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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Visibility, Power and Citizen Intervention The Five Eyes and New Zealand's Southern Cross Cable

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In a quiet suburb of New Zealand in 2013, an unknown artist installed his artwork on a seemingly ordinary cable pole; the artwork proclaimed '*Five Eyes Network – Surveillance Outpost*'. Unbeknownst to the public, the post marked the landing point of the Southern Cross Cable, the only undersea cable connecting New Zealand to the outside world, carrying all of the country's internet traffic. How does such a small nation like New Zealand figure in the global debate over mass surveillance? Controversy following Snowden's NSA exposés enveloped New Zealand, fuelled by the revelations that the New Zealand government, as part of the Five Eyes intelligence community, had been collecting data on the population by tapping the Southern Cross Cable. 'If you live in New Zealand,' Snowden wrote, 'you are being watched.'

This article examines the relationship between power and visibility; specifically how creative citizen engagement can serve to reveal structures of power surrounding global politics and surveillance. Visibility is a central concept, extending beyond issues of local visibility at the micro level, into the networked, global environment through online media. The significance of the cable landing point and its intersection with the public space is analysed in relation to the invisibility of elite powers, and the potential for creative participation to act as resistance to dominant narratives over surveillance and privacy. This artistic intervention points to an evolving citizen counter-narrative of the surveillance state, making visible the connected, global system where the influential power of the Five Eyes alliance is wielded.

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**Keywords:** citizen intervention; visibility; creative participation; surveillance; New Zealand; Snowden; Five Eyes

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## Introduction

In the quiet suburb of Takapuna, on Auckland's north shore in New Zealand in late 2013, an unknown artist installed his artwork around a seemingly ordinary cable pole. The near two-metre tall black and white banner proclaimed to passers-by '*Five Eyes Network – Surveillance*

*Outpost*. Unbeknownst to the majority of the public at this time, this post marked the landing point of the Southern Cross Cable, the only undersea cable connecting New Zealand to the outside world, carrying all of the country’s internet traffic to and from abroad.<sup>1</sup> How does such a small island nation like New Zealand figure in the global debate over mass surveillance, and what was the significance of this cable post?

The artist, now known to be John G. Johnston, created this artwork (**Figure 1**) during Edward Snowden’s exposé of NSA documents in June 2013, and the subsequent worldwide debates over mass surveillance (Johnson et al., 2014). Public debate on this issue similarly enveloped New Zealand, fuelled by the announcement that the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB)<sup>2</sup> would expand its intelligence scope, ‘creating a legal basis for the agency to intercept electronic communications from and to New Zealand citizens and permanent residents for the first time.’ (Burton, 2013, 231). The debate reached a critical point soon after this, with Snowden writing ‘if you live in New Zealand, you are being watched’ (Safi, 2014). Snowden’s revelations indicated that the New Zealand government, as part of the Five Eyes intelligence community, had for some time been collecting data on the population by tapping the Southern Cross Cable (Bennett & Trevett, 2014). Snowden also claimed the New Zealand government was supplying surveillance data directly to the NSA about its trading partners and allies in the Pacific region (Patman & Southgate, 2016).

New Zealand’s historical relationship and political allegiance with the United States and the United Kingdom has strong implications for its intelligence-gathering agenda, and for the undersea cable infrastructure itself. This relationship is characterised by unequal power structures, and these inform New Zealand’s role in the Five Eyes alliance and how visibility figures in its structures of communication. Along with the other members of the Five Eyes



**Figure 1:** ‘Five Eyes Network – Outpost’ (image credit: John G. Johnston).

<sup>1</sup> One company, Southern Cross Networks, owns the Southern Cross cable and construction began in March 1998. Its two submarine cable paths connect New Zealand to Australia and the United States West Coast, through Fiji, Hawaii and the US Mainland. The cable has only two landing points in New Zealand: Whenuapai and Takapuna (Southern Cross Cable Network, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The GCSB is a key intelligence agency in New Zealand, governing both counter-intelligence operations and foreign signals intelligence collection. (Rolfe, 2010). The GCSB’s annual budget for the year 2012–2013 was reportedly NZ\$67.9 million. (GCSB, 2013).

– the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia – New Zealand has agreed to cooperate over matters of intelligence, such as the sharing of cyber monitoring products and communication data (Cox, 2012).

