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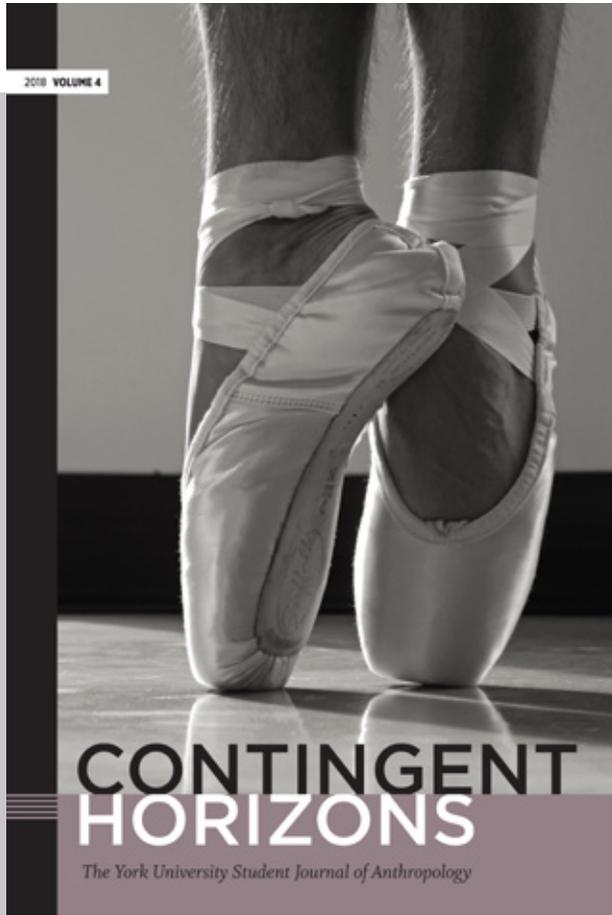
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Facebook: The Modern Day Panopticon

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Facebook

The Modern Day Panopticon

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Facebook keeps a keen eye on the inhabitants of the world by tracking users' lives as they create profiles, connect with friends, and share pictures, videos, and statuses. Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, Jeremy Bentham, David Miller, and Michael Welch, in this article I consider how Facebook exists in the world of technology as a modern day panopticon and argue that, by creating a platform on which users can instantly post and share their private lives with the public, Facebook blurs the lines between the private and public domains. Through a review of the workings and features of Facebook, I argue that the social network site is a virtual rendition of the penitentiary.

KEY WORDS Facebook, social media, panopticon

Technology, as it is manifested in the form of social media and social networking sites (including web-based sites), gives individuals the power to create online profiles through which they can connect and communicate with others (Lange 2007, 362). These platforms are gaining popularity in today's social settings. Facebook, a popular social network site of the last decade, is a platform that "combines the ability to post visual materials with text status updates and interactive features such as 'liking' posts, commenting and private messaging" (Haynes 2016: 46). A brief analysis of particular social dimensions of Facebook can uncover how Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism has molded people's experiences on Facebook today.

Foucault's (1995) concept of panopticism was developed from Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, an architectural penitentiary design that produces a system of social control through surrounding surveillance (Bennet 1988). Bentham's prison served as a model and metaphor for Foucault to theorize structures of power (Bennett 1988). Furthermore, in *The Post-Panoptical Society? Reassessing Foucault in surveillance studies*, Gilbert Caluya explains:

Foucault introduced Bentham's prison architecture as an exemplar of the shift in mechanisms of social control. The proposed panopticon was composed of an annular building circling a tower. The peripheral building is divided into cells for the inmates, which has a window facing out of the building and another facing

the tower such that the backlighting effect would allow anyone within the tower to see all inmates. On the other hand, the tower was designed in such a way that one could not tell whether it was occupied. The result of this architecture was ‘to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects’ (2010, 622).

In other words panopticism describes a society of surveillance, one that watches over itself by “transforming the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating ... orderly public—a society watching over itself” (Bennett 1988, 81). The power of the panoptic gaze is one of the fundamentals of Foucault’s work and the uncomfortable reality of the world today is that of being constantly surveyed and analyzed through new techniques, such as the social networking site Facebook. As one carries on with one’s life, uploading and sharing one’s daily endeavors, the concept of hundreds of strangers getting a peek into one’s private life is a thought tossed aside; oblivious that, just like Foucault’s panopticism, every upload further enables a tighter surveillance on the uploader.

