

Data Harvesting or Tailoring our Needs? Life in the Surveillance Society

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Surveillance is heavily entwined with issues of power relations; those with power have access to the means to allow for greater inspection and need this information to monitor, control and influence the masses. The political discourses surrounding surveillance fluctuate: sometimes it is viewed as a positive aspect of society which allows individuals' safety and freedom, and ensures governments can fairly and accurately allocate resources and ensure the functionality of social institutions. At other times surveillance is seen in a negative light wherein government control and forms of legislation are weaponised as a tool of oppression in a system of inequality.

These contrasting perspectives are developed in relation to changing means of production in the labour market and occupational structure (from Feudalism to Industrialisation to post-Fordism), the rise of new technologies due to modernity and globalisation, and the ever changing fluid identities social actors create in relation to



liquid modernity. I will critically address these themes and look at the ways in which surveillance has adapted alongside a constantly evolving social structure, analyse how it is wielded as a tool by the capitalist ruling class and evaluate the possible consequences this holds for society on both a global and individualised scale, linking back to relevant contemporary examples and taking a holistic approach to these theories by utilising global conglomerate Google as a referential example.

Foucault (1975) argued that at some point in the 1800s there was a shift in the paradigm towards more contemporary means of surveillance in which the few see the many,

leaving behind more traditional methods wherein the many see the few (Mathieson, 1997). However, it is also argued that we are in a 'viewer society' wherein new media technologies hold great significance to surveillance as it allows

the masses to observe the few. Giddens (1985) described all modern societies as 'information societies' (Giddens, 1985: 178)

meaning they value 'knowledge, information, and the technology of their processing, including the technology of management, and the management of technology' (Webster and Blom, 2004: 140).

With the rise of internet there has been an undeniable increase in surveillance in our society, as new technology indicates new times (Webster, 2006). Media has always had a significant impact on social life and self-identities as it is a 'central element to modern life' (Gauntlett, 2008: 1) and with the growth of the internet (specifically social media) the idea of what an audience is has changed rapidly and become far more confused due to more

interactivity (Gauntlett, 2008). We put our whole lives online and popular sites such as Facebook



gather data on where we work, the people we know, and so forth.

Working with third party companies, online leaders such as Google harvest huge amounts of internet traffic to gather information on our search histories (Esteve, 2017) under the guise of 'better tailoring our experience' whereas I would argue this data surveillance is commodifying us. Advertisers want this information so that they can specifically target the right product to right audience, increasing profit margins by saving time and money with this individualisation. However, this process only serves to benefit those at the top of the capitalist hierarchy and turns unique, fluid individuals into a two dimensional static products to be sold so that they in turn will

continue the cycle of consumption without ever seeing any compensation other than the supposed 'free' usage of social media sites (Clark, 2011). Within this cycle the interconnectivity of post-industrial capitalist society and new methods of surveillance tools become apparent.

Moreover, the increasing binding connection between technology and social life has allowed the monitoring of individuals to become far more personalised. This can be demonstrated in something as seemingly innocuous as an everyday object, for example mobile phones. Most social actors play their role and are in constant connection to their

phones, and there is often a political satirisation of the idea that newer generations of individuals are 'glued to their smartphones' (Hill, 2016) and unable to tear themselves

away from technology.

The amount of information that these technologies, information that in many cases we hand over freely, is staggering: our phones recognise our finger prints and voices, have medical knowledge down to our specific blood types, constantly monitor our location, and with the latest iPhone X model they now have facial recognition software. The ramifications of this is the loss of privacy and personal freedom. Further, in a more generalised sense Bauman (1995) talked about the fragility of social ties, fragmented bonds and the disarrayed search for the Self (Palese, 2013) in liquid modernity and consumer society.

It should be noted, however, that less subtle forms of surveillance can still be seen in

contemporary society, such as with the increased presence of police and armed officials in city centres over the past few years, which is even more substantial after any terror attacks (Booth et al, 2017). While those in control might argue this is in the name of safety and 'freedom' (mirroring the aftereffects of 9/11), when employing the sociological imagination these methods demonstrate the oppressive nature of government control and vigilance. I would argue an armed official signifies a clear warning; obey the social order or face extreme repercussions.

This (coupled with institutionalised forms of oppression) is hugely problematic when trying to strive for an equal, peaceful society.



In preindustrial society Feudalism was the dominant form of social organization wherein labourers worked to live in the Feudal Lord's land. Moving away from this system, after the period of the enlightenment (Robertson, 2015), rationality and scientific method were the keystones economic growth within industrialisation. Fordism created systems of production that brought rise to mass employment and mass production, making society as a whole more work-orientated.

Similarly, Taylorism, or scientific management, (Giddens & Griffiths, 2006) saw working classes as incompetent and lazy and increased focus on productivity by fragmenting and standardising tasks and equating fast output with monetary incentive. The nature of this system, from a Marxist

standpoint, caused alienation of the worker from the product, self and other workers (Ollman, 1976), and flexible specialisation could be considered the death knell for Fordism. In modern fields of work, demand is in a constant state of flux as consumer wants become more individualised.

One positive aspect of this change is that with the need for 'smart' workers means the revision of skill and recognition of craft. Yet those critical of these modern advancements are quick to point out that while there are certain benefits for high-skilled workers, individuals without the means to achieve these skills are left vulnerable as they are seen as more disposable in a neoliberal consumer society.

However, it can be contended that industrialisation and dualism are not outdated, as alongside larger firms there have always been smaller craftsmen, such as with the case of The Third Italy (Kumar, 2004). Moreover, there are still forms for Fordism prevalent in 21st century Britain; most people working in customer service (for example, Starbucks employees) follow standardised methods such as adhering to a regulated script. To critique this further, the McDonaldization thesis by Ritzer (1993) describes how society in general has become more homogenous, desiring 'efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control' above all else (Ritzer, 2014). Furthermore, the impact of Fordism can still be felt outside of Western society; under capitalism there is an increased division of labour and production is often outsourced to factory workers in foreign

countries thus the trend seems to be 'out of site out of mind'.

Google recently purchased 300 homes as a short-term housing solution for their employees. The tech giant stated the \$30 million deal (McMullen, 2017) was an effort to combat the rising house prices in Silicon Valley. In 2016 Facebook also announced their plans to spend \$20 million on affordable housing surrounding their campus after initially gaining critical feedback for ignoring lower-earning employees affected by gentrification (Levin, 2016).

Whilst on paper these efforts seem altruistic and inherently beneficial to those facing income inequality there is also a more sinister side effect. With these actions some have theorised that Google and Facebook are reverting back to Feudalism (Morozov, 2016). Interestingly there are parallels to Bentham's 'Panopticon' here; employees will be working and living under the watchful eye of their employers and so it is easy to see how this could devolve into culture of community-monitoring and careful self-regulation for fear of the consequence of losing not just their job but their homes and lives built there.

Finally, this links with the ideas of utopia and inherent opposition between of the value of true freedom verses the safety a monitored and carefully controlled environment can provide. Who is to say which contrasting side will provide more happiness for society as a whole, and does the harmony of the masses trump the needs of the individual? While surveillance can be a tool for the regulation of needs and services for the masses, there is an inherent double standard built upon unequal power relations. Those at the top of the social hierarchy have the social and economic capital to help individuals, however, there is a conflict of interest as social actors often end

up exploited by the State and the very institutions that are meant to benefit them.

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