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Rethinking the Internet

Rob Wipond, in his article, "Rise of the Internet Police State," envisions a potential future of all-inclusive surveillance, in which the internet becomes a powerful tool of state control, as opposed to the means of "a veritable democratic revolution" (Wipond 1). The argument is simple and attractive. Companies such as Google are watching and recording our internet activity and even collecting our personal information. This information is being sold to interested parties or stored in databanks where it could be retrieved at any time. The logical outcome is paranoia. Surveillance technology can collect data on individuals and turn it against them, controlling dissenters and enforcing the status quo. With every action on the internet being recorded as such, people will be too afraid to take advantage of the internet as a communication medium. This nightmare scenario, however, is predicated on concepts of privacy, identity and the internet, which either do not reflect the reality of the internet or are being transformed in response to technology and postmodernism.

Privacy is the central concept in the internet surveillance debate. The internet is seemingly blurring the distinction between private and public life, but this perspective depends on how much privacy, if any at all, is expected. There is arguably nothing public about viewing a web page in the isolation of your own home, for example, and yet this does not accurately reflect the nature of the internet. The internet is best understood as a public network, a virtual agora in which people can meet and exchange ideas and information. The assumption of privacy currently made by the general internet user is based on a misunderstanding of how the internet operates. A web page is hosted on a server, whether a corporate or personal server. Visiting a web page is akin to visiting a place of business or attending a social gathering, with potentially thousands of other internet users also visiting at the same time, as welcomed by the proprietor or host. There is, of course, one crucial difference. Other people are always present but not always visible, hence the misunderstanding. Privacy cannot and should not be assumed in a public network.

With the understanding of the internet as a public network, there is nothing sinister about a company like Google recording internet activity and collecting personal information. According to Philippa Lawson, there is "'a huge market incentive for companies to violate the privacy of individuals. Our personal information is now a commodity in the marketplace'" (Cited in Wipond 1). The negative implications of Lawson's statement, however, are predicated on the erroneous assumption of privacy in a public forum. Google monitoring activity on its web sites is no different than a store clerk, or even security cameras, monitoring activity in a convenience store. The recording of internet behaviour and collection of personal information amounts to market research, a practice that occurs offline as much as online. Paranoia is simply unfounded as there is no direct or meaningful impact on an individual's life, outside of Amazon, for example, being able to recommend commercial products suited to an individual's taste, however questionable Amazon's predictive capabilities. There is one aspect which deserves more attention, however, and that is the use of personal information and potential misrepresentation.

Jeffrey Rosen offers an argument against internet surveillance in his article, "The Eroded Self." He states that "privacy protects us from being misdefined and judged out of context" (Rosen 48). The argument is that privacy is necessary given the potential harm of being misrepresented to a wider, ignorant audience. Rosen explains, "Your public identity may be distorted by fragments of information that have little to do with how you define yourself" (49). The concept being debated here relates to personal identity and how it is defined, both online and offline. The fear of misrepresentation as articulated by Rosen assumes an essential and individualistic self. The fear is that there is a complete and knowable self that will appear only in part through some particular internet behaviour, and that that part will come to erroneously define the whole. This could be harmful to one's reputation, or simply be a harmless case of stereotyping. This notion of the self, however, is misapplied in the context of the internet, and is arguably being reshaped in a broader context through technology and postmodernism.

A more accurate conception of identity, as it is formed in relation to the medium of the internet, is articulated in Sherry Turkle's book, "Life on the Screen." Turkle argues that identity is "multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections" (15). For example, in virtual spaces such as videogames, players can adopt, or create, a variety of roles or identities. Personal identity in such a context is best understood as an active process of creation or performance, and this can be applied to all forms of internet or computer behaviour. At any given time, in multiple windows on a computer desktop, a user can constitute multiple personas, such as a character of opposite gender in a videogame, a professional business partner in e-mail exchanges, or an anonymous heckler on an internet forum. These personas constitute neither the whole nor even a part of one's identity, as that presupposes a knowable whole, an unsatisfactory concept for a contemporary postmodern society. The fear of misrepresentation as articulated by Rosen assumes the possibility of an accurate representation of a static or linear identity. More accurately, identity is an active construction, something that is continually transformed through performance and in response to experience.

The implications of performative identity complicate Wipond's argument as it relates to the surveillance and control of individuals in society. Wipond argues that accurate information can be collected on individuals and potentially used against them as a form of control. Lawson feels we are approaching a situation containing "innumerable people with power over your life holding reams of information on you that you don't know about and can't control" (Wipond 1). This notion of control assumes that information collected from the internet has a direct correlation with a complete and knowable self, which can be defined and subsequently misrepresented. However, as conceptions of identity are transformed by technology and postmodernism, misrepresentation becomes a misnomer. The internet will more likely foster the concept of performative identity, in which identity is a fundamental misrepresentation, a stage performance without reference. In other words, there is only the performance of identity, or the virtual simulation of identity, and no individualistic or essential self that can be represented or referenced. When Google monitors internet behaviour, it records performances in a specific place and time. A compilation of such performances, linked to personal information, offers a profile of an individual who does not exist, for the profile itself can be nothing more than an artificial construction. Nobody is surprised when Amazon makes recommendations that hardly seem coherent to the individual user. The user Amazon thinks it knows does not refer to any real or knowable person. We find ourselves staring in virtual mirrors and rejecting our reflections.

Rob Wipond's argument is ultimately based on a misconception of the nature of the internet as a communication medium. Wipond sees the potential of the internet as enabling "forces of state control" in its worst case or "democracy and liberty" in its best (Wipond 1). This perspective assumes a medium that can be stabilized, organized and controlled. Fascism and democracy alike assume a center of power. Andrew Sullivan, in his article, "Dot-communist

Manifesto," argues that the internet is rather a virtual realization of Marxist communism. The internet is a manifestation of a collective spirit, and when we log on we are "medieval peasants entering their village commons," where property is "possessed simultaneously by everyone" (Sullivan 30). While this is a more accurate picture of the internet, it must be taken one step further. Following from the postmodern concept of performative identity, the internet, as Sherry Turkle would argue, is an exercise in postmodernity. The internet brings postmodernism "down to earth" (Turkle 17). It can be characterized, along with the performance of identity that occurs in its space, as fluid, nonlinear, and decentered (Turkle 17). The internet is not simply the realization of previously articulated social formations, but something radically new, something inherently postmodern. The implications transcend old ways of thinking.

   An internet police state, as Rob Wipond envisions, is impossible, or at least could never be sustained. The fear of surveillance and control is rooted in old ideas of privacy and identity that are being transformed in relation to the internet, and in a misunderstanding of the internet itself. As the medium becomes more widely acknowledged as a public forum, the questions of privacy will be revised. As the medium becomes more deeply understood, questions of identity and even reality will be revised. The internet is a radically new and postmodern phenomenon, a medium that is fluid, fractured, and constantly transforming. Above all, it is without a center. It cannot be so easily organized, policed and controlled. It is too unpredictable. Moreover, its users cannot be controlled. They, too, are fractured, nonlinear and unpredictable. They are performers in a virtual simulation. The internet is a revolution, but not of democracy or fascism or even an ideal communism. The internet is still young and without precedence. Its eventual maturity will be simply the next stage of its transformation as a medium that defies definition through an understanding of old systems of structure.

Works Cited

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