According to Foucault (1995), Bentham’s Panopticon was a structure designed to survey the inmates and its architecture ensured that inmates were seen by the guards who remained hidden. Through this model the inmates felt the gaze of the guards, and this panoptic scrutiny “induce[d] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1995, 201). Moreover, threat of always being watched urges individuals to conform to social norms.

Facebook can be seen as a mode of panopticon surveillance because the sharing of one individual’s data is viewed and surveyed by others. For the posts can be tracked back to the earliest of days of one’s time on Facebook. Timelines seem to stretch on—anyone at any moment is able to pull up exactly what one was feeling at a certain time and date in their lives. For once it is online, it is out there in the system for eternity; slowly circulating through millions of other data.

The works of anthropologists, such as Michel Wesch (2008) and Daniel Miller (2010; 2013), demonstrate how Foucault’s (1995) theory of panopticism has extended into the modern day world of Facebook through three major categories: the sharing of private pictures of oneself, the public display of one’s friendships on Facebook—the quantity insurmountably more crucial than the quality—and Facebook Live, a feature that incorporates live streaming to further bring one’s private life out into the public until users are constantly mindful of their social status online. Through the example of image sharing we can get a sense of how social norms and relations are shaped through public viewing. Similarly, the calculation and evaluation of friendships reflect how these too, on Facebook, have become a power struggle: to appear popular strangers are added as friends in bulk.

In this article I explore the panoptic implications of Facebook through three specific aspects of the social media platform: image posts, the open display of one’s Facebook friends, and live video interactions. Because Facebook users are aware that their posts are being read by others online it is crucial for them to put their best face forward. Therefore, I argue that Facebook can be regarded as a modern day panopticon, where the users act like the inmates of Bentham’s prison, and the rest of the Facebook community like both the guards and the inmates. I also consider how Facebook blurs the line between private and public domains and disrupts conceptions of authenticity. This is done by reinforcing

social norms and sharing intimate details of one's life as panopticism flows and operates through the people, by the people, for the larger businesses eagerly collecting personal data, one "like" at a time.

Posting Images

It takes little less than a minute to post a picture, or a selfie, on Facebook but once it is posted the lifespan of that picture, a picture that introduces private moments to the public, is infinite. Once posted online the picture is in the hands of the internet, and what was once an intimate moment is now visible on any number of screens, becoming subject to unknown gazes. Indeed, selfies proliferate on the internet. From family vacations and wedding receptions to individual bedrooms and personal spaces, the notion of personal and private dimensions of life are now being showcased to the public over Facebook.

Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts (2015) define selfies as "visual presentations of one's self and [...] photographic representations and formations of identity" (1672). Through one singular picture, an individual's identity can be glimpsed by their clothes, facial expressions, and the framing of the selfie (Koliska and Roberts 2015, 1675). The elements one chooses to include in the selfie exhibits a (public) image—an image that is shaped according to the norms displayed on Facebook. For example, selfies that focus on the perfect, happy family, often snapped while on vacation, influence others to mimic these ideals. Thus, selfies have become a way of expressing identity on social media platforms including Facebook, but this identity is subject to conforming with ideals and social norms (Venkatraman 2017, 98).

Feelings of desire can be discerned when gazing at the pictures posted on Facebook. For example, ideals of beauty and its social value are shared and followed—from the so-called "perfect" hair to the "perfect" waist size. Selfies display the qualities one desires because one is aware of the fact that once the selfie is posted on Facebook it will be open for public scrutiny (Costa 2016, 79). For instance, in *Social Media in South India*, Venkatraman (2017) highlights how private events become public through the power of Facebook and mere pictures:

Saranya and Srijith Saranya's love story—an intimate part of their lives—is painted and announced on Facebook for all of their friends to see, to analyze, and to 'like.' Saranya began by posting pictures of their dates, and then pictures from their wedding were added and slowly their love story—from their courtship, to their wedding, to their married life—was chronicled on Facebook for the public to follow (Venkatraman 2017, 121).

Their private moments were turned into a public show, facilitated by the ease of posting pictures on Facebook. It takes a second to click the "post" button, to disclose one's private life to the public, and to place oneself onto the virtual grid.

Facebook thrives on the sharing of personal information and the posting of pictures. The principles of panopticism, one of which includes always being seen without every seeing the source of the gaze, is present in the world of Facebook: from the way the pictures one posts are being gazed at by individuals whose identities are unknown. Once on the

internet the picture can be rapidly transported all over the world. Even if privacy settings restrict the amount of people allowed to view the picture, there are several ways one can send the picture to others—from screenshots to downloads; many possibilities are available online.

