How does 'Black Mirror' represent contemporary aspects of surveillance and the dystopian outcomes it can produce?

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Nosedive is one of the many episodes of "Black Mirror" (2016) that is most notable for depicting a twilight zone to look into the near future; it also explores the dystopian outcomes in a world of new technologies of surveillance, control and social stratification. The episode portrays a woman who lives in a society arranged by technologies where, through mobile devices and iris recognition, every citizen is rated on a scale of one-to-five according to their social interactions they encounter in their everyday life. Visible to others, an average score is generated through an accumulation of the ratings, and this determines an individual's socio-economic position. As for the lead character, she illustrates that self-censorship also comes with unavoidable control from the outcome of her social positioning from her score, such as where she can live or who she can have relations with.

Accredited for tales of techno-paranoia, "Black Mirror" is recognised for its features of modern technological power that we are experiencing in the contemporary world. The desire for an Orwellian state of Big Brother surveillance, China's communist government is adopting a Social Credit System (SCS) planned for 2020 that will rate its 1.4 billion citizens for their "trustworthiness" (Liang et al, 2018). Relying on technologies of surveillance similar to those in *Nosedive*, the use of mobile applications, the internet and CCTV will track citizens to generate a quantified credit score based on their activities and movements. As a result of this, tracking the most private aspects of everyday lives such as their consumer habits, social interactions and their content on social media will become the norm (Creemers, 2018). Accordingly, the information they provide classifies who is rewarded or punished presented as feedback. An individual's score will determine success such as access and eligibility to have a car, get a mortgage, apply for jobs and can even govern children's access to particular schools (Botsman, 2017). This suggests that the dystopian outcomes depicted in the "Black

Mirror" episode are coming into reality in the form of China's Social Credit System (SCS).

It is possible to interpret China's vision as a social justice warrior of utopia that enhances trust and builds a nation of sincerity through being able to take a watch and learn approach of their citizens through new technologies. Webster (2006) argues that the establishment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are ushering a new type of 'Information Age' that we have encountered since the evolution of a post-industrial shift. Manuel Castells (2010: 71) theorises modern society as a technological revolution that is "characterised by constant change and organisational fluidity" where the information infrastructure allows the opportunity for adaptability based on a feedback loop. Therefore, technological developments of China's SCS reflect an information society where citizens are able to adapt their behaviour and activities according to their virtual score that will act as informational feedback in order to encourage a more trustworthy nation.

China is currently exercising a pilot run of the SCS through an array of private companies, most prominently by Ant Financial Group who accumulate big data analysis on their consumers through the distribution of Sesame Credit that mirrors the social consequences the SCS will produce (Creemers, 2018). This voluntary system scores individuals between 350 to 950 to measure their credit history, social relations on the platform, behavioural trends - including

An episode of **Black Mirror**
One Phone can change a person's life

NOSEDIVE

Directed by Joe Wright
Story by Charlie Brooker
Teleplay by Michael Schur
Rashida Jones

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their consumer habits - personal information and ability to honour agreements (Creemers, 2018: 22). To some extent, the system is appealing by the rewards whereby having a high score can lead to many social advantages, for instance a score of 650 allows you to hire a car without a deposit, while the score of 666 grants you a monetary loan equivalent to £5,700 (Botsman, 2017).

However, it must be acknowledged that the ICTs that involve everyday dependence to generate a score such as phones, cash machines and emails are being used as an execution of social control. The National Credit Information Sharing Platform (NCISP) which involves China's local governments, central agencies and market actors, have been collecting and sharing the data produced through the credit system to form a 'blacklist' that holds records of those who are considered to be dishonest (Creemers, 2017). Failing to pay a bill or posting a controversial comment on social media can result in an individual to be placed on the 'blacklist' and can restrict their most essential aspects of everyday life. It has been reported that since 2017, 6.15 million Chinese citizens had been prohibited from taking flights over the duration of four years, while 1.65 million of those on the list are banned from travelling on trains (Botsman, 2017). The main reason of "Black Mirror's" popularity is for its successful social commentary that reflects
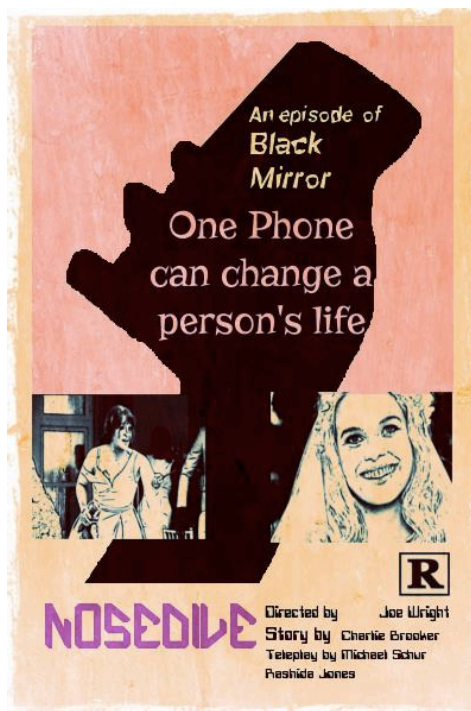
on issues with existing technology. While *Nosedive* tells a fictitious tale on people been turned away from flights due to their low score, this dystopian outcome is the reality for China. This surveillance facilitates a much greater and more systematic analysis of who constitutes as a trustworthy citizen, yet here we can see the system been used as a form of control (Liang et al, 2018).

