

## Surveillant Companionship and the FBI Agent Meme

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Article abstract

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### Abstract

In late 2017 and throughout 2018, surveillance discourse collided with meme culture through the popular “FBI agent” meme. The meme had various iterations but usually depicted ordinary individuals who are aware that they are constantly being surveilled on their personal devices by an assigned government agent. However, far from threatening Orwellian depictions of surveillance, in which a dangerous government is constantly watching, the FBI agent meme characterized the surveillant relationship as positive and caring, where the government agent is answering questions or helping with homework, providing a sympathetic ear for relationship troubles, crying over movies together, and even dropping by to deliver milk. The joke is predicated on the assumption that the government agent is always watching, knows the individual intimately, communicates with them regularly, and sometimes even intervenes through their devices, but only with the individual’s best interests in mind. The FBI agent meme depicts the relationship between the individual and the surveillant apparatus as one of surveillant companionship. Surveillant companionship suggests that surveillance fulfills a social role: partly care and control, and partly a response to widespread alienation. The FBI agent meme’s depiction of surveillant companionship satirizes the normalization of mass surveillance by highlighting the absurdity of sharing every intimate moment with the surveillant gaze. Memes also function as collective interventions in political discourse, in this case mass surveillance. Although the meme depicts the surveillant apparatus as a form of ambivalent companionship, the collective and collaborative nature of memes and the participation in communal humor and critique offers a different kind of companionship, one organized around a recognition of shared grievances and surveillant intrusions.

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### Surveillant Companionship and the FBI Surveillance Meme

In late 2017 and throughout 2018, surveillance discourse collided with meme culture through the popular “FBI agent” meme. The meme had various iterations but usually depicted ordinary individuals who are aware that they are constantly being surveilled on their personal devices by an assigned government agent. Other surveillance-focused memes that began in 2017 include “elf on a shelf” parodies (Kircher 2017) and “birds aren’t real,” a satirical conspiracy theory that argued that all birds are actually government surveillance drones (see Appendix A, Figure 13). However, the FBI agent memes humorously represented mass surveillance as not only inevitable but also as benign or even beneficial. The meme generally characterized the surveillant relationship between the FBI agent and the individual as positive and caring, where the government agent is answering questions or helping with homework, providing a sympathetic ear for relationship troubles, crying over movies together, and even dropping by to deliver milk. Some of the memes show the individual flirting with or intentionally performing for the ever-present surveillant gaze by posing suggestively or making eyes at the camera (see Appendix A, Figures 15 and 16).<sup>1</sup> The joke is predicated on the understanding that the government agent is always watching, knows the individual

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<sup>1</sup> While images of analyzed memes are included here, other referenced memes have been placed in Appendix A to improve readability.

intimately, communicates with them regularly, and sometimes even intervenes through their devices, but only with the individual's best interests in mind.

Memes can be mechanisms to reflect cultural anxieties or collectively process events through humor. They are typically shared across various online networks and social media platforms, meaning they must be compelling or resonant enough to prompt users to share them. But why did a meme portraying a supportive or caring surveillant apparatus emerge four years after Edward Snowden revealed the National Security Agency's (NSA) mass surveillance operation, and more than a year into the highly contentious and politically fraught Trump Administration? A Pew Research Center survey from 2017 found that "nearly eight-in-ten US adults under the age of 50 think it is likely that the government is tracking their communications" (Olmstead 2017). In addition, the annual Chapman University Survey of American Fears found that "corrupt government officials" are the top American fear, a feeling that increased in 2017 and 2018 with nearly 75% of respondents listing this fear, up from 60% in 2016 (The Earl Babbie Research Center 2021). In 2019 and 2020, 77% and nearly 80% of respondents cited corrupt government officials as their top fear (The Earl Babbie Research Center 2021).

However, the FBI agent meme presents a more ambivalent commentary on government surveillance. Far from threatening Orwellian depictions of surveillance, in which a dangerous government is constantly watching, variants of the FBI agent meme show individuals being observed in private or during vulnerable moments by a seemingly caring FBI agent who suggests that they drink more water or get some rest. Occasionally the meme will show the individual returning a gesture of care, blowing a kiss or googling whether FBI agents need hugs. The meme might show the FBI agent celebrating the individual's successes, looking on fondly when their crush texts them back (see Appendix A, Figure 18), or grimacing in frustration when they procrastinate on their homework. Some versions of the meme did try to clarify that it was the NSA, rather than the FBI, conducting surveillance, and there were even some incipient conspiracy theories arguing that the shift in focus from the NSA to FBI was an intentional deflection.

My initial fascination with the FBI agent meme centered on the depiction of surveillant care, as the FBI agent was shown not only actively assisting the individual but also seeming to genuinely care or provide for them. The meme explicitly highlights the surveillant nature of the relationship by showing the individual in the act of typing something into their personal device, poised to tweet or search on Google, and immediately receiving a text message from the FBI agent before the search can be initiated. The individual communicates with the FBI agent by speaking aloud or beginning to type something on their phone or computer, whereas the FBI communicates by intervening through the individual's devices, texting them directly, or even appearing at their house. The implication is that the FBI agent and the accompanying surveillance apparatus can access everything on the individual's personal devices, not simply their browsing history but also each word as they type it, perhaps even as they think it.

The meme touches on internalized surveillance, the increasingly blurred lines between private and public, and the relationship between performance and power. But it also shows a public reckoning with ubiquitous surveillance and shifting surveillance imaginaries, in which individuals do not know where their data goes, how it is being used, or who sits at the other end of the watchful gaze. Although some versions of the FBI agent meme express discomfort or resistance to constant surveillance, they all depict a one-to-one relationship with an individual government agent.