Selfies that tell stories of private and intimate moments are now, through Facebook, transferred to the public domain in which individuals are aware of being constantly surveyed by unknown gazes. Facebook is a space in which the private and public distinction becomes more complicated, and a platform on which panopticism is implicated by transforming individuals and societies into self-regulating citizens that are keenly aware of the selfies that are acceptable and “liked.” Facebook selfies demonstrate a society of surveillance where individuals regulate both themselves and each other through posting and “liking” selfies, often those that strive to represent their best selves and their “perfect” lives.

Friendship Evaluations

Friendships have changed in the 21st century with the introduction of social networking through Facebook. With this social networking site, the number of a person’s friends has been placed on a grid for all to see, to analyze, and to judge. Facebook has more often than not turned meaningful friendships into shallow “Facebook friendships,” created for nothing more than a number count. For even the once personal relationships are often transformed into a public display of posts, likes, and comments. The connections made on Facebook are called “friends,” and these friends are the main purpose of the website: without friends individual profiles are essentially insignificant (Dalsgaard 2016, 98).

Daniel Miller (2013) states, in his book *Tales from Facebook*, the fact that one has 700 friends on Facebook does not indicate that one has that many friends offline, and when students were interviewed regarding the number of friends they have on Facebook as opposed to their offline lives, the results did not come as a shock. Miller explains that having over 300 friends on Facebook was impressive but the amount of friends with whom users had offline relationships with were significantly lower (2013, 166).

Friendships on Facebook have become a popularity contest where the level of popularity is deemed by the number of friends displayed. This contest is difficult to evade because a friends list is available to others for viewing (unless restricted). Thus, I argue Facebook friend lists have become another means through which surveillance and the gaze are practiced. The unknown gaze of Facebook members is always watching the citizens but is hidden from view which forces citizens to conform to what this society has constructed as appropriate.

According to Miller’s research, individuals connect with others and become Facebook friends for the sole purpose of adding to their friend count (2013, 166). In addition, Steffen Dalsgaard explains that upon logging onto Facebook one is able to “follow” the activities of friends through a “newsfeed where recent activities of friends appear. What appears . . . is otherwise determined by an algorithm computing one’s likely preferences from data about previous choices and actions online” (2016, 98). When scrolling through a newsfeed, every action—from “liking” a post to becoming friends with another person—is documented by Facebook and Facebook uses this information to filter and personalize a newsfeed according to their algorithms (Facebook 2018).

As Facebook members act as both the prisoners and guards of Bentham's panopticon they are welcomed into the private friendships and relationships of others, and their (faceless) gaze (that enables one's every move to be monitored) is snapped on. As Facebook members scroll through their news feed, they become the guards keeping watch over other users, and once these members upload personal information (image posts, statuses, and so on), their roles are reversed and they also become the prisoners feeding into the system. Facebook can also foster jealousy, as stalking one's profile to see whose wall they've posted on can spur feelings of distaste, especially in the cases of former relationships.

Although it might seem that merely posting on a friend's wall is of no concern to others, the reality is that the post is now also in the domain of the public, and countless people become privy to the intimate details of personal relationships due to public exhibition of Facebook posts and friendships (Miller 2013, 168). Although these posts are regarded by many Facebook users as a way to document memories, by posting details or anecdotes of their day together their private memories are also being made public (Venkatraman 2017, 122).

While Geoff D'Eon and Jay Dahl's documentary *Facebook Follies* (2011) suggest that the average Facebook user assumes Facebook is "for love," the reality is that Facebook is using every bit of data it can glean from profiles for its own advantages, such as for expanding their business. The world of Facebook is one in which friendships are a commodity used to keep citizens conforming to social norms and under constant surveillance.

Facebook Live

Along with posting pictures and statuses, Facebook users can stream live videos which are published onto the page as a video after the live stream ends through a new feature called Facebook Live. Facebook Live, launched in early 2016, allows users to live stream videos and update friends and followers in real time (Mastroianni 2016). With just a click of a button they are able to send out live videos to the world, where their followers can respond by reacting through 'Live Reactions,' which provides a range of expressions—love, anger, or grief for instance (Mastroianni 2016). According to Facebook's Chief Product Officer Chris Cox, Facebook Live is "bringing a little TV studio to users' pockets" (Mastroianni 2016). But the difference between a TV studio and Facebook Live is the level of intimacy.

