Cameras turned inwards: An enquiry into digital identities and the legitimisation of self-surveillance

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George Eastman was the founder of the Eastman Kodak Company, in 1888 he successfully elevated photography into the mainstream by manufacturing roll film. All cameras were manufactured with an outward gaze in mind, encouraging the photographer to observe the world around them. The 2003 release of the Sony Ericson Z1010, marked the advent of the front-facing camera, changing the landscape of photography and more importantly, identity.

The inward turning of the lens has since been embraced within Western culture, by 2015 Apple had even dedicated a folder in the iPhone for selfies. This lens shift can be digested as a literal depiction of how cameras have become less about looking outwards and documenting the world, and more about looking at oneself. The camera being turned inwards can be directly aligned to contemporary society, exhibiting how digital technologies have given rise to increased occurrences of self-surveillance, in-turn legitimising the act.

With the emergence of digital identities and the online marketisation of the self, one must ponder over whether the camera can ever truly look outwards again? In-turn, this piece will argue that behind the rose-tinted curtain of commercial opportunity and amelioration of the online self, self-surveillance poses a serious threat to something far more valuable, our sense of self. Such an argument will be supported with relevant academic literature and contemporary examples, as well as my independent analogies of; 'the legitimisation of surveillance', 'the mirrors of surveillance' and 'the like-economy'. Whilst keeping a firm eye on the malignant relationship the government and organisations share with surveillance, this piece also aims to be self-reflexive in asking the role we play in the maintenance of surveillance.

To begin to establish a true understanding of surveillance, one might observe how it is defined and the way in which it has transformed. Foucault (1979) rehabilitation of the panopticon is the leading scholarly model

for surveillance, presenting a society that controls people through disciplinary practices. This act of continuous surveillance yields an illusion that we are forever being watched, forcing one to normalise their behaviour. Whilst his work has come under scrutiny for being outdated, it is a foundational text with an abundance of work that is capable on development. Foucault's (1979) notion of self-monitoring is applicable to contemporary society, especially in relation to posting on a platform like Instagram. People post accordingly on social media to avoid public scrutiny, a contemporary punishment of self-surveillance. A decade on came Roger (2003) concept on dataveillance, the monitoring of groups through data, used to not only govern, but commodify surveillance. We now find ourselves in a state of self-surveillance, in which we are no longer victims of surveillance but consumers of it.

The most recent era of surveillance is of the self, employed through the Western markets inventing products such Amazon's *Alexa* and the *FitBit*. The emergence of these new products has marked a new trend of surveillance being welcomed into the home, where self-monitoring is abundant. These items are effectively 'mirrors of surveillance' as collecting personal data daily mark 'the camera turning inwards'. The mirroring nature of these products marks perhaps the most notable transition in the history of surveillance, in which surveillance has turned from an enemy into a friend. Contemporary hegemonic discourse justifies surveillance as a necessary evil, essential in restoring order and facilitating social relationships.

Surveillance has always attracted an array of competing academic argument by debating over the nature, purpose and development on the subject. Whilst academics may be worlds apart in their understanding of surveillance, almost all work on the matter presupposes a power relation, in which surveillance is enforced onto actors and groups in society. One could argue that the consumption of self-surveillance calls for a reassessment of this supposed 'power relation'. Bauman and Lyon (2013) work can be applied to such an issue. He effectively makes the point that when it comes to surveillance, individuals are no longer indoctrinated or policed in the same way, instead society is shaped by imperatives like consumption and enjoyment.

At face value this might suggest there is simply less surveillance in society today, yet there is a far subtler point at play. Surveillance, like any form of power, is far more effective when it is not enforced. By incorporating surveillance at the heart of popular gadgets and technology, it has seeped its way into popular culture. Rather than enforcing it, or even hiding it, Western culture has glamourized it. Lyon (2007: 47) makes the fruitful point that 'the more stringent and rigorous the panoptic regime, the more it generates active resistance, whereas the softer and subtler the panoptic strategies, the more it produces the desired docile bodies'.

