

The Panoptic Internet: New Mechanisms of Power and Social Control

Introduction

From its inception for public use in the 1990s, the Internet was perceived as tool for ultimate freedom. The first browser tools that enabled the way we search on the Internet today allowed entire cyber societies to be formed along with their very own cyber culture. Text is at the heart of communication on the Internet, the users could use chat rooms to post messages anonymously or under a pseudonym, thus removing any recognition of identity, one could send emails using unverified email addresses. In the late 1990s, a standard of conduct for the Net emerged, thus, curtaining some of the freedom of using the Internet “incognito” and the question of who really has the power to control and discipline the societies emerging on the Internet begins to surface.

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether the technology of the internet is panoptic in character and can be psychologically internalize as mechanism of social control based on the following question:

What would make a medium, such as the Internet, panoptic in character?

Panopticism

Jeremy Bentham's principle of “panopticism” can be understood as a device for the enforcement of discipline. The innovation is, in Bentham's opinion, that the principle of panopticism is generalizable to any situation in which “persons of any descriptions” would tend to follow or make plans that do not conform to given societal norms, and therefore require to be kept under surveillance¹. Foucault’s main concern in the panopticon is the organization of

disciplinary knowledge in terms of space, that in the architecture presented by Bentham underlies the notion of the separation and individualization of the masses and this serves to the panoptic society to employ institutions to distribute power throughout the society.

The Virtual Space as Carceral Institutionalization

The term "institutionalization" is used to describe the process by which prison inmates are shaped and transformed by the institutional environments in which they live. Persons gradually become more accustomed to the restrictions that institutional life imposes, become increasingly "natural," second nature, and, to a degree, internalized. The process of institutionalization can be subtle and difficult to discern as it occurs. Thus, prisoners do not "choose" to succumb to it, and few of them who become institutionalized are aware that it has happened to them².

Both panopticism and the Internet construct themselves through the subject's internalizing a particular model of space, through a particular notion of how people are distributed throughout space in relation to one another, and through defining of the individual through the space he/she occupies. Further, both are intensely interested in the construction and distribution of authority over and within the subject³.

The Double Scenario: The Panoptic Gaze of the Internet

Winokur explains in the "The Ambiguous Panopticon," that while both utopic and panoptic critics of the Net describe the Net as a *visible spectacle*, neither takes into account the Net's hardware — its architecture — as a determinant of the gaze. While utopic accounts oppose the notion of the internet as a significantly surveillant because it is not associated with as

“visible” architecture; yet the simplified diagram for the relationship between the end-user and the internet looks suspiciously like the schematics for Bentham’s prison⁴.

The bi-directional nature of the Internet’s gaze allows the end-user to observe what is displayed on the monitor, and the hardware/software systems, that is exists in the heart of the technology observe the end-user. The gaze is built on infinitesimal potential possibilities for interactivity along with the virtual environments it features. This type of flexibility is especially important in the sense that it provides the organization that connects the end-user to the Internet allowing him/her to share his/her thoughts and ideas, at the same time the *institutions* that are also use the Net have the ability to collect the end-user’s data, while providing spectacle: the view of information about other end-users, and thus, everyone is made to feel empowered.

The mass media has made known through its channels information about the power of the “gaze” programmed in the code of the Internet that watches where the end-user threads while online. This produces an internalizing of the gaze, making the end-user thread carefully through sites that may pose a risk to his/her reputation, thus psychologically disciplining himself/herself. Here the idea of the panopticon automates its power.

Discipline Outside of the Traditional Physical Space

In its original sense, discipline is referred to systematic instruction given to disciples to train them as students in a craft or trade, or to follow a particular code of conduct or “order.” Often, the phrase “to discipline” carries a negative connotation. This is because enforcement of order – that is, ensuring instructions are carried out – is often regulated through punishment⁵.

The historical transition from the public punishment spectacle to inspire control and discipline on the masses denotes that in post-modern society the principal elements are no longer

the community or public life, but, private individuals and the state. These are relations that can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle⁶. For Foucault, discipline is a mechanism of power which regulates the behavior of individuals in the social body. This is done by regulating the organization of “space” (i.e., architecture), of time (time tables) and people’s activity, and behavior (drills, posture, and movement), where discipline is usually enforced with the aid of complex systems of surveillance⁷.

