New Media and Changing Perceptions of Surveillance

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Introduction

The antagonist of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the iconic Big Brother, sees all and knows all. He is at the center of a repressive regime that controls the population. Orwell’s novel depicts a society without privacy and freedom, but with absolute state control: “Big Brother is watching you,” as the famous posters say in the story’s version of London. Since its publication in 1949, Orwell’s novel has been the textbook example of a totalitarian society with all its fear, repression, and horror. According to the logic of the story, such a society is necessarily identical with a surveillance society, and this argument has been extremely influential, especially in public debates. In the novel, a society is described where power is based on a firm control of the mass media. Big Brother is the center of power and the image of his face is used aggressively on large “telescreens” as an intimidating presence everywhere. At the same time, historical records are rewritten into propaganda for the government – a job that is performed by the protagonist of the story, Winston Smith.

In this chapter, I explore how new media dynamics contribute to new surveillance practices. Orwell illustrated in his dystopian post-Second World War novel that media constitute a powerful apparatus for surveillance. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the citizens are controlled through their own gaze, as they watch the incessantly appearing images of Big Brother. In a sense, the spectacle controls the spectator, even though surveillance technologies and practices permeate the society to the point of zero privacy for the people. My ambition is to introduce a radically different concept that more adequately reflects the surveillance practices associated with (especially) new media. When we share opinions, tastes, activities, and locations with a network, we proactively take part in our own surveillance. This “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtslund 2008a) is quite different from Orwellian and panoptic frameworks, as it points out the potentially empowering and social aspects of the surveillance practices that many of us engage in on a daily basis. In the following, my focus...
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is on the experiences of the subjectivity involved in these different surveillance practices and, here, I am particularly interested in the mixing of and transition between broadcast media and social media. My approach is to explore and analyze the key concepts “privacy” and “transparency” to better understand how these are redefined according to the new media dynamics.

**Media as a Surveillance Practice**

The development from traditional broadcast media (e.g., television, radio, etc.) to social media is not simply a process of replacement. Broadcast media, obviously, still play a major role in today’s culture and, thus, the proliferation of social media should be considered an addition to the general media landscape. If broadcast media can be described as “the many watching the few,” then social media might be described as “the many performing for the few” in the sense that this latter type of media is characterized by mass participation and communication in egocentric networks (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Thus, I am suggesting that both broadcast and social media can serve as illustrative examples that point to the need for a pluralistic perspective on surveillance practices.

**The Many Watching the Few**

When we think of media as surveillance practices, an initial observation is that broadcast media connect equally well to democratic and totalitarian societies. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* illustrates the “evil” conception of mass media in society in which the power of broadcasting is a one-sided propaganda tool for the totalitarian regime. The absolute power of media technology, specifically the camera, is a necessary assumption driving the entire story. The many are watching the few – or even just the one (the omnipresent image of Big Brother) – and this broadcasting of the figure of authority is part of the control apparatus. In democratic societies, broadcast media have been (and still are) something that significantly influences the political and cultural spheres, though in a very different way. Rather than forcing a certain perspective, such as in the model of the totalitarian society presented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, traditional mass media in democratic societies both facilitate and shape public understanding and discussions of political, cultural, and social issues by (for example) selecting certain types of content, using particular ways of portraying lifestyles, and including and excluding opinions and beliefs.

An example to illustrate this latter understanding of broadcast media as a surveillance practice is the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. This public-service organization, known in Denmark as “DR,” was founded in 1925 and is the oldest and largest media enterprise in the country. It was the only national broadcaster for more than 50 years until the monopoly was broken in 1988 by the introduction of Danish TV2. During the many years of total broadcasting dominance, there
was lively public discussion about how DR managed the monopoly: did they allow for a reasonably broad range of viewpoints to appear? Did the journalistic choices favor certain political opinions? One especially tenacious criticism characterized the debate during the 1970s and 1980s and has since reemerged from time to time in the era of postmonopoly broadcasting. This criticism by pundits from the right-wing political spectrum employs the infamous phrase “red henchmen” for DR’s employees to reflect the latter’s supposed promotion of socialist or even communist propaganda through their service at the broadcasting corporation.

