

Bernard Keenan, **Interception: State Surveillance from Postal Systems to Global Networks**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025, 286 pp., \$45.00 (paperback), open access.¹

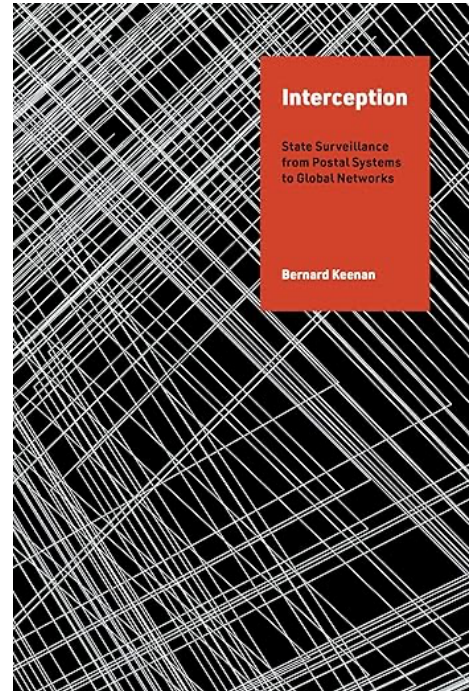
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State surveillance in the digital age is often associated with contemporary data extraction models capable of mining sensitive data from millions without their knowledge or consent. But, of course, it was not always this way. It may come as a surprise to many that initial manifestations of state surveillance, defined by eminent sociologist David Lyon (2007) as a “social practice” that could be demarcated by its “focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (p. 14), revolved around mass media and communication.

In ***Interception: State Surveillance from Postal Systems to Global Networks***, author Bernard Keenan offers readers a surfeit of surprises on state surveillance. Marshalling socio-legal methods to investigate the history of surveillance in the United Kingdom, Keenan draws on court cases, legislation, case law, British public law, national archives, warrants, files, copybooks, intercepted letters and telegrams, and constitutional law to tackle the early history of government surveillance. Through these documents, he argues his central thesis that in every era, interception conjoins with communication.

Interception critically builds upon the surveillance scholarship of Randolph Lewis (2017), David Lyon (2018, 2022, 2024), and Andreas Marklund and Laura Skouvig (2022). Missing from many of these accounts is a *media history* angle. That is part of what makes *Interception* novel: Keenan approaches the history of state surveillance through the lens of a media genealogical account. This, of course, is interesting and intentional and will be revisited later in this review. The following is a summary of the most salient points that Keenan makes, beginning with *Interception’s* initial words.

The title—*Interception: State Surveillance from Postal Systems to Global Networks*—highlights Keenan’s purpose to present the history of interception powers. As the title suggests, Keenan is concerned with state surveillance as a global system, but *Interception* is primarily a case study of the United Kingdom. Keenan draws on the United Kingdom from the 17th century to the present. In drawing on key moments in UK history, Keenan exposes the complex, intricate, and even abstruse past between state surveillance and the ways the public communicates. Two points can be made here regarding Keenan’s focus.



¹ <https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5984/InterceptionState-Surveillance-from-Postal-Systems>

One, the United Kingdom presents a credible starting point because of its position as a global leader and worldwide influencer on international standards and practices in privacy, freedom of expression, civil liberties, and democratic accountability in modern society. Two, a crisp mapping of its protracted past fills a gap in the literature. Keenan, a trained human rights attorney and journalist turned academic, is well-qualified to take on this project. He has published on the UK legal oversight system following the Snowden revelations and continues to lecture on national security law at the University College in London (Keenan, n.d.).

In chapter 1, Keenan explicates the value of a media genealogical approach to this examination. Keenan points out that interception exists within the confines of technical communication in every major media epoch. Keenan draws on Michel Foucault to highlight the role of government practice in its use of political sovereignty (p. 7). Keenan leverages Friedrich Kittler to underscore the media's ability to evade reflection, since cultural and social discourse occurs at the level of the imaginary (p. 3). Finally, Keenan builds on Marshall McLuhan to assert that the media operate through a "rear-view mirror" of society, which connects to the understanding of surveillance (p. 3). Drawing on Foucault, Kittler, and McLuhan makes sense for a media history and surveillance and provides a strong theoretical foundation for the study. Chapter 1 then delves into the relationship between the law and media. The chapter delineates that the law depends on the media to "communicate, give it form, and allow it to circulate within a given space" (p. 2). This point highlights that surveillance is a particular rendering of media law and history (pp. 1–2). To illustrate the long history of surveillance, Keenan uses the postal system to show an initial example of state power operating under limited legal oversight.

Chapters 2 and 3 delve deeper into the post office example. In chapter 2, Keenan describes how the 17th century postal system served as surveillance machinery. According to Keenan, its purpose was to introduce order to the state (pp. 15–16). The postal system undergirded a practical necessity because the modern state required a "spatial demarcation of political authority" (p. 16). In chapter 3, Keenan details significant changes in the efforts and reasoning behind postal interception in 18th- and 19th-century England (p. 37). This heralded a new period in which the government's interest in the population widened. The all-important Mazzini scandal that led to the first historical rendition of interception of practices and changes in policy is reviewed (p. 56).

In chapter 4, Keenan dives into electronic communication technologies as amplifiers of a new media epoch in surveillance. This chapter broadly covers the late 19th century to the beginning of World War I. Interestingly, Keenan explores electrical telegraphy and telephony as initial technologies that expand the scope of surveillance and points out that they were not yet considered private media (pp. 72–74). Examples, such as Marconi's radio as a stage for intrusive surveillance, pepper the pages of this chapter (p. 96).

Chapter 5 contributes an estimable account of the advancement of telephone interception, better known as "tapping." Keenan focuses on tapping as an intelligence priority to confront and manage internal subversion (p. 118). Widespread concern about the supremacy of the state ranked second to the political acceptance that regulating it might compromise its efficacy. Keenan's point that the difficulty in legally rationalizing such interception and surveillance is becoming increasingly complex reminds readers that emerging technologies often outpace the law. It reminds readers of the initial pages in which Keenan assails

the law for failing to keep pace with technological developments and calls for a grounded balance between privacy and security (pp. 1–4).

Building upon chapter 5, chapters 6–8 are reserved for a deeper exploration of mass domestic surveillance. In chapter 6, Keenan details the advent of contemporary global interception as a consequence of radio. Chapter 7 provides readers insight into the role of the Internet and the Edward Snowden case, arguing that the case epitomized a media-technical epistemology (p. 173). Chapter 7 admirably reviews the Snowden case and proffers a media-technical epistemology for Snowden’s decision to reveal the network. Keenan calls attention to the structural shifts that followed, clearly situating the Snowden revelation as a tipping point for legal reflexivity. However, the Snowden affair leaves readers wanting more. Keenan only fleetingly references journalists. Given current discourses on the use of spyware and digital surveillance technologies against journalists, and the recent passage of the *European Media Freedom Act*, such an inclusion is necessary. Chapter 8 provides an analysis of significant changes since the Snowden revelations, with Keenan arguing that states are called to redefine boundaries between public power, public entities, and users. It is a powerful conclusion and forces readers to situate *Interception* within broader debates on surveillance, mass media, and the challenges of legal oversight.

Interception makes a commendable socio-legal contribution to the history of media and surveillance studies. Those in legal history, public policy, and human rights would justifiably find this read beneficial.

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