Extending from the idea of "digital companionship," or the relationship between individuals and their smartphones that transcends the phone's technical capabilities (Carolus et al. 2019), the FBI agent meme depicts the relationship between the individual and the surveillant apparatus as one of surveillant companionship. Surveillant companionship suggests that surveillance fulfills a social role: partly care and control, and partly a response to widespread alienation. Yet memes also function as collective interventions in political discourse, in this case mass surveillance. The FBI agent meme's depiction of surveillant companionship satirizes the normalization of mass surveillance and challenges surveillant realism (Dencik

2018), the belief that surveillance is inevitable and inescapable, by highlighting the absurdity of sharing every intimate moment with the surveillant gaze.

### **Memes as Political Commentary**

The FBI agent meme went viral in late 2017 and remained in the public spotlight through 2018. Throughout that time, variations of the meme circulated on various social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit. Some of these memes received hundreds of thousands of likes and shares. The meme's virality follows what Hemsley and Mason (2013: 144) define as an information cascade, as individuals forward the message across various social networks and it rapidly achieves broad social reach. In addition, pop culture platforms like BuzzFeed, Mashable, and Thought Catalog published compilations of the FBI agent meme drawn from across the internet, with clickbait titles such as "21 Tweets the Government Agent Watching You Will Love" or "19 Hilarious Memes About the FBI Agents Who Are Definitely Watching You Through Your Webcam RN [right now]" (Byrnes 2018; Flaherty 2018). Other pop culture compilations included the FBI agent meme in their list of the best memes of 2018 (Radulovic 2018; Thrillist Entertainment 2018), framing the emergence of the FBI agent meme in a broader context: "Edward Snowden. Charlie Brooker. A gentle but consistent stream of hacking news. Whether because of pop culture or current events, many internet users now seem carelessly aware that someone might be spying on them through their phones and laptops. Cause for panic? No, more like, Wow, someone's spying on me? Hello, new friend!" (Thrillist Entertainment 2018). However, the meme's virality and public presence is the result of users actively sharing and spreading the meme, contradicting the idea that they are "carelessly aware" of digital surveillance. The article, like the collection of FBI agent memes, finds an uneasy balance between digital surveillance as a "cause for panic" or as a "new friend" (Thrillist Entertainment 2018).

I collected 105 unique versions of the meme in the "FBI agent" genre from pop culture compilations and by searching "FBI Agent meme" or "Government Agent meme" on Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, and Google Images (which retrieved images from different social media platforms or led to the type of pop culture articles mentioned above). Slight variations in the text that did not change the meaning were counted as the same meme. After reviewing all the memes, I grouped them into eight main categories based on each meme's primary focus. These categories included depicting a mutual relationship/receiving care from the FBI, the individual offering a gesture of care to the FBI, seeking/receiving help from the FBI, the FBI celebrating successes/disappointments, the FBI observing private moments, flirting/performing for surveillance, resisting/critiquing surveillance, and a final miscellaneous category of memes that did not appear often and did not fit into one of these main categories. While these memes came from different social media platforms, I am less interested in the specific affordances of each platform, which is beyond the scope of this paper, and more in the various iterations of the meme and in what made them resonate so strongly with the public. Due to the varied provenance of the memes, it was not always possible to identify an exact date or number of engagements, particularly with the memes that were compiled in pop culture articles. Given the ephemeral nature of the internet, some memes that were published in those articles are no longer available on the originating social media platform (for example, a meme that originated on Twitter and was published by BuzzFeed is no longer available on Twitter, making BuzzFeed a curious kind of archive).

Memes are loosely defined as "digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" that are created, remixed, and circulated over the internet (Shifman 2014: 7–8). A collection of memes, like the FBI agent meme, are made "with awareness of each other" since each revision or adaptation requires broader general knowledge of, and reference to, the original joke (Shifman 2014: 8; see also Wiggins and Bowers 2015: 1892). Memes are part of public discourse, representing a variety of perspectives and reflecting a "genre of communication enacted by participatory digital culture" (Shifman 2014: 8; see also Wiggins and Bowers 2015: 1892). Users encounter, interpret, and contribute to memetic conversations by liking or sharing them, and in some cases, creating their own interpretations. As popular digital cultural artifacts, memes "reflect deep social and cultural structures"; their creation and circulation can "shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups" (Shifman 2014: 15). In this way, memes are a contemporary iteration of folkloric practices, a space to affirm or subvert social norms and anxieties. Memes

reveal how “folk practices can be deployed as a resource to reinscribe or resist dominant power structures” (Blank and Peck 2020: 12; see also Shifman 2014: 15).

Following Bennett and Segerberg (2012), Limor Shifman (2014: 129) argues that memes are a link between the personal and political, allowing for individuality while participating in collective action and civic discourse. Studying the role of memes as a communicative tool in Occupy Wall Street or as a tactic of dissent in social movements suggests that memes play an important role in articulating public concerns or demands through contemporary digital culture (Ben Moussa, Benmessaoud, and Douai 2020). While a single meme might attract a few hundred likes or shares, the larger collection of memes around a topic, with hundreds of thousands of engagements, can “intervene in the media discourse” to “promote or confront the hegemonic interpretation of the events” (Denisova 2019: 195). The popularity of the FBI agent meme followed a period of public concern about and awareness of ubiquitous government surveillance, represented in the all-seeing and all-knowing figure of the FBI agent. Yet the ambiguous, almost Trickster or Faustian, nature of this figure reflects the diverse responses to hegemonic narratives of government surveillance and national security. In depicting the surveillant relationship as a mixture of care and control, the FBI agent meme balances paternal solicitude and friendly banter with the reality of pervasive surveillance.

