

## Web 2.0 Surveillance and Art

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### 1. Surveillance

“Living in ‘surveillance societies’ may throw up challenges of a fundamental – ontological – kind” (Lyon 1994, 19). Social theory is a way of clarifying such ontological questions that concern the basic nature and reality of surveillance. An important ontological question is how to define surveillance. One can distinguish neutral concepts and negative concepts.

Neutral approaches define surveillance as the systematic collection of data about humans or non-humans. They argue that surveillance is a characteristic of all societies. An example for a well-known neutral concept of surveillance is the one of Anthony Giddens. For Giddens, surveillance is “the coding of information relevant to the administration of subject populations, plus their direct supervision by officials and administrators of all sorts” (Giddens 1984, 183f). Surveillance means “the collation and integration of information put to administrative purposes” (Giddens 1985, 46). For Giddens, all forms of organization are in need of surveillance in order to work. “Who says surveillance says organisation” (Giddens 1981, xvii). As a consequence of his general surveillance concept, Giddens says that all modern societies are information societies (Giddens 1987, 27; see also: Lyon 1994, 27).

Basic assumptions of neutral surveillance concepts are:

- \* There are positive aspects of surveillance.
- \* Surveillance has two faces, it is enabling and constrainig.
- \* Surveillance is a fundamental aspect of all societies.
- \* Surveillance is necessary for organization.
- \* Any kind of systematic information gathering is surveillance.

For Max Horkheimer, neutral theories “define universal concepts under which all facts in the field in question are to be subsumed“ (Horkheimer 1937/2002, 224). Negative approaches see surveillance as a form of systematic information gathering that is connected to domination, coercion, the threat of using violence, or the actual use of violence in order to attain certain goals and accumulate power, in many cases against the will of those who are under surveillance. Max Horkheimer (1947/1974) says that the “method of negation” means “the denunciation of everything that mutilates mankind and impedes its free development” (Horkheimer 1947/1974: 126). For Herbert Marcuse, negative concepts “are an indictment of the totality of the existing order” (Marcuse 1941, 258).

The best-known negative concept of surveillance is the one of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, surveillance is a form of disciplinary power. Disciplines are “general formulas of domination” (Foucault 1977, 137). They enclose, normalize, punish, hierarchize, homogenize, differentiate, and exclude (Foucault 1977, 183f). The “means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible” (Foucault 1977, 171). A person that is under surveillance “is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication“ (Foucault 1977, 200). The surveillant panopticon is a “machine of power” (Foucault 2007, 93f).

Neutral concepts of surveillance put phenomena such as taking care of a baby, the electrocardiogram of a myocardial infarction patient on one analytical level with preemptive

state-surveillance of personal data of citizens for fighting terrorism, economic surveillance of private data, or online behaviour by Internet companies such as Facebook, Google, etc for accumulating capital by targeted advertising. Neutral concepts might therefore be used for legitimating coercive forms of surveillance by arguing that surveillance is ubiquitous and therefore unproblematic. If everything is surveillance, it becomes difficult to criticize coercive surveillance politically. Given these drawbacks of neutral surveillance concepts, I prefer to define surveillance as a negative concept: surveillance is the collection of data on individuals or groups that are used so that control and discipline of behaviour can be exercised by the threat of being targeted by violence. A negative concept of surveillance allows drawing a clear distinction of what is surveillance and what is not surveillance.

## **2. Web 2.0 Surveillance**

Tim O'Reilly introduced the notion of web 2.0 in 2005 (O'Reilly 2005). He stressed that many newer web platforms operate as platforms that support various communication functions and technologies and that they constitute an architecture of participation and rich user experience. On the one hand, one can criticize that web 2.0 is a marketing ideology, that the notion of participation underlying web 2.0 is only pseudo-participation, that web 2.0 is dominated by large corporations and commercial interests, that it is an advertising machine, that communication and community-building has also been supported by older Internet applications (Fuchs 2010c). But on the other hand, an empirical analysis of how the world wide web has changed in the past decade, shows that although the importance of information and communication on the web has not much changed, web platforms that support information sharing, community-building/maintenance, and collaborative information productive have become more important (Fuchs 2010c). There are continuities and discontinuities in the development of the world wide web. The web is neither completely new, nor is it the same as ten years ago. One important characteristic of many contemporary web platforms is that they store, process, assess, and sell large amounts of personal information and usage behaviour data. It is therefore important to theorize web 2.0 surveillance and conduct empirical research about the surveillance and privacy implications of web 2.0 (see the collection edited by Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund and Sandoval 2011).