This case study allows for an examination of the relationship between power and visibility, specifically how citizen intervention through cultural and political participation can serve to reveal structures of power surrounding global communications. It is a useful example of the creative ways in which citizens engage with political issues, and where the physical public environment becomes a site of artistic intervention and protest. The synthesis of multiple online and offline platforms allows for varying types of participation with the issue of mass surveillance from cultural, political and social perspectives.

Visibility is a central concept in this case, extending beyond issues of local visibility at the micro level, into the networked, global environment through online media as well as the physical infrastructure of the cable network. Firstly, this article provides an overview of the impact of Snowden's revelations on the New Zealand context, such as New Zealand's role in the Five Eyes and the GCSB Amendment Bill. Secondly, the article discusses visibility in relation to creative participation through public art, and examines how online spaces enable creativity, increasing the opportunity for political participation. Lastly, the article analyses the significance of the cable landing point: particularly its intersection with public space and relation to the invisibility of elite powers, and the potential for creative participation to intervene in dominant political narratives.

### **The New Zealand Context: Snowden and the Five Eyes**

Two months before Snowden's revelations, public debate about mass surveillance in New Zealand was already in motion as a result of the government's expansion of its foreign and domestic intelligence collection via the GCSB. In August 2013, the New Zealand government, under the leadership of Prime Minister John Key, successfully passed the GCSB Amendment Bill. This amendment allowed the GCSB to 'intercept the private communications of a New Zealand citizen for the purposes of cybersecurity and for surveillance undertaken by another agency' (Patman & Southgate, 2016, 875).

Snowden's release of NSA documents in 2013 intensified public concern in New Zealand over the extended powers of the GCSB and exposed the omnipresence and breadth of the Five Eyes surveillance network (Kuehn, 2016, iii). The Five Eyes states began cooperating at the start of the Cold War, developing a surveillance network called ECHELON to track the Soviet Union's communications (BBC, 2001). ECHELON marked the early stages of a global network capable of intercepting immense amounts of private communications, creating an interconnected information collection process between members of the Five Eyes coalition (Patman & Southgate, 2016).

As a member of the Five Eyes, the New Zealand government became a target of Snowden's exposé of surveillance activities, and public debate grew around the subject. A public event named 'The Moment of Truth', held in Auckland, New Zealand on 15 September 2014, brought together several key figures such as the founder of the New Zealand Internet Party Kim Dotcom, American journalist Glenn Greenwald, Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, via a live video broadcast (Manhire, 2014). During this event, Snowden and Greenwald revealed that New Zealanders were subject to mass electronic surveillance by the GCSB, who shared this data with the NSA (Hume, 2014). The pair refuted Prime Minister John Key's assertions that New Zealand citizens were not the targets of surveillance. Snowden's documents showed details of the GCSB's project 'Speargun', which involved tapping the Southern Cross undersea telecommunications cable to gather internet data (Hume, 2014).

These kinds of 'lively' public debates surrounding Snowden's NSA documents, combined with the GCSB Amendment Bill exposed the integral and active role played by New Zealand in the global intelligence community (Patman & Southgate, 2016: 884). Until these controversies in 2013, local and global surveillance debates in mainstream media had primarily focused on the United Kingdom and the United States (Kuehn, 2016). Snowden's documents were a key catalyst in shedding light on the nature of New Zealand's intelligence activities, raising vital questions over citizen privacy, and the implications of New Zealand's participation with the Five Eyes. Artistic citizen intervention such as John Johnston's is embedded in this global debate over mass surveillance, manifesting in the local context and attempting to highlight and challenge the Five Eyes' mass surveillance of New Zealanders.

### **Creative participation: From local to global**

Gauntlett describes the act of making arts and crafts as a way of participating with others and society (2011, 2). Creativity, he argues, is vital to society since the act of creating and sharing is inherently political, allowing for engagement with wider issues through the creative process (2011, 162). Johnston's artwork exemplifies active citizen participation with the issue of mass surveillance, channelling creativity as a mode of expressing political views, and as a way of bringing the political into everyday spaces. Extending out from the physical artwork itself, online technologies enhance creative participation at the micro, local level, encouraging macro participation, such as connecting with the global anti-surveillance movement *The Day We Fight Back* ([thedaywefightback.org](http://thedaywefightback.org)).

