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WATCHING YOU WATCHING YOURSELF:  
THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW WATCHMAN IN THE CULTURE OF DIGITAL  
SURVEILLANCE

One of the first things you will notice upon entering University College London's main building is a wooden box, which contains the bones of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). In that box, you see his wax figure dressed in authentic clothes, constantly staring out at passing-by students and academics from its glass case. That gaze does not only exist metaphorically, however. His body contains a webcam, recording all things around him, and later broadcasting it all online as a part of UCL's PanoptiCam project. The main purpose of the project is to investigate how visitors alter their behaviour upon realising they are being monitored and seen (a screentext is constantly exposed on the glass case). "UCL is hoping that it will spark discussion around contemporary surveillance, but it isn't a coincidence that this webcam is attached to Bentham's box," Prof Melissa Terras, director of the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, in an interview<sup>1</sup> with The Guardian.

### **Introduction**

The term "Panopticon," deriving originally from Greek mythology, means 'to observe all,' 'allseeing.' In the 18th century, Jeremy Bentham designed a type of institutional structure (most often considered as a prison, but also successfully adopted in any environment which involves some kind of supervision), whose main purpose was to exercise constant control over human subjects through the overarching threat of surveillance. The idea was very simple: Imagine a circular building, made up of single-celled rooms, arranged in rows and floors, and fully isolated

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas McMullan, "What does the Panopticon mean in the age of digital surveillance?", The Guardian, July 23, 2015, accessed December 2, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/23/panopticon-digital-surveillance-jeremy-bentham>

from each other. The cells need not contain doors but they must all face inside, to the centre of this structure, where an observation tower stands tall. From there, anyone would be able to see inside each individual cell, while remaining completely invisible to the residents of those cells. Yet, no person inside any of the cells is capable of seeing if and who is watching them from the tower. This constitutes a perfect design, allowing a single watchman (the unseen) to observe the prisoners, while also cutting off their communication with neighbouring cells.

If we know for sure that for every action of ours there will be a reaction from others, our guiding principle will be not to act in any way which results in a negative or harmful reaction from others towards us.

“Morals reformed - health preserved - industry invigorated instruction diffused - public burthens lightened - Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock - the Gordian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut, but untied - all by a simple idea in Architecture!”<sup>2</sup>

### **Knowledge Becomes Power**

A century later, French philosopher Michel Foucault took Bentham’s Panopticon as a prime example of the novel ways power relations condition human subjects in modern society. Foucault’s main argument in his book *Discipline and Punish* suggests that human beings are docilized and disciplinized through authoritative institutions, which condition them into acting a certain way. The Panopticon is taken as the perfect institutional structure, where the fear of being seen, regardless of whether or not there is anyone watching, makes human beings enforce limits and rules upon themselves. In other words, the idea was that the Panopticon would continue to work flawlessly, as a system of containment, even without the presence of a watchman or guard.

Foucault demonstrates how the Panopticon can be seen as a tool of surveillance in modern societies and how its structure could be easily implemented in different types of institutions like hospitals, schools, army barracks, asylums, etc. It is a type of surveillance, radically different from what had been used in the Ancien Régime times. Instead of binary relations (master-slave; king-liege) based on sovereignty and unconcealed physical coercion, modern societies offer us much more sophisticated and fluid ways of exercising power and of imposing subordination in everyday life. In modern societies, power is positive, rather than simply negative. Power is no longer simply domination. Whereas in the past, punishment was public, a spectacle warning the

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, Ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), p. 30.

social body of transgressions against the Sovereign and his divine right to rule, punishment in modern society is hidden and unseen (that's why the Panopticon cells only face inside, there are no windows to the outside world). It is also focused on moulding the deviant's body, rather than causing death. Like the insane person, schoolchildren, the prisoner, soldier, etc. - it is the practice of disciplining the body into new ways of being. The goal, in the end, is to create a system of disciplinization, in which everyone employs this practice on themselves, as a human subject aware of his place and role in a given social body.

The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.<sup>3</sup>

When you're not sure whether or not you are being observed, the theory goes, you start to observe yourself. You do your best to become a model prisoner. Furthermore, you internalize the gaze of power and train it on yourself. As a result, authority becomes ubiquitous, without being physically present at all.

### **A wake-up call: If it is for free, then you are the product**

What consequences does this kind of surveillance-state hold for our everyday life today?