Economic web 2.0 surveillance predominantly takes the form of the collection, assessment, and direct or indirect selling of user data and user behaviour on profit-oriented, advertising-financed platforms such as Google or Facebook (Fuchs 2009, 2011a). Advertising is highly targeted to the users' information behaviour. Targeted advertising is enabled by economic surveillance. Both targeted advertising and economic Internet surveillance are components of the process of Internet prosumer commodification, which is a reformulation of Dallas Smythe's (1981/2006) notion of the audience commodity in the age of the Internet (Fuchs 2010b): users actively produce surplus value on profit-oriented web platforms and are endlessly exploited by capitalist Internet corporations that commodify the users, their data, and their information behaviour that are sold to advertising clients (Fuchs 2010b). Economic Internet surveillance is a category that is subsumed under the categories of class, surplus value, labour, and exploitation on the Internet, which means that economic surveillance is a means for achieving the end of the reproduction of exploitative class relations that are constituted by the production of surplus value by users and the appropriation of this value by Internet corporations.

Manuel Castells (2009) characterizes web 2.0 communication as mass self-communication. Web 2.0 "is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a

message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic networks is self-selected“ (Castells 2009, 55). Web 2.0 surveillance is directed at large user groups who help to hegemonically produce and reproduce surveillance by providing user-generated (self-produced) content. We can therefore characterize web 2.0 surveillance as mass self-surveillance.

“The panoptic sort is a difference machine that sorts individuals into categories and classes on the basis of routine measurements. It is a discriminatory technology that allocates options and opportunities on the basis of those measures and the administrative models that they inform” (Gandy 1993, 15). It is a system of power and disciplinary surveillance that identifies, classifies, and assesses (Gandy 1993, 15). Producers commodification on web 2.0 (see Fuchs: 2010a, b) is a form of panoptic sorting (Gandy 1993): it identifies the interests of users by closely surveilling their personal data and usage behaviour, it classifies them into consumer groups, and assesses their interests in comparison to other consumers and in comparison to available advertisements that are then targeted at the users.

Foucault characterized surveillance: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication“ (Foucault 1977, 200). With the rise of “web 2.0”, the Internet has become a universal communication system, which is shaped by privileged data control by corporations that own most of the communication-enabling web platforms and by the state that can gain access to personal data by law. On the Internet, the separation between “objects of information” and “subjects in communication” that Foucault (1977, 200) described for historical forms of surveillance no longer exists, by being subjects of communication on the Internet, users make available personal data to others and continuously communicate over the Internet. These communications are mainly mediated by corporate-owned platforms, therefore the subjects of communication become objects of information for corporations and the state in surveillance processes. Foucault argues that power relations are different from relationships of communication, although they are frequently connected (Foucault 1994, 337). “Power relations are exercised, to an exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs”, “relationships of communication [...] by modifying the field of information between partners, produce effects of power” (Foucault 1994, 338). In web 2.0, corporate and state power is exercised through the gathering, combination, and assessment of personal data that users communicate over the web to others, and the global communication of millions within a heteronomous society produces the interest of certain actors to exert control over these communications. In web 2.0, power relations and relationships of communication are interlinked. In web 2.0, the users are producers of information (producers, prosumers), but this creative communicative activity enables the controllers of disciplinary power to closely gain insights into the lives, secrets, and consumption preferences of the users.

Based on a critical theory of technology, the Internet in contemporary society can be described and analyzed as a dialectical system that contains both opportunities and risks that stand in contradiction to each other (Fuchs 2008). The Internet therefore is both a system of co-operation and competition (Fuchs 2008). In the context of surveillance this means power and counter-power, hegemony and counter-hegemony, surveillance and counter-surveillance are inherent potentialities of the Internet and web 2.0. But we cannot assume that these potentials are symmetrically distributed because conducting surveillance requires resources (humans, money, technology, time, political influence, etc). The two most powerful collective actors in capitalist societies are corporations and state institutions. It is therefore likely that

companies and state institutions are dominant actors in Internet and web 2.0 surveillance and that there is an asymmetric dialectic of Internet/web 2.0 surveillance and counter-surveillance.

