

## A Proposal for GERA Conference 2014

### Digital Surveillance: Foucault, the Internet, and the Meaning for Democracy

Recently, on Georgia Southern University's campus the administration spearheaded a program to assess the quality of online courses. Without telling the faculty, they appointed the staff at the online teaching and learning center to surreptitiously enter random online courses and evaluate them based on a standard rubric. This example highlights the surveillance capabilities of our new digital world and its potential threat to academic freedom, in this specific case, and democracy, in other cases. Edward Snowden showed the world that governments and corporations are joining together to digitally collect data on citizens and customers. Most theoreticians of the day are familiar with Michel Foucault's (1977) description of the surveillance society and the normalizing effects it has on the individual. And, there can be no doubt that digital surveillance has the same normalizing effects, sometimes. But, there can also be no doubt that in some ways, digital surveillance acts quite differently than Foucault's original thinking on this subject. In this paper, we will use Foucault's discussion of surveillance, the panopticon, and the carceral society to help interpret our new digital world and the corresponding surveillance technology – a world Foucault could not have imagined when he was writing *Discipline and Punish*. The panopticon, as Foucault described it, depended on a presence of the surveilling technology. There was a guard tower, a camera or an examination that was physically present with the subject, even though the person who created the technology or who employed the technology was hidden. In contrast, digital surveillance abstracts not only the creator, but the surveilling technology, as well. It is important in the example above that the faculty was not made aware of the surveillance. In Foucault's world, the visible presence of the technology, and therefore, the constant awareness of potential surveillance, resulted in an internalization of the perceived judgement and normalization of behavior. Prisoners and citizens became more docile as they never knew when they were being watched. Digital spaces, on the other hand, actually encourage users to break from normality, fixed identities, and the ordinary. All the while, this seemingly safe space for exploration and anonymous play is under constant surveillance. Our searches, our texts, our e-mails, and our web histories are archived in proprietary servers for long periods of time, and potentially incriminating. Without the constant presence of the surveilling technology, digital surveillance can work more like entrapment; luring subjects to behave freely and then capturing this free play, sometimes fantasy play, for inspection by others.

#### Objectives/purposes:

In this paper, we want to theorize around digital surveillance and ways it enhances and changes the surveillance society Foucault described. We are at the very beginning of living with and trying to understand a networked media system that includes constant surveillance technology. Digital technology often has positioned itself as being a new media formation that will enhance democracy through peer-to-peer networks that highlight user-generated content and user-generated prioritization. Often hidden, however, is the relationship between the user and the owner of the proprietary digital space. Using Foucault to help theorize about the surveillance on the internet is a worthy enough project. However, we want to go beyond and to show how digital surveillance actually differs from Foucault as the

social context has changed. We believe one major difference is the presence (or lack thereof) of the surveillance technology so necessary to Foucault's thinking.

### **Context**

The context of this work will be in the United States and we will use examples from social media and learning management systems. However, these digital networks are global and so our work will be relevant and useful outside of the United States. We will consider contemporary news stories, to include Edward Snowden and other examples that highlight issues of government and corporate surveillance.

### **Method**

This is a qualitative and theoretical paper. We use Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to compare and contrast surveillance in the panopticon with digital surveillance. We use contemporary examples in the news and in the courts to highlight how these surveillance technologies are impacting democracy.

### **Arguments/conclusions**

We argue that digital surveillance has both a normalizing effect on the individual and also has the ability to entrap and shame individuals. In the end, the relationship between user and owner is often one of deceit and exploitation. The potential consequences for democracy are not promising.

### **Importance/relevance.**

In order to understand our world, it is crucial we understand our new networked media systems and ways that we interact with it. The consequences for citizenship, democracy and education are far reaching.

### **Works Cited**

Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.