Johnston's critical awareness of the dynamic of the physical space and the value of the online sphere for increased engagement is evident in his statements: 'Often street art is only there for a very short time anyway, but the images can gain their own momentum online...' (2015a).<sup>3</sup> Just as the street is not traditionally an elite space (Butsch, 2008, 62–3), the technologies of Web 2.0 are also generally free from hierarchies (Gauntlett, 2011, 40) helping to enable and spread creativity, and to invite further participation with the issue of mass surveillance. In this case, sites such as the everyday space of the street and local community of Takapuna combine and are empowered by the wider political community via the online sphere.

### ***The artwork***

Johnston's art installation represents maximalist (Carpentier, 2011), active (Gauntlett, 2011) participation, driven by emotion to interact with a political issue:

'Like many people around the world, I was shocked to learn of Edward Snowden's revelations about the Five Eyes alliance and its extensive, ever-growing surveillance capabilities. I was transfixed by the regular articles... and the world's reactions to Snowden's leaks.' (Johnston, 2015b)

In Castells' discussion of the significance of affective intelligence for social movements, he argues that in order to overcome fear of retribution from acting against hegemonic institutions, an individual needs to be pushed into feelings of outrage or heightened emotion. He argues that the way in which people interact with issues is through different communicative forms (2012, 15). Johnston's artwork is a creative communicative form on an individual level, allowing him to come to terms with the GCSB revelations, translating into action by

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Johnston, J. G., 20 October 2015.

communicating publicly through his art. He states 'Making the work did give me a greater understanding of how spy agency surveillance is carried out, and how their capabilities have expanded significantly in recent years.' (Johnston, 2015a).

Johnston's decision to place this artwork within the street (and use social media) instead of an art gallery becomes an active critique against government power and of elite structures. However, while the public space allows for greater access and thus theoretically flattens traditional power structures, hierarchies of participation still exist between the public and the artist. Historically, the artist holds a position of power over audiences (Carpentier, 2011, 55), so even unwittingly, the artist possesses control over the audience, as the main actor and creator of the message. Yet, Johnston recognises the value of the public space and its ability to reach non-elite audiences, as well as creating the artwork quickly to raise the most awareness:

'...rather than make work to go in an art gallery environment, which would require a much longer lead-in time and be more exclusive in terms of the audience, I wanted to make some work that responded quickly to the topic as the public discussion (primarily in the media and social media) was still in full swing. I thought the work could have maximum impact that way, and especially if situated in public space.' (Johnston, 2015a)

In this way, the artwork invites participation with the issues of mass surveillance by attempting to open a public dialogue. Similarly, Johnston makes his art available for free download on his blog and Flickr account,<sup>4</sup> thus subverting the power position of the artist.<sup>5</sup> By offering free downloads, Johnston stresses the importance of spreading the political message, rather than retaining artistic power and control of the artwork.

### ***The online spaces***

There is significant optimism within media and communication research about the capacity for Web 2.0 technology and the internet to enable cultural and political participation (e.g., Castells, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013; Gauntlett, 2011; Shirky, 2008). These positions highlight possibilities of democratic contribution to the public sphere aided by new media technologies. However, others such as Fuchs (2012) warn that we must be wary of oversimplifying the positive effects of the internet in effecting change. He argues that simply having access to online tools is not enough to ensure the lasting success of political movements (Fuchs, 2012, 781).

This case lands somewhere in the middle of these two arguments over the potential of the internet for political change. The marriage of the online platforms with the offline artwork support and enhance creative citizenship, connecting local with global participation, and helping to remove traditional hierarchies and boundaries to participation. Contrary to Fuchs' assertion that online networks may not be sustainable (2012, 781), this particular multi-site participation was sustained over a period of nine months, weaving the original protest artwork into a complex local and global debate over mass surveillance, which continues today. Johnston utilised Flickr, Twitter,<sup>6</sup> online news sites (scoop.co.nz), his blog (jjprojects.com)

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<sup>4</sup> [www.flickr.com/photos/jjprojects](http://www.flickr.com/photos/jjprojects).

<sup>5</sup> Further examples of Johnston's willingness to make his political artwork freely available are seen frequently, for example his tweets directed at media personnel offering the free use of his artwork: 'Here's a hi res image of my Drone Warfare Decoration, if any media want to use it with a #dronePapers related piece <http://bit.ly/1RdDgFk>' (@JJProjects).

