Article

Kids R Us: Online Social Networking and the Potential for Empowerment

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Abstract

Our paper examines the dynamic of surveillance and empowerment from a theoretical perspective, identifies illustrative empirical examples, and perhaps most importantly investigates the practices that maximize the empowerment potential and minimize threats to that potential. In particular, we seek to understand the ways in which young people have adopted or adapted online media in order to deepen their social experiences, build community, and resist measures that seek to limit their online speech and access to information. We posit that there are four different models of the relationship between surveillance and empowerment in the context of young people on social networking sites (SNS). We introduce each of these with a discussion of the dynamic between surveillance and empowerment in each model and some representative examples. Finally we explore whether there are particular conditions which permit empowerment to emerge in a surveillance environment.

Much of the policy discussion around young people and online media has focused on the need to protect children from online predators and offensive material. Often, the policy response to these concerns has been to increasingly track young people's online activities, ostensibly to protect them from danger (Steeves and Webster 2008). Although many policy makers argue that young people seem willing to trade their privacy away in order to participate in online media, children themselves tell us that it is a trade-off they do not make willingly (Burkell, Steeves and Micheti 2007), and that they jealously guard the privacy of their online activities especially from family members, teachers and, interestingly, their own friends (Steeves 2005; Livingstone and Bober 2003).

Yet our understanding of children and online surveillance may be based on faulty assumptions about the meaning of the online experience and its potential for empowerment. Social networking is an excellent example of the dynamic we see evolving. When Facebook introduced the Beacon program, for example, it argued that its users would not see the program as invasive because they had already traded their privacy away to participate in the social network. However, many of the young people who populate the network responded by using the site to call for signatures to an online petition that successfully required Facebook to restructure the Beacon program to allow users to opt out, in effect reasserting privacy rights into the online environment (Johnson and Regan 2007; Steeves 2009).

Research indicates that many young people use online media for self-expression and community building (De Smedt 2006; Ito et al. 2008; Larsen 2007; Lenhart and Madden 2007; Mendoza 2007; Meyers 2009; Moenk 2007; Media Awareness Network 2004). From the early days of the Web, young people have also used new communications technologies to provide themselves with educational opportunities, to explore their own place in the world, and to communicate with other young people about issues that matter to

them. At the same time, the democratic potential of the online environment has been constrained by broader social forces, including the commodification of children's online spaces and policy responses that seek to limit children's use of media for their own protection (Steeves 2009b).

Our article examines the dynamic relationship between online surveillance and the potential for empowerment from a theoretical perspective. We identify illustrative empirical examples drawn primarily from the United States, Canada, the European Union and Oceania in which children and young people have adopted or adapted online media in order to deepen their social experiences, build community, and resist measures that seek to limit their online speech and access to information. Our purpose is not to provide a detailed summary of the empirical literature, but to use these examples to inform the development of a theoretical framework to support a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which empowerment may be experienced in a surveillance setting such as the Internet.

Children and young people are of particular interest because, as Lenhart and Madden (2007) note, they are developmentally predisposed to focus on their social life and as a result have been early adopters of online technologies that enable them to communicate with their peers (11). Livingstone suggests that they may also turn to the Internet specifically to experience empowerment: "the online realm may be adopted enthusiastically because it represents 'their' space, visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance, an exciting yet relatively safe opportunity to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence – to construct, experiment with and present a reflexive project of the self in a social context" (397). Koskela (2004) argues that this increased visibility may be experienced as a form of "empowering exhibitionism." Our goal is to identify and theorize the types of empowerment that might occur for young people online and the conditions under which such empowerment is likely.

In doing so, we are cautious about treating children and young people as a monolithic block. A number of studies have found that there are gendered differences in patterns of online communication among children and youth, especially with regard to privacy protective behaviours (Aslanidou and Menexes 2008; Berson and Berson 2005; Bortree 2005; Lenhart and Madden 2007; Mendoza 2007; National Centre for Technology in Education 2008; Sangmi et al. 2009; Schouten 2007; Shade 2008; Stern 2004; Williams and Merten 2008; Youn and Hall 2008). In addition, socio-economic status continues to correlate with lower levels of connectivity both between and within countries, although, interestingly, Canadian and European households with children are more likely to have Internet access than households without children (Statistics Canada 2009; DeMunter 2005).

