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I am a senior at the University of Hawaii at Manoa pursuing both a BA in

Creative Media, Digital Cinema and a BS in Psychology. I wrote this piece as my final paper for my Ethics and Film course taught by Professor Claudia Pummer. I chose this topic because the femme fatale character type from the film noir genre has always fascinated me, and I noticed that this female character type has changed over time. Since I have binge-watched *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* one too many times, I noticed interesting implications of gender, and thought it would be cool to explore them in this paper. I'm glad to have this opportunity to share my thoughts and observations.

# The Omniscient 21<sup>st</sup> Century Femme Fatale

Genre and Gender Under Surveillance in  
*Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*

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Academy for Creative Media 460 (Ethics and Film)

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*The television shows Gossip Girl (2007 – 2012) and Pretty Little Liars (2010 – present) explore worlds with characters who know everything about everyone, Gossip Girl and A, respectively. Gossip Girl and A's gender, relationship with the show's characters, and genres of each show work to support how Gossip Girl portrays social media surveillance in a positive light, while Pretty Little Liars, in contrast, remains aligned with the dangers of it. Gossip Girl and A are manipulative in nature, and they both obtain privacy-invading amounts of information on the shows' characters; however, the feminization of Gossip Girl entices audiences, thus making her more likeable. On the other hand, A is a classic villain who serves the show's thriller genre, thus critiquing the lack of boundaries when under surveillance. Gossip Girl's role as a modern, technologically-built femme fatale, the role of gender, the relationship between "she" and the other characters, as well as the glamorized genre/tone/style of the television series work to indicate that Gossip Girl advocates for a surveillance society (or at least makes it look appealing). In contrast, the implications of the gender(s) of A from Pretty Little Liars, abusive relationship between A and the girls, and the thriller genre of the show serve to illustrate the television series' critique on a surveillance society. The two shows offer contrasting views on the ethics of surveillance, which ultimately opens up a discussion regarding what surveillance means for individuals' right to privacy.*

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Imagine a world where an anonymous person knew everything about you, every detail about your life, and every secret that you have. In both *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010 – present), this is exactly the case. Both “surveiller” characters, **Gossip Girl** (*Gossip Girl*) and **A** (*Pretty Little Liars*), can be described as 21<sup>st</sup> century variations of the femme fatale, since both “surveillers” use their acquired knowledge to manipulate the characters in each show. *Gossip Girl* and *A*'s gender, relationship with the shows' characters, and the genres of each show work to support how *Gossip Girl* portrays social media surveillance in a positive light, while *Pretty Little Liars*, in contrast, remains aligned with the dangers of it.

Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz's hit television show, *Gossip Girl* chronicles the lives of privileged Upper East Side Manhattan teenagers through the eyes of the anonymous blogger, Gossip Girl. Every secret and scandal to hit these teens is publically announced on Gossip Girl's blog. Similarly, Marlene King's *Pretty Little Liars* follows the secret-filled lives of four teenage girls in Rosewood, Pennsylvania, following the mysterious disappearance of their friend. In this drama, mystery, the girls are constantly blackmailed by a seemingly all-knowing stalker, A (the name of the show's antagonist), and throughout the show, each of the girls receive anonymous text messages, in which A threatens to expose

their secrets. Both *Gossip Girl* and *A* are extremely intelligent, yet manipulative in nature, thus attributing to their femme fatale character type. While access to knowledge can often be a dangerous thing, especially with the help of technology, the different portrayals of each character (*Gossip Girl* and *A*) contribute to the shows' overall promotion or critique of being under constant surveillance.

While the target audience of both television shows are primarily female teenagers (this is not at all to say that this is the only group of people that watch the show), the issue of social media surveillance is still important for everyone to consider. *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* present different points of view on this issue of surveillance, which in turn opens up a necessary discussion on how (social media) surveillance affects one's right to privacy.

## Part I: Genre and Interrelationships Between "Surveiller" and "Surveillee"

### Introducing *Gossip Girl*

*Gossip Girl* can (arguably) be categorized as a romantic drama, which contributes to the shows' promotion of surveillance. Caught up in the on-screen romance and drama, the audience is immersed in an extravagant world that most people dream of living in, all the while, wishing that an anonymous blogger would add *color* to their lives. In the show, *Gossip Girl* follows the glamorous, but scandalous lives of opulent teenagers who live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, her signature opening of each blog post being, "Hey there Upper East Siders, *Gossip Girl* here, your one and only source into the scandalous lives of Manhattan's Elite." *Gossip Girl* puts a flirtatiously inviting spin on the drama and scandal that goes on in the story, resulting in the audiences' attraction to *Gossip Girl* herself. Furthermore, the show is also characterized by the incorporation of contemporary music, the latest in high-end fashion trends, and well known, almost glorified, New York locations, such as Central Park and Time Square. Ultimately, the tone and genre of this show portrays *Gossip Girl*'s social media surveillance as something *cool*. In many ways, *Gossip Girl* symbolizes what it means to be thoroughly connected with the details of everyone's personal lives. The show's target audience (female teenagers)

is constantly immersed in a smaller scale of similar gossip on a daily basis. With that, the show's tone and genre create an added appeal to gossip, thus portraying surveillance in a positive manner.