Memes most often communicate through humor, whether satirizing popular culture or political issues. Humor fuels the most successful and most widely shared memes (Shifman 2014: 78). Understanding and appreciating the joke can function as a form of social bonding or even build solidarity (Penney 2020: 798). In addition to using humor as critical social commentary, humorous memes can be political coping mechanisms, allowing individuals a milder medium through which to confront difficult issues (Penney 2020: 798). Perhaps for this reason, the FBI agent meme has not disappeared. References to the meme have resurfaced periodically since 2018, including in pop culture articles and user created content on TikTok, suggesting that it remains in popular memory (Gordon 2020).

In October 2021, Pat Buetow, a popular comedian, created several TikTok skits centered on the FBI agent character. The first of these videos was viewed 3.6 million times and received 1.1 million likes, as well as more than thirty-two-thousand comments, twenty-nine-thousand shares and sixty-thousand saves (Buetow 2021). This popularity is surprising given that meme culture usually moves quite quickly; a popular meme could become passé or even cliché within a matter of weeks. I emailed Buetow to ask why he referenced the FBI agent character several years later, and why he thought it resonated so strongly with viewers after so long. He replied that the idea of constant government surveillance on our devices and platforms is quite frightening. But at the same time, “that’s where the impulse to make fun of it comes from, and thus the meme. It defuses some of the tension of this uncomfortable reality we all have to live with and can’t do much about. And I think mine came from the same place” (Pat Buetow, personal communication, November 25, 2022). Buetow references the idea of the meme as coping mechanism as well as the feeling of digital resignation, as individuals are acutely aware of online surveillance but do not feel they have the power to prevent it (Draper and Turow 2019).

The humor in the FBI agent meme plays with the incongruity of a powerful government surveillance apparatus that is thoughtful and caring rather than frightening and punitive. The incongruity veers into absurdity, as the assigned government agent openly observes and invades every private space, but in the process becomes a friendly and helpful companion. The meme engages a sense of nihilism, where “horror mingles with humor, and young people have space to play with emotions that seem more and more to proceed from ordinary life—the creeping suspicion that the world just doesn’t make sense” (Bruenig 2017; see also Olsen 2018). These memes evoke a contemporary iteration of Dadaism, reflecting a youth culture keenly aware of existing social and political problems. The memes use humor to “mak[e] rational sense of a political world that is experienced as irrational, absurd, and chaotic” (Penney 2020: 798). In the process, the meme offers a cathartic release as well as social connection through engagement, in understanding the joke and sharing the meme with others. The meme highlights the tension between the individuals who are surveilled (and who share the meme amongst themselves) and those who conduct the surveillance. There

were some versions of the meme that imagine the FBI agent laughing at the joke, as they encounter the meme in their routine surveillance activities. The humorous framing of the FBI agent as friend or companion marks a collective experience of mass surveillance, as we all are subject to surveillance and thus all have a surveillant companion.

### Getting a Hug From the FBI: Surveillant Care and Control

In struggling to come to terms with the constant visibility of private life and of vulnerable moments that cannot be hidden from the surveillant gaze, the FBI agent meme may reflect the self-disciplining nature of surveillance, forms of “imagined surveillance,” lateral or participatory surveillance, and feminist reinterpretations of the pleasure in looking and being seen (Albrechtslund 2008; Andrejevic 2004; Duffy and Chan 2019; Foucault 1995; Van der Meulen et al. 2016). The memes are a type of political satire, extending into absurdity the government’s claims that surveillance is beneficial and in the national interest; here, surveillance is depicted as benefiting each of us individually. Or, following van Dijck’s (2014: 204) ideology of dataism, in which the public trusts and believes that surveillant institutions will “protect user data from exploitation,” perhaps the meme is aspirational, reflecting the faith, or at least the hope, that individuals are surveilled by responsible and caring institutions.

This faith allows surveillant institutions to be seen in a paternalistic fashion, an amalgamation of God and the State, watching and judging, but with love (Harding 2018: 39). As James Harding (2018) notes, surveillance is sometimes conceptualized as a binary between “good” surveillance, of the sort associated with a benevolent and omniscient God, and “bad” surveillance, performed by nefarious government actors. However, this binary then “slips into the conceptual foundations of surveillance itself, providing it with its own variation of an inviolate ideal that justifies surveillance’s continued development and use. Here the binary between care and control is no longer merely a contrast between divine omniscience and secular surveillance but is extended as the ‘two faces; of surveillance: a surveillance of care and surveillance of control’” (Harding 2018: 39). There is no longer any separation between divine omniscience and government surveillance; they are joined into a complete system in which everything is visible and known.

The FBI agent meme parodies the unification of “divine omniscience and secular surveillance” by presenting a softer image of surveillance, humorously suggesting that the constant gaze of the State is attentive and benevolent. Following Marxist theory, Harding (201: 43–44) contends that a positive perception of surveillance stems from alienated consciousness, as surveillance provides “an illusory balm for genuine human suffering.” Individuals turn to surveillance out of hope or need for security and stability, but find neither. In this light, surveillant companionship arises from a sense of alienation, striking an uneasy balance between intrusion and the longing for care and intimacy, the desire to be truly seen.



**Figure 1:** *Surveillance as companionship (Bryan 2018)*

In Figure 1, the individual is relaxing in their bedroom (ordinarily a private or intimate space), but all the while, they are conversing with the FBI agent/surveillant apparatus through their computer, implying that the relationship is ongoing and familiar. When the individual asks what “FBI” stands for, the agent replies “Faraway... Buddy... Insideyourcomputer,” a response that the individual placidly accepts before asking what they should watch together next. Even in this humorous depiction, the agent’s response attempts to mask the surveillant nature of the relationship by framing it as a type of long-distance friendship. The meme describes a scene reminiscent of a slumber party, snacking on chips and watching a movie, but the only participants are the individual and the unknown (but seemingly familiar) surveillant apparatus.



