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Deconstructing Bentham's Panopticon: The New Metaphors of Surveillance in the Web 2.0 Environment

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Abstract: *This article reflects on the meaning of the words "control" and "privacy" in light of the intensive diffusion of user generated content on the web. It presents some results of an empirical research based on 145 essays written by Italian students. The data were analysed from a qualitative point of view to understand how young people frame the topic of control on the web 2.0. The attention is focused on the metaphors used to describe online platforms and on the social environments they mention when they speak about the impacts of online diffusion of personal content on offline life. The results show that the new control practices cannot be adequately described within the classical framework of vertical control. The traditional panoptic principle of observation has to a certain extent been transformed and the Panopticon itself is no more an effective metaphor to describe the control dynamics on the web 2.0.*

1. Introduction

In today's society the boundary between private life and public life has been blurred. Nowadays - thanks to the development of a new generation of Internet applications (e.g. social network sites, blogs and video or photo sharing sites) that support social relationships and the ever increasing use of new tools of self-publication on the web - a large number of people are able to utilize online platforms to upload personal content and share private details, photos and videos with a vast network of friends and, often, with an unspecified number of strangers, producing in this way long lasting digital information that remains on the web for a long time, exposed to intrusive eyes (Rodotà, 2004; Zwerger and Medosh, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Paissan, 2009). From Facebook to Youtube a vast amount of personal material is shown to a mass audience of the Internet and it would seem that very often the desire to put oneself on display is stronger than the fear of being monitored.

Social media applications are radically changing not only the way we interact with other people, but also our view of what is "private" (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Rundle & Conley, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). They mark a move toward a more interactive, social and collaborative web but also one that is more and more coming under surveillance (Cascio, 2005).

In this paper a part of the results of a qualitative analysis on Italian students is presented. The research is based on 145 essays written by students from the University of Udine and aims to examine the metaphors used by them to describe the new online platforms and on the social environments that they mention when they speak about the impacts of online diffusion of personal content on offline life.

First a brief literature review will be presented, analysing some of the most popular metaphors used by scholars to conceptualize surveillance (section 2) and exploring how web 2.0 platforms challenge the traditional dynamics of control and require us to go beyond the top-down paradigm

(section 3). Then, the research methodology will be illustrated (section 4) and the results of the analysis will be described and discussed (section 5). Finally some conclusions will be attempted and some hints will be proposed for further works.

2. How to Conceptualize Surveillance

The main theoretical and historical framework which this contribution draws on is Michel Foucault's disciplinary model, exemplified in the Panopticon metaphor. The Panopticon - designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham at the end of the Eighteenth century and popularized thanks to Foucault in "Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison" (1975) - is an architectural plan conceived to impose order on the lives of criminals and madmen. This plan - also known as the "Inspection House" - was annular and included a semi-circular building with several individual prison cells visible from a surveillance tower located at the centre of the semicircle. The observation tower allowed all inmates to be visible, while the prisoners never knew whether or not they were being watched or even if there was anyone in the tower (Bentham, 1995). The inmate became in this way "a subject of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1976, p. 200). Two of the main effects of the Michel Foucault's disciplinary model were the internalization of discipline in the mind of the observed and the voluntary subordination of individual to the observer's potential gaze. The asymmetrical power relation created by this building assured the automatic functioning of control and discipline and facilitates the classification and the management of the prisoners, forced to live in a total and permanent visibility, while their guardians were invisible and hidden to their eyes.

The Panopticon concept with its vertical and hierarchical model of control occupies a pivotal position in the field of surveillance studies and for many years it has represented one of the most evocative and powerful metaphors used to conceptualize control and describe the modern "disciplinary" societies. It constitutes a strong theoretical framework for discussing surveillance dynamics and has attracted numerous scholars, which have embraced Foucault's Panopticon and extended its principles and applications to the analysis of modern technologies. During the last decades Foucault's analysis of Bentham's architecture has become a central reference in the surveillances studies literature. Some scholars have tried to go beyond the Panopticon and introduce other metaphors, more suitable to describe the new media scenario (Poster, 1990; Haggerty & Ericson, 2000; Simon, 2005; Lyon, 2006). As Haggerty pointed out "Most common are those analysis which detected panoptic attributes in any number of surveillance arrangements, extending panoptic thinking to various new domains" (Haggerty, 2006, p. 25). Due to limitations of space, I will present only the most significant ones.

