

# ARE WE DIGITAL MASTERS OR CAPTIVES? A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PANOPTIC VERSUS SYNOPTIC EFFECT OF SURVEILLANCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The era we are living in is the one where we are exposed to a massive attraction of social connectivity based widely on digital forms of media. The most common one of them is social media. Social media exposes us to a kind of virtual Panopticon where ‘the few’ watch ‘the many’ in architecture of surveillance. Another term related to surveillance is Synopticon, a system where ‘the many’ watch ‘the few’ in the “Viewer Society”. In the light of the related literature of theory and practice in the area, the study aims at viewing social media tools and its users from a critical perspective in a descriptive manner. To be able to do this, the study develops a set of hypothetical questions whose answers are instrumented to find out whether there is truly such a thing as “Virtual Panopticon” or “Synopticon” and if so, to what extent and how the Panoptic versus Synoptic effect of social media are felt among its users in various applications in light of media and communication. Facebook, based on the current theoretical knowledge within the field of surveillance can be given as an example. The study concludes with an overview of both assumptions with further reflections and contemplations of the readers of the study, who implicitly or explicitly could also be the actors of social media as masters or captives.

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Key words: digital communication, social media, surveillance, panopticon, synopticon, self-captivation, self-affirmation, self-construction

### INTRODUCTION

Died long before the arrival of the internet, though, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) developed a set of insights that can help explain how social media affects us. He studied subjects related to social conditioning and identity formation in relation to power. Those studies are still considered to be applicable to life online. Viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, social media is considered to be not simply a vehicle for exchanging information; it is also a vehicle for identity-formation involving 'subjectivation' Fascinated by Jeremy Bentham's model of the ideal prison, the Panopticon in Foucault refers to a conscious and permanent visibility, which also stands for what all social media is all about. By making our actions and shares visible to a crowd, social media exposes us to a kind of virtual Panoptico (Rayner, 2012). It is simply a reciprocal system of control. Today's social technologies in use are fundamentally Panoptical.

Another term related to surveillance is Synopticon. Put forward by Thomas Mathiesen in "Viewer Society", the Synopticon is tied to a top-down, instrumental way of theorizing the media. On the contrary, it neglects resistance, alternative currents in media production and reception, and the role of culture and the increasing centrality of the internet. Mathiesen's piece is most useful in a narrower way, in highlighting how surveillance and the mass media interact, rather than in thinking about the role of the media in control more generally (Doyle, 2011).

As societies have become more and more networked, new forms of surveillance have also appeared due to the ways and tools used. Fixed CCTV cameras once representing the very power of surveillance are now replaced by mobile and interactive modes of surveillance. One of them is sousveillance, that is, surveilling the surveillers. Sousveillance is a step forward and it is a new form of surveillance that is everywhere but little observed. In networked societies, people are more likely to want surveillance and coveillance as they lack the protection of the village community or hierarchical

organization. Newly developed technologies allow people to surveil the surveillers. These enable people to be simultaneously master and subject of the gaze through wearable computing devices that offer a new voice in the usually one-sided dialogue of surveillance. A self-empowering *sousveillance* awaits people as they traverse their multiple and complex networks "Personal *sousveillance*" has been referred to as "coveillance" by Mann, Nolan and Wellman (2003). Coveillance, 'watching the watchers' is a very common form of documentation of interaction with others online. Digitally, when we share, like, befriend, register online, we are tracked every second through personal data systems. The process is called 'dataveillance'. Overall, surveillance has evolved into different forms due to technological advancements and developments. We are often self-captivated in the process of the construction and affirmation of our digital identities. The discussion at this point is triggered by a question as to whether we are in full control as digital masters-the watchers or in loose control as digital captives under heavy coveillance. The study basically puts forward and discusses three research questions:

