

# The Controversies of Social Media Surveillance: When Privacy and Exposure are at War

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## Abstract

*Social media is characterized by a self-regulatory privacy policy regime that puts capital interests first. Surveillance normally occurs in political and economic forms; though to a small extent social surveillance is also evident in social media. Little is known by Social Media users about social media surveillance, and surveillance technologies, yet such media is used for e-management. This article sought to establish the stages of surveillance, its technologies as well as its linkage to self-exposure and privacy by a qualitative and innovative research. In relation to exposure, it was discovered that surveillance creates an unbalanced relationship between the observers (such as social media service providers) and those being observed (social media service users). From a privacy point of view the study revealed that the anonymity enjoyed by the individual in small communities, is jeopardized by pervasive surveillance, especially via social media. It was concluded that surveillance over social media is a very controversial issue. The study recommended that the concept of surveillance and its transformation through the digital incarnation of the individual requires an examination with a greater scope and an interdisciplinary approach (which includes diverse disciplines of social sciences like sociology, political sciences, social psychology, anthropology and even history and philosophy) to be evaluated.*

**Keywords:** Surveillance, privacy, exposure, surveillance society, surveillance technologies

## Introduction

This study was conducted with a qualitative and innovative research method, instead of a quantitative and generalizing one. In searching for an answer as to how self exposition and surveillance take form in the social media on the point of self expression, this study was based upon an objective manifestation of the current situation as it occurs. For this reason, a comprehensive literature search was done by focusing on current studies. Digital data alongside areas of recent communication technology usage were included in the scope of this research.

Social media, through the changes and transformations that are brought up by the new communication media and technological developments come forward as the most influential platforms. For this reason, it is highly important to examine the individual-power relation under the title of surveillance, and to detect the situation of the privacy principle. To put forward the affects of the developments mentioned above, current studies on discourse and content analysis have been broadly evaluated; moreover, the digital data of the usage of social media and where the individual is situated within the dimensions of surveillance, exposition and privacy while expressing oneself have been examined.

The limited number of researches based on surveillance on social media, has caused the necessity to concentrate on international studies and foreign researches about the topic.

This article targets all social media users particularly those who are unaware of surveillance and their contribution towards it, social media platforms

## **Background**

### **The context of the surveillance society**

Surveillance society involves being spied on by a “third party”. Communication and surveillance are antagonistic counterparts of the usage of commercial social networking platforms

The easy transfer of information from one place to another through digitization has facilitated the surveillance of “information” alongside the convenience ensured regarding the user, and this has brought up new arguments concerning the relation between the one surveilling and the one who is surveilled, “privacy”, and “self expression and exposure”.

Contemporary surveillance is linked to the growing centrality of consumption and the adoption of information technologies (Lyon 1994, p.25).

The new communication media, while providing avenues to move an individual’s self-expression via his/her “digital incarnation”, particularly with the social networking, into a much more different and richer dimension than it used to be, has also introduced the transformation of surveillance in new forms .

“Surveillance”, as it does in every aspect of life, also reveals itself in social networking where information is being shared. Thus, the basic objective of this study in which the current and potential consequences of “self exposition” of the individual are being examined, and in this context, the transformation of surveillance through digitized information is being investigated; is to put forward, understand and interpret the contradiction of the forms of self expression on social media, on the basis of exposition and surveillance.

### **Surveillance Technologies**

Surveillance technologies have changed the nature of surveillance. Internet surveillance technologies may take the form of surveillance of personal data captured from general internet use; surveillance of personal data captured using specialized internet services; and technologies and practices designed to access data from internet users. Many technologies especially those that support social media operate as part of the global networks that enhance continuous surveillance for example from the Global Positioning System(GPS).In this context, Face book and other web 2.0 platforms are largely advertising based capital accumulation machines that achieve their economic aims by economic surveillance.

Additionally web 2.0 surveillance can be referred to as mass self-surveillance, since it targets large user groups which help to hegemonically produce and reproduce surveillance by providing user-generated (self-produced) content.

