Panopticon or Participatory Surveillance: An Investigation into Teens Online

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Abstract

There is a great divide between the perceptions of what happens when teens and young adults participate in Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Parents and educators fear the potential dangers of online stalkers and the possible future ramifications of lives lived in mediated publics. Consequently, there are ongoing attempts to limit these dangers by limiting young people’s access to the technology. In this article, I argue that, not only are these attempts made in vain, they are made with a complete misunderstanding of what happens when youth utilize private information for the sake of gaining social capital. While the actions of young SNS users are misperceived by guardians and legislators as being oblivious to the potential pitfalls, these same guardians and legislators fail to understand the use of personal information as currency within the social sphere of SNS users. This paper outlines the concerns of parents and educators, the role of SNS companies, and, finally, addresses the youth point of view through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social capital.

In 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA). Although this legislation did not pass Senate committee review
(Grimmelmann, 2008), the intention of the act was to block access to all social networking sites (SNSs) in locations that receive federal funding, such as libraries. While the goal of this legislation was to protect minors from encountering online predators (Albrechtslund, 2008), it raises other concerns with regard to the larger issue of online surveillance in the lives of young SNS users. This debate encompasses the issue of youth using SNSs for public disclosure and the possibility of future ramifications in academic pursuits and seeking future employment. This paper will use DOPA as a launching pad for an examination of these issues from the vantage point of parents and educators, who seek to limit the online exposure of young SNS users’ personal information, the companies who provide these online platforms, and young people who use these tools to gain social capital through image representation, contacts, and identity creation.

It will be argued that, though the threats perceived by guardians and governments must be dealt with in some fashion, restricting the use of social media is not only ineffectual, but damaging to youth who interpret the display of private information as a positive social force in the context of desired peer-to-peer surveillance. Furthermore, it will be argued that the most productive method of dealing with the potential harm that can come from youth disclosing private information in an online context, is through instruction in the concept of judgement of young SNS users. This idea stems from Barney’s (2007) notion that judgement is the basis of all political decisions, and that the ability to execute judgement is at the heart of what it means to be a citizen. Focusing on this aspect empowers youth in their online decision-making, and initiates them into a form of action that befits the act of citizenship.

The basis of parental fears is located in the concept of “leaky containers” as outlined by David Lyons (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008, no page available). Lyons explains that information placed on the web that is meant for discrete audiences is being spread beyond those audiences and that “data move[s] freely between different sectors of society...rather than [being] contained separately” (Albrechtslund, 2008, no page available). It is this fluid nature of information movement on the Internet that permits the blurring of the private and public realms and produces the dangers focused on by parents and educators.

As Barnes (2006) notes, the impetus for DOPA is located in the knowledge that personal information, revealed on SNSs, is a boon for sexual predators looking to locate new victims. She cites Katz and Rice who view the entire Internet as a Panopticon in that it is a “constant view of individuals through parasocietal mechanisms that influence behavior simply because of the possibility of being observed” (Barnes, 2006, para. 12). It is argued in the article that online networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, that contain both user profiles and blogs, allow for “high levels of surveillance” (Barnes, 2006, para. 12), and while many young users believe that they are participating in a private sphere, they remain unaware of the public nature of their posts. Barnes (2006) goes
on to say that “the private versus public boundaries of social media spaces are unclear” (para. 14) and that users are often under an illusion that their information will remain in the private sphere. Typical information given through SNSs includes name, address, birth date, and numerous contacts, including email addresses, instant messaging user names, and links to personal Web pages. This plethora of information has prompted Huffaker and Calvert to state that “because teenage bloggers are revealing a considerable amount of personal information, as well as multiple ways to contact them online, the danger of cyberstalking and communicating with strangers online is a serious issue” (as cited in Barnes, 2006, para. 33).

MySpace was particularly troubled by safety issues and legal action was taken due to “sexual interactions between adults and minors” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, no page available).

It is clear from the above examples that parents and educators have reason to want to protect young people who divulge information online. The argument presented here does not negate these concerns, but rather seeks to reflect on the method of dealing with those concerns. It must also be pointed out that boyd (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008) counters the extreme nature of the fear regarding SNS user behaviour stating that the number of child abductions resulting from online activity is marginal. Moreover, both Jenkins and boyd (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008) dispute the notion that any legislation limiting public Internet access will protect potential victims, but will merely guarantee that those who are reliant on public resources for Internet access will suffer from an ever-widening cultural gap between the information haves and have-nots.