1. How can we conceptualize and understand the practice of online social networking in terms of surveillance and its new forms (*sousveillance*, *coveillance*, *dataveillance*)? To do this, a timeline analysis through the lenses of space, place and time has been chosen for two reasons: Firstly, these perspectives offer a way to be able to better and metaphorically compare and discuss the terms in use. Second, developments relating to place and time play an interesting role in relation to social networking sites today.
2. What kind of discourse surrounds the practice of surveillance, online social networking and identity on it? The construction, integrity and captivation of the self-disguised in digital identities on social networking sites led to differing opinions about especially surveillance-related scenarios with pros and cons.
3. To what extent can we be assumed to be free or captive with our new identities on social networking where new forms of surveillance are observable with an increasing density and intensity?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. SURVEILLANCE**

Surveillance is a cross-disciplinary field that helps understand the rapidly increasing ways in which personal details are collected, stored, transmitted, checked, and used as means of influencing and managing people and populations. It may also involve physical watching, but today it is more likely to be automated.

Surveillance has a relatively long history as it existed long before new media technologies. Communication field of study is related to the study of surveillance due to its conventional concerns with media and media technologies. In many perspectives, surveillance technologies are media technologies. In this regard, all forms of surveillance beyond direct supervision include the use of media, from writing and paper to digital video and audio recording devices. Surveillance practices in all of their technological forms are part of the cultural rituals of modern societies (Magnet and Gates, 2009). Surveillance in all regards does not stand alone in the field as issue of monitoring and observing others can be traced back to some other practices and concepts. The most and related one is Panopticon where surveillance continues to play an important role in establishing and reinforcing social inequalities.

#### **2.1.1. SURVEILLANCE AND PANOPTICON**

The types of surveillance typically uttered in the Panoptic model include the monitoring of people staying at a lower point in the social hierarchy; with physicians monitoring patients, guards watching inmates and supervisors keeping an eye on workers. Surveillance continues to play an important role in establishing and reinforcing social inequalities. Panoptic surveillance is fundamentally concerned with monitoring people. The Panopticon is a form of technology establishing systems of visibility (Haggerty, 2008). According to Chow (2012), Foucault's prison is concerned with whatever visible. It not only wants to show the crime and the criminal but in itself it forms a visibility. Defined by "Panopticism, it is a system in which the warder can see all the detainees without being able to see either him or one another. Panopticism is no longer 'to see without being seen'.

Los (2008) points out that western societies draws much debate on the question of the extent and nature of surveillance awareness. Technological surveillance moreover, contemporary surveillance (especially so-called *dataveillance*) does not appear to depend on the existence or truth of the awareness of being watched. In this respect, contemporary society is a type of networked society. Networked information exchanged among the members of this society is hard to secure and easy to produce. This fact of the digital age explains both the power of surveillance today and its potential weakness or vulnerability. In fact, surveillance as a network of power and knowledge relations always produces resistance. Restating Foucault's claim that power requires resistance as a force following its action, to surveil something essentially means to watch over or guard it despite the resistance offered (Bogard, 2008).

Keen (2012) emphasizes the ironic relationship between Panopticon and social media. He asserts that the Panopticon connective technology would bring us together by separating us. Social media is the confessional novel that we are not only writing but also collectively publishing for everyone else to read. Facebook wants to populate the wilderness, tame the howling mob and turn the lonely, antisocial world of random chance into a friendly world as, for Foucault, (hyper) visibility is a (hyper) trap that is difficult to avoid without leaving any digital tracks that are vulnerable to dataveillance.

### **2.1.2. SURVEILLANCE AND SYNOPTICON**

While Panopticon was designed for prisoners, today's surveillance society has extended its function to society as a whole. The main principle of Panopticon is that people internalize the surveillance and behave themselves. By doing this, society is shaped as the individuals are constantly reclassified and assessed according to the requirements of power. The mechanism, therefore, is changed from Panopticon into Synoptican, a new technique of power. Synoptican refers to a new technique of power in which people are themselves turned into watchers. Panoptical and Synoptical methods complement each other as mechanism of control In short: Surveillance can be direct and top-down (Panopticon) forcefully persuading people into conformity or indirect in which many watch the few (synopticon) using seduction to ensure

conformity and the legitimization of existing inequalities. This is simply implemented through the mass media, using captivating instruments to secure conformity and the legitimization of existing inequalities (Siapera, 2012). The development of new patterns of inequality and discrimination needs to be taken into account while studying the formation of new online identities.

