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Author(s): Talvitie-Lamberg, Karoliina

Title: Video Streaming and Internalized Surveillance

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Talvitie-Lamberg, K. (2018). Video Streaming and Internalized Surveillance. *Surveillance and Society*, 16(2), 238-257. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i2.6407>

Article | Video Streaming and Internalized Surveillance

Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg

University of Jyväskylä, Finland
karoliina.k.talvitie-lamberg@jyu.fi

Abstract

This paper aims to develop knowledge about the complicated ways in which the modern individual uses surveillance (techniques) and the ways surveillance uses the individual. My observational analysis of a videostreaming community reveals the central role that surveillance plays in participating and becoming visible in an online environment. The results show that through disciplinary and lateral surveillance, participants produced context-defined I-narrations and formed themselves following the normative judgment of the environment. The same mechanism may be observed in other videostreaming social media environments and the modern social media-saturated society in general. This is an inconspicuous way to produce surveillant individualism. Contrary to the notion of exploitative participation, this study reveals the productive power of surveillance. My research suggests that disciplinary power is integrated into the everyday in online DIY environments and it creates the space and framework for communication in these environments. Surveillance practices offer empowering means for forming identities.

Introduction

Surveillance is a ubiquitous phenomenon that is tightly embedded within our contemporary culture. Surveillance practices have transformed our ways of seeing, watching, and being seen (Gangneux 2014). The everyday uses of surveillance techniques not only produce subjugation (Albrechtslund 2008) but also offer places and means for forming identities and subjectivities. One of the most frequently used metaphors for modern surveillance is the Benthamian Panopticon model: a utilitarian architectural concept for organizing the masses and a paradigmatic example of disciplinary technology (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) in which the individual is the object to be controlled and produced through it (Rabinow 1991). In the aftermath of Internet expansion, the Panopticon has emerged as a framework for making sense of the surveillance of the web (Andrejevic 2005, 2006, 2007), which has even resulted in the internet being conceptualized as a large-scale Panopticon prison (Poster 1989). Consequently, a number of related concepts such as the superpanopticon (Poster 1989), the panoptic sort (Gandy 1993), the electronic Panopticon (Lyon 1994), the participatory Panopticon (Whitaker 1999), and the virtual Panopticon have emerged and been used within varying scopes in the analyses of surveillance systems (e.g., Farmer and Mann 2003; Hogan 2001; Parenti 2002).

Most surveillance studies of the virtual Panopticon are dystopian. However, to see the Panopticon and its possible operation through the web as dystopian contrasts with Foucault's original understanding of the power that operates in that "machine." The Panopticon was essentially an ideal construction, an example of the productivity of power (Foucault 1995: 137). Because of the biopower operating in this machine,

individuals internalize discipline. Thus, if we follow Foucault literally, the disciplining power in the Panopticon is foremost productive, and we should not conceptualize its essence negatively.

The idea of productivity makes the Panopticon interesting for understanding social media participation. In surveillance and media studies, there has been research on surveillance in social media (e.g., Tokunaga 2011; Trottier 2016) and on the ways social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare) enable lateral social surveillance between individuals (e.g., Marwick 2012). However, there is a lack of research that connects discipline and the productive features of the Panopticon machine and that investigates how the modifying of individual behavior happens in the machine through self-governance (Elmer 2012).

Popular audiovisual social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, Periscope, YouNow) are fundamentally based on visibility: the actors' self-revealing through me-centered messaging (Hodkinson 2007; Livingstone 2008; Lundby 2008; Reed 2005) and the performers' telemediated presence (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Bolter et al. 2013; Campanella 2002; Manowich 2001). There are apparent connections between the videostreaming and vlogging environments of today (e.g., Periscope, YouNow, Youtube vlogs) and largely forgotten early webcam communities. Parallel to new visual platforms, these former webcam communities¹ were based on visibility and the self-revelatory representations of individuals (Hillis 2009; Senft 2008; White 2006). The central motivation was to share and document individuals' everyday lives in real time (Wood 2009). Technically, this was possible by offering a real-time peak through a webcam. Interestingly, one of the most novel and appraised applications of social media, Periscope, builds on the same idea of live-casting one's everyday life, only now using smartphones instead of webcams. The emerging research on Periscope demonstrates high expectations that this new platform will generate not only day-to-day documentation but also eyewitness reports, such as those of crisis situations and political contests (Gregory 2015; Mortensen 2015). It is considered to be a platform that offers a new way of witnessing and monitoring in real time by providing (constant) visual attention for the viewer(s). The recent research on surveillance management indicates that various organizations follow the new visibility regime and build their practices on the idea of transparency (Flyverbom 2016; Ganesh 2016). The public visibility of employee salaries or the tracking of their physical activities (Flyverbom 2016) are a few examples of what the idea of visual monitoring may produce. Digital platforms such as Periscope play a vital role in creating this type of visibility.

Both former webcam communities and new videostreaming environments have raised expectations of their liberating and empowering effects. Indeed, they build on a similar logic of visibility and monitoring. Individuals exist by representing themselves online and being observed while a camera mediates their presence. The visibility on which these environments rely seems to be strikingly similar to the Panopticon machine. The objects (individuals) to be controlled fall under the monitoring and controlling gaze and the disciplinary power remains invisible. Thus, it seems relevant to consider whether the (constant) look that is offered for the viewer(s) is liberating either in modern video streaming environments or older webcam communities.

Building on this, it is relevant to ask whether a webcam community is a place in which disciplinary power operates? Is the monitoring gaze a central way to construct the individual inside this communicational environment? I examine the possibility of the Panopticon using a classic webcam community as a potential case of Foucauldian biopower. I explore Panopticon features by asking whether the individual is disciplined and at the same formed through these features. The formation of subjectivity and the communicational activity inside a specific environment is understood as being bound to the structures of

¹ Webcam communities were precursors to the present videostreaming and vlogging scene, but their role is underestimated. Videoblogging is often understood as a novel way of communicating that only new social media platforms have enabled.

the environment. Taking the similar logic of visibility and monitoring between the studied webcam community and the recent video streaming services such as Periscope and YouNow, the study generates a new understanding of how and why the modern videostreaming environments may shape individuality and what modes and frames for self-representation they offer.

