



Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Trottier, D. 2012. *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World*. Farnham: Ashgate.
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Already in 1950 Norbert Wiener, the founding father of cybernetics, predicted that we will one day live in a society that *can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it*. Increasingly, he stated, the identity of human beings will be mediated by technologies, by machines. The internet and, in particular, interactive social media seems to be the ultimate outcome of Wiener's prediction. Today we are accustomed to the idea that our communication, biographies and identities are mediated by information and communication technologies. But do we even begin to understand its impact? Do we realize the huge influence social media has on our lives? Social media is a relatively recent phenomenon and we are just beginning to address issues of privacy, social change and *living* on social media platforms. Daniel Trottier's book comes at just the right moment to offer an insight on social media in all its particularities, but more importantly to address a new domain of monitoring: social media surveillance.

Facebook, the social media platform that is central in Trottier's analysis, is the virtual space par excellence where users can customize their private information and share it with others. Facebook is a particular kind of digital space that is first and foremost a *dwelling*, as Trottier convincingly shows in his book. Users live their lives on Facebook so naturally that we almost take it for granted. Its success has black-boxed the underlying principles of the platform and, as a result, the question as to how a virtual life is lived seems superfluous. Yet, the fact that the lives of Facebook users are visible to one another and that the exchange of information enables types of visibilities unanticipated by those who use the platform justifies a critical study of social media surveillance. Trottier raises two key questions in opening the black-box of Facebook. First: how is personal information exchanged? And second: how do social actors use social media technology? He address the second question by proposing four models that form the rationale (i.e. the empirical chapters) of his book: 1) lateral or peer-to-peer information exchange, 2) institutional information exchange, 3) data mining by businesses to study markets, 4) policing and other forms of investigation on Facebook.

A key message scattered over the pages of the book is: Facebook is not neutral, it does something, it overcomes distances, is intrusive, creates communities, and *transforms* lives and identities. In this respect, the cover of the book is meaningful: it portrays the Social Network as an actor among humans, integrated and connected in an actor network. It's as if the author wants to say social media has agency, it mediates our actions and our perceptions of the world (Verbeek 2005). And indeed, the book leaves room for that interpretation.

Yet, at the same time, Trottier shows that Facebook is not an autonomous growing machine—it is shaped and reshaped by its users: albeit, a particular kind of shaping. Facebook is a dwelling that requires much effort by the users and moreover, is owned by someone else. Facebook is big business. Whereas earlier media studies suggest that computer mediated communication decontextualizes social life, social media platforms such as Facebook strengthen connections between offline and online worlds. Facebook as social media is convergent, ubiquitous and embedded in everyday practice. This makes the question about social media as surveillance all the more important.

Trottier begins writing about surveillance under the heading, “*The Trouble of Social Media Surveillance*” (my italics). And although social media surveillance is a major concern for him, he recognizes that sharing information on Facebook can also be liberating and empowering. In other words, he adopts a dualistic view: Facebook as surveillance is neither good nor bad but should be considered in its user-context. Facebook enables its users to dwell in a spaceless space (p.7), provoking the question: can they feel safe at home!? Trottier’s answer is rich and layered. That Facebook is a *leaky container* is clear after reading his book. On the basis of his theoretical framework and empirical data (he interviewed students and university employees who use Facebook) Trottier presents five features of social media as surveillance. Facebook enables: 1) a collaborative identity construction with other users, 2) unique surveillance opportunities, 3) social ties to become visible, measurable, and searchable, 4) an ever-changing interface that influences users’ visibility, 5) re-contextualization of information.

A significant contribution worth mentioning is Trottier’s reflection on the use of Facebook by scholars as a source of data. It is commendable of Trottier to address this issue and particularly at the time of the “big data” hype. His analysis shows that it is absolutely necessary that we begin raising ethical concerns concerning the use of social media data for research. It is tempting to consider the big (amount of) Facebook data as a source that comes like manna from heaven—free and easy. However, Trottier rightly states that scholars need to develop a better understanding of what it means to draw their data from social media sources. Little is known about the epistemological status of social media information as data (e.g. users can attach different meanings to the information), and, more importantly, researchers should realize that they have to respect the privacy of users. After all, the information posted was never meant as research data. Trottier doesn’t patronize his audience, but makes a case for a reflexive approach where the scholar using social media data makes him/herself known in order to make the visibility more symmetrical.

In January 2014 researchers from Princeton University published a rather dramatic study on Facebook in which they claim that it will lose about 80 per cent of its users between 2015 and 2017 (Cannarella and Spechler 2014). Well, maybe. Maybe Facebook’s prominence will decline, but social media surveillance won’t go away. It is here to stay; it will expand, become more complex and intrusive. In this respect, it is difficult to write a timeless book about a social phenomenon that is so rapidly changing. Trottier, however, has managed to do precisely that. Of course there is more to say about Facebook and social media as surveillance than the book does. For example, Trottier doesn’t pay much attention to the use of Facebook in non-Western contexts, such as during the “Arab spring.” Instead Trottier’s empirical focus is on the first group of users, university students and instructors. This is understandable, since Trottier collected his data in 2008 and 2009, during the early days of Facebook. It will not be long, however, before we have forgotten that Facebook started at an Ivy League university. Currently Facebook’s users are heterogeneous and so the dwelling becomes even more complicated. Facebook increases its rooms and corners and—indeed—dwellers. Its convergence and ubiquity make it a pressing concern for surveillance scholars.

Trottier has written an excellent book about a social phenomenon that will have a lasting impact. With this book he sets the agenda for the studying of social media (Facebook) as surveillance. *Social Media as Surveillance* will guide future researchers in their attempts to unravel online dwellings.

References

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Editor's Afterword

Social Media as Surveillance was awarded the 2013 Surveillance Studies Network Book Prize for the best monograph on the subject of surveillance published in 2012. Congratulations to Daniel Trottier.