### **3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION**

Mass communication emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It established direct contact with the public in such a manner as to bypass the traditional socializing institutions, such as the church, the school, the family, and the political system (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012). Today's new form of communication is digital communication that is realized on digital channels. It is even faster and instant and everywhere forming a new cultural and political divide not only among members of society but institutions.

Within the online sphere of digital communications, there are many tools that allow organisations and individuals to track, trace and monitor the actions of others. The digital age has provided states, organisations and individuals with a number of new opportunities for the surveillance of populations. People can potentially be affected by the use of information that they have not willingly supplied. The use of personal or sensitive information collected without a person's knowledge or permission can have all manner of potential personal or financial consequences as digital media tends to be *networked* (produced, distributed and consumed through two-way network infrastructures) in a variety of ways such as the internet, mobile phone, or WiFi networks, whereas broadcast media tends to be consumed on one-way analogue infrastructures. To its audience, interactivity is an important part of digital media. In that sense, interactivity can be defined most generally as 'responsiveness' (Miller, 2011).

Media is the connective tissue of society. The internet is the first public medium to have post-Gutenberg economics. Since all the data is digital (expressed as numbers),

there is no such a thing as a copy any more. Every piece of data, whether an e-mailed love letter or a boring corporate presentation, is identical to every other version of the same piece (Shirky, 2011). This connective tissue has new form called social media that are invading all aspects of life. From a traditional “underground” perspective, it may be inconceivable to use Facebook or Twitter (Lovink, 2012).

Keen (2011) draws attention to the fact that web 2.0 technology personalizes culture so that it can reflect ourselves rather than the world around us. Blogs personalize media content so that all we read are our own thoughts. Online stores personalize our preferences, thus feeding back to us our own taste. Google personalizes searches so that all we see are advertisements for products and services we already use.

On the other hand, digital communication has not always existed online. As a form of reaction to the authority and power that surveil, it took to the streets, too. The move ‘from the web to the streets’ has not only been undertaken for instrumental reasons. It also worked for crossing the digital divide and engage with those ‘who are not on Facebook’. It is also a reflection of contemporary popular movements’ anti-authoritarian valuing of immediacy and face-to-face relationships (Gerbaudo, 2012).

### **3.1. PERSUASION AND DECEPTION**

With the advent of digital form of communication, some things, similar to forms of surveillance, changed its cover only. One of them is persuasion. Celebrated as a quite essential human activity and contrary to popular opinion, persuasion does not happen with the flick of a switch. On the contrary, it takes time, consists of a number of steps, and actively involves the recipient of the message. Technology has also increased the complexity of persuasion, blurring lines among information, entertainment, and influence. For example, a web site intended to inform or amuse may capture the eye of a blogger, who combines it with imagery and sends the modification over the internet. It is now a persuasive message, taking on a meaning the original communicator never intended (Perloff, 2010). Persuasion is closely followed by

deception in that the message can be as persuasive as it can be deceptive, too. McGlone and Knapp (2010) define deception as something that involves deceptive intent. Most communication, for example is by necessity truncated. Identification technologies emerged from the desires of both individuals to authenticate their identities and states to exercise surveillance over individuals. Thus, deception and persuasion were also used against surveillance techniques and forms as a reaction and protection in the identification processes.