Conceptual Background

Internalized Surveillance

Many people have criticized the Panopticon model, especially its relevance for understanding the surveillance society that the web has enabled. Many of these concerns originate in the question of visibility. As argued, we witness that the post-Panopticon in which surveillance is fragmented works at a distance and that the watchers of the panopticon have slipped away (Bauman and Lyon 2013). In the original Panopticon, the few watched the many, and the omnipotent gaze(s) controlled the bodies (Foucault 1995). In our mediated environments, the reverse is true: the many watch the few. This synopticon (Mathieson 1997) has been acclaimed as the way that contemporary mass society works, many viewers controlling the actions of the few. Once private and intimate things are revealed through surveillance (Lyon 2006: 36). The synopticon serves as a model for our contemporary “viewer society” (Lyon 2006: 36) or voyeur nation (Calvert 2004). Through “co-veillance,” individuals monitor and surveil one another, which produces the obedience that the term “sousveillance” describes (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003).

According to the pessimistic understanding, panoptic monitoring relies on the internalized discipline of the watched and the watchers, which interactive media technologies deploy (Andrejevic 2007). This produces a surveillance society, which consists of mutual monitoring and investigative technologies. The question is on the performer’s willingness to reveal himself and the viewers’ enjoyment in watching. As argued in the context of neoliberal theories of a surveillance society, citizens have internalized surveillance. Popular culture plays a central role in this, e.g., reality TV (Andrejevic 2007; Dubrofsky 2007; Pecora 2002) and webcam shows (e.g., Ericson and Haggerty 2005). Surveillance centers around the “savvy subject” who self-consciously performs for the imagined gaze of the watchers (Andrejevic 2007: 238). The growing surveillance of individuals goes hand-in-hand with interest in intimate stories. Together, they produce a type of “intimacy surveillance” (Pecora 2002: 352) in which the participants know they are being observed but are willing to participate and act out—and observers are eager to watch. Surveillance of oneself becomes a desirable feature felt by the participants (Dubrofsky 2007). Subsequently, surveillance practices are increasingly embedded in day-to-day life and interpersonal relationships through social media (Marwick 2012). By internalizing surveillance, we self-monitor our online behavior (boyd and Marwick 2011).

Consequently, web-mediated surveillance has become a form of smooth and efficient control (Bogard 2006), which operates at the level of the individual and his subjectivity (Vaz and Bruno 2003). The incitement to self-disclosure is how a governed panoptic space works; we watch one another redoubling the monitoring gaze (of the authorities). In modern neoliberal society, the interactive participation of the web works as a disciplinary technology and produces neoliberal subjects—self-governing and responsible citizens (Jarrett 2008).

In addition to these classic claims of subtle surveillance working at the level of the individual, a growing field of research in surveillance studies states that the subjects’ resistance toward surveillance practices and their creative uses of them should be taken seriously (see Koskela 2004, 2006; Monahan 2006). Resistance should be understood foremost as an enjoyable practice (Albrechtslund and Dubbel 2005). For example, in webcam porn, the “surveillance-savvy” subject playfully explores voyeuristic and exhibitionist experiences of sexuality (Bell 2009: 203). This strand of surveillance studies, which builds on the earlier studies of the subject’s resistance, focuses not on the top-down mechanisms of surveillance

but more on the participatory, lateral, bottom-up, and playful possibilities (Gangneux 2014) that the various surveillance practices offer for the formation of subjectivity. However, studies on the forms of subjectivity that playful surveillance practices produce are few. Building on the notion of lateral coveillance (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), Palmås (2015) studied the lateral surveillance techniques of speedsurfers and proposed that those techniques were a way to intensify the experience of oneself as a speedsurfer. What this suggests for my study is that surveillance does not necessarily produce only disciplined individuals but also active doers whose experience may be possible just because of the surveillance techniques they are using.

Surveillant individualism works at the level of the individual as a contemporary managerial and disciplinary everyday practice in which individuals monitor and surveil each other. It is composed of three different levels of surveillance, which also function as varying levels of agency (Ganesh 2016). In the first level of *prosumption* (Fuchs 2011), the production and consumption of the surveillance take place by the same subjects, which illustrates the productive and often freewill activity to surveil others. The second level of surveillant individualism, *coveillance*, builds on peer-to-peer surveillance (Rainie and Wellman 2012). This is also defined as lateral surveillance (Palmås 2015), and it illustrates the impossibility of differentiating between the surveilled and the surveillers. The third level of surveillant individualism is bottom-up surveillance, or *sousveillance* (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), which offers a way to resist surveillance. Logically, bottom-up surveillance and the potential for individual resistance are embedded in surveillance environments. This way, the individual agency and social organization in which surveillance takes place are intertwined (Ganesh 2016). However, in former webcam communities and in new videostreaming environments such as Periscope and YouNow, it is challenging to identify how the individual and organizational levels of an agency are linked together because the surveillance in these communities is voluntary and playful.

This implies that there is a quest for in-depth and contextual analysis of particular web-based surveillance practices at the level of individual agency (Albrechtslund 2008; Ericson and Haggerty 2006; French 2014). That is, there is a need for analyses of specific communication practices and organizations, such as Panopticism, from within. Specifically, studies on social media platforms for videostreaming, vlogging, and webcamming are deficient. Studies on vlogging and webcamming describe their characteristics as authentic, intimate, confessional, and honest self-revelations (Griffith and Papacharissi 2010; Kuntsman 2012; Raun 2010, 2012; Miller 2011) in the form of I-narrations (Herring et al. 2004; Livingstone 2008; Lundby 2008; Reed 2005). Self-revelations are a form of social life (Burgess and Green 2009; Hodgkinson 2007; Lange 2008; Livingstone 2008) and a means for forming the social self (Hjarvard 2013), and vlogging aims for social attention and connections (Griffith and Papacharissi; Navarro 2012; Zoonen et al. 2010). However, few studies focus on the mechanism that produces the I-narratives of social media (Griffith and Papacharissi 2010; Kuntsman 2012; Livingstone 2008; Lundby 2008; Raun 2010, 2012). Considerably fewer studies have analyzed particular visual social media environments and user behaviors concerning their connections to the disciplining and organizational control inside those environments.