With the technology of the Internet the use of the “virtual space” as real space has been instituted. *Virtual space* is computer (machine) generated and associated with highly visual, immersive environments, and has enabled us to eliminate the physical space through the use of the artifacts that depend on the Internet to make us feel independent of the limited physicality of architectural space, among these there are devices such as wireless computers and cell phones/Smartphones. These alone have enabled us to free our lives to the extent that it might fair to compare it to the time in early human history when bipedalism freed human hands and enabled them to outrun and escape their knuckle-walking primate ancestors. However, the freedom is an illusion; the Internet’s design is a structure that is inherently similar to the panopticon in that Internet service providers have extended their gaze beyond the limited physical space and can observe their subscribers online activities at any time without their knowledge⁸ possibly forcing them to behave in prescribed societal norms. The Internet is responsible for the ever increasing number of surveillance cameras in urban spaces. With an Internet as panopticon model the social totality comes to function as the hierarchical and disciplinary panoptic machine. The society is prisoner and at the same time jailer. Only those that refuse to use the technology will be free from being observed. However, even if individuals do not use the Internet, friends, family, and peers may use it thereby extending some of that

social pressure and control over non-users⁹, exemplifying how people, even those who are not in the system, internalize the faceless panoptic power.

Authority: Does it Matter Who Operates the Panoptic Machine?

In Webster.com we find that *authority* is defined as the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior¹⁰, and *power* is the legal or official “authority,” capacity, or right¹¹.

Bentham’s idea was to design architecture that could imbue uncertainty through visible surveillance by a guard perched on a watchtower that may or may not be there, consequently, the authority to “punish” a rule breaker is internalized. This relates to the Internet architectural structure and the uncertainty regarding a watch-person within the Internet system. One example outside of computer automation worth citing is the idea of a duty to obey and conform to authority for fear of surveillance was powerfully internalized in Nazi Germany, where the citizens have not voted in the Nazi Party and yet, under its powerful authority, the whole country became panoptic to the extent of becoming a police state.

Foucault emphasizes that power is not discipline; rather discipline is simply one way in which power can be exercised. He also uses the term “disciplinary society,” when he discusses its history and the origins of disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals, asylums, schools and army barracks. Foucault also specifies that when he speaks of a “disciplinary society” he does not mean a “disciplined society”¹². The first implies that there is an obsessive fervor sought to organize the ways bodies behaved, how time and space are divided and the division of tasks amongst a hierarchy of individuals¹³.

A Prison that Someone Else Has Imagined

The Internet is a global “network” connecting millions of computers in many geographical areas, and its networking infrastructure is a massive network of networks. It connects millions of computers together globally, allowing the end-user of any computer to communicate with any other computer as long as they are both connected to the Internet. Information that travels over the Internet does so via a variety of languages known as protocols. Once logged into the Internet network, the computer screen becomes the dominant “eye,” it can be converted into the watchtower in Bentham’s panopticon because the Internet network is coded for auto-bookmarking making the end-user the target of constant observation. When using search engines such as Google, the system also categorizes those queries into Web, Image and Map searches. This particular feature can tell a savvy person who knows about computer networks, about the network addresses where an end-user has visited at any moment including the content of private emails, one of the consequences is that the end-user can be hounded until everything he/she did on the network is made public causing the end-user to take many precautions regarding his/her correspondence. This happens regardless of what precautions one takes in installing privacy software to surf safely. The end-users who know the panoptic capabilities of the Internet internalize the fictional idea that the guard built in the code might be watching them and become prisoners of the system on which dictums about life and environment become projected.

One example of who is on the driver’s seat of the panoptic machine comes from the well publicized scandal about WikiLeaks, an international private limited organization that publishes submissions of private, secret, and classified media from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers. Its website, launched in 2006 under The Sunshine Press organization,

claimed a database of more than 1.2 million documents within a year of its launch. Julian Assange, an Australian Internet activist, is generally described as its founder, editor-in-chief and director¹⁴. Assange, who has a vast background in science and computers had already been convicted of computer hacking in 1995. In 2010 the founder of WikiLeaks leaked United States military reports from Afghanistan and created a public spectacle. The secret-spilling site may also have used file sharing networks to obtain some of the documents it had published, but allegedly it used untraceable Ghost Net networks that had infiltrated the computers of government offices, NGOs, and activist groups in more than 100 countries since at least the spring of 2007 to spy and publish its findings¹⁵.