The first to suggest that the classical figure of the Panopticon is no longer adequate to represent the current "surveillance society" (Marx, 1985) was Mark Poster in 1990. Talking about the relationship between electronic surveillance and information technologies, he describes computer databases as a *Superpanopticon* that brings the surveillance principles out of the prison. According to Poster in the *Superpanopticon* "the play of power and discourse is uniquely configured. The one being surveilled provides the information necessary for the surveillance. No carefully designed edifice is needed, no science such as criminology is employed, and no complex administrative apparatus is invoked, no bureaucratic organization need be formed. In the superpanopticon, surveillance is assured when the act of the individual is communicated by telephone line to the computerized database" (Poster, 1990, p. 184).

In 1994 David Lyon theorized the notion of *Electronic Panopticon*, a significant metaphor that focuses on the role that new technologies and in particular computerization have played in the routine operation of surveillance. The author, analysing the proliferation of surveillance activities at home, work, leisure or out on the streets, illustrates how the modern ICTs extend the Panopticon's walls both in space and time, influencing in this way the social order. The *Electronic Panopticon* in fact has seen as an instrument able to monitor people, and - when necessary - order and categorize certain segments of society and to marginalize and exclude some groups from the system of information exchange. Government agencies and corporations are used to employ these technolo-

gies to watch workers, citizens and consumers and collect precise details of people's lives in huge computer databases.

Another important approach that suggests that the classical model of Bentham's Panopticon is no longer adequate to represent the current "surveillance society" (Marx, 1985) was that proposed by the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen (1997; 2004). He introduced the term *Synopticon* in the article "The viewer society: Michel Foucault's "panopticon" revisited" (1997) in order to describe the contemporary mass-mediated society where the many watch and contemplate the few public figures via the mediation of the television screens. According to Mathiesen (1997, p. 230), in contemporary society, the Synopticon accompanies the Panopticon and is able to direct, control and discipline our consciousness. It makes individuals silent and its effects could be much worse than the Panopticon's ones. As Fuchs has recently pointed out "There is a difference between seeing and supervising, in Mathiesen's concept the many do not have the power to supervise the few, but the few have the power to supervise the many" (Fuchs, 2010c, p. 305). An analogous mechanism characterizes also the Internet, where few agents control economic, symbolic and technical capital and are able to set the agenda (Mathiesen, 2004).

More recently Roy Boyne (2000) has proposed the concept of *Post-panopticon*, highlighting that the Bentham's architecture does not seem to adequately describe the shift from the society of discipline to the society of control. In 2005 Albrechtslund introduced the notion of *Postmodern Panopticon* suggesting that the Panopticon model does not fit contemporary dynamics in environments of ubiquitous computing. For Albrechtslund this model "neither represents a *Superpanopticon*, that is an enhanced and more effective version of Panopticon, nor does it abandon the idea of Panopticon. […] Panopticism is brought to a new conceptual and technologically constituted environment, where it together with other equally important metaphors forms a new framework for ethical discussion." (Albrechtslund, 2005, p. 7).

In addition to the presented definitions I would mention also the *polyopticon* (Allen, 1994), *urban panopticon* (Koskela, 2003), *ban-opticon* (Bigo, 2006), *industrial panopticon* (Butchart, 1996), *neopanopticon* (Mann, Nolan and Wellman, 2003). What the majority of these applications of the Panopticon notion have in common is that - although the various concepts give a different interpretation of Foucault's Panopticon - most of them includes the idea of a hierarchical model of surveillance based on an asymmetrical power distribution[1]. The word "surveillance" itself literally comes from the French words sur-"over" and "veiller" "to watch" and therefore contains the meaning of a top-down scrutiny. But is this model of information management, predominantly based on a one way structure, still adequate to describe the control dynamics of social media platforms? The mere application of the traditional notion of surveillance to the analysis of the web 2.0 environments and the actual practices of online self-publication may not fully reflect the current scenario. As Albrechtslund (2008, p. 6) has recently pointed out: "If we want better understand this and other related practices, it is necessary to challenge the hierarchical conception of surveillance". Although the classical concept of "vertical", asymmetrical surveillance (from up to down) is still relevant – as in the numerous applications of data mining used for direct marketing purposes - and there are several new media corporations (Google, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) that are used to collect, analyse and sell huge amount of personal data in order to accumulate capital and maintain economic surveillance (Castells, 2001; Kovacic, 2003; Turow, 2006; Wall, 2006; Andrejevic, 2007; Ragnedda, 2008; Fuchs, 2010a) in recent years it has been flanked by "horizontal" surveillance (from peer to peer) (Albrechtslund, 2008). Therefore - in light of the proliferation of networking technology - the panoptic metaphor must be rethought. The new Internet applications in fact modify the strict role division between observer and observed and offer new possibilities of involvement that empower people to spread information about each other (Koskela, 2004; Albrechtslund, 2008). It is therefore necessary to go beyond the metaphor of Panopticon and search for new figures that are useful to represent more effectively the new scenario. Although - in relation to the new ICTs - the need to