Another issue of concern to parents and educators is the effect private disclosure will have on future prospects in schools, universities and employment. It is believed that revealing personal information through blogs, photo sharing, and conversations on SNS pages will adversely affect participants, both in the present and future, as schools, universities, police, and employers that participate in surveillance on the Internet will make decisions according to the profiles of SNSs.

Information disclosed in SNS profiles that could be potentially damaging exists in abundance. As Barnes (2006) notes, photos of hazing incidents have led to the suspension of sports teams, postings of defamatory messages have prompted schools to contemplate methods of regulating conversation on MySpace, and the sharing of information that is considered to be excessively personal might lead employers to favour job candidates who have a limited online presence. Living life in mediated publics allows for the possibility that “adolescent thoughts, musings, and immature actions might become a millstone around the neck” (Albrechtslund, 2008, no page available) of youth as they progress to new stages of their lives. Stressing this point, Tribble, a pseudonymous professor who writes about the ills of blogging, questions the entire reasoning behind blogging, questions the entire reasoning behind blogging and other forms of information sharing when he asks: “The pertinent question for bloggers is simply why? What is the purpose of broadcasting one’s
unfiltered thoughts to the whole wired world?” (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008, no page available). Unable to answer these questions, Tribble says that, as an employer, he would not hire someone who participated in this level of disclosure (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008, no page available).

These incidents all give ample cause for concern about what kind of information is being displayed to a wide audience on SNSs. Again, the question is not whether this is worth worrying about, but, rather, how this issue should be dealt with. Many organizations are deploying DOPA-like solutions: for instance, Chicago’s Loyola University has sent the message to its athletes that they will lose their scholarships if they remain on either Facebook or MySpace (Barnes, 2006). The message from Tribble and some other employers is to stay off of SNSs or risk unemployment. These measures seek to solve the privacy dilemma by removing individuals from the prevalent surveillance of SNSs; however, these solutions cannot be effectual in the long term. The prevalence of SNSs in the lives of young people has made them one of the most important markers of identity. Negating access does not deal with the broader societal issues of privacy and surveillance, but simply seeks to limit the negative effects of online personal information disclosure on schools and businesses. The message from universities that sports teams are not to disclose private events on SNSs does not inhibit negative behaviour like hazings, it merely allows it to go undetected. As boyd (as cited in Albrechtslund, 2008) points out, employers who will not hire applicants who blog risk losing out on the best applicants. She states that “bright people push the edge, but what constitutes the edge is time-dependent. It’s no longer about miniskirts or rock and roll; it’s about having a complex digital presence” (no page available).

Limiting access to SNSs is not a realistic policy objective, and does nothing to engage with the wider conversation of how technology functions in society and what is happening in the larger sphere of surveillance and privacy.

Companies that offer social networking services constitute another important group of stakeholders involved in this debate. Here, the issue is complex because these companies want to protect those who use their sites in order to maintain their customer base, but also want information to be readily available to sell to other companies for profit. Beer and Burrows (2007) speak to these “cultural circuits of capital” when they state that “it is the user profile that has become the commodity of Web 2.0” (para. 3.3). As such, the perspective of the SNS providers is necessarily more ambiguous and their mixed motives result in a variety of attempted solutions to the problem of unwanted surveillance on SNSs.

Before entering into a discussion about protective design elements that have been attempted and others that are lobbied for, it is necessary to address the wider government and business surveillance environment that exists in our culture, which affects all segments of society and to note that this environment necessarily impacts the behaviour of online social networking companies. While the goal of the
policies mentioned thus far seeks to limit participation in a specific surveillance context, it must be mentioned that online surveillance is prevalent in all aspects of online interaction, and is carried out by a variety of actors including governments, marketing companies, insurance companies, and investors. In this respect, many of those institutions that might wish to protect youth from the harm of online predators are also full participants and instigators in the wider surveillance culture. Online surveillance is lucrative to both businesses and governments and, as such, efforts to 'save the children' do not go so far as to remove the opportunities for surveillance, but merely to attempt remove the most vulnerable users by limiting their access. In an atmosphere where surveillance is desired by political and economic forces, social networking companies exist in the middle: simultaneously trying to protect their users from potential harm, while enabling user information to be gathered and sold to third parties.

