



What New Risks Do Women Face in the Information Society?

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Michel Foucault is undoubtedly one of the most influential surveillance theorists of the nineteenth century as he exemplified discipline through the panopticon in his publication; *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Although the panopticon originated from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, Foucault and Bauman incorporate this to understand and analyse the wider society (Farinosi, 2011). The underlying argument is the fact that panoptic principles define any realm demanding instructions, and consciously, these principles are apparent in modern society such as the closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras (Norris and Armstrong, 1999). Although we have witnessed technological innovations far superior to Bentham's time, the principles of the panopticon are largely unchanged, this is imposed by the smartphone culture encouraging individuals, especially women, to monitor and observe the self to 'fit in' on social media (McCarthy, 1990).

In this critical reflection I aim to explore in more depth the idea of self-surveillance and how the panoptic principles have led to self-

discipline. Anthony Giddens defines self-surveillance as, "assumptions about others changes one's behaviour and limits what one does" (Giddens and Sutton, 2013: 833). This is a primary characteristic of modern society; and I will specifically focus on the feminine perspective of how technology has allowed diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery to be key social control outcomes. However, this is seen as a growing contemporary risk because women are increasingly experiencing physical and psychological distress due to self-objectification (McCarthy, 1990).

The idea of risk as seen by Beck and Giddens is "central to modern culture, and as having become a key element in the calculations of the self" (Petersen, 1996:46)." This raises the question: why has risk become a major point of discussion, and how does it relate to self-surveillance? The risk society was first coined by Ulrich Beck (1992) who argued in the late modern period, once we have subjugated or limited the real challenges of premodernity. A few examples being disease, natural disasters and bad

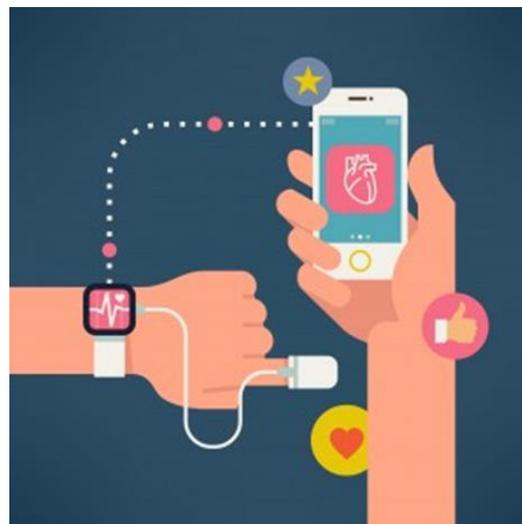


weather, we suffer from ones we are creating ourselves. Therefore, in relation to this discussion, self-surveillance is unquestionably increasing risks for women (McCarthy, 1990). "These psychological consequences in turn influence certain mental health risks, including disordered eating and depression" (Greenleaf and McGreer, 2010: 188). This traces back to the panoptic principles of how social media and self-tracking apps challenge and create an unhealthy competition for women's well-being, as they are constantly pressured to present the 'perfect' self. Beck (1992, 2009) also highlights the idea of self-reflexivity, suggesting women are actively pursuing information and making choices about their own life.

This refers to the panoptic metaphor as social media and specifically the photo sharing platform Instagram (Castells, 2010) creates a constant fear of observation, inspection and the monitoring of behaviour (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). Therefore, this intensifies self-discipline, which may result in undereating or altering bodies to fit their desired identity (Greenleaf and McGreer, 2010). Lyon (2010) states self-surveillance to be further mentioned in Bauman's recent work; whether in their consciousness or subconsciousness, women of our times are haunted by the spectre of exclusion" (pp. 329). Research of academic sources has implied self-surveillance through self-tracking and social media has created the 'entrepreneurial self' (Couch et al, 2015). This is a neoliberal method of self-control where women are juxtaposed with the self (Elias and Gill, 2017). Referring

back to Beck (1992) this may seem to depict unknown potential, but it may likewise exacerbate the feeling of weakness.

In the book *'The Entrepreneurial self'* by Ulrich Brockling (2016) it states the fact life in late modernity has become a competition for power, money, fitness and youth. In regard to Beck (1992) this is a growing risk, as women are forming a collective aesthetic online identity and therefore those whom cannot consume the high branded technology, causes exclusion and to a further extent depression and anxiety. Although new technology such as the smartphone is a necessity it is also an expensive product. This has become a cultural pressure and therefore you have to purchase it to portray an ideal self-online, (Lupton, 2017) which increase algorithmic likes and comments, this promotes the sense of satisfaction of existence (Elias and Gill, 2018).