There is a Post-Fordist component via e-surveillance as observed by Arvidsson

(2005, p.241), when he alleges that the post-fordist production process directly exploits the communication dimension of social life. A case in point for instance is the Face book application developed by the “software-as-service” company Appirio that enables employers’ access to employees “social networks”. The application links data from the social networks of individual employees to a proprietary consumer relationship marketing database, in order to track leads, make follow-up offers, and report on campaign success to see how their viral campaigns stack up to other marketing programmes.( Market Wire, 2009).

Much as interactive media technologies facilitate new forms of collaboration and communication, including the enhanced ability to access and share information rapidly at a distance, they also represent the next stage of colonization of social life by commerce and marketing.

As internet –based services compatible with mobile technology, social media also benefit from special versatility, meaning that opportunities for surveillance multiply.

### **Research question**

- a. What are the stages of surveillance?
- b. What are surveillance technologies?
- c. What is the linkage between surveillance, exposure and privacy?

### **Hypotheses:**

Social media surveillance has a negative co-relation with privacy and exposure of social media users.

The above research questions were meant to inform social media users about the surveillance process, surveillance technologies about which they may not be aware, and the relationship between surveillance, self-exposure as well as privacy.

### **Stages of surveillance**

The surveillance society is made up of various processes, whereby by surveillance that was formerly conducted on the “suspect” and “ deviant”, has now been extended to the entire population world-wide, as explained below.

### **Social sorting**

Social media surveillance potentially sorts its users by basis of their economic value, and may do so on the basis of unregulated transmission data, as well as the billing data protection under data protection legislation.

### **Categorization**

This involves sorting social media users into categories, and then ranks’ ordering within and between those categories. According to the state, citizenship and surveillance belong together in the modern world.

Social media users' profiles enable companies to target their marketing to a narrower band of consumers, thereby decreasing marketing costs, and increasing response rates. This is much cheaper than mass marketing channels of television, radio, and print marketing. While largely intentional, sometimes surveillance is conducted unintentionally, under the intention of a swift flow of information, goods and people.

It is worth noting that direct privatization can lead to increased surveillance. A case in point is the telecommunications sector in which the diversification and convergence of both technologies and functionalities in telecommunications, as well as the diversification of telecommunications markets, have greatly extended surveillance. The trend is therefore for a multiplicity of surveillance agencies and agents (like social media sites' operators) with their own databases, becoming increasingly subject to commercial pressures to purchase and sell valuable information, as well as to succumb to state desires to accumulate information for anti-terrorist; anti-fraud; and law enforcement purposes.

### **Surveillance technologies**

These networks provide a crucial source to the state or ruling power for the control and surveillance of Internet medium (which is indeed a database as a whole). Disclosures of Edward Snowden who used to be a former agent of America's NSA (National Security Agency) have played a prominent role in Face book and Twitter becoming important data sources within a global context, stemming from the fact that these media's frequent usage in our country, and Snowden's confessions become more of an issue in our contemporary world, where the USA is called the "*big brother*."

The NSA (National Security Agency) is an intelligence and counter intelligence unit established by the USA for the purposes of global surveillance, data collection, decoding, translation, analysis of information and data. Snowden's exposition of "Prism" global surveillance system of the NSA and claims about global surveillance through this system in addition to social networks such as Twitter and Face book providing data to NSA have all caused wider controversy regarding the issue.

So, "meaningful relation" between social sharing networks and surveillance has been revealed. Snowden's recent disclosures have added to the impact of data provision through social networks and enabled a more clear sight of the contemporary situation in surveillance today.

According to the secret documents revealed by Snowden, NSA has set up a Google-like system in order to trace cell phone location information, internet communication logs as well as phone records and electronic mail messaging information that belongs to millions of people. It is claimed that this system named as ICR reach has been developed by American intelligence. The system, which can be accessed by the FBI and CIA, is designed to enable searching data and communication logs of foreigners and ordinary American citizens with no criminal record at all. (<http://www.sabah.com.tr/Dunya/2014/08/28/abdnin-gizli-googlei>).

This new "intelligence pool" developed by the USA, makes it easier to reinterpret future provisions and scenarios of individuals ,in addition to keeping current surveillance intact.

