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The Virtual Panopticon: Identity Creation and Surveillance on Facebook

As their prevalence grows, new media technologies continue to impact the societies that depend on them at a fast increasing level. The more sophisticated and specific new technologies become, the more constructions of culture and society become entwined in the interfaces of those technologies. One technology that has seen an impressive amount of growth and popularity in recent years is the social networking site. A social networking site allows users to create a profile and then have the opportunity to connect with other people through the site. Over a hundred million people around the world are active users of Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites, and this site has made a substantial impact on the ways that people interact with one another, how they form relationships, and how they construct an identity for themselves.

Because of this impact, it is important for people – such as students, scholars, and the sites' users – to question the effects that Facebook has on society, as is the case with any new technology that alters a way of life. Specifically, Facebook plays a large role in the identity construction for those who participate in the structure, as well as impacting the way those participants understand the notion of privacy and the concept of surveillance. Social networking sites provide new and interesting spaces for people to embody and it is attractive to have the opportunity to construct oneself in a unique space and then learn how to navigate relationships within that space. However, Facebook may also be considered as a surveillance technology; a

site that encourages spying on others. One can argue that Facebook is comparable to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, because of how users construct an identity and conduct relationships based upon the knowledge that they are being monitored, and they often disregard the necessity of constricting access to private information. This paper seeks to investigate the new forms of Panopticism represented in the social networking site Facebook, as well as the various modes of privacy, identity creation, and writing the self into existence as both subject and object.

Facebook has deeply positioned itself into contemporary American society and its social pervasiveness is striking. Due to the effect Facebook has had in helping to construct modern culture, it is beneficial to critique the structure of the site and the type of environment it fosters. Those for whom this critique is beneficial are the users, so that they may fully understand the environment they are participating in, and scholars who are interested in the social impacts of these sites. How people are interacting in Facebook must be addressed because, with so many millions of users on the site, this space is undoubtedly changing the ways people construct their identities, interact with others, and differentiate between public and private. Because I argue that Facebook is structured similarly to Bentham's Panopticon, it is therefore subject to much of the same scrutiny that Michel Foucault discusses in *Panopticism* in his book *Discipline and Punish*. On the surface, Facebook and the Panopticon may seem entirely disparate: one is an online social network and the other an architectural plan for a prison. What these two environments have in common, though, is the disciplinary structures under which they operate and the methods of surveillance that permeate both spaces. Once these parallels are elucidated, the similarities between a Panopticon and a social networking site like Facebook become markedly evident. Questions of surveillance and the notion of privacy are then unavoidably raised.

Bentham's Panopticon is an architectural plan for the most simplistically effective prison possible. It is comprised of a circular, ring-shaped building built around a central tower. The large ring is compartmentalized into individual cells, with solid, opaque walls, rendering the occupants of the cells completely isolated from those around them. There is a space in the central tower where one can reside and effectively keep watch over all of the subjects in the surrounding structure. On the wall facing the center of the ring, and the wall parallel, there are two windows; Bentham's structure allows for backlighting of the subject within a cell through the back window, which in turn allows the subject to be visible through the opposing window from the spot in the central tower. As such, each subject in his cell is "alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately" (Foucault 200). The person in the tower holds the power in this structure; he has the ability to watch over anyone at any time. Therefore, Foucault argues in *Panopticism* that the disciplinary structure of the Panopticon is useful as a jail, as well as a school, a hospital, or any organization in which people need to be monitored.

This discipline structure exists within the composition of Facebook as well. The reason for using Facebook in this analysis – as opposed to another social networking site - is because, with a current population of over 140 million active users, Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites in the world. The site is extremely popular with its users, who upload around 700 million photos a day and have an average of 100 friends on the site ("Statistics"). Interestingly, Facebook boasts such a large number of users even though it does not allow those users to alter the layout of their profiles in any way. Unlike MySpace, where a user can use html coding to add sparkly images or backgrounds of their favorite celebrity to their profiles, the structure of Facebook does not permit such visual adjustments. Facebook users have not,

however, had any problem identifying themselves and interacting with others within the structure of the site in ways that are vastly altering contemporary culture.

