Theoretical and empirical accounts of Internet surveillance are a growing field of study. Likewise, the relation between surveillance technologies and an ever-embedded information economy is a foundational concern for surveillance scholars. In *Towards a Critical Theory of Surveillance in Informational Capitalism*, Thomas Allmer contributes to these research areas. His book provides a compact overview of surveillance theory as it relates to understanding informational capitalism online. In his overview, Allmer provides an assessment of this literature that may benefit even a seasoned scholar of the Panopticon.

*Towards a Critical Theory* addresses the saturation of the Internet in contemporary life. It also responds to a proliferation of surveillance models available to explain this development. Citing consumer and workplace surveillance as prominent aspects of surveillance societies, Allmer notes “[t]he approach that is advanced in this work recognizes the importance of the role of the economy in contemporary surveillance societies” (12). Automatic information processing is a de facto reality in the workplace, the marketplace and everyday life. Facing no shortage of theoretical perspectives and scholarly positions, much of Allmer’s efforts go towards assembling a perspective that can contribute towards understanding online surveillance. This book is primarily an overview of existing surveillance literature, which is framed along “theoretically founded typologies in order to (...) analyse examples of [internet] surveillance” (14). The book is structured in a way that moves from a general field of Surveillance Studies to the specific sub-field of economic surveillance on the internet. Each chapter builds upon the overview provided in the last, narrowing in on an appropriate perspective to theorize informational capitalism online.

As such, Allmer concentrates on two primary points of origin: Michel Foucault’s interpretation of Bentham’s Panopticon, and Marx’s theory and critique of the political economy. While Allmer is not the first to apply them to surveillance, he considers the contributions of either approach, asserting that a Marxist political economy supplements a panoptic focus on only one aspect of the economy. Allmer’s use of the term panoptic does not suggest a close, orthodox reading of Foucault (if such a reading is possible), but instead refers to Surveillance Studies literature that pays particular attention to control and domination. Likewise, his political economic approach includes Karl Marx, but Taylorism and Fordism are also influential.

While it may not be Allmer’s intended key contribution, readers will surely be drawn to and dwell upon his assessment of Surveillance Studies literature. Allmer identifies a panoptic/non-panoptic divide as the principle scholarly fault line. Panoptic understandings “consider surveillance to be negative and being connected to coercion, repression, discipline, power, and domination”, whereas non-panoptic notions “use
a neutral and general notion of surveillance, where everyone has the opportunity to surveil” (41). In other words, panoptic authors are primarily concerned with surveillance as a repressive force, while non-panoptic authors see surveillance as a more abstract social process. This distinction is upheld in later chapters where Internet surveillance is specifically addressed.

The designation of particular authors as panoptic may be misinterpreted, as many of those included in this category are not primarily concerned with the Panopticon in their scholarship. In fact, many of these authors would likely not designate themselves thusly. Additionally, Allmer’s claim that non-panoptic authors “are not fruitful for studying surveillance as they do not take asymmetrical power relations and repressive aspects of society into consideration” (46) ought to be read as a provocation. The distinction between critical and non-critical scholarship, and the privileging of the former, is valuable here. Yet Allmer is not attempting to do away with half of the Surveillance Studies cannon. Indeed, authors cited as being “non-panoptic,” like Gary Marx and David Lyon, are relied upon in later chapters.

Allmer’s overall message is that all social actors may potentially have the opportunity to watch over others, but only certain kinds of relations matter in terms of capital accumulation, influence, power and repression. This message is helpful for entering a discussion of Internet based surveillance, given the kind of libratory hype that so often characterizes such discussions. Towards a Critical Theory arrives at an overview of surveillance on the Internet, as structured in terms of spheres of production, circulation, and consumption. Allmer further sharpens his focus by emphasizing the primacy of production (49). This framework provides a critical approach to Internet surveillance practices, but also toward the study of internet surveillance itself, identifying relations that are overlooked and understudied in an ever-growing field.

Overall, Towards a Critical Theory provides a refreshing and provocative account of the state of surveillance theory. It is a compact read at 125 pages, yet it provides a faithful overview to two important lineages of surveillance theory. A risk with works that devote so many pages to discussing other scholars is that this overshadows the author’s own voice and contribution. Yet Allmer finds his voice precisely in the way that he arranges existing surveillance scholarship. One limitation to this approach is that individual scholars, rather than concepts, are the base unit of analysis when surveying the field. However, this structure does not diminish its contribution for readers who seek a primer in Internet surveillance and informational capitalism scholarship.

Allmer employs 19th and 20th century thinkers to explain a 21st century phenomenon, and this provides an enduring grounding. Yet the political economy of online surveillance is a mutating field, and it remains to be seen if his work will retain its relevance in the wake of new technologies, as well as new monetization strategies. Allmer should be prepared to follow up in this field of study, as his framework for approaching Internet surveillance maintains a healthy distance from both optimistic and alarmist hype.

This book will benefit readers who are new to Surveillance Studies and Internet studies. In particular, graduate students looking for a concise overview of how these two areas intersect will gain a lot from Allmer’s work. Additionally, scholars who are more familiar with Surveillance Studies may appreciate revisiting a familiar terrain from a fresh—and occasionally contentious—approach.