ICReach will enable collection of information ranging from religious beliefs to political ideologies, facilitating prediction of forthcoming actions of individuals within the context of such collected information.

All this progress shows that there is a new individual who prefers to be known instead of remaining anonymous; being visible instead of invisible; being aware of surveillance and not being disturbed by this fact; what is more enjoying it by becoming an object of *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This perception of an individual who willingly exposes himself or herself, rewarding the power by providing all kinds of information to its “database”, while not even being definitely suspicious about the potential harm that all this might cause, has resulted in a power which does not even invest more in surveillance and control, and this transformation is still in progress.

Among the social media tools used for analyzing business trends such as consumer data are SocioBro on Twitter which monetizes the followings of businesses on Twitter; Tweetdeck which enables users to monitor activities across several accounts on Twitter; Social Rank which ranks a business’s best followers, most engaged and most valuable; Tweriod which measures the effectiveness of posts according to levels of engagement, detailing hours and days when engagement is at its peak; Need Tagger which pinpoints Twitter users that are searching for a product or service; LikeAlyzer on Facebook which analyses Facebook pages while highlighting areas for improvement and can therefore enable businesses to see how they compare to similar brands and other businesses’ standards; Wolfram Alpha Facebook report which is incredibly detailed including a relationship status graph and is mainly useful to those who run their businesses through their profiles; Agorapulse which focuses on Customer Relationship Management( CRM) by building profiles of fans based on their interactions on the page. Build Fire which interacts with all platforms; as well as PageModo. All these social media business surveillance tools are paid for on a monthly basis by social media business owner users.(The Entrepreneur Facebook page). These tools play a big role as far as surveillance on social media is concerned, of which many social media users are unaware.

### **The linkage between surveillance, self-exposure and privacy**

#### **Privacy**

As Lyon also states, blurring down of lines between private and public space is related to the improvement of our contemporary surveillance technology. While technology is causing a restructuring within the realms of public and private spaces, “the body” presents itself as the most-influenced one, degraded to a new form of incarnation made concrete by numbers, letters, symbols and codes (such as mobile phone numbers, IP or e-mail addresses) instead of a physical entity, and this results in the physical “disappearance” of the body. Therefore, privacy becomes “*a new space of imprisonment*” under the vice of authority. Many technology users however are unaware of this constraint.

The intense monitoring of cyberspace by private corporations seeking information on consumer behavior, is worthy of critique.( Brown 2006,p10).In web 2.0 ,the users are producers of information, but this creative communication activity enables the controllers of disciplinary power to closely gain insight into the lives , secrets, and consumption preferences of users. For

example, last year, Face book disabled the possibility of people not seeing your name during searches and it is increasingly exhausting privacy violation avenues, whereby the only way to prevent a person from your profiles, is to block them.

### **Exposure**

Being a part of that social network is realized through not hiding one's self, but directly "exposing" it. The individual realizes himself by "dissolving" in and mixing with these virtual communities; so he is confused about when he becomes the subject or object of surveillance. This surveillance that the individual is also aware of is progressive with all its speed and impact on social networks too; however causing a dilemma, the individual does not see harm in "exposing" himself by overarching "self expression" (and even pushing the limits of own privacy) just to be present there.

Haggerty (2006, p.175) alleges that reading weblogs is a form of surveillance that allows for analyses and images of otherwise unknown individuals in an entertaining way. That is to say, democratic surveillance is enhanced by social media and a virtual archiving of documentary traces of the "powerful" is enabled. This is true, since bloggers freely express themselves on ordinarily contentious issues like politics. It is worth noting that while bloggers freely express themselves, they also contribute to surveillance whereby details about them are archived for future use when the need arises, without their knowledge.

The danger of surveillance society lies in the fact that there is more to it than just a series of activities connected to a political-administrative force. So, a sociological perspective aimed at complete control of private living spaces has come along with the transformation of the Internet and information technologies into a form of cyber-space (Aslan, 2011p. 94-95).

It therefore involves the society's simultaneous transformation into an observer/observed position.