A vocal ambassador for the dystopian view of the digital world, Gandy (1995) maintains that surveillance takes place in our lives at the level of employee, consumer, and citizen. He clearly outlines how the use of technology of the “panoptic sort” (Gandy, 1995, p. 36) uses private information to make composite sketches of individuals and groups. This information is then used in a discriminatory fashion by government and businesses as they relegate people into “groups of winners and losers on the basis of countless bits of personal information that have been collected, stored, processed, and shared through an intelligent network” (Gandy, 1995, p. 36). Barnes (2006) elucidates the paradox inherent in attempts to protect privacy while government participates in creating the complete lack of privacy when she states, “on one hand, teenagers reveal their intimate thoughts and behaviors online and, on the other hand, government agencies and marketers are collecting personal data about us” (para.10). Barnes (2006) continues to give examples of government participation in the kind of surveillance that parents are hoping to protect their children from citing a proposal from the American Department of Defense to “create a marketing and recruitment database to track students for military recruitment” that maintains information concerning “ethnicity, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, intended fields of study, extracurricular activities, and parents' attitudes about military recruitment” (para. 12). Commercial entities routinely gather a wide range of data regarding individuals, a practice that now occurs with the consent of the individual through credit card applications and catalogue mailing lists. This atmosphere of surveillance pervades many aspects of society, and it is in this environment that SNSs have set up business. This fact must be kept in mind when reviewing the apparent attempts by SNSs to limit user information available through their sites.

For example, SNSs have made attempts to protect the private information of teens. In 2006, MySpace began deleting under-age profiles at a rate of 5,000 a day, restricting users under the age of 16, and requiring all under the age of 18 to read online safety tips before
registering. They have also begun working with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Advertising Council in an online safety program (Barnes, 2006, para. 37).

Furthermore, SNSs like Facebook have clear privacy policies, apparently promoting a strategy for protecting youth that involves making sure they understand the privacy implications of participating in SNSs. Grimmelmann (2008) disputes this strategy by stating that even though he believes Facebook has a textbook perfect privacy policy, “a 2006 survey of Facebook users found that 77% of them had never read its privacy policy and that large majorities had mistaken beliefs about how Facebook collected and shared personal information. Even the 23% who claimed to have read the policy were no more likely to understand what it allowed” (Grimmelmann, 2008, p. 1171). More to the point, Grimmelmann (2008) states that even if users understood the policy, there are still very few safeguards standing in the way of their personal information becoming public. If this is true for all participating on Facebook, it is clearly also true for teenagers. In response to the argument that technical controls will help teens control who sees their information Grimmelmann (2008) points to the work of boyd, which argues that teens will allow their information to be public rather than restrict potential social interaction.

At present, SNSs earn their income by selling user information. Consequently, any privacy protection strategy put forward by SNS providers is unlikely to fully protect the privacy of the user. Grimmelmann (2008) states that the only effective solution to this problem is user education, explaining that education regarding privacy-enhancing practices and the potential pitfalls of exposing too much information must be provided by the same cultural user group rather than authority figures. Teens trust what other teens have to say on this issue and are unlikely to respond to advice from those outside their social sphere. Educating in this manner has proven to be ineffectual (2008).

The arguments in favour of limiting access to SNSs have, thus far, been made by stakeholders who view the lives of young people from the vantage point of adulthood. What has not been taken into consideration is why SNSs are important in the lives of youth, how they are used, what they accomplish, and how the changing nature of the public and private spheres is impacting not only young people, but our entire society. It is the contention of this paper that restricting use of SNSs is ineffectual; what young people do online is important to their development and deserves attention and understanding in order to develop adequate policies of protection.

This viewpoint also uses the concept of surveillance, but in a very different form than discussed thus far. In the peer-to-peer context, surveillance is considered beneficial and functions as a means for gaining social capital. For the purposes of this argument, the term “social capital” is best defined by Pierre Bourdieu (as cited in Siisiäinen, 2000) in lieu of the more popular conception formed by Robert Putnam (2000). In the work of Putnam, “social capital” encompasses concepts of social
engagement and social action, whereas in the
work of Bourdieu social capital is limited to
gaining and using influence in the social sphere.
It is this concept that is central to revealing
personal information online. Referring to
Facebook in particular, Ellison, Steinfield, and
Lampe (2007) claim that there is an understudied
online to offline relationship, furthering the
argument that what happens online bears directly
on the offline lives of SNS users. Consequently,
social capital gained online quite possibly
translates into social capital offline.