**Figure 2:** FBI agent delivering milk.

One version of the meme (Figure 2) shows the individual about to tweet “I want a bowl of cereal but I’m all out of milk.” Before the tweet can be posted online, the individual receives a text message from the FBI agent saying, “look outside,” accompanied by a photo of a man in a tactical police uniform standing outside the window holding two gallons of milk. This version of the meme was also adapted to show the individual typing “no one came to my birthday party,” with the same picture of the FBI agent, this time carrying two gift bags instead of milk. Other popular variants show the individual entering text into Google’s search bar, either requesting a hug from the FBI agent or asking if FBI agents need hugs. As they are typing, the individual receives a text message from their father asking why the FBI are here, implying that the FBI saw the incipient search and responded immediately to receive or bestow a hug.

There is a version with Spongebob (Figure 3), a popular cartoon character used in many memes, with an FBI hat and smartphone superimposed onto the cartoon. Spongebob looks fondly towards the phone, accompanied by the text: “My FBI guy watching me drink water for the first time in weeks.” Other versions show the individual receiving text messages from their agent after a government shutdown saying how much the FBI agent misses them and encouraging them to drink water and get more sleep. One subgenre showed the individual seeking out their FBI agent during a protest, the agent in riot gear, the individual joyfully running towards them with arms outstretched (see Appendix 1, Figure 17).

My FBI guy watching me drink water for the first time in weeks



**Figure 3:** FBI agent as Spongebob Squarepants.

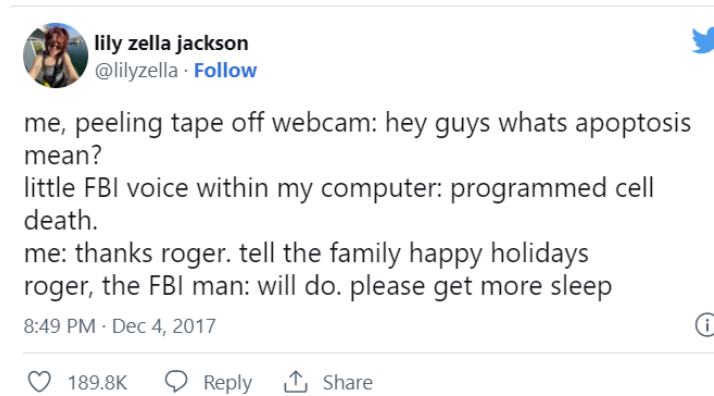
More than just care, however, the FBI agent meme often depicts a very intimate personal relationship between the individual and the government agent. The government agent witnesses everything in the individual's life; the meme suggests that the surveillant companion knows the individual better than anyone else. In some cases, the FBI agent is merely a sympathetic witness. In others, the meme depicts a mutual relationship of care and intimacy. One widely circulated version (Figure 4) originated on Twitter in January 2018, where it was liked more than 412,000 times and subsequently spread to various other platforms. This version depicts the FBI agent commiserating about romantic problems and validating the individual's sense of unease with their partner. The meme also suggests a degree of closeness or intimacy with the FBI agent that even the individual's partner may not share. The individual then returns the gesture of care, calling the FBI agent by name, asking after the agent's marriage, and offering sympathy.



**Figure 4:** Meme depicting a conversation between the individual and FBI agent (Strunck 2018).



Another popular variant of the meme touches on privacy, a sense of resignation, and the extreme intimacy of surveillant companionship. In Figure 5, the individual, who has covered their computer camera with tape in a seemingly futile attempt at privacy, removes it in order to ask the camera for help with their homework. The FBI agent immediately gives the answer, seeming to replace traditional search engines as a source of information and knowledge. The individual again thanks them by name and passes along greetings to the agent's family. The agent replies by gently suggesting that the individual try to get more sleep, implying full awareness of their behavior with or without the tape covering the camera.



**Figure 5:** *The FBI agent helping the individual with homework (Flaherty 2018).*

The popularity of the FBI agent meme in 2017–2018 also follows the emergence and growth of technological assistive devices such as Siri, Alexa, and Google Home. These devices combine surveillance with a friendly disembodied voice, always listening and eager to help. This depiction of surveillant companionship is encapsulated in the 2013 film *Her*, in which futuristic digital voice assistants provide rich and fulfilling relationships, with little mention of surveillance or personal data collection (Jonze 2013). Although these technologies are positioned as assistants, the idea of surveillant companionship encompasses a broader understanding of surveillance as always watching, inescapable, and offering a form of care.

### **I See You Through Your Front Camera: Digital Resignation**

Although the FBI agent meme often presents surveillance in a softer light, imagining a caring response on the part of a surveillant apparatus, the tension and humor in the meme stem from the individual's awareness of being constantly surveilled in private or vulnerable moments. In nearly every variant of the meme, the individual is alone, at home or in a private space, scrolling through social media or thinking aloud, but their every action is visible to outsider observers. Draper and Turow (2019) suggest that, in the face of relentless surveillance, individuals may experience a sense of digital resignation, finding surveillance undesirable but unavoidable.

Digital resignation also offers a possible explanation for the “privacy paradox”: that although people say that they care about privacy, their behavior seems to suggest otherwise. Draper and Turow (2019) argue that individuals do care about their privacy, but the constant and seemingly inescapable nature of online surveillance leaves them feeling hopeless or resigned. Although individuals may still take steps to protect their privacy, they may not feel it will make much difference (Draper and Turow 2019: 1826). In fact, there seems to be an inverse relationship between understanding the scale and scope of surveillance, and the feeling of resignation, as “greater awareness regarding privacy risks corresponds to stronger feelings of powerlessness” (Draper and Turow 2019: 1826).