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[1] For instance, the concept of *Postmodern Panopticon,* expressed by Albrechtslund, diverges from this definition, because in this case the surveillance principles go both ways and the structure of visibility is symmetrical (Albrechtslund, 2005, p. 5).

transcend the Panopticon has already been underlined by some of the most important surveillance studies scholars (Lyon, 2006; Haggerty, 2006), today, in the web 2.0 environments, this require-ment is even stronger. Nowadays within social media applications surveillance practices are changing and becoming even more based on a symmetrical structure of visibility. These develop-ments require us to explore and analyse the new control metaphors.

3. Toward the Horizontal Control

In the web 2.0 environments the distinction between those who watch and those who are being watched is increasingly blurred. The new social media platforms are based on a distributed struc-ture that allows a sort of "democratization" of the monitoring practices. Everyone online can be at the same moment observer and observed, but most of the time, as in Bentham's building, the ob-server is still invisible to the observed and the visibility is permanent.

One of the first to talk about practices of peer-to-peer monitoring was Mark Andrejevic (2005). Some years before the proliferation of social platforms on the web, he analysed a range of tools for "later surveillance" and read their adoption practices in the light of the generalized climate of risk that characterizes the modern society. He found that these technologies cover three sectors (fami-ly, friends and romantic interests) and comprise several kinds of monitoring, from the use of search engines for information retrieval purposes to surveillance cameras or monitoring software. Although also the contemporary "horizontal" surveillance is based on a mutual practice, the diffusion of web 2.0 environment challenges the Andrejevic's notion, empowering the users and leading to the birth of new participatory practices (Albrechtslund, 2008). The horizontal surveillance is manly based on a symmetrical power relation, created by different factors that drive the online information disclo-sure. As Gross and Acquisti pointed out "The list includes signalling, because the perceived benefit of selectively revealing data to strangers may appear larger than the perceived costs of possible privacy invasions; peer pressure and herding behavior; relaxed attitudes towards (or lack of interest in) personal privacy; incomplete information (about the possible privacy implications of information revelation); faith in the networking service or trust in its members; myopic evaluation of privacy risks; or also the service's own user interface, that may drive the unchallenged acceptance of per-meable default privacy settings" (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, p. 3).

In order to understand why the social media platforms challenge and modify the knowledge and power distribution it is necessary to reflect on the four properties that - according to danah boyd[2] - characterize online public spaces and distinguish them from the offline ones (cafes, shopping cen-tres, parks, etc.):

1. *persistence*: texts, photos and videos are stored indefinitely and last for a long time. The main consequence is that the content that people upload online will be available for later consultation and in some cases it could be potentially damaging to their personal reputation;
2. *replicability*: the digital nature of content makes it duplicable. It can be copied easily and repro-duced in another context;
3. *scalability*: online content can potentially have a high level of visibility;
4. *searchability*: information can be easily retrieved by anyone through a simple web search (boyd, 2009).

These environments reflect three of the dynamics that Meyrowitz attributed to broadcasting media:

- *invisible audiences*: online people write and upload content with a specific audience in mind, but, very often, the real audience is much larger and the potential visibility is enormous and the content could reach everyone with an Internet access. Users cannot identify who might be

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[2] The author has decided to write her name in lower case letters for personal and political reasons. For further infor-mation see http://www.danah.org/name.html

watching them as they are unable to perceive their audience. The architecture of the tools of web 2.0 is so designed that users do not know who has looked at their data or at their profile;

- *collapsed contexts*: online it is almost impossible to maintain distinct social contexts. Technical settings are not capable of capturing social complexities and cannot represent the actual social relations between users;
- *the blurring of public and private*: the boundaries between public sphere and private sphere are becoming even more indiscernible (Meyrowitz, 1985; boyd, 2009; Peterson, 2009).

In the online public space the audience is invisible, so it is impossible for people to tailor their expression to their audience and to maintain "contextual integrity"[3] because almost every aspect of the architecture of web 2.0 directly conflicts with the offline norms of distribution and appropriateness (Nissenbaum, 2004; Peterson, 2009). The way personal information flows through the net is very different from the way personal information flows through offline environments as online everything can be easily recorded, stored and retrieved. People are artificially unaware of who they are performing for and cannot detect who might be watching from the other end of the Internet connection and which data might be accessed.