### **Methodology**

The literature was selected based on validity and reliability in relation to the research questions. This was very helpful in answering the research questions.

The available literature was analyzed using the content analysis method which was not very appropriate, since the material was holistic and non step-by-step, and ongoing by the researcher.

There was no chance to include variables, since working with them would be highly restrictive.

### **Observations, Discussions, Validation**

From the content analysis of the limited available literature about social media surveillance, it was observed that Social media surveillance is both empowering and exploitative from the angles of privacy; exposure as elaborated below.

A key aspect of privacy is the maintenance of anonymity of individuals, especially in the urban areas. On a positive note, surveillance while violating the anonymity principle can help to create many new services and a speeded-up urban lifestyle backed by individually tailored services, continuous electronic and physical interaction, an always digital-reliant economy and the transcendence of many of the time and space barriers that traditionally inhibited urban life. On the other hand though, the anonymity enjoyed by the individual in small communities, is jeopardized by pervasive surveillance, especially via social media. Through anonymity, the individual has ownership over his or her actions, and relationships.

In addition, the ideals of modernity such as freedom of ownership result in income and wealth inequality; poverty; unemployment as well as precarious living and working conditions. These socio-economic differences create problems for the maintenance of order and private ownership, such as crime, political protests and violent conflicts to mention but a few, that must be contained for modernity to survive. From this point of view, surveillance is a necessary component of modern societies. To elaborate on this further, the establishment of trust, socio-economic differences and corporate interests, are three qualities of modernity that necessitate surveillance. Hence, modernity on one hand advances the ideal of the right to privacy, but at the same time it must continuously advance surveillance that threatens to undermine privacy rights.

Some people are heavily using social networking sites and are willing to take the risk of increased surveillance, despite their awareness of surveillance and privacy risks. Therefore, in this case the potential advantages seem to outweigh the potential disadvantages. For example, for the young generation, it is not an option not to use social media platforms because they consider the communicative and social opportunities associated with social media as very important. At the same time, such users are very conscious of the disadvantages and risks. They seem to fear that they will miss social contacts or otherwise be at a disadvantage if they do not use platforms like StudiVZ, Face book or MySpace and many others. To them not participating in social media, equals to missing out on an increasingly important communication trend in today's world. This seemingly controversial adherence to social media, is attributed to the fact that alternative social networking platforms that are non-commercial and non-profit oriented without an interest in economic surveillance, and which see privacy as a fundamental right that needs to be well-protected under all circumstances, are hardly available or hardly known.

Put differently, capitalist business interests and the unequal distribution of assets that is characteristic of the capitalist economy, result in the domination of markets by a handful of powerful corporations that provide services and that make influence by non-commercial, non-profit operators difficult.

Albrechtslund discusses about participatory surveillance when he alleges that the practice of on-line social networking can be envisaged as empowering since it involves voluntarily engaging with others and constructing identities, hence being regarded as participatory. This is not all though, since participating in online social networking involves the act of sharing yourself( in terms of your constructed identity with others). In this case therefore, participatory surveillance is a means of maintaining friendships by checking on information shared by other people. In modernity via social media, strangers enter social relations that require trust or

enabling exchange. Whether a stranger can be trusted is checked with the help of surveillance procedures. Friend requests and suggested sites' verification on Face book are a good example.

Mere access to interactive platforms does not amount to shared control. In other words, produsage/prosumer commodity does not signify a democratization of the social media toward a participatory /democratic system, but the total commodification of human activity. For example, according to the Entrepreneur page on Face book this year, Face book revealed its secret study of 689,000 users who did not give their consent. Face book harvested users' News Feed interactions to develop a detailed report on "emotional contagion," the ability to manipulate a person's emotions through Face book. This is just one example of Face book's unethical use of the public's information, and entrepreneurs who need to protect their intellectual property are not safe on this platform.

Some surveillance is user-generated (self-generated) and therefore there seems to be a blurred line between online producers and consumers due to the emergence of user-generated content. There is an element of social media users' exploitation, since such users are not paid for the value creation they engage in when using commercial web 2.0 platforms and uploading data.