The site provides users with a template to fill with information – such as favorite books, favorite movies, and an “About Me” section – and the template’s coding is not editable, but users have total control over the content that they choose to include on their profiles nonetheless. This means a user can present herself as similar to how she views herself in real life, or she can choose to construct an identity that is very unlike her real-life identity. In addition to having control over the information put on the site, a user also has access to the identifying content of other people via their own personal profiles. Users may opt to set their profile as private, so that only those who are on their friends list can see the profile; if a user leaves her profile public, though, any person within her network – which is “a collection of users with a school, workplace, or region in common” (Grimmelman 6) – can see that user’s content. Herein lies a similarity of observing within the Panopticon’s central tower. Just like a Panoptic observer, Facebook users can in essence conduct surveillance on other users. This idea raises a question about the level to which millions of people around the world are participating in Facebook. If Facebook is similar to a surveillance technology that is intended to make compliant and obedient all whom it surveils, why do users willingly participate in this structure? To tackle this question, it is important to first understand the hierarchy of power that exists within the Panopticon, since power directly influences participation in the site.

The person in the Panopticon’s tower, or the guardian, may monitor the inhabitants of the cells at any time. However, those within the cells cannot see inside the tower due, according to Bentham, to blinds covering the windows and angled, zig-zagging walkways in the tower that work to conceal the presence of the guardian. Because of this, a hierarchy of power is

constructed that favors the person in the tower; he has the ability to see anything that happens in any of the cells, while those inside the cells can never even be sure there is someone in the tower, much less whether or not they are currently being watched. This is the most special trait of the Panopticon; it works off the assumption that one may never know if he is being watched. It puts the people in the cells in a “state of conscious and permanent visibility,” for at any moment, someone may be in the tower, observing any of the inhabitants in their cells (Foucault 201). Bentham’s power hierarchy calls for power that is both visible and unverifiable – visible in that the central tower is constantly in view for those in the cells, and unverifiable in that one must never know if he is being monitored, only that the possibility always exists. As Foucault writes, “in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever been seen” (202). In the Panopticon, visibility is a trap.

A Facebook user intrinsically knows that others on the site have access to the content on her profile; in this regard, visibility is conscious in this online space much as it is in the Panopticon. In order to control visibility to a certain degree, some people set their profiles as private. However, a user’s friends have access to her profile, and her friends’ friends have the ability to see when she is interacting with any of her own friends. In other words, even if a user’s profile is private, that doesn’t stop mutual acquaintances from seeing her activity with her friends – whether she is commenting on a photo or leaving a post on the Wall. Along that same vein, the only way a Facebook user can make her presence on someone’s profile known is if she interacts in some way, like by leaving a wall comment. Without interacting, one is just observing, which then helps perpetuate the surveilling nature of the site. Because the disparity between interacting and observing is so vast, Facebook users are constantly subjected to the same “conscious and permanent visibility” to which inmates within the Panopticon are subjected (201). Predicting

when a user is observing on Facebook, and what she is observing, is impossible in the same way that it is impossible to predict whether or not someone is watching from the central tower of the Panopticon. This makes observation (without interaction) on Facebook completely unverifiable, similarly to how those in the Panopticon never have unmitigated verification of observation in the central tower. Regardless of if one's profile is set as private, her presence on Facebook is still active for those to whom she's connected, even if it is by a few degrees of separation. Facebook users inherently know this. It's common knowledge that people have the ability to look at the information put out onto Facebook by others – even if the information is just a wall post to a mutual friend – and this undoubtedly has an effect on the ways in which information is being presented, what information is being presented, and how that information works to create an identity for someone in this virtual space.