### 3. Web 2.0, Surveillance, and Art Projects

Eduardo Navas in his project *Traceblog* documents search engine queries generated by an anti-tracking software on a blog. It is, as Navas argues in his chapter, a “critical commentary on the preoccupation of losing one’s privacy“, an “aestheticized device invested in critical evaluation of online surfing“. The project shows that the problematization of web 2.0 surveillance is not just a political task for activists, political parties, NGOs, and social movements, but is also reflected in the realm of arts and culture. By making public information that corporate search engines and other corporate web 2.0 projects normally keep hidden and treat as expropriated private property, Navas thematizes the relation of public and private on the Internet. Online information behaviour of individuals takes place in a publicly available virtual space that is privately owned by companies. By agreeing to usage term, the transaction data generated in this process becomes the private property of companies, users are expropriated and exploited.

Navas’ *Traceblog*-project reminds us that alternatives to the corporate Internet, an Internet based on private property, exploitation, and expropriation, are possible. The new capitalist world crisis has resulted in a renewal of the notion of communism (Hardt and Negri 2009, Harvey 2010, Žižek 2009a, 2009b), understood as the project of a self-organized and self-managed participatory economy as alternative to capitalism and state socialism. Navas’ project reminds us that the alternative to the capitalist surveillance Internet is a communist Internet that is based on common knowledge and self-managed co-operatives (Fuchs 2011b, chapter 9). A commons-based Internet requires the socio-economic context of a truly participatory society (Fuchs 2011b, chapter 9). Navas understands *Traceblog* as an “act of appropriation” and thereby reminds us that in order to establish a humane economy, alternatives to the expropriation economy are needed, which can only be established by acts of negating the negative, re-appropriating the expropriated Internet, expropriating the Internet expropriators.

Lee Walton in his project *Facebook, What My Friends Are Doing in Facebook* explores Facebook “as a performance venue” by creating, as he writes in his chapter, “a series of video performances” using his friends’ Facebook status updates as scripts for videos. Walton created videos that he posted on his Facebook profile and that reflected selected status updates of his Facebook contacts. In the videos, the artist enacted the status update messages. Walton situates his art in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades. Like Duchamp he makes everyday objects (in this case status messages) part of an artwork, which comes as a surprise for the audience, especially for those users, whose messages are enacted. Other influences for Walton are John Dewey, John Cage, Guy Debord, and Vito Acconoci.

Walton’s project blurs “the line between public and private space“ and thematizes that private spaces become more public through social media like Facebook. The private user dimension of Facebook is that content is user-generated by individual users. When it is uploaded to Facebook or other social media, parts of it (to a larger or smaller degree depending on the privacy settings the users choose) become available to lots of people, whereby the data obtains a more public character. The public availability of data can both cause advantages (new social relations, friendships, staying in touch with friends, family, relatives over distance, etc) and disadvantages (job-related discrimination, stalking, etc) for users (Fuchs 2009, 2010d). The private-public relation has another dimension on Facebook: the privately

generated user data and the individual user behaviour become commodified on Facebook. This data is sold to advertising companies so that targeted advertising is presented to users and Facebook accumulates profit that is privately owned by the company. Facebook commodifies private data that is used for public communication in order to accumulate capital that is privately owned. The users are excluded from the ownership of the resulting money capital, i.e. they are exploited by Facebook and are not paid for their creation of surplus value (Fuchs 2010b). Facebook is a huge advertising-, capital accumulation-, and user exploitation-machine. Data surveillance is the means for Facebook's economic ends.

One of the principles of Guy Debord and the Situationist International was *détournement*: objects of the culture industry spectacle are subverted or their meaning is changed in such a way that they no longer support the system, but communicate an oppositional meaning. *Détournement* is an artistic form of culture jamming and semiotic guerrilla warfare. "Détournement reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies" (Debord 2002, §206). Lee Walton's project is a *détournement* of Facebook: he appropriates the platform and transforms its function by creating an artistic space within Facebook that thematizes the relation of the private and the public. Adorno said that the critical function of art is that it negates the logic of capitalism and that "the function of art in the totally functional world is its functionlessness" (Adorno 1977, 320). If the corporate function of web 2.0 platforms is subverted by turning corporate platforms into something different or introducing a non-corporate logic of art into the platforms in acts of *détournement*, we are reminded of the possibility of transcending corporatism and the logic of capitalism. This shows that capitalism is not the end of history, but the pre-history of humankind. Walton's project gives us an impetus to think critically about the role of Facebook and other commercial Internet platforms within capitalist society and to reflect about alternatives to an Internet and a society dominated by corporatism.

The works of Eduardo Navas and Lee Walton have in common that they broach the issue of the private and the public on web 2.0, that they remind us that the corporate Internet is today an alienated space dominated and controlled by large companies that expropriate, surveil and exploit users for economic ends, and that alternatives can be imagined and should be practically created.

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