Facilitator Guide Blaxites (2019) | Josh Lyon (Director), Nehal El-Hadi (Writer)

Introduction

In light of recent surveillance developments — social media breaches, smart city projects, workplace monitoring — we need to consider the implications and critically examine the logics and practices within big data systems that underpin, enable, and accelerate surveillance. As part of an international multiphase project on Big Data Surveillance, in 2018- 2019 the Surveillance Studies Centre produced three short films speculating surveillance futures and the effects of deeply embedded and connected surveillant systems on our everyday lives. Intended as public education tools to spark discussion and extend understandings of surveillance, trust, and privacy in the digital age, each film focuses on a different aspect of big data surveillance and the tensions that manifest when the human is interpreted by the machine.

Each film is approximately 10 minutes long, and here are short descriptions of each:

- *Blaxites* is a film that follows the story of a young woman whose celebratory social media post affects her access to vital medication. Her attempts to circumvent the system leads to even more dire consequences. In *Blaxites*, we highlight issues that arise when different data systems are connected.
- In *A Model Employee*, to keep her day job at a local restaurant, an aspiring DJ has to wear a tracking wristband. As it tracks her life outside of work, she tries to fool the system, but a new device upgrade means trouble. In *A Model Employee*, we examine data ownership and the need to earn a system's trust.
- In *Frames*, a smart city tracks and analyzes a woman walking through the city. Things she does are interpreted and logged by the city system, but are they drawing an accurate picture of the woman? In *Frames*, we highlight the problems in trusting sensor data and facial recognition to interpret human behavior.

The films raise issues in our understandings of trust and surveilled relations. This facilitator guide is intended to support organised screenings and discussions of the films. Each guide provides a brief film synopsis, questions for discussion, suggested activities, and offers a closing conversation.

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How to analyse a film	Film analysis combines literary, audio, and visual analysis—you will need to pay conscious attention to narrative, audio cues, and visual elements (including written text): characters, setting, dialogue, sound design, music, cinematography, shot composition, lighting, etc. To analyse a film, you engage with all the different elements, and analyse and evaluate them. Questions to guide film analysis include:

- What is the film about? What themes are addressed?
- What is its narrative structure? How does the plot unfold?
- Are there any recurring visual elements?
- Who are the characters, and what roles do they play? What are they wearing, and what does this say about them?
- Where is power located in the film, i.e. who has power, who acquires power, who loses power, who is powerless? Why?
- Where is the film set? And in what time period (e.g. futuristic, contemporary, historical?
- What are the different locations throughout the film?
- What do you think the director is trying to achieve through this film?
- How did you feel throughout the film? Why?

For example, the three films here are all set in urban environments in a very-near future. All of the protagonists are young women of colour, in possession of smartphones, and all are being monitored and regulated by technology in different ways. Each film presents the possible implications of a particular surveillance technology, and through this facilitator's guide, invites the viewer to develop some kind of sociotechnological literacy to address the privacy and surveillance concerns raised.

The facilitator's role is to guide discussion about the content of the films, and the larger social context of the implications of surveillance technologies. As a teaching tool, these films offer many different discussion nodes about the intersections of technology and society. Topics for discussion include smart cities, mental health, workplace safety.

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Synopsis	Blaxites follows the story of a young woman whose celebratory social media post affects her access to vital medication. Her attempts to circumvent the system lead to even more dire consequences. **Note:** In analyzing and discussing this film, it is important to be sensitive to possibly triggering discussions, specifically about mental health, performance anxiety, access to medication, and social and familial pressures.
Discussion Questions	• What did you learn about social media and surveillance from the film? • What motivations do you think each of the characters has for the decisions they make: Dr. Bontet, Jai, and Karl? Why do they make the decisions and choices they do? What are their values? • What would you suggest that Jai do? Brainstorm options for the different paths of action that Jai can take. • Who benefits from the monitoring software? And who is disadvantaged by it? Do you think the outcome would have been different if Jai had not been a Black woman? In what ways? • In what ways is the doctor justified in closely monitoring his patients? And in what ways is he going beyond his duties? • Are there any circumstances that you can think of where use of this technology is justified or unjustified? • Which of Jai's rights are being infringed upon by the medical healthcare system? What other factors play a role in the way Jai receives access to healthcare (e.g. race, access to financial resources)?

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Suggested Activities	If you were to opt out like Karl, what would you have to change about your life? Imagine that you were asked to put together a how-to opt out guide—what would be on it? What possible measures can you take to protect your online privacy? Rather than addressing Jai's condition, the increased surveillance feeds into her anxiety disorder. In what ways can technology help alleviate or complicate mental health?
In Closing	Medication is increasingly prescribed to help manage depression and anxiety disorders. As a university student, Jai is attending school in the midst of an unfolding mental health crisis at many postsecondary institutions. Jai is told that if she wants to continue receiving prescribed medication, she has to show that she is a good patient, and subject herself to more surveillance. The ending of the film invites viewers to ask: what is next for Jai? One way to close the discussion is to consider what kind of sociotechnological literacy or social media consciousness education would be beneficial.

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