Here is where the notion of Facebook as surveillance technology comes into play. If a user knows that her wall post to a friend will be read by all of that person's friends, especially considering people she may not know, it is likely that she will edit or censor herself in ways that would not be applicable or necessary if she were talking to her friend face-to-face in a physical setting. The knowledge that the content on Facebook may be gazed upon by others shows that, like in the Panopticon, visibility is a trap. This concept is also represented by tagged photos; when one tags people in a photo, it then becomes linked to the profiles of the people tagged. Tagged photos are visible for the person who uploaded the photo, her friends, for the people who are tagged in the photo, and all of their friends. Tagged photos therefore have an impressively large base of people with access to them. When people begin leaving comments, the size of that group of people becomes more and more visible, since Facebook users have access to content with which their friends have interacted (unless their friends change their privacy settings to

dictate otherwise). Problems with embarrassing or incriminating photos are common and this is mainly due to the fact that a Facebook user knows that once a photo is uploaded to the site, the amount of people with access to it – including people who are not her friends – can become quite large. The power that the anonymous Facebook observer has over the person constructing her identity is like that of the person in the Panopticon's tower: the Facebook observer's presence is unverifiable, but the inherent knowledge that a user's information can be observed puts that user in a state of conscious visibility on Facebook. Facebook users are thus consistently aware of the invisible audience that may be lurking at any time (boyd 2007).

A similarity therefore exists between the invisible audience on Facebook and the unverifiable observer in the tower of the Panopticon. Knowing specifically who is observing on Facebook isn't the primary concern for users – possibly because users accept that their audience is invisible when they sign up to use the site – but rather that observation can occur at any time without any indication of the presence of an observer. Likewise, for those inside the cells of the Panopticon, it doesn't matter who is monitoring within the tower; it hardly matters whether there is someone inside the tower at all – only that there could be. The panoptic structure therefore imposes a responsibility upon its inhabitants. If one “is subjected to a field of visibility,” and knows it, then he will become “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 202-3). It only takes the knowledge that one may be watched, at any time, to instill behaviors that are consistently nonthreatening and compliant. Foucault claims that the Panopticon “makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power ... because, without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry, it acts directly on individuals; it gives ‘power of mind over mind’” (206). Being responsible for the creation of one's own subjection is seen on Facebook – which disciplines like a Panopticon without even requiring any sort of physical architecture – in the

ways that users construct their identities with the knowledge that others will have access to their identifying content.

In her essay *Surveying the Surveilled: Video, Space and Subjectivity*, Lili Berko discusses new instruments of surveillance and the ways in which they impact social structure. She writes:

The seeing machine has moved from the dark room into which individuals spied (the dungeon), to the transparent building in which the exercise of power was supervised by society as a whole (the panopticon), to the present situation, in which society itself has become transparent, relying on the apparatus of surveillance to exercise power through the production of social space and subjectivity (the new surveillance) (225).

Here Berko describes differences in surveillance, or observation, between a panoptic structure and a structure that she calls new surveillance, which consists of video and computational systems. These systems are part of a surveying structure that transcends time and physical space. This is the method of surveillance that the Panopticon cannot benefit from; panoptic surveillance is always grounded in physical space – those within the cells or the tower, and embodied in the architecture. With new surveillance – systems that use video or computers – physical space is not an issue, and therefore observation is not limited due to time constraints or issues of distance or proximity. Or, to use Manuel Castells's terminology from *The Rise of the Network Society*, Facebook benefits from “timeless time” and “the space of flows.” To put this in perspective, one should consider Facebook as constantly, consistently available to all of its users. It's true that the amount of new content coming into the site (updates to a user's status, uploading of photos, wall comments) may decrease during the early hours of the morning when people aren't as active on the site, but a user constantly has the ability to click from profile to profile, ingesting information and using it to inform identities about those people.