The emergence of self-surveillance has legitimised a new market, where people are now able to make a serious living from their

social media presence. Advertisers have begun to shift their attention from television to social media, investing in online personalities. In the same way that television was set on views, social media is based on likes and follows. This is an inherently neo-liberal industry, one of de-regulation and a universal market. The currency people now work with can be referred to as the 'like-bank', in which online popularity results in social acceptance and economic gain. The neo-liberal nature of self-surveillance makes people believe that society can be re-ordered and that we can reimagine our status as individuals, through social media sites. Several small businesses have transformed into global brands, being the benefactors of the like-bank.

One could argue that the euphoria of a new unregulated market will be short lived, in that the like-bank is a mirroring of capitalist society. Much like capitalism, the like-bank has an acute percentage of winners and abundance of losers. One could go a step further and suggest that self-surveillance is a wider fragmentation of capitalist interest, it not only echoes the dominant capitalist rhetoric, but also creates a new market for large corporations. Beck (1992) introduces the concept of 'risk' and how it can be applied to the like-bank. It is a market of manmade opportunity and equal uncertainty, where individuals commodify their sense of self in the pursuit of popularity and financial gain. With wealth at its core, self-surveillance benefits an elite, and usurps the majority.

The most profound effect self-surveillance has is on our values and sense of self, posing a great threat to both. The rise in self-surveillance has not only impacted how much we engage with social media, but also the reasons in doing so. Marwick (2013) argues that social media sites like *Linked-In* and *Instagram* encourage us to strategically market the self, transforming ourselves into a brand. In doing so, we create more career opportunities for ourselves, meaning this construction of identity has a purely financial incentive behind it. Hearn (2017: 32) goes a step further in saying that we use social media to 'cultivate a following and a reputation'. These examples are wider fragmentations of the inwards turning of the self, in which we are becoming less voyeuristic and increasingly narcissistic.

To ever truly rule the like-bank, you must embrace narcissism in its fullest form. It can be argued that the enactment of the supposedly narcissistic self, is not a completely autonomous decision. A rejection or avoidance of this emergent self bears negative social and economic consequences. Horney (1932: 8398) fruitfully states how 'narcissism is an expression not of self-love but of alienation from the self ... [a] person clings to illusions about himself because, and as far as, he has lost himself'. When applied to our notion of the self this quote is of great relevance, in that the emergence of social media has created an artificial social pressure, that places great impetus and reward on the enactment of narcistic behaviours. This is a

tactful colonisation on the identity, transforming it into a profitable asset.

The emergence of self-surveillance has brought with it the legitimisation a new market, as well as a new opportunity to construct an identity. Yet this shift from voyeurism to narcissism, is of great impact to our morality. The pursuit of winning with the like-bank, is a narcissistic dream with deep flaws. It threatens our very sense of self and impacts those most vulnerable in society. The increased act of self-surveillance online has no doubt worsened issues like body shaming and financial insecurity. Such worrying developments make one ask, should commercial and technological innovation come before the preservation of the self? As it stands, the legitimisation of self-surveillance means that the camera is most certainly turned inwards.

As individuals we are at great risk when trying to look outwards, on exposing ourselves to alienation. There is no doubt that embracing self-reflexivity could help us in our pursuit of the outwards gaze. Yet, let us not be docile in regards with the other discursive forces at play. Behind this illusion of autonomy, lies the sinister work of corporations and the government. The legitimisation of self-surveillance helps them, in that it echoes the hegemonic discourse that retains their power and wealth. If we are to have any chance of regaining our sense of self and turn the camera outwards, we must challenge the corporations that maintain the narcissistic gaze. This might start by going offline or forming petitions about the oppressive side of social media. Let this piece not act as a solution to the issue, but as a line of enquiry about how we might one day challenge it.

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