'That's Problematic': Tracing the Birth of Call-Out Culture

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The word 'surveillance' finds its etymology in 19th century French, meaning literally to 'watch over' (Harper, 2017), yet is now defined by Sociologists as the 'focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction' (Lyon, 2007: 14). This can include observation, supervision, inspection, recording, and monitoring, in which the information is produced for the use of others; in that one person in this definition is the surveiller and one is the surveilled, it presupposes a power relation.

Foucault theorised surveillance centralised around the concept of Bentham's Panopticon; the Panopticon is a circular building of cells with one large window facing inwards and one facing outwards surrounding a tower, in which the tower is made entirely of windows, meaning those in the cells are in constant view of a surveiller. In this instance, 'he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication' (Foucault, 1977: 200).

Bentham's panopticon could apply to any institution, such as asylums, schools and hospitals, but was mostly theorised as a design for a prison. The Panopticon reverses typical containment strategies of being left in the dark and in solitude, and instead makes the inmate constantly aware that they may be being watched, but never certain if they are; Bentham defines power as something that must be visible yet constantly unverifiable, and herein lies a power structure that transcends the social actors involved as the power exists within the building composition (Kaplan, 2009).

This form of surveillance creates discipline, in that the fear of constant watching, inmates will begin to engage in a self-governance and alter their behaviour to that which is desirable. For Foucault, discipline is also a form of power that also transcends any physical actor or institution, it is a technology of power that operates throughout a set of techniques and instruments.

The panopticon thus serves as a conceptual encapsulation of a social model of disciplinary apparatus, one that does not merely survive in the its original form, of the physical building in a prison, but one that applies to all social life as a means of understanding how disciplinary power works

and operates through a myriad of technologies throughout and across society.

In the Panopticon, the form of surveillance is that the few watch the many; this concept was developed into the Ban-opticon by Didier Bigo (2006), who suggested that contemporary surveillance no longer took on the paradigm of the Panopticon, but instead involved a process of selection and exclusion, stratifying people into groups of who should be surveilled and who should not. It is no longer that the few watch the many, but now the few watch the selected few.

In Bigo's view, surveillance began with the intention of individual development, but transformed into 'playing with fears by designating potentially dangerous minorities' (Bigo, 2002: p.82). The Ban-opticon still presupposes a power relation, in that there is someone given the privilege to act in this process of exclusion, thus giving them the power of defining social actors as 'good' or 'bad'.

For Bigo, this brings together a collection of discourses in which phenomena are placed in direct comparison to one-another, for example, of people, good Muslims versus radical Muslims, of legal procedures, asylum seeking versus immigration restrictions, and of institutions, international organisations versus national NGOs. In bringing these discourses together, Bigo holds that contemporary surveillance has no intention of surveilling everyone, but has a clear intention of surveilling a specific and small group of people, those which are defined 'bad' by those in power (Bigo, 2002).

The Ban-opticon and its stratification of surveillance is considered outdated again by some sociologists who now argue that surveillance has taken on the form of a Synopticon in contemporary society, in which the many watch the few; this is in direct contrast to the original 'opticon' in surveillance sociology: the Panopticon, in which the few surveilled the many.

The concept of the synopticon was introduced by Thomas Mathieson (1997), and is updated in accordance with new technologies that facilitate the ability for the many to watch the few. For Mathieson, the synopticon is representative of the 'viewer society' in which we live; in that although the changes in society have enabled an increase in Panoptic characteristics, it has allowed for a new revolution in the many watching the few, in that we have unprecedented constant access to news, stories, sightings and images of celebrities (Mathieson, 1997).

An example of the prevalence of Synoptic values is that a study in the UK noted 'being famous' as the main ambition of most children involved in the study, who were under ten years old; many of them referring to celebrities as their idols (Asthana, 2004 in Bauman and Davis, 2008). These synoptic values thus become embodied, creating members of society who deem this 'watched' life to be representative of success, consequently securing social actors who live by the ideology that their actions have widespread consequences and are of great importance to everyone else in society, allowing them to apply value and meaning to their life and social conduct.

Celebrity reporting is thought to have begun in the 1920s with Walter Winchell's *New York Graphic* column, which reported combining a traditional style with unofficial society happenings; in 1926 *Time* magazine followed suit by introducing a page named *The People* which followed and reported on celebrity lives. By the 1950s, the magazine *Confidential* was introduced, which no longer provided a combination of news and celebrity, but solely

reported on celebrity culture, and in three years its circulation grew from 150,000 to 3.7 million an issue, highlighting the rise of interest in the accessibility to these lives.

By the 1980s, the television equivalent of gossip magazines appeared in the form of *Entertainment Tonight*, and by the 1990s, *E!* Network began covering celebrity entertainment content 24/7, with news segments and programs dedicated purely to celebrity lives. By late 2007 and early 2008, celebrity magazines began to face competition in the form of websites and blogs, that were able to post news and happenings significantly earlier than waiting to go to press the next morning. By 2007, entertainment websites were receiving up to 19 million users per month, and saw increases in hits of up to 40% a year.