Facebook Live forges a deeper connection between friends and followers through these videos by creating a sense of intimacy and implying that the video is unscripted. Yet users are aware of the public gaze which bears an influence on their behaviour. As more social network sites are created, and individuals are made to feel as if they are connecting more, ideas of authenticity are becoming complicated with these virtual modes of interaction that are affected by panoptic gazing; individuals are aware that they are being watched and are influenced to present themselves accordingly, for example by often demonstrating their best (or ideal) behavior. The seemingly unscripted nature of the medium changes the overall feeling around everything the individual is doing and saying during the live stream and changes the manner in which messages are carried through this new medium.

Facebook Live can be seen as an extension of YouTube as both mediums convey messages through the use of videos and convey the idea that any individual with a camera has a “strong voice” (Wesch 2008). In *An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube*, Wesch (2008) states that as media changes human relationships change as well, and media is mediated through these human relationships. In addition, Wesch (2008) theorizes that in the search for individuality human beings still have a strong value for communities, and as commercialization increases so does the hunger for authenticity, and once again all of these points can be seen in Facebook Live. Specifically, Facebook Live is a medium through which communities on Facebook can share a deeper connection with an individual by asking question during a live stream.

Facebook Live is also another way of complicating the private-public divide; the private life of an individual is displayed to the public through live videos and these act as windows into the presumably private lives of individuals. When the line between private and public is blurred, a sense of intimacy is created. One of the attractions of Facebook Live is the sense of authenticity produced by being in an intimate and mundane setting with another individual. In this way, live streaming brings friends and followers into the private lives of users and thereby provides another means through which panopticism can operate—surveilling the seemingly private lives of individuals. The minute the video is turned on numerous gazes are snapped onto the live stream where they can examine every move. The omnipresence of this unknown gaze, mediated through Facebook, impacts the way one acts the moment they are “live.” In other words, Facebook Live “provides a semi-public stage for . . . performances of the self,” aware of pressures to follow “normative standards in their public performance on social media” (Haynes 2016, 58). Facebook Live has extended the means through which the public gaze can keep citizens under surveillance. Expressing one’s identity takes a whole different twist when one is being watched in ‘real time.’

Conclusion

Through Facebook one is able to build new friendships, revive old ones, and share pictures of one’s life, from mundane images of food to breathtaking travel images featuring views of the Eiffel Tower. This platform involves everything from messages to pictures to live-streaming, all of which serve to display private and personal aspects of life to the public. Furthermore, with its pictures, friendships, and live-streaming, Facebook has a global reach, giving people the tools to watch and to analyze the lives of others.

In this way, it exhibits elements of surveillance that suggest forms of social relation that are reminiscent of Bentham’s prison and Foucault’s (1995) panopticism. By analyzing the way Facebook keeps a close eye on its citizens through the pictures posted, the friendships established, and the live-streaming available, we can consider the hidden gaze that Facebook users employ to surveil the private lives of others—a type of gaze that Foucault (1995) might recognize as the building block of his theory on panopticism. Through the examples of image posting, friends list, and Facebook live we can get a sense of the relationship between the panoptic gaze of Facebook and its virtual social relations and norms. As these three categories exhibit, Facebook and its users can track the movements of users as they upload, add, and watch videos and thus the line between private and public domains starts to blur.

Marshall McLuhan (2002) theorizes that the medium is the message, and this is evident in the way new messages are being transferred and published through Facebook Live. Facebook Live has been the reason behind several protests in recent time, including outrage after the public witnessed the live streaming of Philando Castile's shooting in 2016. According to CNN reporter Emanuella Grinberg (2016), "Amateur video is more personal and raw, compared to what you see in newscast or edited video, where you're prepared for what you're going to see."

The gaze is as heavy through Facebook as it was in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. The architecture of Facebook and the Panopticon may differ visually but the process and the workings of the two are similar: where guards watched the inmates in the Panopticon, Facebook and the users watch other participants with the same hidden scrutiny and constructs obligations to conform to social norms—reflecting similar social mechanisms of control. Decades have passed since Foucault's (1995) theory of panopticism and yet panopticism still flows through every picture, friend request, and live-streaming session. In this way, the modern experience of Facebook presents an example of panopticism, where there is seldom a moment in which society does not feel the watchful gaze of others.

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