Whether or not this criticism can be substantiated is part of ongoing discussions. It can be argued that to some extent only a few employees were in control of a media apparatus that was the de facto platform for public debate. At the same time, because of the way traditional broadcast media works, a very limited number of people had access to appear on the screen (and on the radio) to present opinions, beliefs, and perspectives on different issues. Thus, the many were watching the few, and the latter were in control of the media. However, a central characteristic of a democratic society like Denmark is the possibility of conducting such discussions in an open manner – including during debate programs on DR itself – and this openness underlines the insufficiency of an Orwellian understanding of mass media. In other words, monopolized broadcast media with only a few people having access to the screen is not necessarily totalitarian. To understand the complex historical relationship between mass media and audience we may begin by considering the way media are inextricably connected with home life.

The television set – a centerpiece in the traditional, Western world understanding of the home (Huston et al. 1992) – transmits images and sound from the “outside.” This means that a power structure between broadcaster and receiver is established in a way that reaches into the privacy of the home. What is indicated here is that a home is traditionally considered to be a private place. This is in line with the idea of the home as the symbol of privacy, or even the home as the geographical place of privacy, an idea that is somewhat in contrast to the many current television series that focus on the home (those relating to buying/selling houses, displays of celebrities’ houses, home make-overs, etc.). In these shows, the home becomes a public space with the television audience as voyeurs. Here, the home is a representation of everyday life as well as an indicator of social status often associated with a certain ideal of family living. However, the home has also, historically, been considered to be the cradle of the petite bourgeoisie, the suburban lifestyle dreaded by countercultural people and progressive artists. In this vision the home is a prison-like place with a respectable surface appearance – a place where privacy means isolation and ignorance, sustained by the reception of the one-way stream of information from broadcast media.

In recent years, the increase of more flexible work arrangements has meant that the home as a retreat from the world has changed to be a more transparent place. When we use mobile phones, computers with Internet connections, and other similar devices, we connect our home to the world in new ways. Especially, the Internet is opening the home to a two-way flow of information. However, the home remains a place for privacy and mundane living, becoming what could be described
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as a mixed zone with many openings to the world with the Internet as a “pulse” (Bell and Kaye 2002: 53) that can empower the inhabitants.

The Many Performing for the Few

The introduction of the Internet has obviously changed many people’s media usage, as a range of new platforms for communication have appeared. Many of these new media platforms offer the possibility to customize or personalize the media experience, and they allow for new ways of engagement as well as extended social interactions. From a surveillance perspective, social media has brought about changes that call for a post-Orwellian understanding of practices.

Today, Facebook is the dominant online social network and, since its introduction in 2004, has grown to 901 million active users as of March 2012 according to Facebook’s own numbers (Facebook n.d.). The communication structure of Facebook can be described as a collection of egocentric networks (boyd and Ellison, 2007), as the site is made up of individual users’ specific ties to other users. These egocentric networks offer the users the possibility to share a wide variety of types of information about anything and everything. On Facebook, the users have two major ways of sharing: profile information and status updates. A user profile can be very minimalistic, only showing limited personal information, or it can be more elaborate, with details about political opinions, religious beliefs, and preferences in movies, music, and much more. Status updates can have a variety of forms: brief text; text in combination with a link, video, or picture(s); or simply a link, video, or picture(s) without text. Besides creating profiles and status updates, users can communicate with each other in a number of other ways, for example by creating or joining groups, participating in social gaming, and commenting on or “liking” pages or other users’ status updates.

These manifold types of information are distributed in the Facebook “News feed,” which is individual to all users based on their settings and personal networks of friends. The news feed is the interface in practice to the network, and this means that the users are presented with a stream of different types of information provided by their network. This ongoing personalized narrative is shaped simultaneously by the design of the social network website, the users’ settings, and the ongoing social interactions between friends in the network.