Since the essence of disciplining power is its ability to define and produce reality and individuality (Foucault 1995), the Panopticon model offers one potential theoretical tool² to understand the mechanisms for producing I-narratives and participation in popular videostreaming environments. The particular communication network may be analyzed as a “machine” that produces, or favors, certain types of discipline and communication. And through these communicational environment frames, a certain kind of individuality emerges, which might be that of surveillance individualism (Ganesh 2016). Is the Panopticon one possible efficient solution to that issue?

Strategies of Panopticon

² This includes both aspects of control and discipline (individual as an object) and the confessional act (the individual as a subject) (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 169).

To examine the parallels between the Panopticon and the webcam community under analysis—i.e., asking what Foucault would say about modern technology-based communicative society—I concentrate on the particular operations of disciplinary technology. I ask whether individualized subjects under control are produced through the delicate details of disciplinary technologies (Foucault 2000; Rabinow 1991) and whether the control arises from individuals themselves in the form of self-control (Foucault 1995). The analysis concentrates on the specific procedures of disciplinary technology, which operates primarily on the body (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) through the use of space, visibility, the normalizing gaze, hierarchical observation, and examination (Foucault 1995, 2000, 2003). Table 1 details these classes and presents the way in which they are thematized as research questions.

Table 1: Thematization and Strategies of the Panopticon

Space ³	Visibility ⁴	Hierarchical observation ⁵	Normalizing gaze ⁶
“Each individual has a place, and each place has its individual.”	“The Panopticon creates for the prisoner a state of conscious and constant visibility.”	Hierarchical observation as mutual monitoring.	The normalizing gaze is combined with normalizing judgment.
“Space is organized through the absence/presence dichotomy.”	“The more the subjects are highlighted, the more they gain marks of individuality, whereas the holder of power remains invisible.”		
Thematized Questions:			
1. Does there exist a (communicational) space that is arranged to differentiate individual slots around the participant?	3. a) In what ways does visibility take place?	5. Do chat postings contain instructional comments to other co-participants?	6. What types of instructions do chatters post to each other (if they do)?
2. a) How do absence and presence take place?	3. b) Do participants refer in chat sections to the visibility as being constant and/or conscious?		7. Does there emerge a normative axis of right/wrong in the form of chat postings?
2. b) Do participants refer to absence/presence as constitutive elements (of the WCN space)?	4. How is individual visibility negotiated in rule violations?		

³ Discipline over the body operates through the use of space. Discipline is transformed into a spatial construction and the cell in the Panopticon is an individual stage. This divides an individual from the masses and produces the prisoner/performer as an individual by on-staging him (Foucault 2000). Space is organized by the absence/presence dichotomy (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982).

⁴ The individualized subjects under control are produced through visibility; the surveillant gaze creates a state of conscious and constant visibility, which is not perceived as oppressive (Foucault 1995, 2000). Individuals are linked together in a disciplinary space by the act of looking and being looked at (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). The visibility of the Panopticon machine is reversed for the subject, which makes him the object of reversed visibility (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 2000).

⁵ The ultimate efficiency of disciplinary power is possible when combining normalizing judgment with (hierarchical) observation. Through a refined specification along the axes of right and wrong, a normative ranking system is created. The individual comes to discipline himself as expected in the environment (Foucault 1995). Because of (institutionalized) normative judgment that operates within the Panopticon, the machine itself seems to be value-neutral. The normalizing gaze and hierarchical observation combine in an examination procedure, intensified through documentation (Foucault 1995). An individual is constituted as an analyzable object that can be classified. This objectification produces a reversed visibility of that individual.

⁶ Through the normalizing gaze, the individual internalizes discipline and the surveillance of himself—and the Panopticon gains its lightness. “Disciplinary power becomes an ‘integrated’ system, linked from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it was practiced” (Foucault 1995: 172-174). The discipline seems to originate within the individual.

Method, Setting, and Ethical Issues

This research is a work of virtual ethnography (Baym 2000; Dicks et al. 2005; Hine 2003, 2005; Miller and Slater 2000; Pink 2007). The webcam environment was a field site for research (Beaulieu 2008; Maanen 2011), understood as a place for social reality that should be studied as a culture (Hine 2005). I participated as a lurking observer (Murthy 2008) following the guidelines for observing online environments in the same way as the actual participants (Garcia et al. 2010; Walström 2004). In the research context, lurking was a dominant form of participation alongside the position of participant observer (a participant occasionally sending text comments but not uploading videos himself). The role of the non-participant observer (participating but not chatting or sending webcam streams) best served my purposes of “getting close” to the social world being studied (Emerson et al. 2012: 2). Consistent with the ethnographic methodology at use, my participation as a lurker was affected by the theoretical framework of the Panopticon inside which I operated (Dicks et al. 2005; Emerson and Pollner 2001; Murthy 2008); and it served also as an analytical framework (Beaulieu 2004; Kozinets et al. 2014). In comparison with a social observer, the lurking presence in the researched environment was a way to create audiences for the performers. Together the lurker observes and the performers create the social stage from which to perform. This means that even though at the outset the lurking seems to be a passive activity, it is a profound way to build up the environment altogether.