Widespread digital resignation is also linked to alienation. A feeling of “futility about technological systems causes people to despair about their ability to guide their futures” (Draper and Turow 2019: 1827).

Individuals are often forced to contend with technological systems and platforms that they may depend on for social and emotional connections, for work, or for news and information, yet over which they have no control and through which they are exposed to constant corporate and government surveillance. Draper and Turow (2019: 1833) argue that corporations intentionally cultivate digital resignation, and position privacy as an individual problem, “leading individuals toward confusion and indecision (rather than toward collective action) about whether and how to take on the burdens of privacy self-management.”

In some versions of the FBI agent meme, the individual attempts to protect their privacy, attempts that are proven entirely ineffective by the FBI agent’s constant awareness of their movements and actions. In others, the meme directly acknowledges a sense of futility, indicating that surveillance is inescapable or inevitable. Privacy and data protection are frequently depicted as individual concerns. In Figure 6 below, a bored-looking individual is lying in bed accompanied by the text, “I honestly don’t care if an FBI agent is watching me through my laptop cam because all they’re going to see is me like,” implying that the invasion of privacy is not important since it would only show banal daily activities.

i honestly don't care if an fbi agent is  
watching me thru my laptop cam cause  
all they're gonna see is me like



**Figure 6:** *Digital resignation (23 Hilarious FBI Agent Memes You Can't Risk to Pass Up 2019).*

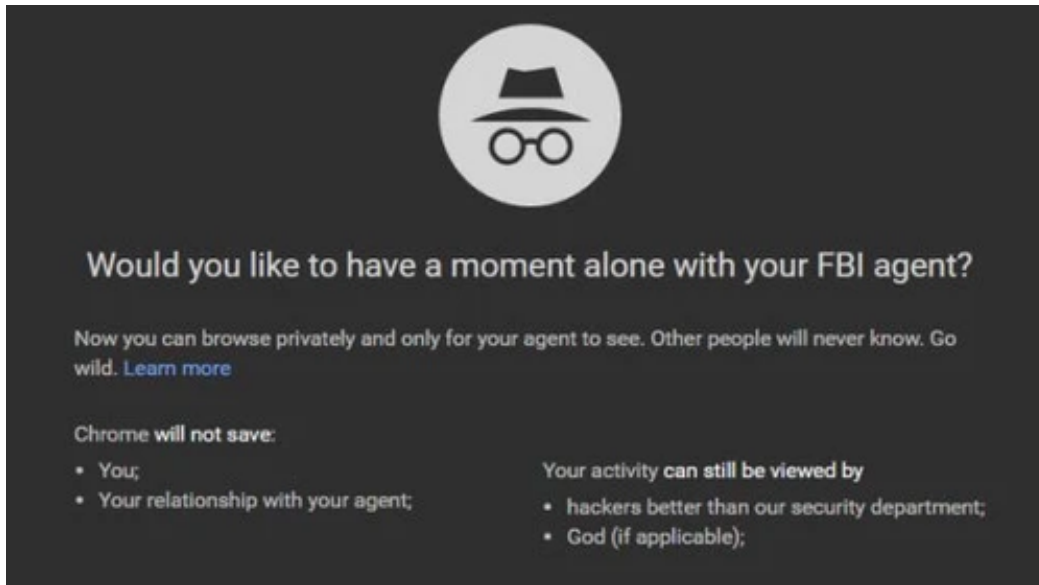
A widely shared version (Figure 7) shows the individual attempting to protect their privacy by covering the laptop camera with tape. This attempt is wholly ineffective, as the FBI agent continues to comfortably watch the individual from a different device (their toaster, which could either reference the absolute absurdity and inescapability of surveillance, or the interconnected Internet of Things). A similar tweet described the individual covering their camera with a piece of tape, while the FBI agent speaks from the microwave saying “haha... you fool.” This suggests that individual efforts to protect privacy are futile and even laughable, as a vast surveillant system connects both devices and platforms; privacy then becomes a carnivalesque form of whack-a-mole.

Me: \*Puts tape on webcam\*  
FBI Agent watching me from my  
toaster:



**Figure 7:** *Surveillance from the Internet of Things.*

In Figure 8, the meme satirizes the Google Chrome Incognito browser, which offers mildly enhanced privacy protections. However, the meme dismisses any notion of increased privacy and instead describes the Incognito Browser as “a moment alone with your FBI agent,” explaining that the Incognito page allows the user to “browse privately and only for your agent to see. Other people will never know. Go wild.” A similar variant (see Appendix A, Figure 19) satirized Facebook’s privacy settings, depicting an individual in the process of posting a status update, “going out for a pizza.” They are offered a choice of whether the post will be visible “to the public, to friends and the CIA, only me and the CIA, or only the CIA” (DeGeurin 2018).



**Figure 8:** *Satirical privacy settings (DeGeurin 2018).*

The Google Chrome meme goes on to say that Incognito browsing “will not save you,” nor will it preserve the individual’s relationship with their agent, perhaps threatening that the friendly relationship could be damaged by the individual’s intended searches. Browsing activity may still be viewed “by hackers better than our security department,” and “God (if applicable).” Once again, the depiction of surveillance invokes both God and the State, not as opposite ends of a binary but as higher powers that cannot be avoided. The meme represents privacy and data security as a losing battle, a thin piece of tape over an omniscient gaze, where efforts to protect privacy are ineffective in the face of a massive surveillant apparatus. Privacy is stripped of meaning, stretched and distended to include government surveillance within the scope of private actions. Only “other people,” or the public at large, are prevented from accessing private spaces and personal data. This distorted form of privacy reflects a sense of digital resignation, the understanding that privacy now always and inescapably includes the presence of a surveillant companion.