Social capital is used in a variety of ways
on SNSs. For example, when a teen employs
online surveillance, he or she is “tracking the
actions, beliefs, and interests of the larger
groups to which they belong...[T]his surveillance
may help the watcher search for social cues that
indicate group norms” giving them a “peripheral
awareness...which can support one’s ability to
remain aware of increasing large and diverse
offline communities, thereby increasing social
capital” (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007, p. 1). In this teenage world, restricting access to
SNSs entails restricting access to social capital.
As a focus group participant said, “At my
school...some people that don’t have Facebook
don’t even exist socially...other people can’t even
place them in their minds...if you’re not on
Facebook, you don’t exist” (Cohen & Shade,
2008, p. 210). Restricting access to individuals is
punitive in that it not only denies them access to
the technology, but also denies them the
possibility of enlarging their sphere of contacts,
specifically through revealing personal
information, and thereby gaining social capital.

Albrechtslund (2008) states that the
display of personal information can be explained
by a desire by teens to facilitate surveillance.
However, this is considered to be participatory
surveillance, which is seen as a positive and
empowering force for those who participate. He
goes on to say that the Panoptic notion of
surveillance “puts the power into the hands of
the watcher while the watched is a more or less
passive subject of control” (no page available).
In contrast, Albrechtslund defines participatory
surveillance as encompassing two key aspects:
“user empowerment and the building of
subjectivity, and the understanding of online
social networking as a sharing practice instead of
an information trade” (2008, no page available).
This definition provides the rationale behind
“empowering exhibitionism” (Albrechtslund,
2008, no page available) as it is used as a tool of
self-creation. He cites Koskela’s statement that
“By exhibiting their lives, people claim
copyright to their own lives, as they engage in
the self-construction of identity. This reverts the
vertical power relation, as visibility becomes a
tool of power” (Albrechtslund, 2008, no page
available). Furthermore, Stefanone and Lackaff
(2009) claim that their studies indicate a
relationship between blogging behaviour and
the behaviour displayed on reality television
shows. They claim to “see a substantial
congruence between Web 2.0’s culture of
personal self-disclosure and the ‘reality culture’
that has come to dominate some segments of
the television market” (Stefanone and Lackaff,
2009, p. 965). The argument presented here, as
well as in the aforementioned article, is more
nuanced than merely stating that teens mimic behaviours they see on television. However, it is illustrative of the fact that there are cultural aspects that reaffirm that social capital may be gained through extreme public disclosure.

This perspective does not take into account the adult fears regarding sexual predators and future ramifications of personal exposure because these are not the major concerns of young people when they employ SNSs to gain social capital. It is argued, however, that it is this perspective that must be taken into consideration when deciding what protective measures will be sought. Attempts to restrict access will not only be circumvented, but the motivation behind these attempts are ill conceived. Any solution must value the self-expression, self-creation, and social capital being enacted in this mediated public. This does not mean, however, that nothing should be done and that teens should be left to unknowingly risk their lives or their futures.

As mentioned earlier, Grimmelmann (2008) notes that after careful consideration of all the policy options available, education regarding the risks inherent in SNS use, and the technological options for personal protection is the best solution. It is suggested that Grimmelmann (2008) is referring to the concept of judgement, and the improvement thereof. This is a concept central to the argument of Barney (2007) in his discussion of the central role of a citizen. It could be argued that, in discussing the need for policy regarding technology, Barney's (2007) ideas are most compatible with the perspectives of parents and educators who want to regulate technology in order to protect teens. This paper is not suggesting that the solution to this issue should be left entirely to the consumer. However, because it is clear that teens will subvert efforts to restrict access, and, without education, will ignore protective technological options, education that augments SNS user judgment seems to be the most effective solution to this particular issue. This solution is limited in that it does not address the issue immediately and it does not fully address the accountability of the SNSs, but educating teens in order to enhance their judgement in both the means and ends of their decisions opens up possibilities for further roles as citizens. By using SNSs as examples, it opens up the discussion on how technology should be examined and evaluated. As the online world becomes more important in the political and social lives of individuals and nations, it seems apparent that educating people regarding judgment at an early age can only benefit future citizens of an online world.
References