In *Gossip Girl*, the characters' relationship with the anonymous blogger promotes social media surveillance. Although the truth, no matter how brutal, is the primary thing on *Gossip Girl*'s agenda, and it momentarily sabotages the lives of privileged Upper East Siders, the character's relationship with the anonymous blogger aligns the show with being in favor of this particular surveillance society. Over the course of the show, the intelligence of the *Gossip Girl* blog itself grows to fit the trends of the constantly evolving technological advances. Starting off with a simple gossip blog, *Gossip Girl* evolves to sending the blog posts as text messages to her followers' cell phones. Furthermore, the website itself catalogs the history of every post ever created, and also features a map, called the "Spotted Map," in which the Upper East Siders' locations are marked (basically a people tracker). However, this does not set *Gossip Girl* apart from the other characters in the show, rather, it positions her as a character no different than any other of the privileged Manhattan teens. Yes, *Gossip Girl* keeps tabs on everyone and collects private information on her blog, but, what she does is nothing unlike what the teenagers do to each other everyday (gossip and manipulate). In simpler terms, *Gossip Girl*'s character is not painted as a fearful enemy, but is instead portrayed as a part of the majority, thus supporting the show's approval of surveillance, since it is what teens do to each other anyway (especially with the technological advances in this day and age). The relationship between *Gossip Girl* and the other characters, as well as the relationships between the characters reflect the behaviors of the current teenaged generation. In the show, there is a reoccurring theme of needing to know/ find out information about a person, someone's past, etc. Perhaps, with this target audience of female teenagers, *Gossip Girl* is able to successfully advocate for a surveillance society because of the combination of technological advancement and constant thirst for information that is prevalent in the lives of today's teenagers.

Established as simply a knowledgeable peer, *Gossip Girl* also has helpful qualities that promote the show's approval of social media surveillance.

Although the characters are often on opposing sides from Gossip Girl, on occasion, they do go to her for help, as access to her wealth of knowledge proves useful to the main characters' agenda. An example of this is seen when one of the main characters, Serena Van Der Woodsen, is missing. Not featured on the spotted map during this MIA period, Serena's friends ask Gossip Girl for help, bargaining for the details of her location. What adds to the likeability factor of Gossip Girl's character is the fact that she provides Serena's friends with her location. In other words, viewers of the show see the value of having a Gossip Girl in their lives because her knowledge is useful. Likewise, being under surveillance provides the characters in the show with the ability to provide its societal members with useful information, and is therefore evidence of the *Gossip Girl* show supporting this lack of privacy.

### Introducing *Pretty Little Liars*

The dramatic thriller genre of *Pretty Little Liars* contributes to the fearful portrayal of A, which ultimately works to convey the show's caution of being under surveillance. The formal element of framing works to align the show with the dangers of the constant surveillance under A. One example of when specific framing works to portray the dangerous nature of surveillance occurs when one of the main characters, Aria Montgomery, makes out with her English teacher, Ezra Fitz, in his car in the woods (an ethical issue in itself). Following close-ups of the romantic action is a long shot of the car with fogged-up windows. This shot is framed with the car in the mid/ background, and trees and shrubs in the foreground. Furthermore, the shot is not static, but it is floating. These formal elements work to convey the eerie tone of the feeling that someone is watching, and furthermore, suggest that these are A's point-of-view shots. Other examples of framing working to convey the dangerous stalker-like nature of the surveillance society in *Pretty Little Liars* occurs when the four main characters, Aria, Hanna, Spencer, and Emily are all together in one of their houses. When they are all together, they are usually discussing strategies to take down, and/ or expose A's identity. When this happens, there is often a floating long shot through the window of whoever's house they are rallying in. The girls are framed within the frame of

the window, and there are trees in the foreground. Again, this type of shot, a motif throughout the television series, serves to reinforce the dangerous and scary feeling of being watched (the essence of being under surveillance in the world of the *Pretty Little Liars* television show).