Self-surveillance also helps in regaining the physically lost inter-personal contacts in form of virtual interpersonal contacts for example, after relocations, school completion and other modifications in people's lives. It therefore enhances social relationship management. The other side of this kind of surveillance from a negative perspective is that it leads to a lot of time wastage as people spend time perusing through other people's profiles, as well as photographs. For example, if an individual spends an hour a day during week days on Face book, an additional two hours on Saturday and Sunday that would equate to about 10 hours a week, which would constitute a big waste of a valuable asset of one's life-time.

In the same vein, Manuel Castells (2009) refers to web 2.0 communication as mass self-communication, since it can reach a global audience just like a YouTube video, a blog or a message to a massive e-mail list. He also refers to it as self-communication on the other hand, since the message is self-generated and the potential receiver self-directed. Many times social media users choose the audience of their message, by way of the «private» and «public» category.

Self-exposure by social media users has enhanced the ease with which surveillance can be performed, due to the new forms of visibility and transparency enabled by such media. A very good example is the time and place indicator when one posts a message on Face book. For example next to the posted message, something like «2hrs ago, Istanbul-Turkey» will appear if the message is posted by a Face book user who is located in Istanbul. This instills some bit of trust among the users of such a platform.

Surveillance from the exposure point of view makes the commodification of audience participation on social media much easier to achieve than with other mass media, since detailed user profiles and knowledge about personal interests and on-line behavior of users can be attained. For example on Face book bio-data; employment information; relationship information; place of residence; home town birthday; likes;email addresses; mobile phone numbers; to mention but a few is among the information required while registering for a Face book account.



In addition, exposure in the form of surveillance enables advertising to become more effective since it is able to predict human behavior with a high degree of reliability, hence managing the populace more efficiently. For example according to (StarTribune.com, 2009), by analyzing or mining large amounts of data, companies can determine customers who are most likely to buy a product, pay their bills on time, or respond to a marketing campaign. Consequently, the more data that are gathered and the more powerful the statistical tools that are applied to that information, the more accurate the results.

The step we take by connecting to the Internet, becoming a member of a social network, buying a mobile phone line, creating an e-mail account, will be watched and surveilled from that moment onwards second by second. “Digital information” based on zeros and ones in different combinations, makes it easier to trace each player included in these social networks. Every player who enters this game (whether knowingly or unknowingly) and believes to be a subject of surveillance would not be able to escape becoming the object of surveillance inside this network structure.

This situation is not only valid for the common citizen; political figures of the powers ruling countries, either “visible” or “invisible”, cannot escape the surveillance of those powers controlling the flow of information and communication. “Facts” revealed could only show the tip of the iceberg while the truth is kept hidden underneath the surface. However, this will not suffice for the observer to remain immune and out of the system. Once information is “digitized”, the preservation of it will not be such an easy task. This information, which is perceived to be well preserved, can change hands unexpectedly and there are examples of such a situation.

Cannons and guns still matter for possessing power; but “the war” is now about having information, possessing digital information through “the surveillance”. “The power” which can develop the best “surveillance” and occupies the targeted “information” as well as preserving it, is going to be the “winner” of the war and “absolute owner” of the power as well.

Contrary to the assumption of the hypothesis, it was found out that social media surveillance is both positively and negatively co-related to privacy and exposure.

## **Conclusions**

This article has explained the surveillance process, surveillance technologies, as well as the relationship between surveillance, privacy and exposure.

Surveillance over social media is a very controversial issue as elaborated above. Any meaningful debate on surveillance society, will depend on the public having at least some knowledge of what information is held about them, where it goes, what is done with it and why. It will also depend on what can be done to regulate the excesses of surveillance and by whom.

## Recommendations

The concept of surveillance and its transformation through the digital incarnation of the individual requires an examination with a greater scope and an interdisciplinary approach (which includes diverse disciplines of social sciences like sociology, political sciences, social psychology, anthropology and even history and philosophy) to be evaluated.

The following areas of research can be helpful in drawing a “road map” for future social media surveillance practices.

- a) The compatibility between level of disclosure, collection and use of personal information with democratic values.
- b) Types of control that should be placed on the use of personal information.

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