World's first real debate about the 21st digital surveillance began in 2013. In early June then, a scandal broke out when The Guardian revealed that the US National Security Agency (NSA) was monitoring tens of millions of US citizens' communication on the web, under a project called Prism. All kinds of data have allegedly been collected: emails, chats, videos, photos, online social networking details, etc. Despite the initial surprise, it turned out that the Foucaultian panoptic model of social control has been functioning without any disruption until today. Digital surveillance depends on abstraction and fictitious transparency. In the battle for media coverage, where 'good' news is always considered to be the bad news, there could be little doubt that the manifest open scene of a burning skyscraper or Paris attacks in the heart of Europe will dominate the abstract and unseen fact that our personal data is abused by someone.

Yet, unlike in the Panopticon, we now know who one of the watchmen in the tower is, yet, does that change anything at all? Not really.

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish, Panopticism*, Ed. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 202.

In his article *Naked in the Nonopticon*, Siva Vaidhyanathan offers a new concept through which to explain the structures of subordination implemented in today's information society. Nonopticon tries to explain the characteristics and ways of functioning of the present-day digitally constructed Panopticon. "We are not supposed to understand that we are the product of marketers as much as we are the market. And we are not supposed to consider the extent to which the state tracks our behaviour and considers us all suspects in crimes yet to be imagined, let alone committed." Vaidhyanathan further cites Emily Nussbaum, a journalist, who says, "Every street in New York has a surveillance camera. Each time you swipe your debit card at Duane Reade or use your Metrocard, that transaction is tracked. Your employer owns your emails. The NSA owns your phone calls. Your life is being lived in public whether you choose to acknowledge it or not."

Why do we complain about our privacy being invaded and then put ourselves on display? Like Vaidhyanathan notes, we like to feel in control. But do we really control the situation by simply choosing who can see what on Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat? Let's face it, whether we accept it or not, our privacy is being invaded. We all know that there is no such thing as privacy any longer and that this issue is never mentioned until it is violated in many respects.

The attacks in Paris on 13th November rekindled the dichotomy between privacy/freedom and security. Is Edward Snowden at least partly to blame for the Paris attacks? Many current and former U.S. intelligence leaders, amongst whom is John Brennan, the Central Intelligence Agency Director, certainly seem to think so. The attacks in Paris were "linked with several years of intense criticism of spying and data collection methods in the U.S. and Europe", Brennan says<sup>4</sup>, adding:

"I must say that there has been a significant increase in the operational security of a number of these operatives and terrorist networks, as they have gone to school on what it is that they need to do in order to keep their activities concealed from the authorities."

Snowden stole and made public a vast amount of information about US government surveillance, which initiated new privacy protections and reforms, making it much more difficult to trace the attackers since they have changed their methods. After it became clear that the Paris terrorists

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<sup>4</sup> Damian Paletta, "Paris Attack Reopens U.S. Privacy vs. Security Debate," *Washington Wire*, November 16, 2015, accessed December 2, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/11/16/paris-attack-reopens-u-s-privacy-vssecurity-debate/>

have acquired weapons most likely through the dark net, many law enforcement agencies have been pressing the US Congress to reopen the National Security's collection of metadata, shut down by President Obama after the Snowden files.

The most important thing Edward Snowden showed us by revealing classified US information in 2013 though, is how a panoptical system is being enforced today. He not only told us that there is a watchman, but indicated his identity. Now, despite the fact that it is overwhelmingly in our hands, are people actually concerned about the consequences this system has on their lives? Not so much, it turns out. We continue to share voluntarily a great deal of personal details on the Internet, while digital social platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. experience their heyday by operating with our personal data on the market. Let's not forget that as long as it is for free, it is we who are the products.

## **Conclusion**

Today there may not be a central tower and a watchman, but there are monitoring sensors in our most personal details – off and online. Seen from a Foucaultian perspective, social media is more than a tool for sharing information. Social media is a tool which transforms our identity, simply because posting on Facebook or Twitter involves 'subjectification' – this means we discipline ourselves voluntarily, without external pressure. Of course, there are no "watchman" and no "inmates" in the web's digital Panopticon. We ourselves play this dual role, but we are also responsible of how far goes the limits of our privacy. The digital market is largely non-transparent. Which data is collected and why is it collected? These are questions still waiting to be answered.

It is hard not to think of the audience who watches you, when you are in front of Bentham's wooden box. He didn't really intend the Panopticon to be a mechanism of oppression, and in fact he never succeeded to construct one in reality. But maybe something even scarier happened with the expansion of digital era progress and its tools of surveillance.

Transparency holds power accountable. That is the reason why it is so important that everyone, be it prisoner, worker, or child, is to be watched. We are all aware of the elephant in the room, but we would rather take a selfie with it and post it, than admit its existence is not just an abstract threat to our freedom and privacy.



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