Echoing Goffman's theory on social performance and the presentation of self (1959) it is possible to analyse the problem of horizontal control as the problem that arises when the walls that usually separate social situations come crashing down. Any content people upload online is automatically broadcast to everyone else at the same time and is equally accessible to everyone without respect for classical social norms of distribution and appropriateness (Nissenbaum, 2004; Peterson, 2009). On the contrary, in everyday life people are used to behaving differently with a different public in different social situations in order to maintain privacy ("selective disclosure") (Goffman, 1959; Beardsley, 1971). Social practices depend on the audience for whom they are performed. As Grimmelmann explains, we "don't say private things when the wrong people are listening in. To know whether they might be, we rely on social and architectural heuristics to help us envision our potential audience." (Grimmelmann, 2008, p. 18).

The architectural properties of the majority of web 2.0 applications, however, cause contexts to collapse and data flows outward and spreads information in new ways, exposing private content to unwanted gazes. They are not able to capture the real social nuances and to reflect the real complexity of daily reality. They create a "technological fiction" that distorts social relations (Peterson, 2009) and are deeply counterintuitive and counterproductive in the protection of the private sphere because usually we are used to thinking of privacy in terms of social roles, not in term of access control (Grimmelmann, 2008). Sharing photos, videos and personal information means sharing life experiences with your audience, which in turn means "broadcast yourself", the very words of the YouTube slogan. Web 2.0 users very often misunderstand the risks involved with self-publishing and as result harm each others' privacy interests (Farinosi, 2010). The potential and underrated implication of these new forms of exposure is the development of what has been defined as "peer-to-peer privacy violation" (Grimmelmann, 2008). Users are now able to monitor each other, invisibly and in real time. According to Albrechtslund (2008) the effects of this new kind of exposure and visibility are unnecessarily negative, but can be positive too. He - challenging traditional understandings of surveillance that often describe the watched as passive subjects - sees surveillance on social network sites as an empowering practice, as social, playful and participatory act that involves mutuality and sharing, as "a way of maintaining friendships by checking up on information other people share" (Albrechtslund, 2008, p. 7). He refers to this kind of peer to peer control as "participatory surveillance", a practice that is essentially social and based on the voluntarily engage with other people.

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[3] "Contextual integrity" is a conceptual framework developed by Helen Nissenbaum for explaining privacy expectations. She analyses privacy in term of norms of transmission of personal information and classifies them in: norms of appropriateness and norms of distribution. These norms govern almost all social spheres and determine roles, behaviors, and expectations. Contextual integrity is maintained when both types of norms of information flow are respected, and it is violated when any of the norms is infringed.

Unfortunately – as Fuchs has recently pointed out – the topic of surveillance on social media is quite unstudied (Fuchs, 2010b). There are few researches focused on this theme and in most cases they analyse the issue of privacy. Due to space limitations only selected ones are presented.

In chronological terms, one of the first studies is that of Harvey Jones and Josè Hiram Soltren (2005), in which the authors examined how a specific social network - Facebook - affects users privacy. They conducted a survey of MIT students (N=419) to ascertain the level of use of platform's features and then downloaded and indexed the profile-data accessible to a typical user at MIT, Harvard, New York University, and Oklahoma University (N=70311). They found that the majority of students did not use Facebook's privacy measures and not restrict access to their profile. They did not change the default settings and their profiles were in this way fully visible to all other users of the same university. Jones and Soltren found also that privacy concerns differed across genders: women self-censored their information more than men did but, in contrast, they were more likely to publish content about themselves. Furthermore the authors noted that Facebook users were more wary to publish some types of personal data than others and undergraduate students were used to share and disclose much more information than average.

In 2006 Acquisti and Gross analysed privacy and security concerns of Facebook members combining online survey (N=294) and data mining of profiles (N= around 7,000). They surveyed a representative sample composed by students of a North American College and found that although people expressed concern about privacy risks, they were unaware of the real visibility of the content that they put on Facebook.

In 2007, Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini conducted an online survey of users of two different social network sites: Facebook and MySpace. They compared privacy concern and perceptions of trust of 69 Facebook members (average age of 20.36) and 48 MySpace members (average age of 22.93) and found significant differences with respect to information shared on these platforms. Facebook users revealed more identifying personal data than MySpace members, but MySpace subjects were more likely to meet new people by using the online platform. For them trust was not a necessary element in the building of new relationships. The authors showed that both group expressed similar level of privacy concern and demonstrate that online relationships can develop also when there is a low perception of trust and privacy.

Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez and Schuler (2008) analysed the content of 1,378 U.S. MySpace accounts to understand the kind of personal data uploaded on profiles. The authors showed an high level of control by members over sensitive identifying information. Although the majority of account sampled were public, only a small number of users published data such as address or phone number.