### **Covering the Camera With Tape: Challenges to Surveillance Realism**

The widespread sense of digital resignation lays the foundation for surveillance realism. Surveillance realism is the gradual process through which constant surveillance begins to seem like the only possible option, while other ways of living (and governing) appear imprudent, and eventually impossible (Dencik 2018). Dencik (2018) argues that ideologies of surveillance have colonized the collective imagination, presenting surveillance as inevitable, and rejecting other possibilities as idealistic or naïve. Resignation “has been actively manufactured through a number of different practices” and makes it more difficult for individuals to imagine alternatives, thus leading to the pervasive normalization of surveillance (Dencik 2018: 37). Surveillance realism reflects this “hampered imagination where datafication and surveillance is seen as the only legitimate response to social ills” (Dencik 2018: 37). Against the specter of terrorism or as

the price of admission to digital culture, “data-driven surveillance, along with its perceived infringements upon civic rights, becomes a small price to pay” (Dencik 2018: 37). The transformation of mass surveillance from an unwarranted invasion of privacy to a common-sense governing approach speaks to the pervasiveness of surveillance realism.

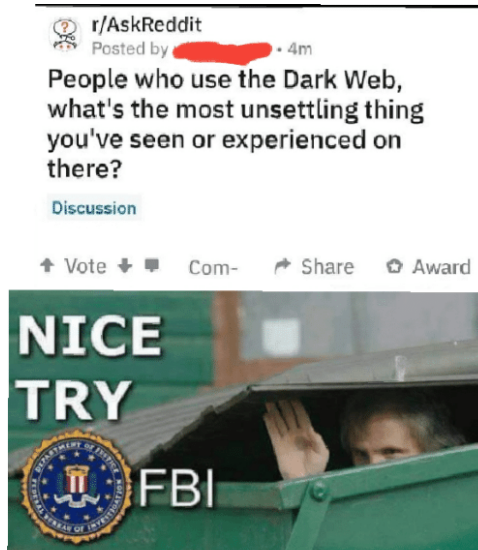
Resignation is often cultivated by emphasizing an individual response to surveillance through an array of personal privacy options, lengthy user agreements, or required consent to allow corporations to access individual data. Protection from government surveillance remains largely inaccessible. Although mass surveillance and data mining are collective issues, privacy is presented as a matter of individual preference or concern. Draper and Turow (2019: 1834) suggest additional research should explore “to what extent resignation prevents individual frustration from being transformed into collective anger that might encourage institutional change.” The focus on individual privacy protections may foreclose efforts at collective mobilization.

At the same time, Shifman (2014: 120) argues that creating and sharing memes is a form of political participation, by engaging in “a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there.” Memes as a form of subversive folk practice or as an intervention in media discourses challenge the normalization of surveillance. If digital resignation reflects isolated, individual efforts at privacy protection, the widely shared FBI agent meme suggests a public reckoning with surveillance, affording a link between the personal and the political in generating collective action. Creating, circulating, and satirizing the figure of the FBI agent is a way of critiquing the fact that government surveillance has insinuated itself into every facet of daily life.



**Figure 9:** *Critiquing or resisting the surveillant gaze (Jackson 2018).*

Although many versions of the meme portray an amusing and warm relationship between the individual and the surveillant apparatus, there were also critical responses and negative portrayals of the FBI agent. One version (Figure 9) appeared to follow the typical format for the meme, writing “haha I love talking to the FBI man in my computer,” but rather than depicting a humorous interaction or companionable exchange, instead continues, “saying classic things like stop watching me you fascist pig.” Other variations, which also originated on Twitter and spread across the internet, commented that the FBI agent meme is a social coping mechanism in a surveillance state or speculated that the FBI itself had started the meme to gauge public reaction and, given the indifferent or resigned response, would follow through with heightened surveillance systems (Gordon 2020; Jackson 2018). These examples acknowledge or explicitly reject the normalization of surveillance in digital life, as well as reflect on the role of memes as coping strategies.



**Figure 10:** Exposing the surveillant gaze.

Another version (Figure 10) parodied a Reddit thread by writing “People who use the Dark Web, what’s the most unsettling thing you’ve seen or experienced on there?” The text is accompanied by an image of someone peeking out of a dumpster with the text “Nice try FBI.” This version not only calls attention to the fact that anything posted online can be observed by others but also implies a strategy of entrapment on the part of surveillance agencies, where seemingly innocuous questions could trigger severe consequences. The meme suggests that even an anonymous platform like Reddit does not protect users’ data and identities from being tracked, traced, and known. Although the meme critiques the attempted government surveillance or entrapment, it still relies on an individual, rather than collective, response to surveillance. Individuals must be knowledgeable enough to recognize the trap for what it is; their personal tech savviness determines whether they will take the bait or not. This view suggests that individuals possess a level of control over their personal data and information, as well as the choice to engage or not, a view at odds with larger systems of surveillance and data collection.



**Figure 11:** How to Get Rid of the FBI Agent (23 Hilarious FBI Agent Memes You Can't Risk to Pass Up 2019)

In Figure 11, the typical format of the FBI agent interrupting a Google search undergoes an interesting revision. The individual is shown in the process of typing “how to get rid of the FBI agent,” but before the sentence can be completed, the FBI agent interrupts with a text message reading, “Bro really.” While other variations of the FBI agent meme show the individual searching whether FBI agents need hugs or how to get the FBI agent to come to a birthday party, this version explicitly rejects such surveillant companionship, as the individual tries to rid themselves of the surveillant gaze. The meme seems to indicate the futility of this attempt by having the FBI agent respond before the search can be entered, suggesting that digital devices and internet searches are immediately and inevitably exposed to surveillance.