<sup>6</sup> Johnston's Twitter account, @JJProjects, has over 20,000 followers.

and the online social movement *The Day We Fight Back* ([thedaywefightback.org](http://thedaywefightback.org)) to share his artwork and raise awareness while participating in the wider discussion.

While the online sphere certainly enabled and expanded the political potential and participatory aspects of the offline protest, the online tools themselves were not the sole reason for its success. Rather, the *combination* of online and offline spheres was highly beneficial for Johnston's artwork, using a multi-site approach to the political (Carpentier, 2011, 18–19). Johnston acknowledges the power of digital media to enhance his original artwork protest, noting 'I wasn't really expecting [the artwork] to get public attention without the help of social media. These days, it's really the spread of images of this kind of work online that matters in terms of impact.' (Johnston, 2015a). Johnston refers to social media here as helping to increase the artwork's attention; thus the two spheres of participation operated in unison.

Building on the networks of high profile political actors in New Zealand and abroad, Johnston was able to situate his highly localised physical artwork within the broader community, such as Kim Dotcom and the online movement *The Day We Fight Back*. Johnston's online connection to Kim Dotcom,<sup>7</sup> an internet entrepreneur and political party founder, had a particularly strong impact when Dotcom tweeted a link to Johnston's artwork locating it amidst the ongoing debates over surveillance and the Five Eyes alliance: 'One cable connects New Zealand with the rest of the world. One single cable with Five Eyes reading all your emails. [jjprojects.com/portfolio/five...](http://jjprojects.com/portfolio/five...)' (@KimDotcom, 17 February 2014).

Similarly, Johnston's participation in the global protest day *The Day We Fight Back* ([thedaywefightback.org](http://thedaywefightback.org)) highlights an awareness of the benefits of multi-site participation, and an optimism about the potential of the online sphere for activism. *The Day We Fight Back* was established by a coalition of activist groups and companies to protest against the NSA's mass surveillance agenda on 11 February 2014. Johnston participated in this event by creating content across a myriad of online platforms<sup>8</sup> to coincide with the international online protest day, sharing images of a new Five Eyes painting (**Figure 2**) and his original installation in Takapuna.



**Figure 2:** 'Five Eyes Network, 2014' (image credit: John G. Johnston).

<sup>7</sup> Dotcom's Twitter account, @KimDotcom, has over 460,000 followers. Dotcom is the founder of the 'Mega Upload' file-sharing website, and was arrested in 2012 for crimes such as online piracy and copyright infringement. His arrest and subsequent trial triggered the amendment of the GCSB Bill by the New Zealand government (see Patman & Southgate, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Johnston shared these images on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Flickr, and his blog JJProjects.



By linking his local protest with the political action network of the movement, Johnston simultaneously expresses his own cultural creativity, but also shares this political idea with others. There are direct calls to action on the website of *The Day We Fight Back*, such as urging people to email local legislators or add web banner links, giving users easy instructions to participate. This type of online interaction highlights the relative equality of online platforms, which create a much more loosely arranged network free from traditional hierarchies, allowing for increased ease of participation, access and sharing of issues (Castells, 2012, 221; Gauntlett, 2011, 40). Where the physical street art lacked overt calls to action, by joining the network of *The Day We Fight Back*, both the artist and his fans could connect with the wider movement and follow their steps to act.

### **Material and immaterial visibility: The Southern Cross Cable**

Visibility as a concept is complex and fluid, and is a 'central aspect to participation' (Dahlgren, 2013, 55). There is a strong rhetoric of secrecy and invisibility connecting the art installation at the cable landing site with the allegation of spying on the New Zealand public using the Southern Cross Cable. Both of these raise the issue of a lack of transparency, whether it be at the government policy level, within the public discourse, or the physical obscurity of the undersea cable infrastructure. As Starosielski notes 'the reasoning goes, if the public doesn't know about the importance of undersea cables, they will not think to contest or disrupt them' (2015, 4).

In this case, the artist's individual participation hinges on the idea of visibility, and the hope to inspire further participation also depends upon making New Zealand's role in the global discourse of mass surveillance visible. Historically, the undersea cable networks which carry global communications have been deliberately hidden from public view, and insulated against both physical and intelligence-based threats, since they are so crucial to the operation of society (Starosielski, 2015, 19). This reveals the critical connection between the physical media infrastructure of the Southern Cross Cable, and its social, political and local environment. The cable has significance in the global political environment, and becomes a symbol (physical and metaphorical) of how power is linked with visibility. For these reasons, protest artwork like Johnston's is even more valuable as it seeks to bring the infrastructure back into focus, and link it directly to immaterial ideas and political networks.

