

Black Code: A thought-provoking film and panel discussion in the age of digital surveillance

By Carlos Morado



*On the evening of 10 October 2018, a diverse audience - citizens and students from St.Gallen, but also from Zurich, Bern and even Geneva - packed the cinema seats of the Palace to watch **Black Code**, a 2016 documentary directed by Nick de Pencier exploring the contemporary reality of digital surveillance.*

Transporting the viewers to different parts of the world - from the streets of Rio in Brazil to the mountains of Dharamshala in India - the documentary portrayed the Janus-faced character of surveillance. It collected the stories of non-conformists or dissidents worldwide, which are targeted by local or foreign authorities. In doing so, the film dissects the ways in which private data is harvested by governments and then used to constraint, repress or even kill their citizens and subjugate civil society.

At the same time, the film showed how the emergence of these new technologies of surveillance can never completely suppress the agency of those affected by it. On the contrary, it illustrated how surveillance leaves open the possibility of contestation and striking back. The Brazilian collective of guerrilla journalists or the Tibetan activist monks provided the audience with some powerful examples of this form of *subveillance* (or surveillance from below), shedding some light in an otherwise bleak scenario.

Following the screening, the audience had the opportunity to interact with Ron Deibert, visiting professor at University of St.Gallen and author of the book on which the film is based, and Patrick Walder, campaign coordinator at Amnesty International Switzerland. The

discussion, moderated by event organizer Tina Freyburg, discussed crucial insights from the film in light of recent developments in European democracies in general and Switzerland in particular. Both the role of private companies in the “business” of surveillance and the emergence of complex social media surveillance designs that constantly push the boundaries of disclosure and profit from the user’s passive agreement were addressed. Walder’s extensive experience within Swiss civil society provided important insights regarding the particularities and specific challenges digital surveillance poses in the case of Switzerland.



Overall, the event proved to be not only a delightful evening at the Palace, but also a thought-provoking session likely to encourage further critical debate on the issue of modern-day surveillance.