Berko also makes the claim that new surveillance technologies – like Facebook – produce “the possibility for each one of us to not only be the object of surveillance, but its subject as well” (225). She notes that unlike Bentham’s Panopticon, where the people inside the cells become their own overseer (or “the principle of his own subjection,” as Foucault writes), forms of new surveillance allow people to produce “their own mini panopticons as they go along, challenging the power of the official panoptic gaze of the invisible ‘Other’” (225-6). It is important to note, though, that with sites like Facebook, no one is the “Other;” no one is marginalized because everyone has the same amount of power to both gaze and be gazed upon.

This concept is exemplified by how the structure of the Panopticon produces “homogeneous effects of power” (Foucault 202). Bentham makes it explicit that anyone has the ability to operate the Panopticon – in effect, to hold the power. One need not have any prior rank of power over those within the ring, for the power is gained when one steps inside the tower to monitor the Panopticon’s inhabitants. Because anyone may have the opportunity to monitor from inside the tower, the power in the Panopticon becomes democratically controlled (207). Foucault writes that there is also the potential for numerous observers to be in the tower at any point, simultaneously monitoring those in the ring. Therefore, one must be aware that at the same time he is observing, he may be observed by others in the tower. This grounds the democratic control of the Panopticon, making the disciplinary mechanism of the structure “constantly accessible to the ‘great tribunal of the world’” (207).

The power structure on Facebook is different from the Panopticon’s in that there is not one figure – or even many figures – on Facebook that serves as the observer while all others are the observed. Facebook users are always concurrently the observer and the observed, much like the position someone would hold if he were inside the panoptic tower with multiple other people

at the same time. Simultaneously acting as the object and the subject of the gaze allows those participating in Facebook to possess an amount of power that is equal to those other users who are also interacting with friends and adding information on the site. For example, a person can use Facebook as a window into the profiles of others, both friends and strangers. At the same time, a user also creates her own profile and writes her own identifying content, and other Facebook users can then view her content in the same way that she can view theirs. Therefore, allowing for everyone to be in the position of the observer as well as the position of the observed makes for a homogeneous effect of power. It does not matter who exercises the power – that is, who is acting as the invisible audience – the same as with the Panopticon’s central tower. What matters is only that the power is indeed enacted both over users and by users on the site.

If Facebook users all possess the same amount of power over one another, it’s worth speculating on the reason anyone would want to willingly participate in this structure. What do users gain by participating in Facebook? One of the most likely factors that contributes to answering this question is that though power is spread equally amongst users, those on Facebook have the power to influence the ways in which they are observed on the site. Having the ability to construct oneself however he or she sees fit can be a very attractive and tempting activity, one that apparently millions of people actively engage in. Therefore, like the Panopticon, Facebook and its power structure subject users to a constant form of visibility and encourage users to become “the principle of [their] own subjection” (Foucault 203).

Because of the equalized power structure on Facebook, and the constant creation and absorption of content, “we come to perceive the surveilled as active participants in their own monitoring performers on a mediated postmodern stage” (Berko 226) – where the postmodern stage is an iteration of Facebook as a panoptic structure, one where people act out their virtual

identities and communicate with others in a digital way. In this sense, users will participate in Facebook because, although they are being gazed upon (or observed, or surveilled), they are also contributing to the performance on their postmodern stage. This likely is affected by the tendency people have now to mix together subjectivity with objectivity. Lili Berko examines social relationships with video projection – whether a home movie, interest in a reality TV show, or just a constant desire for liveness – and says that “from the music videos that dance across the walls of nightclubs and bars to the distracted images of our videotaped bodies gliding up and down the escalators of the Beverly Center, we have become the objects and willing subjects of a daily bombardment of personal identities” (237). The sort of obsession people have with themselves and what they are doing has the ability to manifest in part as a desire to write oneself into being in a virtual space.