### ***A symbol of political power, control and visibility***

The Southern Cross cable and its landing point in Takapuna, Auckland can be viewed as a manifestation of the historical and current power binding the relationship between New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Not only is New Zealand dependent on these larger nations, but their historical influence has shaped the physical route of the cable infrastructure and has ongoing implications for the New Zealand public. For that reason, it is useful to historically contextualise the political relationships between New Zealand and its two most influential allies, the United Kingdom and the United States.

As a former British colony and member of the Commonwealth, New Zealand's historical allegiance with the United Kingdom is complex and ongoing, even shaping the formation of its cable infrastructure and the policies that govern it. This is seen in the only two fibre-optic cables connecting New Zealand with the outside world which are located along colonial British telegraph paths of the twentieth century (Starosielski, 2015, 12). Similarly, the Southern Cross Cable was designed specifically with the United States in mind, since the internet servers (the core that powers the communication network) are located in American territory (Starosielski, 2015, 52–3).

Both the Southern Cross Cable and the Five Eyes network embody this historical alliance, and recall the power structures that are constantly at play. As a small state, New Zealand is particularly vulnerable to larger states which project power, therefore in order to mitigate this, small countries like New Zealand enter into partnerships such as the Five Eyes (Burton, 2013, 218). New Zealand's reliance on the Southern Cross network for the basic operation of its society (Starosielski, 2015, 57) puts it in a position of dependency on these two global powers; the international alliance is predicated on the unequal balance of power associated with the Southern Cross Cable.

While there have been several moments in New Zealand's history where the country has adopted a normative stance in terms of foreign policy,<sup>9</sup> it has largely supported the UK and the US, and bowed to pressure from these nations (Burton, 2013, 225). This imbalance of power is exemplified in the recent statements from former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, who characterised New Zealand (as part of the Asia/Pacific region) as a valuable player in the United States' own foreign strategy:

'...we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain *our* leadership, secure *our* interests, and advance *our* values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment... in the Asia-Pacific region.' (Clinton, 2011, emphasis added)

As Clinton's statements show, American interests are valued over others in the Asia-Pacific region. Activities like these have led some critics to argue that New Zealand's renewed relationship with the US has meant relinquishing its independence (Burton, 2013, 227).

While the promise of protection by an influential power like the US is appealing, partnerships like this raise questions over the relevance of mass surveillance of New Zealand citizens by these powers.

In the same way that online spaces for participation brought Johnston's local artwork into a global context, the political and physical environment surrounding the Southern Cross Cable is also involved in local-global push-and-pull. However, the same idea of freely traversing geopolitical boundaries develops new tensions when it comes to the national policies which relate to cyber intelligence. We see this local-global tension acknowledged in the GCSB bill's wording, but now the boundary less nature of digital communication becomes a justification for extending the reach of the GCSB's powers: 'New Zealand faces a changing security environment in which threats are increasingly interconnected and national borders are less meaningful.' (GCSB and Related Legislation Amendment Bill).

In this way, the Five Eyes network is both materially and politically linked to the undersea network. The GCSB controversy highlights the historical relationship of power and control by New Zealand's traditional allies, who now request access to communications data through cable tapping. The recent US investments to extend its interests in the Pacific region have been deliberately kept hidden from the public, as Clinton acknowledges 'President Obama has led a multifaceted and persistent effort to embrace fully our irreplaceable role in the

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<sup>9</sup> In 1985 the New Zealand government refused entry to the USS *Buchanan* on the grounds that the United States would neither confirm nor deny the warship's nuclear capability. The Labour government at this time had made it clear that it would establish New Zealand as a nuclear-free country. This stalemate resulted in the US severing many political ties with New Zealand, including restricting intelligence sharing (Burton, 2013, pp. 225–6).



Pacific... It has often been a *quiet effort*. A lot of our work has not been on the front pages...' (2011, emphasis added).

