Sun-ha Hong
“Criticising Surveillance and Surveillance Critique: Why privacy and humanism are necessary but insufficient”

Abstract:
I argue that surveillance studies, as both academic enterprise and contributor to public debate, must constantly distinguish between (1) the ‘negative’ work of criticising surveillance as we know it, and (2) ‘positive’ critique which seeks to present alternative ways of thinking, evaluating, and even undertaking the work of surveillance. A positive critique warns against a default to conspiracy or condemnation. It aspires to deconstruct surveillance’s knowledge-regime – that is, what is admissible as ‘true’, ‘valid’ or ‘efficient’ – and subvert it. The objective is an open debate not only about ‘surveillance or not’, but the normalised truth-claims upon which discussion takes place and surveillance becomes defined. It makes possible the discussion of whether ‘another surveillance’ might be possible.

To demonstrate, I examine two existing tools of criticism/critique, and then point to two ‘openings’ towards another surveillance. Privacy and humanism (that is, appeal to human rights, freedoms and decency) are necessary but insufficient tools for a positive critique. They implicitly accept surveillance’s bargain of cost-efficiency – the benefit of security ‘measured’ against the cost of rights. The openings are to be found in surveillance’s operative understandings of risk and security, which can be used to deconstruct and subvert this bargain.