Does YouTube facilitate knowledge or surveillance?

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YouTube is the second most popular website online globally, bested only by their parent company, Google (Alexa Internet, 2017). With over a billion global users, YouTube arguably creates a platform for democracy wherein we can discuss our views and listen to others, freely. However, YouTube is now regulating the allowed content and placing restrictions on content that is not 'advertiser friendly'. Arguably, this restriction on what was once allowed on YouTube could be seen as a reflection on a surveillance society that censors us according to the consumerist ideals that corporations demand we live by. To consider the purpose and effects of YouTube on society, I will mainly be focussing on YouTube as part of an information society as well as the easy access to online surveillance and the ability to subject oneself to invasive surveillance, often directly or indirectly for commercial purposes.

In order to theorise and explore YouTube in a contemporary society, the definition of information society must first be considered. Webster identifies five definitions of an information era as technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural (Webster,

2006). New technologies are the most obvious indicator of changes within society due to the sheer volume of advancements that create such a profound reinvention of the social world (Webster, 2006). YouTube could be viewed as a by-product of this 'information superhighway' that involves two-way surveillance between creator and watcher. The significance of the data on the internet compared to other means however is the extent to which it is collected and stored in pursuance of categorising people and predicting behaviours. YouTube has an advanced source of data collection which can be accessed by individual creators on the platform, detailing the demographics of viewership such as age, gender and location (Blake, 2017). This amount of information on viewership would not be available with less recent technologies like television, where it may not be clear who exactly is watching.

Chris Anderson, the owner of TED, identified that online video has drastically changed the landscape of learning, with people able to view the most talented individuals at a certain

vocation (e.g. dance) and use this information to better their own skills (Anderson, 2010). This could be seen as a clear-cut example that YouTube, or more broadly web video, is contributing tremendously to the information society that we arguably live in. We have access to more information than any other time, so we should be the most informed on almost every aspect of society from education to social issues.

It could be argued that YouTube does not necessarily reflect this. For instance, Khan Academy is an online educational organisation that creates YouTube videos as a learning tool and yet has 3.5 million subscribers (subscribers being the amount of people that get notified when a new video from a channel is posted). In comparison to the biggest YouTube channels, this number of subscribers is not staggering.

For example, Felix Kjellberg, a gamer/comedy video creator, with the online alias 'PewDiePie', has 58 million subscribers and is the largest channel on the platform (figures correct as of December 2017). This creates questions as to what we are consuming and that despite the information that is easily accessible, it is not the information we are consuming in the largest quantities. It is not specified that the video sharing website is for entertainment purposes, and yet entertainment and leisure is one of most popular and lucrative categories on the website.

An argument made by Brown and Duggid (2000) is that speaking at an epistemological level, knowledge and information differ through the embodiment of knowledge in people and practices rather than the mere existence of information in electronic databases (Flew, 2016). Therefore, the argument could be made that while we have access to masses of information online, we are not necessarily more knowledgeable than ever as that depends on the people and not the data that exists.

Although YouTube algorithms often promote the most popular videos (in order to make the most money from advertisements), it is not clear whether we are more likely to watch the entertainment videos, or these are the only ones we think are available to us. From a Neo Marxist perspective, Adorno would argue that entertainment within leisure time is colonized by the same conforming economic values as labour time despite claiming to offer pleasure (Southerton, 2011). In terms of YouTube, though we feel we are viewing content for free, we are also making money for large corporations through viewing the advertisements, which I will further discuss later.

In *Liquid Surveillance*, Bauman quotes Josh Rose; 'The Internet doesn't steal our humanity, it reflects it. The Internet doesn't get inside us, it shows what's inside us' (Rose, 2011 cited in Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 25). In this perspective, it could be argued that YouTube reveals nothing about the online

sphere, but only reveals elements of the society that we create.

On the other hand, if YouTube is regulated based on powers higher than the individual user, how can this reflect the many? Videos uploaded to YouTube are now checked with machine learning to determine whether it meets 'advertiser friendly guidelines' (Kain, 2017). In early 2017 many big brands such as Mercedes Benz and Waitrose had their advertisements distributed on videos that promoted terrorist groups due to poor regulations (Mostrous, 2017).

However, the question remains as to whether these extremist videos being up for public consumption on the platform is seen as the issue by YouTube or the wellbeing of the corporations that were accidently advertised on them. As advertisers do not know where their adverts will appear on YouTube (unlike TV advertisements), many stopped advertising on YouTube altogether. Due to advertising being the main revenue on YouTube, changes began being implemented that allowed corporations to opt out of being advertised on videos that explore for example 'sensitive social issues' or 'tragedy and conflict' (Sawyer, 2017).