This deliberate insulation and obscuring of activities related to global intelligence such as that exerted by the Five Eyes' major players makes it extremely difficult for citizens to engage with these issues. Thus artistic intervention, installed at the specific cable landing point becomes even more crucial in helping to connect the ideas and fill in the blanks in the public discourse around the control and distribution of New Zealand's global communication network. These kinds of counter-narratives are few, but remain vital to help contextualise the undersea network and highlight the international elites involved in its regulation.

### ***The landing point: Creating a counter-narrative***

Thompson presents a largely optimistic view of the role of the media in shedding light on previously inaccessible politic issues, stating 'in the age of mediated visibility, it is much more difficult to close the doors of the political arena and throw a veil of secrecy around it.' (2005, 41). However, this argument downplays the current and historical relationship of power involving the elite and the media, for instance as Corner argues, elites have always sought to control the media and structure the message in one way or another (2011, 20). Even if this is not by overt control or censorship of the media, elites still often hold privileged positions with the media, shaping the way issues are presented to the public, and also those which are excluded (Corner, 2011, 21–2).

Only rarely does the media serve to highlight the political and cultural implications of undersea networks like the Southern Cross Cable. Instead, a 'veil of secrecy' is precisely the narrative surrounding both the physical infrastructure and the initiatives behind the mass surveillance programme. Instances of shattering this veil or intervening with the dominant message have been surprisingly scarce in the New Zealand context (Kuehn, 2016, iii). Therefore Johnston's cultural participation holds extra significance for the potential for citizens to connect the everyday with sites of protest, and bring a seemingly isolated context like New Zealand into the global discourse of mass surveillance.

While various research efforts have centred on issues of cyber security in New Zealand and how this functions at the policy level (Burton, 2013; Greener-Barcham, 2002; Weller, 2001), few have analysed its manifestation in media spaces or examined the role of elite influencers. While the GCSB protests were covered in mainstream media in New Zealand, the actual infrastructure of the Southern Cross Cable network was rarely mentioned prior to this. Instances of the Southern Cross Cable appearing in news media before the Snowden leaks seem to have been largely 'disruption narratives' focusing on technological troubles affecting cable functions (Starosielski, 2015, 67).

Starosielski notes that undersea cables worldwide rarely enter public discourses through popular media (2015, 66), and when they do, they only add to narratives that obscure the *significance* of the infrastructure. She argues that these common narratives support the hidden nature of the networks, because they present the cables as isolated (2015, 67) meaning they are not only hidden in public spaces, but also within media narratives. Counter-narratives are thus essential tools for bringing the cables back into focus in the public's imagination, and for emphasising their vital role in global networks and politics (Starosielski, 2015, 93). Specifically, Starosielski stresses the importance of visualising cable landing points in public discourses, in what she labels 'nodal narratives', since this is where the cables intersect with public spaces (2015, 84 & 141).

Johnston's art installation can be viewed as one such counter-narrative; as a starting point or an intervention in the dominant discourse of the global and local network. The artwork invites us to view the cable landing point in Takapuna as a connected, ongoing system – a

place where the influential power of the Five Eyes alliance is wielded throughout the network. To demarcate the physical landing space with an image of the Five Eyes not only serves as creative protest over the single issue of the GCSB, but its placement on the cable post draws attention to the material landing point.

Cable landing points are vulnerable and important sites, which is why they are kept hidden in public spaces and discourse, they are '...the pressure points of our global nervous system, where only a small amount of resistance can have significant impacts.' (Starosielski, 2015, 169). The cable landing point in Takapuna is a space where the local is intrinsically linked to the global, and a pivotal connection for the US' own strategy and the Five Eyes' agenda. In leaked documents, the US government acknowledged the global significance of the Takapuna landing point, labelling it as 'critical infrastructure and a key resource' (NZPA & NBR, 2010). Johnston demonstrates a heightened awareness of the critical nature of this specific landing point, citing the centrality and importance of the Takapuna post as a reason for installing the artwork there (Johnston, 2015a).

The vulnerability that comes from intersecting public spaces becomes double-layered when connected with allegations of mass surveillance. The initial impetus for those in control of the undersea infrastructure to obscure the landing points from public view takes on new significance in that by hiding the physical infrastructure, it also enables the secrecy around tapping this cable, and communication monitoring. Not only is *information* here becoming an issue of visibility, but the invisibility of the cable infrastructure in New Zealand becomes necessary to guard against the threat of exposure of national and international surveillance activities.