Because it is so easy for someone to become preoccupied with how she looks, how she’s holding herself, or how others perceive her – especially due to the prevalence of surveilling technologies, from security cameras to credit cards – it seems the next logical step to move toward creating a facet of one’s identity where she has complete and total control over the content that writes her into being. As danah boyd writes in *Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites*:

In mediated environments, bodies are not immediately visible and the skills people need to interpret situations and manage impressions are different. [Writing oneself into being] makes visible how much we take the body for granted. While text, images, audio, and video all provide valuable means for developing a virtual presence, the act of articulation differs from how we convey meaningful information through our bodies (12).

This exemplifies the ways in which users on social networking sites attempt to embody a virtual space by creating their own digital identity. Even though users have the ability to construct their identity as closely to their embodied identity as they desire, boyd writes that typically, people's virtual identities are heavily influenced by their embodied identity, which includes facets such as race, gender, and class. "How people represent themselves and interact online is fundamentally influenced by their embodied experience" (Taken Out Of Context 127).

One may assume that with the predilection to watch oneself and to spend time and energy creating an identity – whether in real life, or a virtual space – that people who gravitate toward these forms of new surveillance technologies have no preoccupation with the notion of privacy. If a person signs up for Facebook knowing full well that other people will have access to her content, it may seem logical to assume that she has no qualms with trading privacy for exposure. However, through its forays in social networking over the years, Facebook has found this to be completely untrue. On the contrary, based on users' reactions to some additions to the site, Facebook users care very much about their privacy, regardless of the logical train of thought regarding social networking and the desire to be in the limelight.

For example, in September of 2006, Facebook introduced two new features to the site: the News Feed and the Mini-Feed. The News Feed appeared on a user's homepage and gave information about what that user's friends were up to. If someone added a band to his favorite music or created a new photo album, that information would show up in the News Feed. The Mini-Feed was a list that appeared on a user's profile and the updates were centered on that person; if that user wrote on a friend's wall, or edited her About Me section, it would all be published in the Mini-Feed. Ruchi Sanghvi, the Feed's product manager, wrote in Facebook's official blog:

News Feed and Mini-Feed are a different way of looking at the news about your friends, but they do not give out any information that wasn't already visible. Your privacy settings remain the same – the people who couldn't see your info before still can't see it now.

These features are not only different from anything we've had on Facebook before, but they're quite unlike anything you can find on the web. We hope these changes help you stay more up to date on your friends' lives (The Facebook Blog).

This knowledge had absolutely no effect on calming the initial shock and outrage of Facebook users. Before the News Feed, users clicked around the site, visiting the profiles of the people they were interested in, interacting as much or as little as they desired. But with the News Feed, everyone's information was highlighted, positioned in the foreground; nothing seemed private anymore. Ironically, nothing was private to begin with, but the editing of content had not been so prominent a focal point as it had become with the advent of the News Feed. Minute details about changes in someone's favorite movies section was published; if someone changed her relationship status on Facebook, the News Feed would tell all that she went from being "in a relationship" to "single." Though users wrote their own content and thus their identities onto Facebook without hesitation, publicizing every change of any facet that made up that identity proved to be, as far as Facebook users were concerned, an invasion of privacy. After the News Feed, the colloquial term "Facebook stalking" was born; users would often converse in real life about profile updates and then apologize for being aware of the fact that something had changed. Users seemed concerned they would appear as though they were spying on their friends, when in reality, Facebook had just made updates so much more available that one couldn't help participating in this "stalking;" knowing everything that a person was doing, saying, adding, or editing via the lens of their Facebook profile.