The same year Tufekci (2008) conducted a quantitative survey of 704 college students to investigate the practices used by them to negotiate boundaries between private and public sphere and found that students were not overly worried. The results showed that it was rare that users of social network sites chose to not fill in all the fields proposed by the platforms. They usually managed their audience by modifying the account visibility or using a nickname but not by limiting the personal data on their profile. Tufekci found also gender differences: men were more inclined than women to make their account visible to everyone. According to the author: "Students *do* try to manage the boundary between publicity and privacy, but they do not do this by total withdrawal because they would then forfeit a chance for publicity." (Tufekci, 2008, p. 33).

Sonia Livingstone (2008) explored teenagers' use of social network sites in order to understand the relationship between online opportunities and risk. She conducted 16 individual interviews with 8 boys and 8 girls (aged 13-16 years) and found that the participants generally chose "what, how and to whom they reveal personal information, drawing their own boundaries about what information to post and what to keep off the site" (Livingstone, 2008, p.404).

Lewis, Kaufman and Christakis (2008) analysed the privacy preferences of 1,710 undergraduate Facebook users and found four factors that can influence privacy settings: 1. settings of their roommates or friends; 2. level of activity on social network site; 3. gender; 4. cultural preferences.

Students were more inclined to have a private profile if their friends had it. Further the women of the sample were more likely to have a private account than men.

Lange (2008) - through one year ethnographic investigation and 54 interviews - explored how YouTube users manage the accesses to the videos that they upload online and found that the way in which young people use sharing and commenting features reflects different kinds of social relationships. The author also identified different levels of publicness in video sharing and described how users try to maintain their intimacy. Lange pointed out that "What constitutes how "public" a media circuit is varies, depending on participants' display of information about themselves and the content that they produce." (Lange, 2008, p. 377).

Fuchs (2010b) conducted an online survey of Austrian users (N=674) of the social platform studiVZ (average age of 24.16) and found that they had low knowledge about surveillance in Austria and Europe, but most of them knew that web 2.0 platforms usually store data for a long time. The results showed that the sample had an high degree of critique towards surveillance issues that influenced critical behavior. Fuchs highlighted that exists "a positive relationship between the level of critique of surveillance on the one hand and the knowledge about the studiVZ and critical information behavior on the studiVZ platform on the other hand." (Fuchs, 2010b, p. 181).

The majority of these studies are focused on the issue of privacy on social platforms and investigate the individual concerns and online behavior. Apart the contribution of Fuchs, to topic of surveillance on web 2.0 environments is almost uncovered and therefore it is necessary to fill this gap.

4. Methodology

The research method used was based on a qualitative analysis of 145 essays on the topic of "User Generated Content between privacy and surveillance issues" written during the Fall 2009 by a convenience sample of undergraduate students in Multimedia Science and Technology (aged between 19 and 27 years) of the University of Udine. Firstly, during the class of Sociology of Communication, they were asked to write a composition of 3-4 pages describing what they think about this topic. These compositions constituted a sort of written test and students have been regularly evaluated by the professor in charge of the course, who assigned a mark to each essay. Then, since this was an exploratory study, it was decided to analyze the content of the works done by the students from a qualitative point of view in order to understand how young people frame the topic of control in the web 2.0 environments. The attention was focused on the metaphors used by them to describe online platforms and on the social environments mentioned when they spoke about the impacts of online diffusion of personal content on offline life.

Metaphors represent a sort of hypercodification of reality and add a new dimension to our thinking, helping us to understand what type of social representation comes into play when users talk about the online environment (Semino, 2008; Lakoff and Johnson, 1998; Gibbs, 1994; Casadio, 2009). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1998) metaphors supply our thought with a concrete foundation that help us to understand and to represent abstract concepts in terms of concrete concepts. Metaphors allows us to use what we know about our physical and social experience to provide understanding of countless other subjects (Mazzara, 2008; Contarello, Sarrica and Romaioli, 2009; Contarello and Fortunati, 2006 ; Fortunati and Manganelli, 1999). This process - called "anchorage" - helps to explain something not familiar with something that is already held by individuals (Farr and Moscovici, 1989; Moscovici, 2001).