While this in itself does not seem like an issue, it resulted in many YouTube users not being paid for content that they once may have been. For example, YouTube were accused of hiding videos containing LGBT themes in a 'restricted mode', therefore removing economic potential of these videos (Hunt, 2017). The result of this will be users not sharing content that may carry any kind of risk or fear of not being deemed 'advertiser friendly'. Many deem YouTube as an open forum within which democratic opinion can thrive. Adorno would argue that consumers are invited to express freedom of choice in a world where this is void, limiting the imagination of the consumer to only the culture that is exposed to them (Witkin, 2003).

While Adorno (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002) discussed culture and products more broadly, the online platform could also be seen to be stripping consumers of the wealth of choice that may have prevailed had corporations not censored content, leaving them with limited, similar choices thus maximising profit through manipulation of the repetition of this same content. This creates 'structural power', a term coined by Susan Strange in 1988, by reducing what society and individuals are able to do and shaping access to knowledge (Horten, 2016).

Not only reducing our access to knowledge, these advertisements are creating needs through the publicization of products and services which now form part of culture. 'That is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944: 136).

Furthermore, as YouTube is owned by such a large online power such as Google, it seems fitting that surveillance must also be explored, due to the mass collection of data that is able to be observed and stored by the online giant and utilised to the benefit of those in power (Lyon, 1994). Almost every aspect of human life is now linked to computer databases and therefore potentially leaves a trace. YouTube is one area online where surveillance is prevalent not only within covert governmental surveillance but also with individuals sharing intimate details of their private life to be surveilled by potentially millions of users. Within *Liquid Surveillance* (2013), Bauman claims 'the condition of being watched has been reclassified from a menace to a temptation' (Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 23).

He claims we are a confessional society, "effacing the boundary that once separated the private from the public" (Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 30). This is a striking concept regarding social media, but taken one step further on YouTube. One of the most popular style of video on the website is 'vlogging' (video blogging), which is the recording of a video creators' day to day life. To most, uploading videos of one's life on a public forum would seem invasive into private life.

However, these individuals voluntarily subject themselves to and embrace surveillance and through doing so gain economic status through advertising that Google places on their video and also further advertising within the video. Lyons also points out that according

to Foucault's works, 'individuals take an active role in their own surveillance' (Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 27). Though Foucault often focusses on the "one-way-ness of the gaze" of surveillance (Koleska, 2003: 298), YouTube would suggest an emerging two-way relationship being the watched and the watcher wherein information is gathered on both sides.

Mathieson would argue however that the synopticon, within which 'the many' see 'the few', works alongside the panopticon and in some ways, supersedes the panopticon, using the example of television (Mathieson, 1997 cited in Doyle, 2011: 285-286). Bauman's interpretation of the synopticon was a society within which the many are seduced by the lives of the few (Doyle, 2011: 287). Social media and particularly YouTube allows users to flaunt lavish lifestyles that do not always represent a full picture of their life. Referring back to Adorno, Marcuse and the Frankfurt school, this creates false needs, especially with a limited and false viewpoint of an abundant lifestyle. According to Marcuse, these 'false needs' could never be satisfied due to repression from social forces, in this case the creation of false lives (Southerton, 2011: 570).

The society we live in is becoming more and more influenced by what happens online. If YouTube, the second most popular website, is now being increasingly censored, is this a reflection on the rest of society? Not only are we subjecting ourselves to censorship through
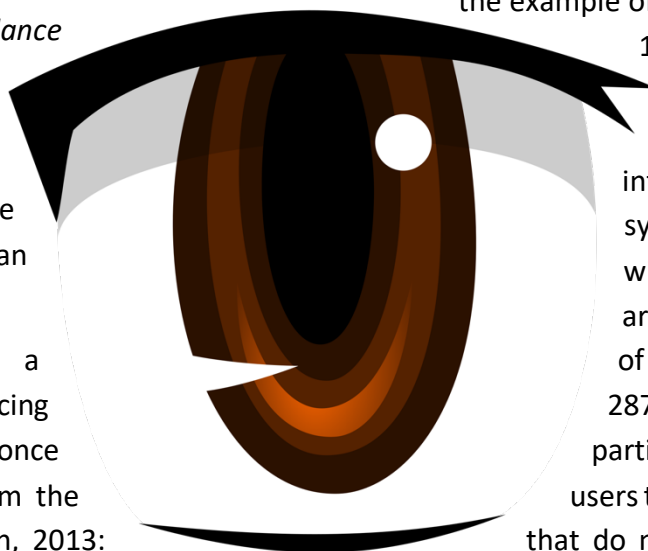
online means, we seem to be embracing surveillance. In a contemporary society, we have a desire to be watched, to be seen, to be heard. But with restrictions on what we are able to do and say, YouTube cannot be a place to express free opinion, due to the needs of power and corporations that shape the information that we have access to as consumers.

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