Considering that online social networking practices involve sharing of personal information as a central activity, it becomes pertinent to think about surveillance in new ways. A panoptic or Orwellian interpretation of the surveillance practices of Facebook makes it difficult to adequately explain why so many users voluntarily engage in such social interactions. Why would users actively take part in a surveillance apparatus that exposes personal information that makes them vulnerable to privacy invasion and perhaps even corporate and governmental exploitation? To answer this question, it is necessary to reconsider the central aspects of Facebook use seen as a surveillance practice.
First, users are not only passive objects for others. Foucault famously described individuals in the panoptic apparatus as passive receivers of the gaze – that is, as objects of information, never subjects in communication (Foucault 1975: 234). Online social networks such as Facebook are not just personal panopticons, since applying such a perspective would clearly miss the point of the social interaction. This is of course not to say that panopticism is irrelevant to all aspects of online social networking; however, when it comes to the core activities of the egocentric social networks (i.e., users sharing information with each other), a more adequate description is needed. People use Facebook in many ways, but none of these reduce users to only being passive objects visible for others. Rather, this particular surveillance practice involves users who actively take part in their own surveillance.

Second, when people voluntarily share personal information with a network, they should not be considered “victims” of surveillance. One of the most dominant understandings of surveillance practices is that they are constituted by power relations where the watched is controlled by the watcher, as in the panopticon. Orwell in Nineteen Eighty-Four of course brilliantly explores this scenario, though in its most dystopian and undesirable form. The idea of surveillance as a power relation is also central to the sociological tradition of surveillance studies (e.g., Rule 1973; Lyon 2001). In this power relation, the person under surveillance is controlled, disciplined (Foucault), or even brainwashed (Orwell). Considering social network sites such as Facebook, it is clear that we need alternative ways of describing how people take part in ongoing surveillance activities. Rather than being victims, people act as voluntary participants in the surveillance practice, and, given the nature of social interaction, it seems more appropriate to describe these users as potentially empowered.

Third, when people share personal information with their network, it should not be considered part of a trade-off. Interpreting this social interaction as a game of “I will give up my personal information if you also show me yours” would miss the point of that activity. Sharing information should not just be understood as a commodity that gives users access to a database of other users’ personal information, even if curiosity about other people’s lives is undoubtedly an important motivation for online social networking. Rather, sharing information is essential to the social interaction; in other words, surveillance practices actually facilitate online social networking. By sharing selected information, users can perform identities, for example by sharing thoughts, news, comments, interests, and so on. In this way, users have, at least partly, control over the personal information conveyed to the network. Thus, when people willingly share information with a network of other people, they are active participants in surveillance practices that even carry the promise of empowerment.

Obviously, social media are quite different from broadcast media, and this becomes even clearer when they are both considered as surveillance practices. These practices no longer involve only the many watching the few but also the many performing for the few. This is of course not to say that broadcast media necessarily only have large, passive audiences but that the design of egocentric social
network sites not only encourages but also requires users to perform activities. The result is a collection of interconnected egocentric networks, each with few people, altogether creating a different kind of surveillance structure including new technologies, relations, and actors.

Privacy and Transparency

Online social networking makes it necessary to develop a new vocabulary to better understand and discuss the surveillance practices relating to it. I have elsewhere described this as “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtslund 2008a), drawing a reference to the notion of participatory culture, in which the consumer is actively participating in the production and circulation of media content (Jenkins 2006). In this section, I will explore how this post-Orwellian thinking, as it were, changes the perception of privacy and transparency, two central concepts for the understanding of surveillance.

From Being Left Alone to Being in Control

Traditionally, privacy has been understood as the ability to be left alone; the word’s Latin root is “privatus,” which designates being separated from other people, groups, and organizations. This definition of privacy is the basis for the Western understanding of classic dichotomies between citizens and states, consumers and corporations, workers and workplace, and so on. The introduction of databases in the second half of the twentieth century has intensified the general concerns about potential invasions of privacy, as in them familiar panoptic principles operate as a digitally enhanced and expanded “superpanopticon” (Poster 1990, 1996).