Given the high number of materials collected, it was decided to follow Marvasti's model and to divide the texts collected into common themes (not mutually exclusive). The definition of the themes arose inductively and was based on an understanding which emerged through interaction with the data available. This means that the data analysis was approached without any preset list of themes. As Marvasti points out, this approach offers "convenience […] in simplifying and reducing large amounts of data into organized segment" (Marvasti, 2004, p. 91). The common themes were then analysed from a qualitative point of view to understand how young people frame the topics of privacy and control in the web 2.0 environments and in particular the metaphors that they

use to describe the social media platforms and the social environments that they mention when they speak about the impacts of online diffusion of personal content on offline life.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1.   The New Metaphors of Surveillance in the Web 2.0 Environments

From the qualitative analysis of the compositions written by the undergraduate students of the sample, it has emerged that very often they employ metaphors to speak about the online environments. These metaphors are found to not vary considerably: usually the students always use the same images so it is quite easy to identify the most significant ones. The majority of the metaphors employed by the young people of the sample have several traits in common. As it is possible to see from the following results, in many cases students make use of metaphors referred to the traditional offline environments.

The major metaphor used by the sample to describe online spaces is the *shop-window*. This symbolizes the idea of exposure and can be seen as a sort of emblem of the exhibition, of the spectacular mise-en-scène of products (Marx, 1886). Its communicative logic is primarily based on showing something to other people's gaze. Its transparency has the capacity to create relationships and put the inside in touch with the outside of the shop. Nowadays the *shop-window's logic* is spreading and is reaching out to the whole of society and people are virtually forced to live in a showcase (Codeluppi, 2007). The window's visibility involves living in the middle between the private and public dimension. Online profiles can be read as full-blown virtual shop-windows, as a tool of self-promotion. The visibility of the shop-window entails the exposition of what is personal and therefore to learn how to build and manage personal identity is becoming one of the essential steps in order to live in web 2.0 environments. The online profiles can be seen as virtual shop-window, tools of self-promotion that people use to appear as best as they can, with the most eye-catching photos that they have and with several personal information that can attract observer's attention.

> *"The creation of a page with all your personal information, photos and videos of your private life is a very powerful shop-window."* Martina (20 years)

> *"I think that social media have helped to spread the model of the shop-window. Today everything is transformed into the phenomenon to be shown, including the personal identity."* Mattia (20 years)

> *"Thanks to the internet you can create a sort of shop-window, where expose yourself to be judged and to have the approval by other users."* Vania (23 years)

> *"Social networks are large virtual communities where each user builds a personal profile, with personal information, interests, hobbies, passions…They are a virtual shop-window on the world."* Fabio (23 years)

> *"The net is a shop-window in which the user can show what he wants that others think of him; everyone is free to appear as he wants."* Emanuele (24 years)

Another metaphor very common is the *theatre stage*. Online environments are viewed as places where people can perform, stay on the stage and put themselves and their daily life on display. The key element of this metaphor is the visibility, the public display of the private self. The private dimension is becoming a public dimension, removing the dividing barrier between the footlights and the backstage (Goffman, 1959). What once was in the background is now revealed publicly, sometimes with the most intimate details. This process is not typical only of the web but, during the last years, is also detectable in many TV programs where ordinary people go to wash their dirty linen in public or where private houses have been videotaped 24 hours a day. In a context where people

perceived the environment as a stage, they feel as performers and, as such, they live for the most part of their live as if they were inside a show. Already in 1998, Abercrombie and Longhurst in the book "Audiences" analyzed contemporary society as "performative society", society in which most of the social and professional activities are experienced as if they were performance, as if they were constantly subjected to the gaze of a potential spectator (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). In 2000, Rifkin wrote that today a large number of individuals - in particular young people - consider themselves as an actor and their life as an artistic work in progress (Rifkin, 2000, p. 285). With the proliferation of social media this metaphor has been strengthened. The students of the sample report that a lot of their friends, when go to parties or discos, usually bring with them the camera to capture the most significant moments of the night and publish them online when they back at home. They also talk about the practice to record the video-clip of songs played by the group of their friends and upload online on MySpace or YouTube in order to get more visibility as possible, in the hope of being noticed by a producer and becoming stars.

The metaphor of the theatre stage inevitably focuses attention on voyeurism and exhibitionism and, consequently, on possible risks associated with overexposure.

"I believe that every person that wants to be creative should have the possibility to appear on the small-big stage of the Internet in order to see published its creation, to gratify his ego." Serena (20 years)

"MySpace represents a stage to attract the attention of new people" Giacomo (20 years)

"Social networks are a kind of stage for the staging of all people of the world." Francesca (24)

Some students of the sample talk about the web 2.0 environment using the old and out-of-date metaphors of the *agorà*, the *square*, the *village* (Rheingold, 1994; Damiris and Wild, 1997; Tidwell, 1999; Dell'Aquila, 1999). The online spaces are seen as big virtual squares where it is possible to get to know new people, meet old friends and acquaintances, chat, do business, keep abreast of the latest events, sharing with other users photographs, videos, thoughts. Alongside the metaphor of the square there is also that of "global village", a term clearly picked up by Marshall McLuhan (1964) and adapted to new online scenarios. Both metaphors convey a sense of belonging, socialization and communication and are very useful to describe the public nature of the online sites. The sample sees online public spaces as places where you can meet new friends, re-encounter old schoolmates, chat and make deals. The metaphors of the village and square bring the attention on relationships and possibilities of interaction available to the members of the community.