The environment was understood as a public place (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 8) not dealing with sensitive issues (Nissenbaum 2010). In the environment, participants could move to the private one-to-one chatroom if wanting to maintain their privacy. The streams that I observed were those performed on the public site and private rooms were not included. Accordingly, it is safe to state that observed webcammers were not particularly sensitive about their privacy. As previous studies also suggest, to launch a webcam show can be considered as an agreement that the show would be watched and discussed publicly, including by researchers (Raun 2010). Since WCN environment was understood as a public place by participants, the study did not obtain informed consent, did not anonymize the researched webcam participants (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 8), and did not ask permission to participate, which would have been contrary to the cultural norms of the environment (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Orton-Johnson 2010).

The researched environment was a webcam community, Webcamnow (hereafter, WCN; <http://www.webcamnow.com>), and it was a “family-site”: an open site of the environment distinct from adult sections with strict restrictions. The field was visited during two periods. The first took place from 10/2005-3/2006 and the second from 10/2009-3/2010. During my first participation phase in 2005 (before the launch of the YouTube), the community was one of the most popular among webcam users, with a million users per month—a significant amount at the time. Unlike other popular webcam communities, the community was divided between an “unmonitored” porn site and a “family” site reserved for everyday communication. In 2005-2006, the family site experienced active participation, whereas in 2009-10, participants had moved to the “unmonitored” site and to new social networking sites, with YouTube being the favorite.

Controlling the Body on WebCamNow

Space for an Individual

To understand whether Panopticon logic operated in WCN, I first observed the spatial construction of the environment. I analyzed whether each participant had an individual place and whether there existed a (communicational) space, arranged to individual slots around the participant (see table 1, column 1).

To exist (bodily) in WCN, one has to log onto that space. To become a full member, the participant needs to be visible, which entails sending a webcam stream online. Each individual in WCN had a place and

each place its individual: the individual stage for the performer was created by spatially arranging the webcam stream into different slots. This was reminiscent of the cell in the Panopticon—a particular scene for each prisoner/performer (Foucault 2000). The staging of the individual was central in WCN and it created a communicational space. In the Panopticon, the performer on her stage is individualized and the center of the focus while she is also isolated (Foucault 2000).⁷

Spatial Presence

For understanding the absence/presence dichotomy, I asked how do absence and presence take place and how do participants refer to them as constitutive elements?

In WCN the performer needs to be spatially present in the place that is reserved for her to become an individual under the gaze, similarly as in the Panopticon cell. The absence and presence in WCN space occurred through (mediated) bodily existence by broadcasting a video stream of one's body. The visual way to display bodily presence was to broadcast a close-up or medium close-up, most often concentrating on one's face (in family section) or sometimes on the genitals (in the unmonitored site). To exist in this environment, participants needed to be present, which occurred by logging into the (virtual) space with the (webcam mediated) body. Four types of presence took place in WCN: presence through (1) webcam stream and active chatting, (2) webcam stream, (3) chatting as a visitor, and (4) observation but not active chatting. Absence, in effect, occurred in two primary ways. Either the webcam was on but the performer was not represented or the webcam was completely off and the participant became non-existent. According to the chat postings, participants themselves emphasized the importance of seeing the image of the mediated body.

As a quite typical request posted to active participant Grandelf in October 2006 indicates:

Please. Grandelf, get your cam on!

It was also common to present oneself as not only absent but as nonexistent. One way to communicate such an absence was to transmit a video stream of an empty room. Absence and presence proved to be constitutive elements in WCN based on the frequency of chat postings announcing them. There was a strong habit of informing co-chatters of one's absence. In October 2006 Grandelf said:

getting a soda, brb (brb=be right back).

In 2009, Krissy 68, a top ten favorite vlogger in the unmonitored site stated:

I gotta pee, I'll be right back

The cause for leaving is often explained as modelled by topless32563 in arieflii's chat room:

OK GOT TO GO WORK U HAVE A GOOD DAY DEAR MAYB C U THIS AFTERNOON

The cause for absence can also become a statement about the ongoing webcam stream itself, as that of Queezie to arie2flii in January 2010:

well I am bored so I'm off

Returning is often announced as well, as simo003 in January 2010 in arie2flii's chat room:

⁷ Recent concerns about the unsocializing effects of social media (e.g., Bauman 2016) can be understood in close relation to this on-staging, which may create isolated individualism.

*!!just came back
i came back
!!!
im here simo is hereeeeeeee*

To sum up, discipline over bodies was made effective through the use of space. Presence was the principal way to exist and absences usually equated to nonexistence.⁸ This notion can be understood in parallel with the insistence of constant presence in various social media environments. The need to be present as much as possible can be understood as an act of free will and as a way to communicate. However, it can also be recognized as a dominant way to become existent in a mediated society through the disciplinary eye of the others (Jurgenson 2012).

Detailed Technologies

Disciplinary technologies may operate through specific and contextually detailed actions (Foucault 2000). In WCN, there were detailed ways of controlling the body, which emerged by controlling the bodily behaviors and gestures of the members. Forbidden bodily behaviors were not explicitly documented. Only by participating and observing the co-participants was it possible to gain knowledge of these rules. In general, the forbidden acts (such as undressing on the monitored site) seldom took place. Regular members especially obeyed the rules and informed promptly in cases of violations. The most active members of the community seemed to have internalized discipline over the body in a way that made it transparent and a form of self-control. This is, of course, reasonable because the ultimate penalty for the wrongdoer was being banned and excluded from the community.

Visibility

Communication in WCN was based on watching and sending webcam shows and commenting on them. Through this, visibility and previously prescribed spatial presence were interconnected. Spatial presence was the primary way to exist in WCN space, and it was through visibility that presence occurred. There were different ways to be visible just as there were different types of presence. The two main ways to become visible were (1) sending a webcam stream and (2) busy chatting in which visibility correlated to chat postings under a nickname. The same performer may send a webcam stream and chat at the same time, but they were not necessarily interconnected.