The advent of social media has increased public concerns about possible violations, because these media involve what is usually perceived as the most important aspect of privacy, namely personal information. The fact that people publish this information themselves has led some to consider online social networking to be a “snoop’s dream” (Marks 2007) or, as the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange once described it:

Facebook in particular is the most appalling spy machine that has ever been invented. Here we have the world’s most comprehensive database about people, their relationships, their names, their addresses, their location, their communication with each other, their relatives . . . all accessible to US intelligence. (in Chan 2011)

Over the years, privacy has been discussed fervently in the public debate, and Facebook has especially been accused in the wake of its numerous alterations to the service’s interface and privacy settings. A result of these discussions, at least in the academic literature, is an awareness of the rather nuanced views and expectations of the users. In addition, the young audience, sometimes thought to be indifferent
about others’ and their own privacy, appears to be very careful and attentive concerning individual limits with regards to sharing personal information (boyd 2008; boyd and Hargittai 2010).

The many separate pieces of personal information available online – sometimes from different sources – can be put together like a puzzle, creating a coherent picture of a person. In this way, the collected information forms a whole that, in turn, constructs meaning for the individual pieces. David Lyon’s concept of “leaky containers” (2001: 37–48) can be useful to describe this situation. In an information society in general, data flow more easily between sectors, groups, and organizations that have otherwise not been connected. The result is that information from (for example) people’s private spheres, work lives, and shopping habits are being mixed rather than being contained separately. This is indeed the case in relation to online social networking, as different types of information are shared with people in a network consisting of contacts drawn from several different contexts, for example family, work, interests, school, and so on. Even though Facebook and other social network sites often offer the possibility to differentiate between groups of people in the network, it does not seem to be an option most people have embraced so far.

A way to address these challenges and to meet user expectations of privacy is to focus on awareness of the context in which people share information. In her book Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life (2010), Helen Nissenbaum elaborates on the reasonable expectations for and limitations of privacy in particular with regards to social media. She develops the concept of “contextual integrity” as a framework for evaluating the appropriateness of the flows of personal information. We need to rethink the widespread understanding of privacy as either the right to secrecy or complete individual control. Rather, the right to privacy is connected to the appropriate flows of information for the given situation – that is, what Nissenbaum labels “contextual integrity.” Of course, this appropriateness varies from context to context, and a number of specific norms are important. Nissenbaum argues that these norms are a function of the types of information in question; the respective roles of the subject, the sender (who may be the subject), and the recipient of this information, and the principles under which the information is sent or transmitted from the sender to the recipient. (2010: 144)

Thus, it might be observed about online social networking that privacy is not about being anonymous. Rather, the discussion about privacy and social network sites indicates that users do not want to be secluded from other users – a wish that would be peculiar in combination with social interaction – but prefer to be in control of the stream of shared information. Of course, we cannot control every aspect of a context, as Nissenbaum argues, but social media users can expect to be in control of what they actively share with whom, and to know that these choices are violated neither by other people nor the social network site.
Visibility as Empowerment

A term central to this discussion is, of course, “visibility,” inasmuch as the word “surveillance” is etymologically associated with the French word surveiller, which translates simply as “to watch over.” The verb suggests the visual practice of a person looking carefully at someone or something from above. The visual metaphor implies a spatial hierarchy where the watcher is positioned over the watched, and this situation is favorable for the former as it makes it easier to keep an eye on the latter. This visual metaphor is at the root of the interpretation of surveillance as a power relation in which the watcher controls the watched. Consequently, transparency is a weakness, because those who are visible are at the same time vulnerable to a controlling gaze.