However, the image in the meme also includes a Google Doodle rather than the standard Google search homepage. Google Doodles are typically artistic renderings on the Google homepage that commemorate a person or event. This Doodle commemorates Carter G. Woodson, an African American historian and scholar known as “the father of Black History” (US National Park Service 2021). The Doodle depicts Woodson writing at a desk, while pages containing images of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Black graduates, and an allusion to a protest or Civil Rights march seem to fly from his pen. Woodson’s Doodle appeared on the first day of Black History Month, February 1, 2018, around the height of the FBI agent meme’s popularity. The Doodle combines images of protest, abolition, and the Civil Rights movement with Google’s logo, with Woodson’s head standing in for the letter “o.” On Google’s homepage, the Doodle might be a straightforward form of corporate historicization and commemoration. While the juxtaposition of the Woodson Doodle and the FBI agent meme could be coincidental, reading them together suggests a different interpretation.

The FBI’s intervention is particularly poignant in the context of black history and liberation. The reference to the Civil Rights Movement as well as the invocation of prominent black intellectuals and leaders, many of whom are now celebrated but were heavily surveilled during their lives, gives the meme a much more pointed and nuanced critique of contemporary surveillance. Woodson founded and published *The Journal of Negro History* in 1916; in 1919, the US Bureau of Investigation (the predecessor to the FBI) published a report detailing the dangers of black-owned newspapers and journals (Greene 2021; *The New York Times* 1919). It is reasonable to suppose that Woodson himself was being surveilled. Woodson died in 1950, but the FBI notoriously harassed, threatened, and surveilled Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, and continues to surveil and harass African Americans and Black Lives Matter protestors (Browne 2015; Joseph and Hussain 2018).

The meme depicts an individual searching for a way out of government surveillance systems, their search surrounded by images of civil disobedience, protest, and higher education, when they are interrupted by the FBI agent casually dismissing any such attempt. In a contemporary context, the meme depicts Woodson, and by extension the individual conducting the search, caught between the dual surveillant structures of Google and the FBI. The meme highlights the individual’s ambivalent relationship towards the surveillant companion, as ever-present but not welcome, and explicitly links government/corporate surveillance with resistance and even protest. Although individuals viewing the meme may not know Woodson, the image of people walking with linked arms, often associated with social protest and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, are widely recognizable, particularly in a US context.

These examples acknowledge and then parody, challenge, or subvert ubiquitous surveillance. The highly visual format of a meme succinctly communicates this critique, making the message easy to like or share, exponentially increasing its visibility across the internet. Although digital resignation and surveillance realism depend on isolated, individual attempts at privacy, as well as a hampered ability to imagine alternatives, the FBI agent meme offers a collective response and potential challenge. The meme mocks the sense of inevitability and can foster a communal sense of defiance, suggesting it has the potential to capture and cultivate public frustration and anger.

## Conclusion

In a moment in which the public's faith in the government was low and when challenges to Net Neutrality were regularly in the news, and with the knowledge that the NSA was conducting mass surveillance on individuals both domestically and internationally, the growth and popularity of the FBI agent meme reflected a public reckoning with mass data collection and ubiquitous surveillance. Although the meme often seems to represent surveillant companionship as friendly or benign, the humor is premised on the fact that there is no escape from the surveillant gaze and that the FBI agent knows the individual intimately, a constant companion. Yet the memes also reveal an acute sensibility of a world in which the seemingly omnipresent gaze is resisted, a kind of *sousveillance* piercing holes in the surreptitious nature of the gaze.

The FBI agent meme has not disappeared from the popular culture landscape. A June 2020 article on Popdust, the name itself suggesting a slow settling of cultural debris, described the FBI agent meme as "haunting" (Gordon 2020). And in 2021, Buetow's TikTok videos referencing the FBI agent character suggest that the meme remains in popular memory. In the video, Buetow (2021) introduces himself as Mark Henderson, "the FBI agent who spies on you through your phone," and directly addresses the viewer with the warning: "you have to stop googling that. Do you understand? You have to stop."

The skit subtly shifts the dynamic of the original FBI agent meme. The original meme portrayed the FBI agent not only as sympathetic to the individual but also as a willing participant in the enormous government surveillance apparatus. This newer version shows the FBI agent as an ordinary man taking his kids to soccer practice, but reaching out through social media to warn the individual about "the powers that be" who are "starting to ask questions, and they're starting to... use phrases like 'snatch and grab' in reference to you, and I don't want to see that happen to you" (Buetow 2021). The shift in tone could reflect the widely publicized exodus and alarm among civil servants under the Trump Administration, in which longtime civil servants were vetted for their loyalty to the president himself (House Committee on Oversight and Reform 2018). Or it might mirror Edward Snowden's decision to divulge the scale and scope of government surveillance in the interest of public safety, as civil servants themselves begin to fear the exponential expansion of government surveillance.

Buetow's (2021) FBI agent recommends that the individual "Google the pledge of allegiance a couple times, or watch some Kid Rock videos" before telling them he loves them, to be safe, and please work with him because there is only so much protection that he can provide. Although still representing the FBI agent as caring and benevolent, the skit implies a more dangerous and potentially malevolent surveillant apparatus that is beyond the powers of both the individual and the FBI agent. The individual can best protect themselves by a private performance of patriotism, or what passed as patriotism in that moment, the pledge of allegiance or Kid Rock videos (a tribute to one of Trump's staunch supporters). Just as in the original meme, the skit implies that private searches are easily visible to the surveillant companion, and that this search history has the potential to indict or protect the individual.