In December 2010, in response to the WikiLeaks scandal, the Internet site called “Above the Law” publish an article by the Boston University School of Law expressing the following: “According to BU, merely reading the WikiLeaks documents could prevent you from getting the security clearances necessary to get certain government jobs.”¹⁶. Any law student reading this will steer himself/herself away from the WikiLeaks site without any torture and violence and will tell on others that had read it if that information could be used to further any personal agenda, as Foucault said in Winokur’s article¹⁷: Everyone has a little power, although power is shared unequally and oppressively.

Totality: Coded Reality

The Internet has become an unavoidable part of everyday life, with new devices, people have reproduced the prison system by being plugged into it 24-7. Winokur illustrates the Internet as a technology is itself gradually being assimilated into at least two bits of ‘convergence’ hardware: The PDA and the cell phone, which have themselves converged into the Smartphone.

Even the designation “cell phone” suggests Foucault’s impression that every citizen inhabits his/her own prison cell. The Smartphone has assimilated other communication and representational devices, enabling end-users to have experiences of total immersion¹⁸.

The “Information Superhighway,” as the Internet is often called, depends upon a more subtle metaphorical configuration — a virtual topography — in which speed, motion, and direction become possible. The Internet becomes a simulated territory we traverse via computer in which the computer screen replaces the car’s windshield. Baudrillard notes how easily motion can transform into a visual experience in which the driver/viewer interacts with images, rather than with the physical world. Unlike this metaphorical transformation of the physical world into images “on” a windshield, “cyberspace” presents the simulation of “beyond the screen”¹⁹, thus blurring the virtual and the real. The technology that aims at containing distance eventually creates a virtual world which destroys the conceptual possibility of distance. In this vertiginous moment of physical stasis and virtual travel, the “Voyeur-Voyager” experiences an immediacy which dissolves space and time: a perpetually repeated hijacking of the subject from any spatial-temporal context²⁰.

With the Internet the virtual can become panoptic, this way, the ideological construed as the representation of reality becomes the real. The end-user is now at the mercy of the institutions that deliver the discourses, messages and the discipline, which one can even view as a system of oppression.

Internet Discourse: Code

In the article being used for this paper, Winokur quotes Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*: “The computer is a machine for creating and manipulating signs; the signs may be mathematical, verbal, or pictorial. Computer

programming and indeed all kinds of writing and reading by computer are exercises in applied semiotics. The first lesson any sophisticated computer user must learn is the difference between a sign and its reference, between the address of a location in the computer's memory and the *value stored at that address*. This dichotomy characterizes the machine at all levels: it is at the essence of hypertext and of programs for artificial intelligence, in all of which text is simply a texture of signs pointing to other signs²¹.”

As in all semiotic systems, we have seen that the web is a mesh of icons, indexes and symbols, depending on the others, even for its own definition. Although the web in its essence and its success relies heavily on images, the dream of a “perfect language of images” cannot be materialized with this medium²². One of the most important issues to be considered in Internet system design is how best to convey the functional attributes and action-oriented possibilities of the system to the end-user via the human-computer interface. Current thinking suggests that a particularly powerful technique is the use of metaphors based on real world and therefore familiar, objects and activities to represent system properties²³. Semiotic study shows that, given time, signs take on a meaning of their own and no longer need to use semiotic techniques to aid in communicating ideas. It is reasonable to assume that web page formats and the use of icons and hyperlinks are now considered normal in the same way that a computer menu no longer relies on the menu concept to be understood²⁴. Through this analysis it seems that part of the panoptic plan of the Internet is for end-users to be able to live in it.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this critical paper leads to the conclusion that the Internet is panoptic in character. The internet is the mouthpiece of the contemporary generation; the medium is prime for public participation and currently ubiquitous in most developed societies in

Europe, the Americas and Asia. Over the past two decades, and with the aid of the users of the Internet, it has originated panoptic structures of surveillance, not only at the lonely user level, but elevated to the mass level. In his work “Discipline and Punish”, Foucault used the panopticon as a metaphor for society’s invasive tendency to observe and punish aberrant behavior. Many new technologies, in particular new Internet services, social networking sites, such as Facebook, are eroding privacy worldwide, with the United States leading efforts to remove legal restrictions that limit electronic surveillance. Sometime in 1996, the FBI started using a program called Carnivore to randomly monitor email, a form of surveillance similar to telephone surveillance called “trunk-side” wiretapping, which has been illegal in the United States for more than 30 years. While it has been argued that email should be protected by the Constitution against government intruders, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled that email messages stored in a computer are not protected by the Electronic Privacy Communications Privacy Act of 1986²⁵.

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology²⁶.

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