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The Panopticon legacy: A Systematic Literature Review of Difficult Conversations on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and Social Media Surveillance

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Abstract

After datafication of society, social networking sites (SNS) have emerged as a progressive platform where citizens freely express their opinions. Following the spread of social media, interdisciplinary notion of surveillance is becoming popular among researchers and scholars of social sciences for understanding how activities are being monitored by government and other corporate organizations. This paper is an attempt to explore how people are continuously under surveillance when they are involved in difficult conversations on social media platforms. The basic aim is to conceptualise various approaches of surveillance in the light of Bentham and Foucault's concept of Panopticon. For developing a synthesis, systematic review of existing literature is conducted related to Panopticon legacy, social media surveillance and difficult conversations on SNS. The paper concludes that governments and corporate organizations keep a continuous covert check on what people post, share, comment and like on SNS especially when they are involved in digital activism or conflict-related conversations to regulate their online behavior.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites (SNS), Social Media Surveillance, Difficult Conversation, Panopticon, Digital Activism, Conflict-Related Conversations, Government, Corporate Organizations, Freedom of Expression, Online Behavior

Introduction

Every aspect of our everyday lives, be it social, professional, intellectual, or recreational, depends on Social sites. One piece of technology that makes a lot of information easily accessible to individuals is the social sites (Hussain et al., 2023). Social networking sites (SNS) are a modern platform used by people to express their concerns, raise their voices and share their opinion with global audience (Sawyer, 2011, p. 2). SNS have gradually replaced face-to-face communication and physical forms of social interaction, albeit unintentionally, by providing people a computer-mediate form of communication that is characterized by its immediacy and comfort. SNS are now being used as a virtual platform for continuous exchange of information that is unfettered by the obstacles of offline communication e.g., distance of time and space or other geographical settings etc. (Watermeyer, 2012, pp. 152-159).

Where SNS are becoming an increasingly integral feature of modern society, surveillance mechanism is also growing rapidly on social media platforms. It may include monitoring of activities of people on various SNS and ubiquitous computing to offer unobtrusive

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surveillance of everything people post on SNS e.g., pictures, posts and videos etc. (Mortensen, Sixsmith & Woolrych, 2015, p. 512). This is generally affecting the quality of communication and specifically of difficult communications on SNS because of inherent challenging nature of difficult communication as it involves difference of opinion, blaming others in conflicting or problematic situations, lack of mutual understanding and involvement of strong emotional elements etc. (Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999).

Therefore, People are sharing their concerns about privacy and protection of their personal data on SNS (Price-Mitchell, 2019, para. 18). Many concerns are raised by scholars about privacy and autonomy of individuals especially when they are involved in any difficult conversation related to activism or mobilization on SNS. The digital surveillance in this era of social media is affecting the quality of interaction and right of freedom of expression by keeping a continuous check on what the people are posting about sensitive issues on social media (Barrett-Maitland & Jenice, 2020.)

This paper is an attempt to understand the theoretical approaches of surveillance and making their relevance with difficult conversations on social networking sites in the light of Bentham's Panopticon theory that was further extended by Michal Foucault. Panopticon is considered to be a synonym or metaphor of surveillance. This is why this concept is highly relevant for analyzing social media surveillance in contemporary period of social and technological developments. Mapping and conceptualizing various surveillance theories will facilitate the process of understanding the relevance of these perspectives with tech-oriented difficult conversations.

Broad Based Questions

The study is based on few broad based questions that will guide the process of reviewing literature for conceptualizing Panopticon and later surveillance theories related to difficult conversations on social networking sites. What are the contemporary social and technological advancements in Panopticon theory? How the current scholars and researchers are contributing towards Panopticon legacy by doing researches on surveillance? How the social media surveillance is encroaching upon the private space of individuals on SNS? How the surveillance poses a serious barrier or threat to difficult conversations on social media platforms by creating a fear in the minds of individuals that they are being watched or monitored continuously by some unknown forces?

Objectives of the Study

Following are the objectives of this study:

- 1) To develop a relationship between Bentham and Foucault's Panopticon legacy with social media surveillance
- 2) To understand how mechanism of surveillance is re-structured after the introduction of social networking sites
- 3) To examine the potential outcomes of social media surveillance in the light of Foucault and Bentham and Foucault's work
- 4) To understand the impact of social media surveillance on the minds of people especially when they are involved or want to be involved in difficult conversations on SNS with the help of pre-existing literature

Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the paper is an attempt to understand the Panopticon theories and build a narrative related to social media surveillance of difficult conversations on SNS. Therefore, this study is qualitative in nature and it will employ the systematic review of literature related to Panopticon theories, digital and social media surveillance in order to understand how difficult conversations take place on social networking sites. For doing systematic review of literature, various studies are identified and selected related to the topic to answer the clearly formulated broad based questions at the beginning of this study. A well thought out comprehensive search is conducted across multiple databases and online libraries to ensure a transparent process of answering the questions and meeting the objectives of the research.

