
In the expanding field of communication, Facebook holds a dubious position as both friend and foe. Hailed for its connectivity and its participatory potential, it is equally criticized for its egocentric exhibitionism and its voyeuristic gaze. And yet, Facebook currently boasts over one billion users who friend, share, like, poke, tag, message, creep, and stalk one another (Facebook, 2013a). Facebook’s mission is simple: to give people “the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2013b). Anyone can join Facebook. Anyone can be a watcher and/or be watched. The promise of “power” has transformed Facebook into a multimodal platform of surveillance, which blends interpersonal, institutional, aggregate, and investigative practices. In his text Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World, Daniel Trottier considers this complex and conflicted terrain and analyzes the “mutual augmentation” of surveillance practices across user groups (p. 11). Influenced by Mark Andrejevic’s concept of “digital enclosures” within the online economy (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 35), Trottier conceives of Facebook as a type of “dwelling” that diverse users occupy but do not own, which heightens the uncertainty associated with their virtual cohabitation. Despite the popularity and ubiquity of social networking sites like Facebook, Trottier argues that users are not prepared for this type of “social convergence” exposure (p. 4). He positions himself as an advocate of surveillance awareness, and as a critic of non-consensual, third party use of personal information.

Trottier’s research is informed by surveillance studies and as such, Michel Foucault’s articulation of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as a model for power structures features prominently. Trottier’s discussions of social media use among students and the aggregate surveillance of Facebook users by marketers are familiar territory. What sets Trottier apart is his user-centred approach to research and his articulation of the practice and consequences of mutual augmentation. Trottier incorporates a series of face-to-face interviews with individual, institutional, and business users. In doing so, he gathers rich description of user practices to consider what compels them to be on Facebook, how they conceptualize privacy, visibility, and sociality, and how they manage their identity(ies). The interviews themselves add considerable depth to his analysis. Trottier identifies a “pressing need to foreground social media users by having them describe the interface and their position in relation to it, instead of only using the interface to describe users” (p. 26). His criticism of surveillance practices therefore extends to ethnographic research, which situates human subjects as objects of analysis in the absence of subject consent or engagement. Commenting on research that relies purely on Facebook as a data resource, he states: “in addition to issues of generalizability, this kind of research makes assumptions about how concepts like friendships and social ties are operationalized” (p. 25). Trottier’s methodology is designed to overcome these obstacles.

Throughout the text, students are identified as particularly susceptible to “surveillance creep” (p. 20), but Trottier is quick to note the changing demographics sur-
rounding social media participation. In addition to an aging population of students and early adopters of social media, the mutual augmentation of diverse surveillance practices results in a collapse of boundaries across modalities. Surveillance practices must be recognized not only as “totalizing and hierarchical” but also as “lateral and diffuse” (p. 21). The penultimate augmentation occurs when investigative forces appropriate the practices of interpersonal information exchange and, in turn, individuals scrutinize one another and participate in investigative surveillance. Trottier uses the 2011 Stanley Cup riot in Vancouver as a prime example of this shift; however, the social media mayhem that surrounded the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings offers another cogent example of the consequences of blended surveillance practices. In the latter case, the surveillance frenzy that ensued within seconds of the bombings instigated an online “competition” to locate the perpetrators. As a result, fact checking was compromised and news outlets turned to social media for immediate, unfiltered (and at times inaccurate) information. ABC news anchors described the bombings as “the first U.S. terrorist attacks of the social media generation” and they hailed “the power of social media” to bring people together (ABC News, 2013). While social media surveillance did offer a window into the event as it unfolded, it also triggered a wave of virtual vigilantes who falsely accused citizens and circulated their photographs across social media sites. This overdetermined spectacle epitomizes Trottier’s concerns surrounding the mutual augmentation of surveillance practices. While it represents an extreme example, it illustrates how everyday domestic technology is easily co-opted and how online users are complicit despite the risks. Without a clear means to manage one’s identity once it circulates online, individuals are at the mercy of online users who continue to manage it for them without their consent.

Trottier develops his argument in a clear and concise manner. His text is organized in a logical fashion and his interview findings are the centrepiece of the work. This text provides a strong overview of social media surveillance as an everyday practice. The reader is asked to consider the consequences of living in a world of “openness” and “connectivity” without effective privacy measures in place. While Henry Jenkins (2006) revels in the collision between top-down and bottom-up processes that media convergence enables, Trottier is apprehensive about the blending of top-down and bottom-up surveillance practices that social convergence encourages (p. 153). He calls for the development of secure privacy controls within Facebook and the development of an ethics of social media practices that emphasizes mutual transparency and mutual protection.

References

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