

# Is Surveillance Really That Bad

Tegan Steane, Sociology

According to Jeremy Bentham "Surveillance is a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example" (Mattelart 2010: 7). By looking at the surveillance of celebrities, this critical reflection will look at to what extent surveillance is desired and if so, why celebrities want to be watched. Additionally within this critical reflection I will be discussing the concepts of the panopticon, synopticon, celebrity surveillance and the development of new technologies to examine how power is inverted within the synopticon in comparison to the panopticon. Bentham formed the concept of the panopticon, which to describe is an architectural device including a central point, the tower. This gives the prison wardens a full view of the entire circle of the building in order to watch over prisoners and as a consequence discipline them (Mattelart, 2010). The panopticon imposes increased control through the normalisation of the gaze, which produces self-control and disciplines people to fit into a capitalist society (Mathiesen, 1997). The accelerating development of the mass media coincides with the growth of the panopticon; the panopticon and the media structure are parallel in that they are potential means of power. Power is represented in individuals and groups who are represented in the mass media (Mathiesen, 1997). The most recognised panoptic principle is the meaning of visibility; the basic nature of

disciplinary power involves regulation through visibility (Koskela, 2003). In summary within the panopticon, the few watch the many.

Mathieson offered a parallel concept, the synopticon, where he takes into account electronic media within the development of new technologies alongside surveillance. Mathieson suggests that we live in a 'viewer society', which is not a society where only the few watch the many, but it is simultaneously a mass media society where the many watch the few (Lyon, 2007). As the watched are being so within a mediated society, the watched tend to be celebrities, media users keep famous people

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surveillance.

With the growth of new communication technologies, in particular the Internet and the use of social networks, both the watched and the watchers become addicted to it (Koesse et al., 2010). Growing technologies has allowed us to watch celebrities every move, from what they wear, places they go to, what they eat for dinner. Gary T. Marx rightly reminds us however, that just because a surveillance system has been installed, do not mean people cannot resist or challenge it (Lyon, 2007).

Celebrities voluntarily put themselves under surveillance when they make a twitter profile.

The most followed twitter accounts are those of pop stars, including Katy Perry, Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber all with more than 30 million followers each (Phua, 2014). A 'follower' and the nature of fandom is much more complex than what it seems from the outset, the relationship between the celebrity and their fan is an active and productive association. The prominence of new technologies has enhanced fan culture even further; it has also enhanced visibility of the fans and their ability to express their devotion to their icon, through sending them a tweet (Barron, 2014). Fans can be seen as passive and easy to manipulate as they consume various texts and products derived from popular culture. There are however fans who are arguably actively and knowingly bestowing upon popular cultures, they consume objects of popular culture and use them to express a sense of their lives/identity (Barron, 2014). Research has however argued that social networking sites like twitter, which is unique in the sense that it is from the perspective of the celebrity, means that they still hold control and power. For example, the celebrity can choose who they follow back, who they send tweets to, etc. When we analyse the way twitter works in this context, the concept of the panopticon is inverted in the synopticon so that it is the ones being watched who maintain the power (Barron, 2014). Furthermore, celebrities have a superior social status, however this status could be seen as a direct result of the capitalist economic system, as being watched can result in wealth through advertising and consumption. The more followers a celebrity has, the more companies will want them to endorse their products, as a wider audience will see it. Meaning the position of a celebrity is being a product of the culture industry, and being conveyed through technologies of mass communication (Barron,



2014). In simple terms, celebrities are commodities who are bought and sold by their fans. Either the celebrity is consumed directly via concert tickets, sometimes they create the object to be consumed e.g. album, or they are an endorser for an item of consumption e.g. clothing lines (Piazza, 2011).

In a postmodern society, focus has shifted towards controlling consumption and to achieve this, controlling the thoughts and actions of consumers. Consequently, the focus of capitalism has gone from exploiting workers to exploiting consumers (Ritzer, 1997). When a celebrity mentions a product or brand in a tweet, their endorsement is potentially broadcasted to millions of people. Fans are consumers of celebrities and celebrities can exploit their fans by selling them more products, not only making them richer but also giving them a status. The tactic to use celebrity endorsers is that it helps to achieve what Baudrillard (1993, cited in Dant, 1996) called sign value onto

commodities. If meanings are attached to a product, they are more likely to be consumed, if somebody's favourite celebrity is using a product then that product then has an attached value to that person (Gabriel, 1995). Part of successful branding is determining what followers admire about a celebrity and then the brand will match products to that attribute. An example that demonstrates this is *L'Oreal's* use of Cheryl Fernandez-Versini; she became the endorser for their hair products in 2009. During September 2009, sales rose from 10,000 to 250,000 by the end of November (Mortimer, 2010). Research on celebrity endorsers and their followers concluded that the more followers a celebrity had the more attractive and trustworthy they were perceived

to be. This leads us to question what this means for the society we live in if popularity and attractiveness are the dominating traits to maintain (Phua, 2014).

It has been suggested that consumption is our new religion; George Ritzer coined the term cathedral of consumption in relation to malls/shopping centres. Ritzer (2011) argues we have moved from purchasing for necessity to worshipping the availability to purchase. Consumption then gives us enchantment in a disenchanted society. Similarly just like we consume from the influences of the people we worship- celebrities, so does a celebrity culture give us something to believe in? By consuming celebrity culture, it gives a way of connecting to other people in the fan base, or as they may see it their religion. If this is how we really think, that the 'best' people to tell us what to buy, and who we should be, then what does this really say about us? A celebrity culture may give people something to believe in, but how realistic and attainable are these beliefs particularly when they cause pressure on young girls to look a certain way. For example, celebrity culture in partnership with advertising has influenced an increase in radical body transformations, a recent example being buttock implants popularised by Nicki Minaj (Barron, 2014). With these 'role models' portraying the body as a 'plastic' instrument in a consumer market through new technologies, there is no surprise the demands for cosmetic surgery have risen. If we take Cher as another example, cosmetic surgeries have enabled her to look younger; this only reinforces the belief that the ageing female body is not sexy (Barron, 2014).

It would be naïve to think of surveillance and popular culture as purely undesirable with anxious and paranoid response. We know

surveillance can be alarmist however within popular culture we see people deliberately putting themselves under surveillance (Lyon, 2007). In recent years a new species of celebrities has evolved, people are increasingly becoming famous for the sake of being famous for example the Kardashian family (Piazza, 2011). The Kardashians actually have their own TV programme where they perform the labour of having their lives recorded for money, similar to when the Osbourne family did this leads me to think do people want to be watched? On the Kardashian programme, Kim was flaunting the fact she was the number one Google search that week, her sister then asked her if she knew

she was also second on dumbest people list for New York post and her response was "as long as they are talking about me honey" (McClain, 2014).

We seem to be in a society where people want to become famous so they can fulfil their desire to be watched by the many. In this context, it is the watched who are the powerful and who gain control by being watched thus power is inverted in the synopticon, in comparison to the panopticon. The more someone is watched, the higher the status they gain and therefore the richer they become through being consumed by those doing the watching. Surveillance within celebrity culture is therefore important for them to gain power. In today's consumer society, aesthetic appreciation is a key factor in influencing what people consume. Thus, it is usually attractive, high status celebrities used for advertising commodities. So in conclusion, celebrity culture reflects a growing desire to be



surveyed, which opposes the panoptic understanding that sees surveillance as imposed on us and where the watched are viewed as powerless.

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