The concern with privacy and resembling a stalker may seem counterintuitive because users had always been eager to add information in order to construct themselves. Yet Sida Vaidhyathan perfectly explains why people took issue with this new feature in his article *Naked in the Nonopticon*: “When we complain about infringements of privacy, what we really demand is some measure of control over our reputation in the world” (B7). The question that Facebook users asked, when the News Feed and Mini-Feed were added to the site, was why Facebook had the right to distribute this information so readily to their friends. When one decides to edit the identifying content on her profile, that is her choice, for she is in control of what goes into constructing her identity, and what gets removed. But when Facebook snatches up those minute changes and then presents them for all of her friends to see, Facebook then becomes the one with the control. The power structure within Facebook, the one that allowed all users to have an equal opportunity to be gazed upon as well as to be the observer, suddenly began to favor the architecture of the site itself. It would be like taking the power away from the observer in the central tower and giving it to the Panopticon instead. Users originally viewed the News Feed as a virtual incarnation of Big Brother; no one was safe from Facebook’s roaming eyes. The site not only saw everything, but also made everything immediately available to everyone.

Facebook users soon became more comfortable with the News Feed, recognizing that one could opt to not have certain stories published, such as those about changes in relationship status – this was always a concern, for the dissolution of a relationship is generally not information people want broadcasted to their friends. People even came to like the News Feed – it ended up providing a way to stay more up-to-date with the lives of friends. At the same time, though, users also undoubtedly edited themselves within the site, more aware than before that friends would be

immediately informed to any changes made to a profile. As Stephanie Vie writes, “In the Foucaudian panopticon, prisoners normalize their behavior because they know that guards are monitoring them; similarly, individuals constantly aware of being watched online normalize their behavior” (69). The News Feed certainly had a similar effect when it was initially introduced; users were much more likely to suppress the changes to their profiles in an effort to not drastically stand out in their friends’ News Feeds.

The biggest issue users had with functions like the News Feed and Mini-Feed was not only the perceived invasion of privacy, but that Facebook was toying with the homogeneous effects of power that satisfied users and kept them continually engaged with the site as a form of communication and identity construction. Though users implicitly know that by writing content on Facebook, they are contributing to the observational, panoptic nature of the site, when a feature like the News Feed is introduced, users become hyperaware of the fact that they are being observed. No longer are they participating in an innocent gaze into the identity-creating profiles of others; instead, the observation then feels like actual surveillance. However, Facebook does not function as a voyeuristic space because its users are willing participants in the disciplinary structure that constructs them simultaneously as subject and object of the gaze. Therefore, they at least have the option of being a subject rather than purely an object of the gaze. It’s one thing to have the desire to embody numerous different spaces; as Lili Berko writes, “We have confused the image of our own subjectivity with the objectification of our image on the TV monitors and cameras strategically positioned throughout the postmodern terrain” (236-7). It is quite another, however, to allow the gaze to cross over into a secretive, inappropriate, or malicious surveillance.

It should be clear that Facebook is like a panoptic environment with a homogeneous power structure that satisfies its users. As long as the power remains equal amongst everyone, people are eager to embody a part of this virtual space and participate in the observing nature, in spite of the fact that they are also the object of the gaze of other users. Users have shown to be willing to contribute to the surveilling nature of Facebook, both as subjective gazer and as object. This homogeneous power hierarchy shows that Facebook is a democratically controlled environment that functions much like Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. It must be noted, though, that Facebook users require control over their information and their identity, as well as who has access to that information. The power hierarchy on Facebook must be equalized – people must be able to simultaneously be the gazer while they are being gazed upon – or else users are not inclined to participate in the structure. The power gleaned from Facebook, as well as the opportunity to write oneself into being in a virtual space, are attractive draws to the site. People around the world are clearly flocking to Facebook and once they're online, the act of creating their own identity and becoming a part of a community through the relationships they form (or strengthen) is staying power for those users.

The degree to which social networking sites are altering contemporary culture is high, and as with any new technology that affects how people perform their lives, Facebook must be subjected to critical discussion. Scholars, instructors, students, and regular Facebook users need to understand how they are using Facebook, what they use Facebook for, and if the effects on how the site alters relationships is positive or negative. Social networking sites are so culturally pervasive that they are likely to continue influencing society and systems, so instead of ignoring their ramifications, they must be engaged with critically. After all, people are still expressing an interest in writing themselves into being in a virtual space.

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