization.***

In “Biopolitics of Security in the Twenty-First Century,” Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero write of “three critically important developments” of the essential characterization of life in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, updating the original object of Michel Foucault’s biopolitics with references for the digital age. “The first,” they write, “is demographic and concerns population. The second is molecular and concerns organic life. The third is digital. It concerns machinic and virtual life” (p. 269). Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero proceed to explain that the last two are “generically concerned with what might be called the changing vital signs of life and the question of animation — assemblages that display life-like properties” (ibid.), although they restrict their analysis to the first two, given the “already very extensive” literature on digitization (p. 270). This schema is useful, but I will note that it risks reinforcing a distinction whose overcoming is central to understanding transformations in how we understand life that are engendered by technology.

This is where Eugene Thacker’s claims in chapter one of *The Global Genome* ascend in importance. Thacker argues that divisions between nature and culture and terms like “organic” and “constructed,” are falsities of perception. Sociologist Bruno Latour has argued that these binary constructs have failed in their goal to establish their proponents as modern people, separate in any way from pre-modern people, and must be surpassed in order to more accurately understand the most important developments of the later twentieth century. (Latour, 1991, pp. 8-9).

Thacker extends this binary breakdown to make an observation on the nature of biological exchange as a process fundamental to the biotechnology industry:

The aim of biological exchange is not to render everything digital and immaterial, despite the industry hype over fields such as bioinformatics and genomics. Rather, the aim of biological exchange is to enable a more labile, fluid mobility across media — to the extent that it is literally immaterial whether the DNA is in a database or in a test tube. This point

¹ Although not solely — Brunton and Nissenbaum describe real-world examples of obfuscation, including protests and group actions in which participants dress alike to obscure the identity of only one actor in the crowd, or disguise themselves to look like others in their surroundings who are not involved in the act of subversion.

cannot be stressed enough. The aim of biological exchange — and by extension the aim of the current intersection between biology and computers in genetics and biotechnology — is to define biology as information while at the same time asserting the materiality of biology. (p. 9)

What is happening here is not that one form of life, the “messy” life conventionally understood as biological, is becoming more easily translatable into “clean” data-life, the province of genomics and informatics. The word “translation” implies a distinction on some level, and thus a phase change when (for example) strands from DNA extracts are modeled in computer code. By the financial logic of the biotechnology industry, they ought to be one and the same — this unity is highly productive for the industry insofar as it penetrates bodies with labor power more deeply and pervasively than what would have been imaginable before the rise of digitally enabled life-substrate mobility.

Here, I am making reference to Thacker’s treatment of the Marxist notion of labor power (p. 182) — the unity of organic and inorganic life that advances the aim of capitalism in its inexorable motion toward the total domination of working power, a movement that is only stymied by the fact that working power is a finite resource. The fact that labor-power is depletable means that the “wet” body as fully indistinct from “dry” data, i.e. as an always-already working producer of usable information, is remarkably valuable. Although it is not immortal, it is a font of labor power with formidable powers of replenishment.

The rationale behind the conceptual unity of material and data life is essential to understanding why obfuscation may work as a tactic against biosecuritization. It is important to note that the unification of “wet” and “dry” life will continue to advance as time moves forward, and perhaps at an accelerating pace: this is a simple function of the growth of the biotechnology industry and the Internet of Things, which poaches data from wearable devices that track the body. As it advances, that which is generally thought to exist solely within the domain of the private individual — the codification of heartbeats, muscle movements, hormonal shifts, and so on — will fall into the hands of those who profit from data. In other words, phenomena which would, before the rise of digitization, scarcely seem capable of productivity in the capitalist sense will in fact be explained with a description of a hypothetical, but very possible, scenario. In this scene, deep nuances of emotion that individuals may feel incapable of actualizing as internal thought or speech acts would come to be excavated and codified by emotion-perceiving algorithms capable of detecting traces of feeling from seemingly unrelated data (such as chemical changes in skin or the content of seemingly mundane emails). Regardless of the fidelity with which these algorithms capture the “actual” feeling, such fleeting and sublime experiences may come to gain materiality, permanence and (most critically) financial value via their translation into data. The culmination of this — and the crux of this situation’s profound dystopianism — would have it such that to speak of “translating” deep emotions into data would no longer make sense. The two would be one and the same. Feelings as data, data as feelings.

The key question in this scenario is: are “deep emotions” more closely related to “identity” or “biological life”? What if, for example, the “mundane” data that is gathered by sentience-detecting algorithms comes from perceptible shifts in one’s pheromones (picked up, say, by wearable technology that analyzes sweat compounds)? I take this example to argue for a coex-

tensivity of identity and biological life. To return to the hypothetical dystopian scenario, we may “identify” with our feelings (and perhaps even locate them as the very cornerstone of our identity), but they are also, from a modern scientific understanding, made of the stuff of “life itself.” From the perspective of the biotechnology industry, the distinction is waning in importance. Thus, obfuscation tactics that work on our own bodies and emotions should be seen as a way to hack biosecurity.

There are other ways in which obfuscation may subvert biosecuritization practices. Commenting on the questionable ethics of obfuscation, Brunton and Nissenbaum describe a real-world case indicating what might happen to grocery store customers who swap loyalty cards:

On a small scale, obfuscation may be insignificant — what can be the harm of marginal inaccuracy in a large database? On a large scale, however, it could render results questionable or even worthless. To take a recent case, the shopping logs of supermarket loyalty cards were used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to identify a common purchase among a scattered group of people with *Salmonella*, trace that purchase to the source, and institute a recall and investigation, a socially valuable project which the widespread adoption of loyalty card swapping pools would have made much slower, or even, theoretically, impossible. (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2011).

A conventional understanding would mark this scenario as unambiguously problematic, a threat to be warded off by complicity with the system at hand (in this case, the grocery store, which itself is obliged to bow its head to the Centers for Disease Control). A more radical understanding might take a different tack, valuing the subversive implications of loyalty-card swapping over the risk of contracting *Salmonella*.

Biosecurity practices do not recognize individual identity, and obfuscation relies on the dissolution of the signs of both identity and biological life into a murky and indeterminate matter. Those who hack biosecurity via obfuscation would feed this dark matter into the systems they wish to subvert as opposed to offering their “real” selves. As to whether this tactic could serve to radically undermine any one biosecurity practice or another may be best left to real-world experimentation rather than theory-based speculation.

Eugene Thacker is a notable proponent of philosophical pessimism, a perspective that rescues pessimism as a “failed” philosophy” at the very least for its instructiveness. He writes: “if pessimism has any pedagogical value, it is that the failure of pessimism as a philosophy is inextricably tied to the failure of pessimism as voice” (Thacker 2012). In identifying himself as a pessimist he identifies the failure of his own voice, and perhaps this awareness is necessary to understand what is really at stake in the fusion of identity, life itself, and capitalism. From the vantage point of all those surveilled and biopolitically secured — which is anyone who connects to the Internet—adopting an attitude of subversion means acknowledging that the very stuff of organic life now exists in an ambiguous state. The body is another site to be hacked: reconfigured and reprogrammed if individuals wish to retain personal sovereignty.

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