#### **4. IDENTITY AND NEW MEDIA**

Foucault argued that identity especially subjectivity in which we become unique individuals and selves is constructed through certain techniques, or practices. These are referred to as "technologies of the self". Namely, they are the practices by which we get to understand and shape ourselves. These technologies are, in turn, constituted through power discourses. They worked through configuring identities in certain ways: they allow things to be experienced, discussed, felt, and they prohibit others altogether. In this manner, they condition us as persons, while also following the requirements of power: after all, our identities must be compatible with the broader socio-political system in which we live. Thus, for Foucault, individuals actively construct their own identities, but using discourses and practices which we are already steeped in power relations. While the internet may be associated with novel means of constructing identities, they must also be assessed in terms of their contribution to self-actualization, liberation and recognition. In other words, terms such as self-construction and self-affirmation and self-captivation in relation to new online identities are starting to find their meaning in the literature. To conceptualize the identity and the new media, we need to find the relationship between new media technologies and identity. There are three theories associated with the theories: Firstly, Foucauldian approach. For him, new technologies can be seen as instituting new practices for self-construction within existing power discourses. We construct ourselves using blogs, social networking sites, MP3 players, mobile phones and so on. Second, new media may be understood as offering the opportunity for reflection and the ongoing construction of the self. So new media confront ourselves with global discourse and



force us to think who we are and we rethink ourselves in relation to specific new media, such as mobile phones, emails, blogs, social networking sites and so on. Third, new technologies can offer new channels both for the collaborative construction of communal identities beyond territories, as well as the means by which such identities organize and act upon their demands. These identities cannot exist outside networked technologies (Siapera, 2012).

One of the biggest debates started by (Gaunlett, 2008) about the social impact of the media can be condensed to one question: “Does the mass media have a significant amount of power over its audience, or does the audience ultimately have more power than the media? In other words, “who are captives or who are masters? It is perhaps not very sensible to consider the matter in such extreme and polarised terms but regarding the ways how digital identities are self-constructed and self-affirmed and in which self-captivation has become an element that is hard to resist, it would be better to discuss these three networked identity existence parameters on social media separately.

#### **4.1. SELF-CONSTRUCTION**

Social identity that develops from social constructionism is permanently constructed through limitless contact with people and social experiences. Today's online networked platforms provide immense opportunities for constructing a new type of self. As social networking sites that relate someone with others in a network have become more in use, the issue of how the self is to be re-constructed in the online world has also become an essential issue to be discussed. Thus, a new kind of self-existing in the online world has been emerging. There is no doubt that by creating new possibilities for presentation of self and of managing the self-presented to others, social medias such as Facebook and twitter have changed and challenge the way we interact with each other.

#### **4.2. SELF-AFFIRMATION**

Self-affirmation is the process of bringing to awareness important aspects of the self. These are values, goals, and treasured characteristics. For example, Facebook profiles are self-affirming in the sense of satisfying users' need for self-worth and self-integrity. Facebook people have a basic need to maintain the integrity of the self, a global sense of personal adequacy. Events that threaten self-integrity cause stress and self-protective defences that can prevent performance. Contrary to common opinion, social media is not privacy. It is often regarded as a platform where our psychological integrity is realized. Leading us to cultivate a prismatic self with different parts of our identity, social media facilitates a different kind of subjectivation. This subjectivation actually imprisons the self within itself with a self-centred focus.

#### **4.3. SELF-CAPTIVATION**

When the self-construction and self-affirmation processes for digital identities are complete, self-captivation and, in a way, being 'self-captive' are like to start. It is often a consistent and permanent process in which users are captivated by the liberties provided by instruments in their profiles. They are little or not aware of their state of captivity while they are voluntarily creating profiles and engaging with other people on social network sites against the background of an audience because the person under surveillance is reduced to a powerless, passive subject under the control of the "gaze" (Albrechtslun, 2008). The question whether there are any consequences of acting with such liberties and free-will is better understood through surveillance especially coveillance where users happen to admit to a participatory surveillance.