Systematic Review of Literature

Systematic literature review will organize the literature into the given categories that will be further analyzed in discussion part to develop a synthesis for answering the broad based questions mentioned in introduction.

- 1) Conceptualizing Panopticon Legacy and surveillance approaches
- 2) Conceptualizing social media surveillance
- 3) Understanding difficult conversations on SNS in the light of surveillance literature

Conceptualizing Panopticon Legacy and Surveillance Approaches

The concept of Panopticon was introduced by an English philosopher Jeremy Bentham who actually proposed an architectural plan for keeping a constant check on prisoners. He proposed that there must be a circular building having separate cell for every prisoner so that they cannot communicate with each other. In the center of a building, there must be a single watch tower from which all the prisoners will be observed by the guards. The idea was proposed to keep a check on maximum number of prisoners with one guard only because prisoners will be conscious of the presence of guard all the time although they will not know when they are actually being observed (Steadman, 2012, p. 3).

His idea of Panopticon was not restricted to prisons only but it is argued by various sociologists that monitoring of individuals may be done in everyday lives e.g., hospitals, schools and organizations etc because it will ultimately help the individuals in internalizing rules and regulations to discipline themselves (Felluga, 2001).

Bentham's concept of Panopticon was re-invented by Michel Foucault in 1975 who actually described it as a disciplinary power inflicted upon the citizens who are at the subjects of this asymmetrical surveillance. This means they are being observed but they cannot see that they are being monitored continuously. According to Foucault's interpretation, Panopticon is a form of centralized inspection for which there is no need to build any ring shaped building instead certain activities may be conducted to convey it to the people that they are being supervised (McMullan, 2015, para. 10-12).

Foucault believes that state can monitor and control people by using methods of oppression. These coercive practices operate within the whole society and for that there is no need to make a ring like building in every commune. However, this disciplinary society depends upon different demographic and psychographic factors. He assumes that every individual of a society has a right to make demands on the government. He is in the favor of political ideals but these ideals cannot be understood without observing, monitoring, examining and controlling mechanisms. This is why panopticon is not only a cell made for criminals but almost every

institution like schools, hospitals and workplace works like a panopticon because they examine the individuals and force them to conform the desired behaviors of society (Spark Notes, n.d.).

He talks about carceral society where modern forms of surveillance are employed for monitoring and regulating the behaviors of the individuals. He pointed out that there is a significant relationship between surveillance and power. He talks about disciplinary power that is not necessarily exercised in the walls of prison but an inescapable culture of control exists throughout the society (Pastore, 2017). His philosophy is very much relevant to the modern world where our every movement is being tracked by the authorities. Especially, state can keep a check on people by keeping a close eye on their social media accounts. That is why this concept of panopticon is relevant till date.

Conceptualizing Social Media Surveillance

Human beings have a natural tendency of keeping an eye on their surroundings either deliberately or unintentionally in every society like between family members, peers, friends, and co-workers. However, this trend of keeping an eye on other people's activities is now shifted to social media platforms like Twitter, Meta and Instagram etc. These social media platforms are continuously tracking the activities of their users by using cookies for maintaining their search history to show them similar kind of information related to their interests and tracing their locations either to facilitate them or to track them on the name of social media surveillance (Brown, 2014).

Social media surveillance is characterized on the basis of certain key features like collaborative construction of identity which means social media users contribute towards identity construction of each other by commenting and tagging. They also tend to monitor comments of other people on their walls and walls of their friends and contacts as well. Social media surveillance is actually about monitoring obvious, searchable and assessable social networking of any individual. It is also related to surveillance of social ties and profiles of different individuals in various social contexts on dynamically evolving interfaces (Trottier & Lyon, 2012, p. 102). Here it is important to mention that it's not only about social media studies but everything we do on internet is being assessed and monitored. The data gathered by social media surveillance is a very valuable source for the people who may use or even manipulate it for their own purposes (Bhattacharyya, 2022, p.27).

In most of the cases, data gathered through social media surveillance is used by various social media companies for commercial purposes for tailoring their own advertising campaigns according to the needs of users for selling their products. Even, the data of the users is sold to the third parties by social media sites and search engines in the name of commercial surveillance that is also called dataveillance (Clarke, 1988; van Dijck 2014).