Consciousness of the Gaze

I further observed how participants understood visibility themselves, how conscious they were of it and whether they recognized it as a constant. Participants often referred to the profound importance of visibility. As simo003 states in arie2flii's chat room in January 2010:

arie im here if u need to talk to me im watching u all the time and im doing some stuf on computer

BexleyBoy's comment back to simo003 reflects that conscious visibility is a well-known fact to regular participants:

why tell her what she already knows...?

Participants' conscious attitude is illustrated in Rochelle_36's chat room in January 2010. Feyg began a conversation by posing an unusual question in a WCN context:

⁸ Presence/telepresence plays a vital role in web-mediated communication environments (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Campanella 2002; Manovich 2001). In WCN, the mediated bodily presence was a way to exist and the disciplining power was working at its minimum.

what motivates your exhibitionism?

Rochelle_36: *im a stripper*

In the following chain, the consciousness of showing off became evident. The regular participants' self-conscious visibility and familiarity at being observed and observing are stated at the end of nzjez's sarcastic comment.

Rochelle_36: *ok im not a stripper lol*

Feyg: *so why are you an exhibitionist, why?*

Rochelle_36: *lol*

Feyg: *i really wanna know*

Rochelle_36: *just enjoy chatting and showing fey*

Meanit: *u have a problem with roch showing feyg*

johnlefty49: *nd i love it roc*

carewllion: *she just loves to share her great body with us*

Rochelle_36: *ty*

Feyg: *what you mean. does it turn you on or something?*

camham42: *and we're happy about that*

Rochelle_36: *i wouldnt be on here if i didnt like it*

german47: *appreciate you share with us*

caravanmick: *and ty for sharing you have a great body*

Pocatwild: *feyg if u don't care for it just leave fag*

Rochelle_36: *ty*

Feyg: *no what i mean is does it turn you on or you like peoples good comments*

meanit: *are u a towel head feyg*

Rochelle_36: *i enjoy it for myself fey not for anything else*

camham42: *well said*

carewllion: *good for u rochelle*

Feyg: *i respect that*

german47: *thats the right way*

Feyg: *i am so gullible. i really thought u were a stripper*

nzjez ignore: *give a sheep the internet and.....*

As the example illustrates, visibility is a prerequisite for communicating in WCN. The regular participants were used to visibility, and the performers seemed happy to perform under the gaze. The performers were highly self-conscious and the most popular ones were strict that nobody leads their shows, as illustrated in arie2flii's chat room in January 2010:

Gogoscotum: *take ur top off*

arie2flii: *GO TO CHATEY IF U WANT TO SEE TITTIES..SHE A EASY HOE*

Jason 5656: *:)*

The excerpt illustrates how self-consciously performed visibility and self-esteem play an important role in WCN communications. This leaves no options for directing shows, as stated by ThaBlakCat while monitoring the chat in arie2flii's chat room:

SHE DOESN'T SHOW GUYS, JUST HERE FOR THE CONVO ("convo" = conversation.)
and

NO, SHE SHOWS WHEN SHE WANTS

Further, one performer, arie2flii herself, stated:

NOOOO I HATE THE ONES THT KEEP SAYIN) SHOW TITS, ASS, PUSSY

The conscious performing and chatting under a gaze proved to be a prerequisite element in WCN communications. The communication continues well as long as the performers are watched but not instructed. They are aware of the possibility of the gaze, but there is no way to know exactly whether one is observed or not. In the Panopticon, the gaze is supposed to be constant, but in WCN, the performers may control when they are visible themselves and when they perform. In this sense, the gaze is not constant. However, as soon as the camera is turned on, the performer is constantly under a gaze. This aspect of time is occasionally referenced, as in the postings between ThaBlakCat and arie2flii:

ThaBlakCat: *HAVE U BEEN ON AT ALL THIS YEA*

arie2flii: *UMM I JUSS GOT BAKK ON*

Participants also create irony out of the possibility of the constant gaze, as Jason5656 states in arie2flii's chat room:

*i am just waiting until the uncontrollable urge hits her to strip naked and run around...
waiting.....
waiting.....
still waiting.....*

To summarize, visibility was based on one's presence as it created the individualized subject in WCN. Participants' understanding of visibility, according to the chat postings, revealed that monitoring and constant gaze were understood as essential. However, the consciousness of the gaze generated remarkably more postings than the duration or constancy of the gaze. Of course, this has something to do with the voluntary act of logging on to the environment; the individual has the power to decide when to turn the camera on. The consciousness of the gaze was essential in WCN. As argued, it is the way in which individuals become linked together in a disciplinary space (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 156). The frequent comments on the consciousness of being observed in WCN were a way to form a communicational and social space together based on discipline.

Paradox of Reversed Visibility

The central effectivity of the Panopticon is its lightness, the disciplinary power tends to hide, and visibility is reversed for the subject. I observed whether this reversed visibility operated in WCN and witnessed it in cases of rule violations and how individual visibility was then negotiated.

The more one behaves according to the communicational norms of WCN, the more visibility one gets. The banning system was efficient, and it forced participants to act according to the rules of the communicational game. At the heart of the banning procedure was the monitoring system. Regular members of WCN played the role of monitor, which was an honor. Getting the position of a monitor is possible as long as the participant is regularly present and behaving properly. The following chain illustrates some of the numerous unwritten rules of the communication and how monitoring takes place. On January 1, 2010, Rochelle_36 was performing:

meanit: *the directors have arrived*

maxbodyworks: *STOP DIRECTING*

meanit: *ok the gatekeeper is here*

maxbodyworks: *she knows what to do*

meanit: *stop shouting stop begging roch don't view and she bans beggars and shouters*

The posting on line 1, "the directors have arrived," refers to the numerous beggings for Rochelle to perform. The second line is the first warning for "wrong-doers" from monitor maxbodyworks. On line 3, "meanit" specifies that maxbodyworks is a gatekeeper. On line 5, he lists all of the forbidden acts, with the ultimate penalty being banning.