"With the spread of the Internet, the world has become a real "Global Village". What once seemed science fiction, today it has become possible." Francesca (19 years)

"Social networks are characterized by their ability to create multiple streams of communication. They expand not only the quantity but also the quality of contacts that become public, reconstructing in this way a virtual square where we can meet old friends and stay in contact with those who live far away." Gianmaria (20 years)

"Social networks are becoming the focus of a new virtual society, a sort of electronic square, a place where you can put yourself on display, creating more or less fictitious personality." Alberto (21 years)

"In my opinion, all these virtual squares represent a serious risk for the privacy of users." Andrea (22 years)

"Today many people publish their personal life on the big virtual square, on the digital board of the Internet." Giacomo (24 years)

"It seems to be a member of a team, a country, a village, a crew that sails in the same boat and in the same sea." Marco (21 years)

A minority group describe the web 2.0 environments as a big *condominium*. I think that this metaphor is very fresh and original. The apartment building conveys perfectly the idea of an intermediate place between the familiar and the public sphere, a place where people's lives come into contact with each other. Obviously the reference here is not to the blocks of flats typical of the urban reality, where relations are minimized, and there is a strong sense of anonymity, but to the apartment buildings where there are solid human relationships, based on knowledge, trust, and solidarity.

Social network sites such as condominiums see intertwining many stories, individuals, ways of thinking. There are people who are more friendly and expansive and there are, on the other hand, people who are more reserved and aloof. Everybody is different and can have different levels of openness and of aloofness, but nobody is immune to the signals coming from the other inhabitants. I find that this metaphor is able to reproduce accurately the dynamics that occur within online spaces.

"Online social networks and their platforms - through the suppression of the right to oblivion - make the Internet a big condominium where everyone knows everything about the other residents, because people wash their dirty linen in public." Giulia (20 years)

Another unusual metaphor used by a small group of students is the *jungle*. Online environments are viewed as places full of pitfalls, where survive only the strongest ones. The topic of the risk represents a quite recurrent theme in the compositions of the sample therefore no wonder that there are some of them that mentally link the Internet to a jungle. This metaphor tends to focus the attention on the danger factor and reflects a negative view of the online platforms.

"In my opinion – based on my daily personal experience – social media are a real jungle where survive only who has a strong knowledge of the territory and knows how to move along." Andrea (22)

"I believe that the online platforms are a sort of jungle. The only rule that exists is the law of the strongest." Serena (24)

5.2. The Places of "No Privacy"

A further level of analysis explores the news items that students of the sample cite in their compositions. This level of analysis allows – at the same time - to individualize what the social environments most involved in the diffusion of personal content online and to see what the possible impacts of this phenomenon on offline life are. The events that the students of the sample have talked about are closely related to the period of the empirical data collection (Fall 2009) so they refer to news stories which happened during the two-three years before.

The place most commonly referred to inside the essays is the school. Most of them cite the case of a video of a young boy suffering from Down's syndrome uploaded on GoogleVideo. In this video, recorded by a mobile phone during the school recess, some classmates abuse, hit and insult a poor boy. The news aroused great interest in the press and Italian television talked a lot about it and about scholastic bullying in general. The numerous references to this news in the compositions

written by the undergraduate students is probably the result of the extensive discussion centred on it in the educational environment and of the awareness campaign on the part of teaching staff to avoid the repetition of similar events.

Another social sphere much cited in the students' texts is the working environment. It is possible to recognize two different approaches:

- On the one hand there are those who exalt the potentiality of the net and see it as an extraordinary opportunity to become famous, to draw attention to themselves and to obtain a job position. The most commonly mentioned news items concern Lily Allen and Arctic Monkeys, who both became famous thanks to MySpace; Julie Powell, a woman who blogged her attempts at cooking 524 French recipes within a year and after some months received a proposal to publish the work; Riverbend, a young Iraqi girl who wrote the blog "Baghdad burning" during the first year of the war; Nick Haley, a young British student who made up an amateur advertisement for IPod and uploaded it on YouTube and who gained popularity almost immediately catching the attention of Apple's marketing department, who invited him to create their next Apple commercial.
- On the other hand there are those who highlight the negative impacts that the web, and in particular the personal content, could have on the professional sphere. These episodes are closely related to the collapsed context and invisible audience phenomena (Meyrowitz, 1985; boyd, 2007). The most commonly mentioned news items concern Erica Lee Chevillar and Tamara Hoover, two young teachers dismissed from their job because of some photos taken of them in bikinis; Kyle Doyle, an Australian boy who forgot that his manager was his 'friend' on Facebook when he updated his status and bragged about throwing a sickie; thirteen members of Virgin Atlantic airlines, dismissed because of a negative discussion on Facebook about their company.