Apart from commercial interests, states also monitor activities of their citizens for security concerns, maintaining law and order in the country, prevention of crimes and for maintaining their rules especially in totalitarian and authoritarian societies because in these social systems, people are subordinates of the states usually on ideological grounds. States even do surveillance when they don't have any well-developed ideological foundations to control the people (Linz, 2000; Meuschel, 2000).

This state control has become very complex with the progress of social media because these platforms are free of organizational policy restrictions. Hence, people may express their opinions by utilizing this so-called freedom of expression but they have to bear the consequences of machine driven surveillance, if they get involved in any conflicting discussion.

Governments of authoritarian to democratic countries are all investing in buying sophisticated technologies to keep a check on the online behaviors of their citizens (Shahbaz & Funk, n.d.).

People usually do not feel exposed in their private space while browsing data. They usually do not feel that their data is under surveillance because they actually do not know where that body physically exist that is monitoring their information. People usually spend a joyous online life by sharing so much of data without the fear of any surveillance because of anonymous nature of surveillance on social media. However, their data is actually under surveillance by carious corporations that are actually making a lot of money by capitalizing this data. That is also under surveillance of government, military and intelligence agencies. Therefore, Panopticon emerges here as an important concept because our data is under continuous surveillance of some anonymous powers who can see us but we cannot see that (McMullan, 2015, para. 20-21). Hence, it may be argued that social media surveillance is way smarter than traditional forms of surveillance because it is an invisible and surreptitious form of monitoring where most of the people are not even aware of the fact that they are being monitored.

Understanding Difficult Conversations on SNS in the Light of Surveillance Literature

Difficult conversations are usually characterized by some conflicting situations where difference of opinion may lead to an emotionally charged argument. The reason may be involvement of high level of perceived stakes of all the parties that are involved in the discussion or at least of any single party who thinks the outcome of this discussion is very important for him (Hawker Brownlow Education, 2011, p. 1-2). These conversations may be about discussing a problem with a friend, communicating workplace issues to the boss or expressing one's opinion about any conflicting situation (Gurteen, n.d.).

Difficult conversations are challenging in every form. However, when it comes to difficult conversations related to any conflicting situation, people are under continuous surveillance of government and intelligence agencies as governments may remove objectionable posts and may also acquire their data from companies for the sake of monitoring and mitigating the online content on social networking sites (Chabba, 2020). Governments fear that a large number of citizens who are equipped with cell phones as their mini-weapons take part in virtual rebellion against authorities (Schmidt and Cohen 2010, p. 1). Governments of almost four continents are expressing their frustrations on violent content, hate speech, extremism, and challenges for national security, cyber-terrorism and manipulation of content and are interested in regulating social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. Hence, they are actually interested in controlling civic activism or digital mobilization in the name of online regulations (Ingram, 2019).

Governments have now created a virtual omnipresent panopticon in which people are continuously being watched. There are no longer spyglasses, physical searches, or dropping from the edges of the roof to keep a check on the people. Governments can do it without sending any physical spy to observe any individual by utilizing technology. In this era of online surveillance, behavior of the people is observable and searchable. Actions of the people can be recorded and traceable because of intrusive surveillance especially when they get involved in any anti-state argument (Wu, Chung, Yamat & Richman, n.d.).

Governments use this panopticon for maintaining their social control by censoring the behaviors of citizens and to make them conform to the desired outcome. Surveillance has adversely affected the freedom of expression especially in case of difficult conversations that involve contradiction with state policies because it foster fear among the individuals and they

impose self-censorship on their opinions. People even avoid saying anything which may lead to a suspicion that they keep a deviant opinion (Boghossian, 2021). Hence, it may be argued that individuals self-police their behaviors because of continuous threat of surveillance which restricts the divergence of opinion. People avoid talking about their political, religious and social beliefs on social networking sites when they are aware of the fact that their viewpoint is being monitored and may be used against them.

Conclusion

The paper has provided an overview of key theoretical concepts of surveillance theory to understand the impact of its wide range assumptions, frameworks and perspectives in various disciplines. Theories of first phase of surveillance like Bentham and Foucault are linked with modern era's surveillance on social media. Paper concludes although Panopticon does not exist in its true architectural form, still a centralized system of surveillance does exist on social media that imposes disciplinary power upon individuals who engage in difficult conversations related to activism, mobilization or conflicts etc. on SNS.

Study recommends that there is a need to promote a positive and socially responsible culture of debate on social media. Social media users should highlight the deficiencies of government for the sake of improvement and governments should accept the deviant opinion in difficult conversations with openness, rationality, tolerance and dignity. Governments should skillfully and thoughtfully engage in dialogues with the people because curbing the difference of opinion with power doesn't generate good results. We are in dire need of good difficult conversations in this era and we should try to find out some better ways to encourage people to share their opinions and raise their voices without any fear of virtual panopticon.

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