This constant access to celebrity lives gained great popularity, but the frequency and saturation of content did not line up with the amount of scandalous happenings in the celebrity world, and a study by Levin, Mody-Debarau and Arluke found that 98% of celebrity/entertainment posts and articles portrayed a mundane event, such as buying coffee or going to the gym (Burns, 2009).

The reporting of celebrity culture often found its' greatest success in reporting mistakes, scandals and downfalls of celebrities. Leo Braudy was noted as explaining that 'the more removed celebrities seem from ordinary life, the more the public is interested in the intimate details of their life' (Burns, 2009: 11).

An example of this is the obsession with the life of Britney Spears in tabloid media, in which we saw her life appear before us like a television drama; she was admitted into rehabilitation, shaved her head, and was involved in a car accident (Smit, 2011). Britney Spears' life made national news; it exceeded the realm of purely entertainment news and

found its way into the most mainstream media coverage, which illustrates the success of a downfall story. The functioning of the synopticon 'specialises in spying on what ought not to be seen and what those under its 'gaze' feel they must reveal or confess themselves' (Blackshaw and Crabbe, 2004: 83), and thus this sensationalization of celebrity life felt entirely natural, as though readers were deserving of this information.

This entertainment media saw a great disconnect between the subject of the stories, the reporter and the reader; the creation of social media allowed for a new direct form of communication between celebrity and reader, however, this also meant that the work of the publicist diminished and the celebrity held the power to put out whatever message they wanted without approval. Social Media allows for Synoptic 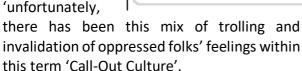values to be laid out in an entirely transparent manner; celebrities literally have millions of 'followers', who actively choose to watch them as closely as possible (Friend or Follow, 2017).

This freedom of speech of celebrities on social medias created room for the 'followers', the many, to begin to actively police the celebrities, the few, bringing in Panoptic values into a Synoptic situation. When a celebrity says something that does not align with the image created, or with popular societal values, they are 'dragged' or 'called-out' on what they have said, usually by a great volume of people and very quickly. Popular user-edited slang dictionary *Urban Dictionary* defines drag as 'when you roast someone harshly, someone supporting you might say this word' (2015) and 'used to attack someone with an opposite opinion with you. Usually seen in stan twitter' (2016).

This calling-out or 'dragging' comes from a culture of online activism that has developed alongside technology itself, in which social medias have extended the realm of activist's reach and exposed activists to other cultures and social phenomena (Pickard and Yang, 2017). Although calling-out comes from a place of internet activism, it transforms into an unhelpful and counter-productive approach, in which celebrities are victimised and ostracised instead of educated; noted by Shackelford (2016): 'unfortunately, there has been this mix of trolling and invalidation of oppressed folks' feelings within this term 'Call-Out Culture'.

Call-out culture faces criticism in that it mimics the actions of historical witch-hunts; those involved in 'dragging' others condemn people based on an action, or alleged action, with judgement the highest of priorities, and an attempt to understand the situation as the lowest priority. It follows the thinking of 'if you disagree, you are wrong. And if you are wrong, you are bad, and if you are bad, you are trash' (Herzog, 2018), and by nature arrives at a conclusion without any exploration. Call-out culture inherently limits interactive discourse as it brands the accused before there is the opportunity for an explorative discussion, creating a society in which punishment is favoured over rehabilitation; branding someone as 'trash' and 'problematic' (Herzog, 2018) and swiftly moving onto the next transgressor rids them of the opportunity to learn and develop their worldview.

This Call-Out Culture of celebrities developed to such a place that a dedicated online blog was created in 2013 called *Your Fave Is Problematic* that detailed offensive behaviour by celebrities and noted them on the internet where evidence, and access to it, will remain forever. Call-Out Culture marks the change in celebrity journalism, as the aforementioned dedicated magazines such as *Confidential* would criticise celebrities in regards to their appearance, whereas they are now being criticised on their attitude and sensitivity to cultural issues, however, they are still being criticised on an amplified level.

An example of this is when celebrity Zoe Sugg was forced to apologise in 2017 for tweets sent out in 2009 that included slurs such as 'skank' and 'fat chav', leading people to brand her 'classist' and 'homophobic' (@taylor_zamo, 2017), although many other actions of hers would not point to this conclusion, one single action led to an overbearing label on her character (BBC NEWS, 2017)

Overall, the transformation of surveillance in society, having developed from the traditional theory of Panopticism, to the adaptation into Ban-opticism and arriving at a place of Synopticism has created a new form of social life, and specifically digital social life, in which the many watch the few, with millions of people quite literally 'following' the day-to-day life of celebrities on social media. This new widespread and instant accessibility has led to a society in which members are branded as bad or good and are condemned or rewarded accordingly, in a matter of seconds with no room for discussion or development. Call-out culture developed through this synopticism as a strain of internet activism, with a productive intention of teaching members of society when something could be considered offensive or misinformed, but became a counter-productive technology of surveillance when it lost its aim of rehabilitation and growth and

became an apparatus of punishment and denunciation.

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