The last place mentioned by the undergraduate students of the sample in their compositions is the domestic one. In this case the news items cited are mostly negative. A lot of students refer to the case of Becky Spraggs, a young mother who discovered that her pictures and her profile details had been hijacked and posted on a sex website claiming she was a porn star. Some students report the cruel incident of Emma Forrester, killed by her jealous husband after she changed her relationship status to "single". A small group of the sample refers to the news of Andrea Feick, a young woman who uploaded on Facebook photographs of herself and her friends, both wearing bikinis, in accompaniment with Bono Vox, the frontman of U2. These photos were found by The Daily Mail and published in the Sunday edition, creating some problems for Bono and his wife.

The main results of this analysis show that when young people talk about the surveillance dynamics on web 2.0 environments they usually employ metaphors referred to the traditional offline environments. The majority of the metaphors used by them to describe online platforms is not inspired by place characterized by top-down control practices. They describe social network sites as environments characterized by peer-to-peer logics, such as the shop-window, the square, the village, the condominium. Also when they speak about the impacts of online diffusion of personal content on offline life they tend to report news items strictly connected with practices of horizontal control - both from a positive and negative point of view - and it seems that they are less aware of the vertical ones. They are very attracted by the opportunities to expose their life and become famous, but - at the same time - they are terrified by the possibility that the diffusion of personal content could have a negative impact on their daily life - both in the educational/working environment and in the domestic one.

6. Conclusion

In the light of these results we can say that the metaphor of Bentham's Panopticon does not seem to adequately and completely describe the new online environments and the actual practices of online self-publication and horizontal control that nowadays characterize social media platforms.

As the outcomes of this research suggest, when young people talk about the new online environments and their control practices they employ metaphors very different from the Bentham's architectural plan. They usually prefer metaphors more linked to peer-to-peer logics. Therefore, if we want to better analyse this kind of practices it is necessary to go beyond the Panopticon framework and challenge the vertical conception of surveillance. Web 2.0 services changes the role of observer and observed and offers new opportunities of participation that - involving users in sharing personal details – empower people to spread information about each other. Online everyone can be both controller and controlled, so even the Panopticon has undergone a process of "liquefaction". More than before, using new media and their tools for self-expression and self-publication means creating a sophisticated portrait of yourself that can be watched by everyone. In this scenario we have to rethink the concept of surveillance and pay as careful attention to our online persona as possible. We are entering in a post-panoptic phase, a phase of liquidity which involves and crosses important aspects of social life of individuals, such as school, work, family. Everything – also social relations and dynamics control - has become more flexible and has been put into question the principle of the central tower of control. Nowadays other kinds of control coexist beside the top-down monitoring practices and what remains of Bentham's Panopticon are basically two features. The first concept that is certainly still present is that of "visibility": like the Panopticon prisoners that live in complete insecurity without knowing if control mechanisms work or less and internalize the gaze of power, behaving as if they were always under observation, web users are acquiring the same awareness and begin understanding that the online environments are places public where were always under observation.

A second concept - closely linked to the "visibility" - that exists both in the Panopticon and web 2.0 environments is the lack of perception of the audience: nobody knows if and when is viewed and it is impossible to verify the presence or absence of supervisor and therefore he/she must employ all the mechanisms related to the "invisible audiences" (Meyrowitz, 1985; boyd, 2007). However - despite these common features - it is worth re-marking that the effects and the perception of this kind of visibility are quite different. The horizontal control developed inside the web 2.0 environments can be potentially empowering, unlike the panoptic visibility. It can represent one of the key-elements for community building and online participation (Albrechtslund, 2008). Obviously, the impacts of this continuous life sharing and the effects on offline life should not be underestimated, and it is necessary always keep in mind the possible risks associated with overexposure.

The contribution of this paper constitutes a preliminary investigation which captures just some elements of the paradigm shift in progress. It would be significant to conduct a survey of young people who use these platforms and also an ethnographic analysis in order to study the level of awareness and the degree of online information revelation. In addition would be interesting involve in the research also more mature generations to analyze if exist some age-related differences.

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