In *Pretty Little Liars*, the girls' relationship with A differs from the Upper East Siders' relationship with Gossip Girl. In *Pretty Little Liars*, the girls show a more prevalent fear of A, and their relationship with A is not a friendly one. This relationship between A and the girls in *Pretty Little Liars* spins a cautionary perspective on the dangers of having information. As in real life, if an enemy has personal information, it can be used to abuse. With this type of relationship between predator (A) and prey (girls), access to information via constant surveillance is dangerous, especially when it ends up in the wrong hands. For example, all of A's interactions with the girls involve blackmail of some sort. A is able to continuously get to the girls because he/ she uses the girls' secrets against them in order to protect him/herself. This can be explained in the following scenario: should the girls go to the cops and report A's torment, A would surely leak all of the secrets that the girls have, and/ or somehow make the truth backfire. An example of this is seen when the girls turn in the suspected murder weapon that killed their missing friend, Allison. The blood on the golfing trophy turns out to be rat blood, not human blood. Furthermore, the trophy is a fake, as there is no existing tournament that matches the label on the trophy. The girls are accused of lying by the police, when all they are attempting to do is tell the truth. As you may have guessed, A planned the whole thing to teach the girls a lesson; that A is always three steps ahead. Furthermore, the closer the girls come to the actual truth regarding the identity of A, the more severely they are punished. An example of this is seen when Hanna sees A driving a car at a camping party. This results in A running over Hanna with a car and hospitalized, so that she would forget what she saw. Unlike Gossip Girl, who is presented as a character that is "just like" all of the other characters in the show, A is presented as a clear enemy against the four main female characters in the show. This relationship between A and the girls highlights the dangers of being under constant surveillance.

### Opposing Portrayals in *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*

As it was described previously, *Gossip Girl* is a romantic drama that chronicles the lavish lives of Manhattan's wealthy teenage population, which invites the audience into this *cool* world that is under the surveillance of Gossip Girl. In contrast, *Pretty Little Liars* is a dramatic thriller that uses formal elements, such as framing, to suggest to the audience that surveillance is a dangerous thing.

Also, unlike in *Gossip Girl*, A is portrayed as more of a bully to the girls, rather than someone who is just like them. This could be due to the fact that in *Gossip Girl*, the characters engage in the surveillance, like Gossip Girl; however in *Pretty Little Liars*, the girls are trying to escape the surveillance. In sum, these contrasting relationships between "surveiller" and "surveillee" result in the shows' different perspectives on a surveillance society.

## Part II: Gender

### Gossip Girl's Gender

The feminization of Gossip Girl by way of voice-over narrations, increase the blogger's likeability, which ultimately works to align the show with the approval of a surveillance society. *Gossip Girl*'s anonymous blogs are presented via narrations done by a female, Kristen Bell. Prior to *Gossip Girl*, Kristen Bell was best known for her lead role as Veronica Mars on Rob Thomas' *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007). With that, her association as a sympathetic protagonist prior to being *Gossip Girl*, casting her to be the voice of the anonymous blogger arguably adds to Gossip Girl's likeability. Additionally, she narrates the gossip in such a way that entices the blog's fans. Her suave tone of voice engages both the audience within the show's world, as well as the show's viewers in such a way that makes the gossip sound exciting. Each post leaves the audiences with a "tell me more" attitude. The use of this type of narration serves to welcome civilians into the society that is under Gossip Girl's surveillance. Had Gossip Girl's narration been done by someone like Morgan Freeman, for example, this outlook would be completely different. Kristen Bell's style of narration contributes to the addictive nature of having access to information (i.e. secrets and gossip), even

signing off each post with saying, "You know you love me, XOXO, Gossip Girl."

Oftentimes in cinema and television, voice-overs are used to give the audience knowledge that the characters in the story are not aware of; however, this is not the case in *Gossip Girl*. In the show, the narration tells the audience information that the characters in the show are aware of, but this method of communication (between the show and the viewers) is necessary in order to immerse the audience in the world of *Gossip Girl*. In other words, the voice-over works to include the audience in the world of the show by narrating the gossip in a way that parallels the characters reading the gossip (via blog, text, etc.). Therefore, this inclusion promotes how the show is an advocate for surveillance.

While Elke Van Damme argues that "the active/passive (male/female) dichotomy dominates the storylines" in *Gossip Girl*, the influence of gender on the implications of the show go beyond the stereotyped behaviors of males and females (83). In the finale of the television series, Gossip Girl is revealed to be none other than Daniel Humphrey, a male. Aside from its contribution to the enticement of Gossip Girl "herself," the choice to even make Gossip Girl a girl, and not a boy, I argue, has to do with the gender implications of an omniscient blogger. When Daniel Humphrey comments on how he was able to pull off being Gossip Girl, his voiceover narrates, "I overheard enough conversations to be able to mimic the language of the Constance girls," directly contrasting the true voice of Gossip Girl with the feminized voice supplied by Kristen Bell throughout the entire series. This coaxes the audience to ponder, why not Gossip Boy? The feminization of Gossip Girl is essential to promoting the benefits of a surveillance society. This puts Gossip Girl in a position comparable to a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the stereotypical, schoolgirl, "Queen B." A primary quality of this type of girl is that the other girls in school envy her. The feminization of Gossip Girl works to evoke reactions from audiences that suggest that they crave the omniscience that Gossip Girl has, and all in all, shines her manipulative, femme fatale character type in a desirable light.