#### **5. FACEBOOK AS PANOPTICISM**

Facebook practices social power through digital technologies as a new means of supervision related to earlier techniques of Panoptic control. The physical description of the Panopticon suits the organization of Facebook quite well. However, Facebook is not a prison and it does not mean to discipline its users. There are no guards and no prisoners in Facebook's virtual Panopticon. As users, we are both guards and prisoners, watching and implicitly judging one another as we share content. Facebook

only works if we don't act as if we are under the surveillance of the Panopticon. Netchitailova (2012) likens Facebook to a powerful advertising machine and questions whether we are indeed customers of Facebook or we are simply its product". Sharing online is a matter of self-affirmation and self-creation. Panopticism on Facebook is maintained on a self-reflexive structure to sharing content

Facebook is a representation of the real life individual. For that reason, the photos shared on Facebook represent what the users consider as important. Their values and pass-time activities can be some of them. The user often has an obsession with publishing the most perfect profile picture. This means scrolling through the often hundreds of "tagged" photos to locate one that is acceptable to represent the user's entire page. This photo has to include a nice photo of the user, and it should also be appropriate and socially acceptable. Support and approval for users' profile pictures would be shown through likes and comments. Often if none of them were achieved, the profile would be changed.

Groups that users join are active communities and individuals can communicate about certain topics. Pages that can be liked however are generally joined on the basis that the title states something that is very applicable to everyday life. The expectation with groups joined and pages "liked" on Facebook is that when people are browsing through a user's page, no judgements are made and instead the groups would be common to the two users and there would be nods of approval and agreement to pages and interests.

The primary reason for posting (status, links, photos, videos) on Facebook is generally due to other users finding it humorous. The expectation in doing this is to make it funnier to the wider community. However, the fact that everyone has a different sense of humour is something most users are often unaware of. As a result of this, users should take into consideration whether a certain post will be entertaining and they will post it only if that humour will be communicated to the viewer.

However, there is a risk that this humour will not be communicated through "likes" and comments. If this humour gets no "likes" or comment, the post can be deleted by the user or it is regretted.

Marshall (2012) points out that the constant surveillance on the individual through Facebook is achieved through a person's Facebook profile that is accessible for all and friends. It cannot be turned off unless the account is deleted or frozen. This means that social norms and values change from real-life into the cyber-realm of Facebook. Thus, users use a self-regulation on themselves accordingly. Posts are only made only when they meet expectations, groups are joined and pages are liked if they will gain acceptance, and photos will be "untagged" if the user does not look attractive enough. Socially accepted norms internalized in Facebook also translate to real-life with social behaviour being determined by "photo-opportunities" and conversations often surrounding a humorous post.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

According to Marwick (2012) social surveillance differs from traditional surveillance on three axes: power, hierarchy, and reciprocity. Through self-affirmation of their constructed online identity, individuals today feel more integrated and empowered as they think they possess more defence and control over their online profiles. In terms of coveillance where everyone can watch the watcher, this type of power feels more like a 'pseudo' power that flows between users and across networks where all may feel masters with full control. Actually, this case from a different look is reflected on us as digital captives under intense dataveillance because, in hierarchical sense, this new type of surveillance occurs between individuals and it also signifies a significant power imbalance between the watcher and the watched. Attracted by its vast interactivity through sharing, siding with or going against, acceptance (like-friend), rejection (dislike-unfriend), users engage in a reciprocal activity by producing online content that is surveilled by others. This is hard to resist and highly self-captivating, which lessens our would-be power of a digital master.

As a representation of the true-life "self", Facebook allows users to create a Utopian self that represent discourses, social norms and values acceptable to society. Although many users see Facebook as a way to keep in touch, how users represent themselves on Facebook differs considerably to their true-life selves. Facebook displays the impact of constant surveillance on representations of the self.

Finally, although there are many points that overlap and differentiate as much as digital surveillance-that is- coveillance is concerned, the answer to the question whether or to what extent we can be considered as digital masters or captives seem to continue to stand at the threshold of digital line for some time. Preserving impartiality and objectivity, this study cuts through an argumentative issue and it tries to illuminate dim and implicit parts of the subject. The fact that this research is entirely qualitative and is based on a single form of social media platform like Facebook limits the possibility of generalisations. It is believed that further studies that will contribute experimental evidence to the field will also have strengthened the theoretical basis of this study.

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