Anthony Giddens (1985) contends that a key feature of modernity is to know the information about the people in governs whereby the state must employ surveillance strategies to organise efficient services effectively. The rise of the urban world and a shift into more complex societies has resulted in increased individualisation where it is more difficult to manage society as a whole. Therefore, it is possible to interpret China's "Black Mirror" scoring system as a rational outcome of modernity as surveillance is key for the organisation of society to determine who is eligible for the access to services and activities based on their trustworthiness. Nevertheless, cultures of control in the contemporary world are not exclusive to the state as surveillance is an ordinary aspect of people's everyday lives instead "it is a set of processes in which we are all involved, both as watched and as watchers" (Lyon, 2007: 13). While China's SCS plan may seem divergent to modern day, similar features of surveillance are occurring in the Western world in similar aspects, such as rating potential partners on the dating application "Tinder", our "Uber" driver for their service, and we are rated by others

according to the content among our social media platforms.

Often, surveillance societies are compared to the Foucauldian approach of a panoptic society that relies on continuous surveillance with the illusion we are being watched as a mechanism of control (Caluya, 2010). This perspective is developed by Jeremey Bentham's panopticon model of a circular tower designed to ensure that no one is aware of it being occupied as a system to observe others continuously (Caluya, 2010). In many ways, China's SCS of government control is comparable to a panoptic society by the use of ineluctable technologies that offer real-time surveillance where citizens are watched, yet they cannot see their observers. Recently, it has been reported that in Western China, the government has forced individuals to download a mobile application that scans the content on their phone and deletes files that are dangerous (Ma, 2018).

Michel Foucault suggests that the consequence of the illusion of constant surveillance leads to self-discipline for fear of punishment (Caluya, 2010). Similarly, the invasive technologies used as surveillance in China's SCS bring the uncomfortable and manufactured practice of self-censorship by citizens being forced to control their activities such as consumer habits or not posting controversial content on social media. Professor Luciano Floridi asserts that the

surveillance through the SCS causes individual's identities to become blurred as the physical and virtual experiences or our lives will essentially become blended to form an 'onlife' personality shaped differently to who we would naturally be in reality (Botsman, 2017). Arguably, China is contradicting their vision of a trustworthy and sincere nation, as in reality their society would be based on deception for fear of reprisals.

Also, Didier Bigo (2006) coined the term 'ban-opticon' to explain how profiling techniques in the contemporary world are used to specifically target certain groups under surveillance. It is arguable that China's SCS is using a 'ban-opticon' surveillance strategy to specifically target those who are showing signs of dishonest behaviour. Consequently, those identified will be publicly reprimanded with a lower score and this has serious effects on one's socio-economic position, reflecting the role surveillance has on the establishment of social inequalities (Haggerty, 2006: 29). Tracking technologies used by government agencies for the SCS is beneficial for identifying suspicious behaviour, such as criminal activities of online fraud to allocate individuals on the blacklist. However, the assemblage of private information such as financial stability and details of occupations of individuals is unequally creating a social stratification of scores. Ultimately, those of a higher-class will be at an advantage of gaining a higher SCS score than those of a lower-class, and this classifies socio-economic groups to affect their life-chances by the access they have to the activities in society.

This reflection identifies the similarities between China's SCS and the dystopian outcomes reflected in Nosedive. State and non-state agencies have developed a scoring system which both involve forms of surveillance through technological and informational innovations and have implications of control and social stratification. Although Nosedive was created to portray the futuristic outcomes of our reliance on digital technology, this world of techno-paranoia is a reality for China that controls citizens by a virtual score based on their activities and behaviour. It may be considered that the SCS is a positive development for disciplining citizens to build a nation of trust, however this creates unequal social hierarchies by individuals being grouped according to their personal information that for the lower-class will be disadvantaged as financial aspects are to be considered in the scoring process. Therefore, it is possible to interpret that the system itself is contradicting their values of trustworthiness by unequally distributing scores that will control the citizens life chances.

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