Bringing the politics involved in the undersea network into the mainstream dialogue is important, and Johnston's artwork is a valuable example of creative ways of doing so. Without the ability to visualise the communication infrastructure we use daily, we are not aware of its interconnectedness with global politics, and the role played by various elite actors in controlling these communications. Therefore, a lack of visibility makes it much harder for citizens to interact with these issues (Starosielski, 2015, 229), and so an intervention in the narrative of invisibility is crucial to encouraging further political engagement.

## Conclusion

New forms of political activism are constantly evolving, and as Dahlgren notes, 'whether or not these developments are genuinely fruitful for the enhancement of democracy is under debate.' (2009, 33). In this New Zealand example, art and the street become places of protest and opportunities for the creative citizen, a development which should be seen as positively channelling political and cultural participation. Johnston's artistic intervention in the physical environment at the cable landing point challenges the invisibility of the physical undersea cable network, and also what this invisibility represents – the government's secrecy surrounding the GCSB mass surveillance initiatives, and New Zealand's crucial yet veiled role in the international intelligence community.

Both online and offline spaces in this case allow for artistic intervention in previously hidden discourses, emphasising 'multi-directional' (Dahlgren, 2013, 21) and 'multi-site' maximalist participation (Carpentier, 2011, 18–19). The synthesis of multiple platforms enables participation with international debates on mass surveillance, bringing localised creative action and New Zealand's role in the Five Eyes into the global networked space. While the everyday space of the street and the cable landing post was highly valuable in connecting the material with the immaterial issues of mass surveillance, this success was found in the fusion of the street and everyday practices like creativity with the diverse macrosphere of the internet (Livingstone, 2013, 27).

Johnston's creative participation at the site of the cable landing point highlights the centrality of visibility to political participation, and the way issues of power have long been connected to this notion of visibility/invisibility. New Zealand's historical relationship with the US and the UK is crucial to understanding the way the cable infrastructure of today has been shaped, as well as revealing the significance of New Zealand as a member of the Five Eyes alliance. These power structures influence what is included and omitted from public discourses around the undersea cable infrastructure. The Southern Cross Cable, as part of the global undersea network is an ongoing example of the invisibility of these elite powers, and offers the potential for creative participation to intervene in hegemonic discourses by creating counter-narratives which encourage participation.

Johnston's artwork opposes these dominant narratives in an attempt to amend the blind spot surrounding the global significance of undersea cables in the public discourse. Fuchs' argument that mere access to online tools is not sufficient to sustain the success and dialogues of political movements (2012, 781) is countered in this particular example. More than two years since Johnston created the original artwork, his engagement with the wider political movement against mass surveillance has continued successfully. He has continued to utilise online tools to both contribute to the global discussion, referencing his original artwork on the Five Eyes<sup>10</sup> and even creating a new series of pieces inspired by this.<sup>11</sup>

The invisibility of the physical cable infrastructure and its political and cultural significance has so far been largely absent from in media discourses as well as in media research. Further research would be useful to examine when issues of cyber security in New Zealand have manifested in media spaces, particularly if these connect with the physical cable infrastructure and issues of elite influencers. Other global examples of creative participation inspired by the NSA revelations would also make interesting future case studies, looking at how these new counter-narratives attempt to expose the undersea cable network.<sup>12</sup> As Starosielski notes, these undersea communication cables are critical infrastructures which underpin our entire global society (2015, 1), and therefore further research into these network has significant implications for how we conceive of global politics, relationships and culture.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., 'Artist to lead...scuba-diving expedition to site of underwater Internet cables tapped by NSA... I like the idea of this cos I did an artwork at the landing point of NZ's undersea internet cable...' (@JJProjects, 8 Oct 2015).

<sup>11</sup> 'Backwater Ops' imagines a dystopian future, built on the mass surveillance idea: 'I'm deeply concerned about where digital mass surveillance could lead a society, and my following series of work, Backwater Ops, is really about that.' (Johnston, 2015a).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Trevor Paglen's recent exhibition focuses on the physical architecture of the undersea cable network in an attempt to highlight 'the American surveillance state' (Sohn, 2015). Similarly, Banksy's street art in reference to the public debate over surveillance by GCHQ in the UK, following Snowden's revelations (Cain, 2014) would make useful additions to the analysis of counter-narratives of mass surveillance.

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