### A's Gender

Famous for multiple revelations of A's identity, *Pretty Little Liars*, the ambiguity of A's

gender contributes to the show's critique of constant around-the-clock surveillance. Currently in its sixth season, the identity of A has been revealed, and even changed, quite a few times. Originally a female, Mona Vanderwaal, A has also been revealed to be males, such as Toby Cavanaugh and Ezra Fitz. The latest A reveal, however, speaks more to how the ambiguous implications of A's gender works to create a wary outlook on surveillance society. In the season six mid-season finale, A is revealed to be CeCe Drake, a transgender female who was born as Charles Dilaurentis, a male. It is valid to argue that this choice to have a transgender person be A was made to support the various transgender movements that are very prevalent at this very point in time. Nevertheless, this choice also serves to support the ultimate implications of how surveillance society is a scary situation because of how the antagonist (A) adheres to typical genre conventions of horror/ slasher films. When discussing whom the killer turns out to be in many slasher films, Carol Clover argues that gender is ambiguous and not "as straightforward as it first seems" (209). For example, Clover states, "although the killer of *God Told Me To* is represented and taken as a male in the film text, he is revealed, by the doctor who delivered him to have been sexually ambiguous from birth" (209). Clover uses this to reason that slasher killers and monsters of horror films are similar in that they "represent not just an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexual energy of the civilized male but also the power and potency of a *non-phallic* sexuality" (209). This also applies to the gender identity of A in *Pretty Little Liars*. A's aggressive and violent behavior appears masculine, yet his/her manipulation and blackmail has a feminine, mean girl quality as well. The gender of A constantly changing between male, female, and transgender individuals works to categorize the ambiguous character with the killers of slasher films and monsters of horror films, and this ultimately serves as support for the show's critique of surveillance. This also transforms the traditional concept of a femme fatale to a modern one, primarily defined by manipulative behavior instead of strict gender categories. This creates a dangerous dynamic for the character of A because it really stresses how a stalker is comparable to killers of slasher films and

monsters of horror films can be anyone, since the fluidity of gender produces a dangerous ambiguity.

In Anna Donatelle's thesis, she analyzes "identity construction within a post-feminist media culture" (2). In her analysis (involving discussion of fashion style and character), Donatelle claims that, "each girl offers a typical representation of femininity" (8). While this is arguably true, it does not reflect the entire show's position on femininity. In fact, the show breaks typical stereotypes of females on television with the fact that they too can be stalkers. This adds to the danger associated with A because, as it was mentioned before, it opens up the stalker-character beyond only males, only females, and anything in between. In contrast to the feminizing effects of *Gossip Girl* adding a likeable quality to the character, the uncertainty of A's gender (arguably) makes the character more dangerous and fearful, especially in the context of the show's genre.

### **Part III: Implications of a Surveillance Society on Our Right to Privacy**

With contrasting viewpoints on whether a surveillance society is "good" or "bad," deeper analysis is required to try and understand what it means for our right to privacy. With *Gossip Girl*, a surveillance society is appealing. The feminization of *Gossip Girl*, relationship between *Gossip Girl* and the characters, as well as the glamorized romantic drama genre/tone/style of the television show work to positively market a surveillance society. In this case, it can be argued that *Gossip Girl* is against a person's right to privacy. This however, is a quick judgment because there is a line between having privacy and keeping secrets. On the other hand, the ambiguity/anonymity of A, abusive/threatening relationship between A and the characters, as well as the thriller genre of *Pretty Little Liars* work to caution audiences on the dangers of a surveillance society. In this case, it can be argued that *Pretty Little Liars* advocates for peoples' right to privacy because when it is invaded, the information can ultimately be used for harmful purposes. With that, it is important to also consider how each "surveiller" uses the information. Although *Gossip Girl* often exploits the truth, "she" does not use it as life-or-death black mail, which is exactly what A does. In closing, the ethics of society

under watch, while dangerous, can be appealing if painted in a certain way.

In conclusion, *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* offer contrasting views on the ethics of surveillance society. *Gossip Girl*'s role as a modern, technologically built femme fatale, the role of gender, the relationship between "she" and the other characters, as well as the glamorized genre/tone/style of the television series work to indicate that *Gossip Girl* advocates for a surveillance society (or at least

makes it look appealing). On the other hand, the ambiguous gender (identity) of A from *Pretty Little Liars*, abusive relationship between A and the girls, and the thriller genre of the show serve to illustrate the television series' critique on a surveillance society. As a whole, both television shows open up a discussion regarding the costs and gains of a surveillance society and what it means for individuals' right to privacy.

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