TikTok: The Darkside of Surveillance

Amber Richards

TikTok is a new social media app that was created by the Chinese company 'ByteDance' in 2017. The mobile video app allows users to upload short-form videos that are typically 15 seconds long and are commonly 'funny dances, physical stunts, short-form skits, and good-humored confessionals straight to camera' (Long, 2020). TikTok is the fastest growing app and is increasingly popular with young people as most users are teens; people over 20 are viewed as 'old' in the world of TikTok. The best representation for TikTok is Charli D'Amelio, an American 16-year-old who has gained fame through sharing dancing videos and has become the first user to reach 100 million followers on the app. In a postmodern society overcome with new media, Charli D'Amelio can be deemed a martyr for new ICTs that encourage synoptic surveillance and the desire to be watched.

However, TikTok is a recently developed app that leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Could there be something more sinister beneath the surface of this funny video-sharing app that Charli D'Amelio and others consider to be empowering with their silly dances and skits? What does TikTok tell us about surveillance technologies in an information society? How does Matheison's (1997) synopticon and Zuboff's (2019) age of surveillance capitalism have relevance to this growing phenomenon? Is there a dark side of TikTok that is collecting its user's personal data to control and influence them for state power? Have we unknowingly allowed ourselves to become the product in a consumer society? These questions are what this paper seeks to explore and reflect upon.

Although only three years old, TikTok has taken center stage in fears of privacy concerns and data collection, resulting in the app being banned in India and having caused ongoing debates in the UK and US. The controversy is a consequence of Chinese tech companies having been asked to hand over their data to the government (Jackman, 2020). The personal data collected by TikTok, from its increasing number of users, is a range of phone and social network contacts, email addresses, IP address, location, and biometric data (Daily Telegraph, 2020). Technological developments, such as facial recognition, allows the state to build a database of faces which can be used to predict crime by watching the population through CCTV surveillance systems. Surveillance is used by the state to exclude those they do not want, such as terrorists and protestors; facial recognition is a prominent technological development that makes this possible. For the Chinese government to have a database of

billions of faces collected from TikTok, creates danger for civilians that are deemed as a 'threat' by the state (Lyon, 2010).

TikTok's controversy is stemmed from the fear of the Chinese government having access to billions of individuals personal data. Zuboff (2019) discusses the 'social credit' systems created by the Chinese government that produces a variety of rankings and lists that prevent those with debt and other undesirable factors from being able to live freely and accessibly (p. 390). This social credit system uses surveillance to control the population - 'the aim is the automation of society through tuning, herding and, conditioning people to produce preselected behaviors judged as desirable by the state and thus able to Preempt instability' (Zuboff, 2019; p.389). By surveilling the population through modern technologies such as TikTok, the state can identify those they want to exclude from society, and civilians they want to track. David Lyon (2010) argues that the state uses surveillance to maintain control and power over its citizens by being able to watch them and collect their personal data.

Foucault's theory of panopticon suggests we are being watched by the few in power, but we cannot know when exactly we are being surveilled, so we assume that we always are (1977). This results in us monitoring and changing our behavior through self-discipline, to keep in line with what the state wants. The Chinese government has been accused of using TikTok as a form of maintaining power through the panopticon, but TikTok itself has more relevance in terms of synoptic surveillance. Mathiesen (1997) developed the concept of synopticon from Foucault's panopticon to keep it relevant for new technological developments that have

appeared. The synopticon is when the many watch the few. We are increasingly living in what Mathiesen refers to as a 'viewer society' – the many can now watch the few because of developments in media that allow the many to surveil those in power and keep track of them (1997; 219). In George Orwell's book *1984,* the panopticon and synopticon are described as 'Big Brother' - "through a screen in your living room you saw Big Brother, just as Big Brother saw you" (Mathiesen, 1997; 223). When discussing TikTok, this is true. Users are watching others through their phone screens, but with facial recognition and front facing cameras, are the viewers also being watched?

Webster (2006) argues that the establishment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have created a new type of 'Information Society' that has developed since the industrial revolution. There is a huge amount of information today which we consume constantly in our daily lives. We now "inhabit a media-laden society" and are continuously surrounded by media that seek to influence us (Webster, 2006; p.19). Media and new information are everywhere because of new technological developments making it possible. TikTok is a perfect example of media that produces a continuous stream of new information that is in the simplest form to consume. Users can scroll through TikTok and watch hundreds of videos in minutes because of the endless number of 15-second clips. Living in a contemporary culture that is 'heavily information-laden' and a 'media-saturated environment,' is what has made TikTok's success possible (Webster, 2006; p.20). We are living in a culture of wanting to be watched even when doing menial activities like 'get ready with me' and 'what I eat in a day'

videos, that are immensely popular on TikTok and receive millions of views and likes.