Later in the same chat section, there is a typical case of how a misbehaving person is banned. It illustrates how the concept of reversed visibility does not work because the sanction is non-visibility and absence. Rochelle_36 is ignoring open_zip right from the beginning;

open_zip: *couple here...cam to cam in yahoo ..pls join only Female my yahoo id cpl_ind63*

Rochelle_36: *no advertising open*

open_zip: *hi Rochelle*

open_zip: *hey Rochelle*

open_zip: *couple here...cam to cam in yahoo ..pls join only Female my yahoo id cpl_ind63*

meanit: *open stop begging*

nzjez: *cut m paste openzip byeeeeee”*

Rochelle_36: *bye openzip*

Banning is most often preceded without comments, as the chatter just disappears from the chat. Sometimes the exclusion may receive comments, as in October 2005 in pinklady’s chat room:

pinklady: *Good, finally we succeeded to get him out*

To sum up, the reversed visibility did not work. The more participants were highlighted in the form of a webcam show, the more they could share information about themselves and gain more marks of individuality. The wrong-doer was banned from the conversation and sanctioned to invisibility and exclusion from communication, not highlighted. Therefore, the *right* way to participate in WCN was to behave according to the unwritten communicational rules. Indeed, the need to act according to the norms is also a burning issue in social media in general. That is, how strictly do we follow the communicational rules of the environment? The next step takes the normalizing gaze and hierarchical observation at its center because normalization ultimately gets people to act as they are supposed to operate in the Panopticon machine.

Hierarchical Observation

Monitoring System

By combining the normalizing gaze and hierarchical observation, the Panopticon finally gains efficiency (Foucault 1995: 184-185). It becomes integrated into the system. The hierarchical observation used in WCN was best observed in chat postings and participants’ instructional comments to each other.

When one logs into WCN, aside from some very general restrictions, there are no exact written rules concerning communications. However, chatters did carry out hierarchical observations toward each other, mainly through posted instructional comments and warnings to each other. In most cases, monitoring caused direct warnings, which occurred when a participant behaved incorrectly. Sometimes, this observational activity was performed sarcastically, as the postings of jason5656 in arie2flii’s chat room on January 10, 2010 illustrate. Simo003 had been posting comments regularly about his presence in the environment and arie2flii grew tired of his behavior, which jason5656 noticed:

jason5656: *he is ALWAYS here for YOU arie...*

jason5656: *lets play a game arie..*

BexleyBoy: *me too...!*

jason5656: *ok lets all play a game of Simo says...*

This chain illustrates the monitoring tendency and its effectiveness. The chatters begin the “Simo says”—play which is a clever way to exclude “Simo” out of the communication. By taking his inappropriate behavior at the center of focus, the chatters implicitly show the codes of accepted behavior without the need for direct warnings.

Overall, WCN followed the logic of hierarchical observation of the Panopticon. Chatters posted instructional comments to each other, which was commonplace in the chat postings in general. This observational activity took place among peers, which can be interpreted as a difference from the hierarchical observation typical for the Panopticon. However, in WCN, the most established members of the community were also the ones that most often posted these instructional comments, which again speaks to the hierarchy of observation.

Normalizing Gaze

(Self)Discipline through Normalization

What types of instructions did the participants then post to each other and was there an understanding of appropriate behavior? In other words, did normalization operate in this environment? Participants posted either practical instructions about the technical aspects of the show and chat settings or direct instructional warnings, which was done to eliminate wrong behaviors from the WCN. Usually, these warnings specified the bad behavior (for example, shouting or begging, as noted earlier in Rochell_36's chat room). After a specific warning, a list of other related proscribed acts was posted and the instructions were directed at a specific chatter. This makes the inappropriate behavior in detail the center of focus and specifies the limits of normal behavior. Novice participants were most often those who tried to behave incorrectly, established members acted according to the communicational rules. The normative gaze seems to work just as Foucault proposed: the individual internalizes the discipline and the surveillance of himself (Foucault 1995: 173).

A right/wrong axis emerged on the grounds of chat postings—and through this, the normative judgment operated. Many of the normatively categorized wrong acts were commonplace and part of shared knowledge. Some of these norms—such as instructing the show too dominantly—operated in both areas, the family section and the restricted area. Importantly, the right/wrong axis was continuously negotiated and evolved over time. Thus, in theory, to become fully aware of the sanctioned acts in WCN, one ought to participate regularly and under the monitoring gaze of the co-participants to grow fully aware of how to properly be a WCN participant.

In this way, WCN followed the Panopticon logic; through the normalizing gaze, participants internalized the surveillance and followed the normative judgment. An axis of right and wrong emerged, which resembled the prescriptive and complex ranking system of the Panopticon. The understanding of appropriate behavior was not possible unless one regularly participated in WCN. Despite this discipline through normalization, the environment was advertised as a free forum for free people. Because of this, it also followed the logic of the Panopticon, which seemed to be value-neutral due to the institutionalized normative judgment that made the participants willing to discipline themselves. Regular WCN participants were extremely proud that they were not instructed and thus not disciplined from the outside. This implies that the proper participants already restrained themselves from the inside (Foucault 1995).

Discussion

The new strand of surveillance studies suggests that surveillance practices should be understood as playful and entertaining processes in which the formation of individuality is something more than a straightforward, top-down disciplining act. As noted, modern societies are surrounded by surveillance practices (Bauman and Lyon 2013); surveillance is embedded in our culture and it has transformed our ways of seeing, watching, and being observed. Surveillance is integrated into our everyday lives (Gangneux 2014). The everyday uses of surveillance techniques do not only produce subjugation (Albrechtslund 2008) but also offer places and means for forming identities/subjectivities. Overall, surveillance practices are increasingly embedded in day-to-day life and interpersonal relationships (Marwick 2012).