This conception of transparency as something that can be employed to break down, control, and eventually rebuild people is well known from novels (not least Nineteen Eighty-Four), cinema, and computer games (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2005; Albrechtslund 2008b). Moreover, surveillance is not only a frequently visited theme in fiction but can also be said to structure films’ imagery and narration. Dietmar Kammerer (2004) has pointed to a trend in mainstream Hollywood cinema over the past decades to integrate the aesthetics of video surveillance as well as the imagery itself into films. Surveillance footage, often grainy images from a raised point of view, can be part of the imagery of the film and in that way influence the way films are structured. As Thomas Y. Levin put it: “surveillance has become the condition of the narration itself” (2002: 583). The post-9/11 TV series 24 (2001–2010), broadcast by Fox Network in the USA, illustrates both the thematic and structural role of surveillance. The fast-paced story and visual style of the series often depend on surveillance technologies, such as GPS tracking and knowledge obtained by computer hacking, and imagery from satellites and CCTV are integrated in all episodes. A characteristic mode of storytelling has Chloe O’Brien (Mary Lynn Rajscub), the computer expert, at her desktop and Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), the hero, somewhere in the field working on a mission. In this set-up, Chloe facilitates Jack’s actions by providing him with information obtained by surveillance.

The cinematic gaze illustrates a paradox of surveillance, in that it allows us to be fascinated with our shame of watching and fear of being watched. The cinema facilitates a space where we, the audience, can explore and to a certain extent live out our issues with and feelings about surveillance. This pluralistic way of understanding visibility is equally appropriate for social media, since power relations are much more ambiguous than is suggested by the etymology of surveillance. As discussed in the previous section, surveillance does not necessarily imply a hierarchy, as the power relation can be “flattened.” The flat surveillance relation has been described as peer-to-peer or “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic 2005). Further, the traditional power relation has been challenged and even inverted, either negatively, as actively
resisting the surveillance (Ball and Wilson 2000; McGrath 2004), or positively, as “exhibitionistic empowerment” (Koskela 2004).

When I use the label “participatory surveillance” to describe the active, sharing, and potentially empowered social media user, it is of course not to replace either flat or hierarchical understandings of surveillance. It is simply an attempt to broaden the concept of surveillance by emphasizing the potentially empowering characteristics that appear when surveillance is part of social practices. My ambition is to focus on subjectivity rather than system, and on participation rather than involuntary targeting. Thus, surveillance is intentional, as it most often involves a purpose, it is most often mediated by knowledge or technology, and – to introduce a new continuum – can be described as a practice that ranges from power exercise to sheer playfulness.

Conclusion

To share personal information with a network – which often includes more people than those whom we consider close friends – is a form of communication that should not be reduced to scary surveillance scenarios or simple trade-offs where users give up something private to gain knowledge about others. In this context, sharing (profile information, activities, links, opinions, location, etc.) is communication where questions and answers are unnecessary. Social surveillance – or, more precisely, the idea that surveillance is facilitating social interaction – underlines the need to approach this issue pluralistically. To adequately understand social media, we must equally embrace users’ activities as surveillance practices. My ambition in this chapter is neither to replace other conceptions of surveillance nor insist that the understanding presented here offers an exhaustive account of all surveillance technologies and practices relating to online social networking. It is my aim to contribute to theoretical discussions within surveillance studies while also providing a new perspective on the historical development from broadcast to social media.

As mentioned above, social media are not replacing broadcast media; rather, it seems that these two types of media are increasingly interdependent. Social media is often a platform for sharing and discussing stories and other material that originates from broadcast media. Similarly, broadcast media are in different ways incorporating social media – or, at least, the participatory aspect of these – into parts of (especially) their live programming, either simply as text displayed on the screen (Twitter feeds, Facebook comments, etc.) or as the occasional reading aloud of ongoing discussions on social media relating to the show being broadcast. This coming together of different types of media will be exciting to follow over the coming years, and from a surveillance perspective this development is an opportunity to further rethink how we grasp these new flows of information. Understanding new practices is not only about finding answers; rather, it is about asking new questions, and a pluralistic approach to surveillance offers a framework to do this.
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Notes

1. Critics might point out that on Facebook it is in fact possible to be a passive object visible to others; for example, if a user displays personal information in an open profile and then refrains from any interaction. In response to this argument it must be stressed that this is hardly in line with Foucault’s description of what it means to be citizen in a discipline society. Moreover, the act of joining Facebook, sharing selected information, and choosing not to socially interact is in itself active, voluntary behavior.

References

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