As well as social media another prevalent self-disciplinary methods women are increasingly incorporating the growing self-tracking technologies into their lives, such as Fitbit and the Apple watch (Lupton, 2017). These are the main suspects of self-surveillance in today's society due to their ability to track individuals. Although it is not gendered, the article *'Differences in mobile health app use: A source of new digital inequalities'* (Bol et al, 2018), is a very predominant writing of how health apps and social media are the two key areas that encourage women to 'self-care.' This means it is an ever-growing phenomenon

and women will continuously track, calculate and analyse their lives through technology (Lupton, 2017). As well as a form of self-surveillance these emerging self-tracking and self-care technologies such as the ones I have mentioned, are profitable for the capitalist economy. 'Capitalism and the information age' by McChesney et al (1998) highlight this point, it is argued information technologies are vastly developing and therefore they are a demand for the population, as a result of peer pressure and ever developing technology.

We would not regard Foucault as an academic of technology however his vision in the "*Technologies of the self*" has an influence in today's society. He was assessing the way humans were consciously seeking information of themselves and therefore establishing themselves new as subjects (Foucault, 1988). Modern society is advancing on this point whereas humans have begun to 'quantify themselves' (Lupton, 2017) through health apps and therefore self-discipline, and self-surveillance becomes a core aspect of society.

David Lyon is a key theorist who has studied surveillance in depth, he argues the most significant contemporary surveillance is social media as, it "develops an inner compulsion to 'do the right thing'" (Lyon, 2007:59). This statement from Lyon has a direct link with Foucault's work as he argued self-discipline is promoted and internalised through the panopticon and the ambiguity of whether or not one is being observed generates the need

to obey the norm. His essential tenet of "power is that it cannot be located; it is everywhere and therefore also inside us (Vaz and Bruno, 2002: 273). Smartphones are the very basis contemporary risk through self-surveillance because their persistent accessibility is creating and enhancing women to control and manipulate themselves (Whitson, 2013).

It is therefore an outcome of modernity where surveillance and the information technology are enabling these risks, this links to Beck's (1992) perception of risk being manufactured by humanity and it is therefore a consequence of modern societies. The development of new technologies has brought society to witness a 'new way of living' as suggested by Webster

and Bloom, (2009:9). Webster in his article 'An information Society' suggests



modernisation has witnessed an 'information revolution' and therefore lifestyles have modernised adapted to new social changes (Castells, 2010).

It is common to think the panopticon is still relevant in modern society, however it is concealing. Lyon (2007) suggests less attention is paid to the newer forms of surveillance such as the mass media. Therefore, it is significant to reflect on the idea of the synopticon which characterises our society but also the transition to postmodernity (Mathieson, 1997). He takes

into account new electronic technologies and how they are seen to be the new forms of surveillance of contemporary society (Mathieson, 2004). Once again information technology magnifies this as options are open to monitor anyone we feel, this suggests “we live in a viewer society” (Mathieson, 1997, 219) where the many watch the many. “It is the normalising gaze of panopticons which presumably produces that subjectivity, that self-control, which discipline people to fit into democratic capitalist society” (Mathieson, 1997:218). This critical reflection is essentially reflecting on this point. The idea of the panopticon has been replaced but still conforms to everyday life, in this case the increased pressures through the information society creates more risks for women around low self-esteem because the pressure to be perfect or fit in is gendered. It is mainly women however in post-capitalist society men are also victims of this (Haferkamp et al, 2012).

The synoptic effect meant women have adjusted to the mentality of looking a specific way; therefore, keeping up with the trends and fashions is a form of the panoptic power as it controls and limits the way one is perceived online (Haferkamp et al, 2012). For example, the intensifying female gym cultures on Instagram is controlling the food intake to create docile bodies (Lupton, 2017).

“Yesterday we were nervous that we were being watched and today we’re nervous that we’re not being watched” (McCahill, 2002, xiii). Social media draws heavily on this quote as the initial aim to diet, exercise or discipline us is to watch and be watched. For example, the proliferation of the female bloggers online is a result of the synoptic society. This means power has been inverted from the panopticon

to the synopticon and therefore women have more agency to impact their lives in a significant way. However, this agency is within a technologically advanced world in which women are expected to participate. Additionally, it is debatable that the advancement of modernisation and globalisation has led to greater risks and had a negative impact of the self, due to this increase in agency (Fuchs, 2011).

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