

It's all in a word

We thank Emily Tagliaro for submitting this article to the OIE News Team.

For someone who loves the outdoors, being confined to a small Parisian apartment with my talented musician husband (I am talking double bass and piano, not flute) and a handsome grey cat, has taught me a lot about myself, my interests and hobbies. It also led me to engage in new activities and pastimes (during non-working hours, of course). As a non-technical staff member who has been at the OIE for many years, I am confident that I can make sense of and discuss most veterinary jargon (of course when dealing with a non-technical/scientific audience). And thanks to confinement, I think I might have become an expert in surveillance.

My newfound distraction of performing 'surveillance' was quite pleasant and I discovered that had it had multiple secondary benefits: while I was discretely peeking over my windowsill, I could simultaneously enjoy the warm morning sun and check my flowerpots. Although this new activity was very short lived (not lasting more than a couple of minutes a day and was totally erased from my daily schedule after 11 May 2020), having a background in cultural anthropology and language, I wanted to better understand the meaning of the word 'surveillance' and, if indeed, I had been involved in it.

The *OIE Codes* glossary defines [surveillance](#) as meaning 'the systematic ongoing collection, collation, and analysis of information related to (aquatic) animal health and the timely dissemination of information so that action can be taken'. This seemed a bit too specific for me – not to be mistaken with [specific surveillance](#) which is also defined in the *OIE Codes* – and therefore, thanks to a little online research, I discovered that the etymology of the English noun '[surveillance](#)' could be traced back to 1802 and derives from the French word '*surveillance*' meaning to provide oversight, supervision or a watch.

The French *surveillance* is considered to have come from '*surveiller*' meaning to oversee or watch and can be recorded in texts dating back to the 17th century. French is a Romance language derived from the vulgar Latin of the Roman Empire, and the [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#) deconstructs 'surveillance' into: 'sur' from Latin '*super*' meaning above, over; + 'veiller' from Latin '*vigil*' meaning watchful. The word made its way into the English language through disturbing reports which crossed the Channel following the creation of [surveillance committees in March 1793](#) in French municipalities. These surveillance committees, established during the [Reign of Terror](#), had the authority to identify, monitor and also arrest suspect persons, outsiders and dissidents (the law establishing these committees was eventually revoked in October 1795).

Historical studies have also commonly correlated 'surveillance' with 'spying' or 'espionage'. These modern synonyms seemed to parallel the historical definition linked to gathering and collecting information, to supervising the actions of other people (in most cases enemies), and to using this information to aid one's understanding of that person. To support this, a whole suite of tools and technologies have been developed in modern times; for example, spyglasses, telescopes, radios, surveillance cameras, spyware and now evolving into facial recognition technologies and who knows what will be next.

I somehow felt that these historical and/or negative dimensions of the word did not reflect my state of mind and therefore I decided to investigate further, remembering George Eliot's famous words in her magnum opus

Middlemarch, 'the right word is always a power and communicates its definiteness to our action'.

I first decided to examine the word 'voyeur'. Deriving from the French 'voyeur', literally 'one who views or inspects,' from 'voir' to view, from Latin 'videre' to see. This noun means one obtaining sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked or engaged in sexual acts. Right! Safe to say, I was on the wrong track.

But voyeur led me to 'scopophilia'. A term coined from Ancient Greek 'σκοπέω skopeō' meaning to look to or examine coupled with 'φιλία philia' meaning the tendency towards - a noun that describes a person deriving aesthetic pleasure from looking at something and from looking at someone. Here I felt I was onto something until I read the Wikipedia page definition where it attributes use of the term to Sigmund Freud to describe a burning and tormenting curiosity to see the female body. (???)

Perhaps by simplifying things, I could get the right word. I asked myself, what was I actually doing; casting quick glances and/or watching. Perhaps that was it, was I 'watcher'? No, it seemed that I was wrong again. The definition of this noun means one that sits up or continues awake at night (not me at all, easy and deep sleeper) or one that keeps watch beside a dead person or one that attends a sick person at night. This was not right either.



View from my lounge room window

I tried one more time, perhaps I was merely gazing across ... a gazer, perhaps? Wrong again as this noun means to fix the eyes in a steady intent look often with eagerness or studious attention. This was not right, and when I attempted looking for synonyms, it was clear I was well off the mark: gape, gawk, gawp, goggle and stare.

I am not sure if any other colleagues found themselves '**looking beyond their windows**' during the confinement, which is the description I have decided to use for it. Perhaps if we are many, there will be a new word coined by sociologists and psychologists in the coming years. In any case, it is a completely curable affliction, causes no harm and has resulted in me better knowing my street and the people I share it with.

Although unrelated, there are some distant connections to the Alfred Hitchcock film Rear Window, with James Stewart and Grace Kelly, though gladly without the murder. I know that it is summer for most OIE colleagues, and therefore you may be wanting to spend a lot of missed time outside, but if you find some time, watch it as it is really a great film.

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