The saturation of social media practices such as YouTube and Flickr and places such as YouNow and Periscope (and the ways they enhance social connection and identity formation) made me consider how the integration of surveillance (practices) into everyday life happens in these environments. The model of the Panopticon offered a theoretical tool for that. The productivity of power (Foucault 1995: 137) makes the Panopticon machine useful for understanding how surveillance is integrated into the system and how it makes individuals self-regulate their behaviors.

The emerging research on videostreaming social media environments such as YouNow and Periscope shows that the expectations are high that these new platforms will offer a new way to witness and monitor in real time by providing a (constant) observation to the viewer(s). Interestingly, former online webcam communities were also based on the logic of visibility, the presence of participants, and self-revelatory representations of individuals. Recent videostreaming environments and old classic webcam communities are both places for monitoring: the individual exists by representing oneself online and by being observed. The monitoring gaze is a central feature. The visibility on which these environments rely seems to be strikingly similar to the Panopticon machine.

To understand social media participation and the type of individuality that these places enable I asked whether there was a self-governing, disciplining project in the studied webcam community. Was it a place in which a disciplinary power is at work to control a mass of people by individualizing them? I explored Panopticon features, asking whether the individual is disciplined while at the same time being formed through surveillance techniques. To examine the parallelism between the Panopticon and the webcam community under analysis, my observational activity on the field concentrated on four main strategies of the Panopticon and how these specific procedures worked over bodies. These four main strategies were built on the theory of disciplining power introduced in *Discipline and Punish*, titled as (1) the use of space, (2) use of visibility, (3) normalizing gaze, and (4) hierarchical observation and examination (Foucault 1995, 2000, 2003). I used these strategies to build thematized research questions, as shown in Table 1.

The formation of subjectivity and the communicational activity inside a specific environment was understood as being bound to the structures of the environment. This generated a new understanding of how the communicational environment shapes the me-centered confessional communication characteristic in videostreaming social media environments and how individuality is formed in these environments. This also raised the question of how liberating the (constant) look is when it is offered for the viewer(s) both of former webcam communities and new videostreaming services. By researching Panopticon logic in the particular webcam community, I raised the question of the regulative and disciplinary mechanisms operating in visual social media platforms in general and particularly in videostreaming environments.

Overall, WCN proved to be strikingly similar to the logic of the Panopticon. Control seemed to arise out of the individuals themselves in the form of self-control. To be a WCN participant in a proper manner, one ought to be visually present, under the conscious and monitoring gaze of co-participants, follow the normative rules (on the body), and avoid the wrong behaviors. The sanction of not following Panopticon discipline was exclusion from the community. In this way, the central features of the disciplining power of the Panopticon operated in WCN as well.

As an answer to my first question, the discipline over bodies through the use of space was effective. Individual bodies were organized in serialized enclosures of space in which each one had a place, and each place had its individual. This is reminiscent of the cell in the Panopticon, an individual stage for each prisoner/performer (Foucault 2000). The on-staging of the individual was the central mechanism through which WCN operated, and created a communicational space of WCN, as is the case in recent video streaming social media environments also.

Discipline over bodies was achieved through spatial presence: in WCN, one had to be present to exist entirely in the environment. Similarly, in the Panopticon cell, the performer needs to be present in the place reserved for her to become an individual under the gaze. In the Panopticon, the disciplinary technologies operate through specific and contextually detailed actions (Foucault 2000). This was characteristic of WCN also; additional ways in which the body was disciplined in a space included controlling bodily behaviors and gestures of the members. Since forbidden bodily actions were not documented anywhere explicitly, it was possible to gain knowledge of the rules only by regularly participating and observing the co-participants.

Observed as the second leading class of Panopticon strategy, discipline over bodies in WCN was created through visibility. Visibility was based on one's presence and created the individual in WCN, just as in the Panopticon in which visibility produces individualized subjects under control (Foucault 1995). In WCN, the participants were conscious of being observed continuously, also characteristic of panopticism. However, in WCN, the constancy of the gaze proved not as crucial as the consciousness of it; the individual had the power to decide when to turn off the camera.

Third, the discipline over bodies was made efficient through the normalizing gaze and fourth, through hierarchical observation. Chatters monitored each other by posting instructional comments, which was commonplace in the chat postings. The primary purpose of these was to eliminate misbehavior from WCN. Thus, normative judgment operated. Many of the normatively categorized wrong acts were part of shared knowledge, and some of them evolved over time. To become fully aware of the sanctioned actions in WCN, one ought to participate regularly and continuously under the monitoring gaze of co-participants. Panopticism in WCN also operated through a normative gaze and hierarchical observation. Participants had internalized the surveillance and followed the normative judgment. There emerged an axis of right and wrong that resembles the normative and complex ranking system of the Panopticon. The understanding of appropriate behavior was not possible unless regularly participating in WCN.

WCN's historical origins in gendered webcam girl culture may become evident in the light of some of the examples provided, although the past roots also lay in the culture of documenting family life and one's living environments (Senft 2008). The performers' conscious attitude of being looked at but not instructed denigrated the explicit top-down power relations and pointed to more lateral power relations, through which individuals became linked together and formed a space for communication.

Ultimately, this study revealed the central role that surveillance plays in participating in WCN and in becoming visible in the environment. Through disciplinary surveillance, participants produced context-defined I-narrations and formed themselves following the normative judgment of the environment. This was a way to become existent in a studied webcam environment. Whether the same mechanism is operating in other videostreaming and vlogging social media environments is a question that needs more research. However it is interesting that, for example, for YouTube vlogs⁹ one needs to be visually present and perform confessional I-narrations, in front of the peers and monitoring audience, in the frames of a strictly regulated platform—to attract viewers and to exist in the environment.

⁹ There, performers construct their identities by performing in front of and in co-operation with their audience. These performances do have similarities to former webcam communities and their live streaming sessions in comparison with the more consumerist stream of YouTube, such as popular makeup tutorials on YouTube—an example of pre-recorded, well edited, and polished content.