Algorithms are efficiently predicting our likes and dislikes through our internet usage, targeting us with consumer goods and then selling these predictions to corporations. Our behavior is now predicted and modified to find our consumer habits and then this data is sold to the highest bidder – turning us into the product. TikTok's 'ForYou' page is unique for every user as it only shows videos that the app believes will entertain them. This is possible because of their endlessly working algorithm that is making billions of calculations every second with the data that has been collected from users' preferences (Jackman, 2020). Zuboff, argues that corporations use surveillance to collect data on users that produces an accurate model of who we are, and they use this to predict our preferences and habits (2019). Through TikTok's ruthlessly efficient algorithm, the app is constantly predicting what videos users will enjoy, and controls what content users see. Users lose their right to a future tense when they lose the ability to shape their own future – TikTok users are controlled by their data and are no longer autonomous individuals (Zuboff, 2019). Through algorithms and data mining, we the consumers are turned into the product.

Information we leave behind when surfing the web is collected by corporations such as Google that then use this data to produce an accurate model of who we are, and they use this to predict our preferences and habits (Hongladarom, 2020). By collecting our data and making predictions, corporations can sell this to other corporations to make a profit. Corporations buy the predictions so they can target us with appropriate adverts they know

we are interested in – this is the basis of Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism. Algorithms, like the one TikTok uses, aims to collect enough data on us to control and predict the media we use. Surveillance capitalism turns us into the product and exploits us for profit (Zuboff, 2019; p.48). By allowing corporations to collect and sell our data, we have unintentionally commodified ourselves and lost our autonomy.

This reflection has explored TikTok in relation to theories of surveillance and has considered the dark side of new media. Although there are positives to new technological developments that allow apps like TikTok to exist, there are consequences that need to be discussed. making the control it holds over us practically impossible to escape. TikTok is just one example out of millions that use surveillance to collect our data with the mission to control and exploit us. Many people are unaware of how far these corporations go for our precious data, but even when aware most people still abide to their privacy laws. We are trapped in a world of surveillance and life as a commodified product, so we may as well enjoy it like Charli D'Amelio and millions of others who use apps like TikTok as a source of empowerment.

Bibliography:

Caluya, G. (2010) 'The post-panoptic society? Reassessing Foucault in surveillance studies', Social Identities, 16(5), pp. 621–633. doi: 10.1080/13504630.2010.509565.

Daily Telegraph (London, England) (2020) 'Tracing apps will prove pointless without a grown-up privacy debate; Activists' fears over data surveillance have been undermined by growing use of China's TikTok', 25 June. Available at:

http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbig&AN=edsbig.A627588323&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

Ericson, R. and Haggerty, K. (2006) The New Politics Of Surveillance And Visibility. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.

Foucault, M. and Rabinow, P. (1991) The Foucault reader. Penguin (Penguin social sciences), pp. 206-213.

Giddens, A. (1987) Social theory and modern sociology. Polity in association with Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (1989) The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change. Basil Blackwell.

Hongladarom, S. (2020) 'Shoshana Zuboff, The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power: New York: Public Affairs, 2019, 704 pp. ISBN 978-1-61039-569-4 (hardcover) 978-1-61039-270-0 (ebook)', AI & SOCIETY: Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Communication, p. 1. doi: 10.1007/s00146-020-01100-0.

Jackman, R. (2020) 'Here's looking at you: TikTok is the world's fastest-growing--and goofiest--digital platform, but should we fear it too', Spectator, 18 January, p. 40. Available at: http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.611931500&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

Long, R. (2020) 'The Soft Power of TikTok', Commentary, 1 July, p. 63. Available at: http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.630334996&site=eds-live&scope=site

Lyon, D. (2010) 'Liquid Surveillance: The Contribution of Zygmunt Bauman to Surveillance Studies', International Political Sociology, Volume 4, Issue 4, December 2010, Pages 325–338.

Mathiesen, T. (1997) 'The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's Panopticon Revisited', Theoretical Criminology, 1(2), pp. 215–234.

Orwell, G. (1984). 1984.

The London Evening Standard (London, England) (2020) 'Is the capital calling time on TikTok? TECH It is the social media site that is adored by Gen Z -- but fears over privacy and surveillance by China are rising. Samuel Fishwick investigates', 20 July. Available at: http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbig&AN=edsbig.A630003121&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

Webster, F. (2014) Theories of the information society. [electronic resource]. Fourth edition. Routledge (International library of sociology).

Whitcomb, C.G. (2020) Review of Shoshana Zuboff (2019). The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power. Postdigit Sci Educ 2, 484–488. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00086-3

Zuboff, S. (2019) The age of surveillance capitalism : the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power.

Zurawski, N. (2006) 'Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson eds., The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility', Canadian Journal of Sociology, 31(4), p. 532.

Pictures:
https://live.staticflickr.com/65535/49979415983_82c69584a7_b.jpg
https://live.staticflickr.com/65535/40747009043_25b1392e36_b.jpg
https://live.staticflickr.com/1396/5141256792_d00a733f53_c.jpg