In part, the relationship in the meme captures the conflation of surveillant care and control, a benevolent God merged with a powerful State under one omniscient gaze. The FBI agent often has a paternalistic attitude, caring for the individual as though they were a child. Even the common variant in which the individual receives a text message from their father asking why the FBI are here suggests a unification of fatherly concern, linking the FBI agent and the biological father. Every variant of the FBI agent meme is premised on a surveillant relationship and power imbalance, in which the individual is always and unavoidably being observed in private spaces or vulnerable moments.

Even when the individual attempts to block the surveillant gaze, their efforts are often ineffective or futile, as the FBI agent maintains full knowledge of the individual's actions and environment. Some versions of the meme seem to accept this as a new reality, unpleasant though it may be. Others imply that ubiquitous surveillance only witnesses unimportant daily life activities, saturating the line "if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear" with a sense of ennui. Digital resignation and surveillance realism emerge from

alienation, as individuals reluctantly relinquish control over their privacy, and surveillance appears inescapable. Privacy is then distorted to include the surveillant apparatus within the scope of private activities, as the FBI agent is always watching and able to access any intimate spaces.

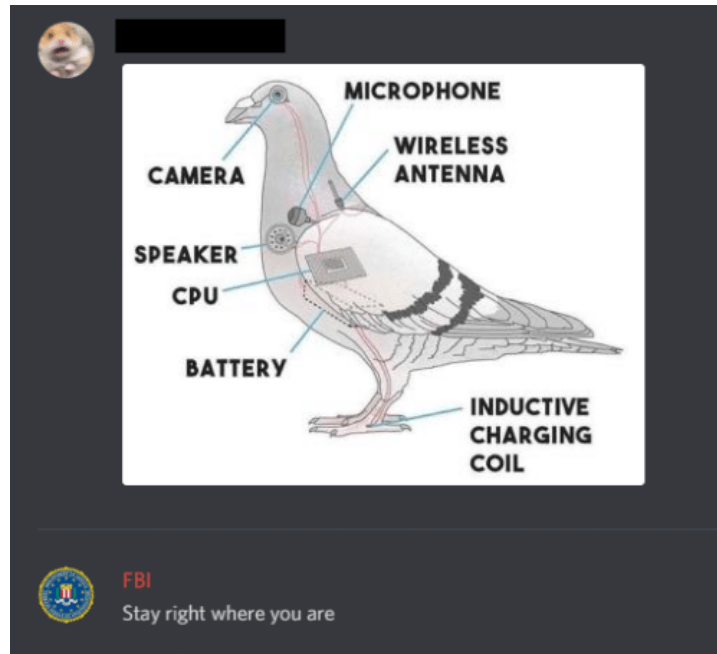
However, many versions of the meme challenged or ridiculed the figure of the FBI agent and rejected the normalization of mass surveillance. Memes can serve as vehicles for public critique, forms of political participation, or tactics of dissent. Their inherently collective nature and wide circulation can rupture the isolationist tendencies of digital resignation and surveillance realism. In this communal critique of mass surveillance, the memes offer a counterweight to surveillance realism by questioning whether such surveillance is either acceptable or inevitable. Critical variations of the FBI agent meme, such as the version with Woodson, juxtapose surveillant intrusions with images of protest, suggesting that collective social action could be another response to mass surveillance, rather than isolated individual efforts. Although the meme depicts the surveillant apparatus as a form of ambivalent companionship, as suggested by Figure 12, the collective and collaborative nature of memes and the participation in communal humor and critique offers a different kind of companionship, one organized around a recognition of shared grievances and surveillant intrusions.



**Figure 12:** *FBI agent meme as a form of social sharing.*



## Appendix A: Memes



**Figure 13:** An example of the "birds aren't real" paired with the FBI agent meme (u/Crew520 2019).



**Figure 14:** FBI agent meme with Toy Story reference.



**Figure 15:** The FBI agent meme and the sexualized gaze.



**Figure 16:** Flirting with the surveillant gaze.

## when you meet your FBI guy during a riot



**Figure 17:** Meeting the FBI agent during a protest.

"Chatting on messenger"

Me: I love you!

My Crush: I love you too!

FB headquarter:



**Figure 18:** The FBI shown celebrating the individual's personal life.

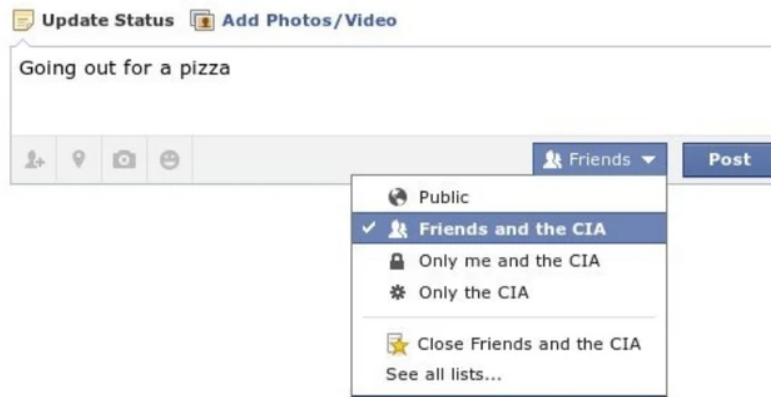


Figure 19: Surveillance and social media sharing.



Figure 20: Satirizing the emotional connection between surveillance and the individual.



Figure 21: An emotional connection between FBI agent and the individual.



**Figure 22:** FBI agent meme and awareness of constant surveillance.

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