Theoretical Contribution

That the panopticism in WCN operated through the use of space and created an insistence on visual presence is theoretically stimulating. The insistence on presence can be understood as a volatile activity for participants to communicate. However, it can also be understood as the dominant way to make oneself visible and thus existent to others. Interestingly, visibility and existence took place only through the disciplinary eye of the others in WCN. The same tendency has also been noticed by previous research (Lyon 2006; Strangelove 2010) but its consequences remain unclear. Particularly interesting is what type of subjectivity (Palmås 2015) and agency it creates for participants.

That visibility and existence took place through the disciplinary eye of the others points to the main difference between the Panopticon and WCN. Instead of the central omnipotent gaze, there operated a lateral network of gazes in WCN. However, this disciplined the behaviors efficiently, and thus the right type of WCN individuality was produced. WCN was therefore effective as a self-organized disciplining machine due to mutual monitoring. This network of gazes can be understood as a form of co-veillance (Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003). These findings resonate well with the reconceptualizations of the Panopticon, which point to the logic of the network society as a multitude of gazes, individuals watching over each other (see Calvert 2004; Lyon 2005; Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003; Mathieson 1997; Whitaker 1999).

That the formation of individuality took place through lateral monitoring is a symptom of surveillance integrating into all aspects of everyday life (Gangneux 2014). The type of surveillance observed here was not a top-down disciplining process and might also be interpreted as a symptom of empowerment, participation, and entertainment (Albrechtslund 2008; Gangneux; Koskela 2006, 2009; Martin et al. 2009). However, this does not make it automatically empowering or less “surveillant.” Instead, the more the co-participants monitor us, the more likely we are to act appropriately. In this way, the empowering and liberating effects of social media environments that make use of surveillance become questionable. The production and consumption of the surveillance in WCN were mixed (Fuchs 2011), and the organization was built on lateral surveillance. This produced specific surveillant individualism (Ganesh 2016), in which individuals monitored and surveilled each other on an everyday basis. Surveillant individualism was composed of different levels of individual and organizational agency. This is why the surveillance seemed to come from within, from the participants themselves as a voluntary and playful activity.

The consciousness of the gaze was remarkable in WCN, just as in the operation of the Panopticon. Through it, individuals became linked together in the disciplinary space (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 156) of WCN. The consciousness of being observed (by the multitude gaze of the peers) also formed a communicational and social space that was based on discipline. This is in line with previous research on surveillance and privacy studies in which the DIY environment and the disciplinary techniques used are understood to frame the type of communication that is possible essentially and through that, how the individuality in the environment is framed (Andrejevic 2007). As has been proposed, communication (in the form of self-performance) in DIY environments happens under the controlling eye of the co-participants (Calvert 2004; Lyon 2006; Strangelove 2010) and the communicational environment (Andrejevic 2006; Gandy 1993; Lyon 1994), and it produces a modern Panopticon (Andrejevic 2006). This has been noted as an effect of exploitative participation claimed as typical for DIY environments and social media (Andrejevic 2005, 2007; Dubrofsky 2007; Fuchs 2013; Pecora 2002; Petersen 2008). However, the DIY cultural understanding (Jenkins 2006) of active doing and sharing of the artifacts with peers through showing has implications for understanding the functioning of new mediated surveillance. The position that DIY culture offers for oneself is twofold. On one hand, the “doer” is as an active subject. On the other hand, she or he is an object that depends on being watched. The active “doing” is, at least theoretically, possible for everyone. Moreover, the roles of the “doers” and watchers can be turned around.

This is how DIY culture builds up environments of lateral surveillance. This also means that the understanding of exploitative participation is now contrary to the findings of this study.

In WCN, the members themselves emphasized the voluntary activity of communication and their insistence to be observed in a loose and free community. The notion of exploitative participation seems to denigrate the willfulness of this activity and is a too general way to understand participation. What I have explained here instead is that the discipline in each circumstance requires delicate procedures when carefully observed. These subtle methods of discipline were the ways of creating the space and frames for communication in the WCN environment. Thus, the individual can voluntarily log on to the WCN environment, which is reminiscent of the disciplinary machine of the Panopticon. Once the individual is logged on, WCN discipline is carefully followed. This further follows the panopticon logic; once the discipline of the environment is “written into stone” and on the spatial and visual arrangements, the individual begins to act and communicate according to the discipline, ultimately internalizing it. However, as this study seeks to emphasize, by internalizing the rules, the individual is also able to communicate and thus to exist in the environment and, as suggested, in a social media-saturated society as well. Therefore, panopticism is a way to create the frames inside which the individual may communicate and make herself existent. In a way, both the machine keeps on going and the individual is offered possibilities for I-narrations and self-formation through them. Whether this communication and the participation it enhances are understood as exploitative or not is still a question of individual choice.

Overall, to understand surveillance as negative would be to ignore its productive power. The notion of participatory surveillance (Albrechtslund 2008) suggests that disciplinary power can be interpreted as positive in the context of DIY cultures. Surveillance changes the role of the user from passive to active and may be understood as a mutual, empowering, and subjectivity building practice that is fundamentally social.

In the studied context, co-surveillance made the vloggers act and communicate context-wise inside a disciplinary machine. Whether this is understood as a positive or negative consequence is a matter of opinion in the debates between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists (Fuchs 2009). What I have here explained is that surveillance should not be understood negatively and as oppressive in essence but as a productive means for enhancing communication in videostreaming social media platforms (that have their ancestors in places such as WCN).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to understand one social media environment, the WCN, to generate knowledge concerning the complicated ways in which the modern individual uses surveillance (techniques) and how surveillance uses the individual. Through this, it is possible to understand present (and oncoming) visual social media environments, which are likewise based on the (voluntary activity of) staging the individual under the surveillant gaze of co-participants. What this study suggests is that DIY environments use disciplinary technology, which is a prerequisite for communication in these environments. The principal conclusion is that for a videostreaming social media environment to function, a disciplining, Panopticon type of power is necessary. Through that, individuality in these environments is formed with help from and because of surveillance.

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