There are also significant differences between age groups. A Canadian study (Steeves 2005) mapping online use patterns of children from the ages of eight to 17 reports that younger children tend to spend their online time playing games (88%) and doing homework (57%). However, at ages 12 and 13, online use patterns begin to shift towards greater communication with peers,¹ presaging the high level of social communication that occurs among 15 to 17 year olds. Accordingly, teens and, by extension, young adults are typically involved in what Castells (2007) calls mass self-communication, i.e. online communication, with a potentially global audience, that is "self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many (248). Castells posits that the peer-to-peer networks and Internet connections that support this new form of communication constitute "an extraordinary [albeit constrained] medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects" (249) and may therefore well provide the young people who use them with opportunities to empower themselves. As such, although the studies we refer to in this article involve young people from the age of

¹ Children aged 12 and 13 spend 47 minutes per day communicating online with peers, compared to 26 minutes a day among eight and nine year olds (Steeves 2005: 26).

seven to 25, we focus particularly on findings about teenagers who are actively engaged in online communication.

Our analysis builds on earlier research in four respects. First, we further engage the theoretical literature exploring surveillance beyond the standard top-down, watcher-watched, paradigm to a subtler and more fully developed concept of surveillance. Second, we investigate the meaning of empowerment in a context of surveillance. The empowering potential of the Internet has been a subject of research for some time, but our contribution is in looking at empowerment in venues where surveillance is active. Third, our analysis is concentrated on young people – how they experience empowerment in a surveillance setting, what opportunities they identify, and with what effects. In this way we enrich the developing research on young people and the Internet. And finally our study is focused on social networking sites, another area of current research. By drawing upon existing research in surveillance, empowerment, youth online, and social networking sites, our goal is to offer a robust and nuanced understanding of the empowering potential for youth in the surveillance-rich setting of social networking sites.

Understanding Surveillance on Social Networking Sites

The bulk of writing and theorizing on surveillance adopts the perspective of what we term “one-way” surveillance where the more powerful, often the state or business organizations, watch others for purposes of control. This type of surveillance is dominant in prisons, schools, and workplaces, as well as more generally in what has emerged as the war on terrorism. Within this perspective, some (Lyon 2006, 403) have argued that there might be a benign form of this surveillance for purposes not of outright control but of care. We would argue that care, or paternalistic, surveillance contains only a limited possibility for empowerment of the targeted individuals. For example, it may enable them to do something that they otherwise could not do, such as the elderly remaining in their home. However, the subjects of care surveillance are dependent on the surveillance and they are dependent on the operators of the surveillance – thus their empowerment is dependent and not reciprocal.

To identify the possibilities for, and the nature of, empowerment in a surveillance setting it may be more important to explore “two-way” surveillance, where there is reciprocal watching with your watching “known others” and the “known others” watching you. Mark Andrejevic (2005) refers to this as “peer-to-peer” or “lateral” surveillance and Anders Albrechtslund (2008) refers to it as “participatory surveillance.” Andrejevic sees this not in an empowering way but within the context of the war on terror and the risk society where the citizen is willingly co-opted into surveillance practices because of the “participatory promise of the market” – people learn to maximize their personal relationships by incorporating the market values of efficiency, enhanced productivity and risk reduction into social life. Reconstituting surveillance as a form of entertainment and self-expression thus becomes an important way to train people to participate on an online economy which is dependant upon the commodification of their personal information (Andrejevic 2002, 251).

Social networking is based on the type of watching where individuals voluntarily reveal rather detailed information about themselves and their activities to “friends” on corporate-owned sites that seek to collect and use the information for commercial purposes. However, this “two-way” reciprocal surveillance may also offer a place where and tools with which participating individuals may empower themselves – in terms of aligning themselves with like-minded others for political or social purposes, and in terms of controlling, or at least contributing to, their identities and reputation. Albrechtslund sees this potential as well, suggesting that the building of subjectivity, the sharing practices, and mutuality in participatory surveillance open up the possibility of empowerment. In the following sections, we explore more specifically the ways this might develop into empowerment.

However, there are at least two ways in which this “two-way” surveillance on social networking sites (SNS) compromises the possibilities of empowerment. First, the “friending” tool may provide individuals with more or less control depending on how the defaults are set. For example, in some SNS users can partition information for certain subsets of their friends and in others they cannot. Raynes-Goldie (2010) found that young adults do report that they worry about how to manage “friend” requests from those with whom they are not really friends. Second, such information is still accessible to the corporation sponsoring the SNS and may also be accessible to “unknown others,” such as future employers, educational institutions, and law enforcement authorities – and watching by such “unknown surveillance” would be part of the first “one-way” surveillance. Raynes-Goldie (2010) reported that users are frustrated with the possibilities that their separate roles collide because of such access and with Facebook’s design which “which always assumed you wanted to share *more* rather than less.” Burkell, Steeves and Micheti (2007) report similar findings with respect to young people between 14 and 17 years of age.

The assumption around the value of “sharing more” reflects the underlying business imperatives that structure SNS. The business plan for these sites rests on the for-profit collection, aggregation and resale of the personal details and behaviours of site members. From this perspective, use of the site is based on a trade-off: users give up their privacy in exchange for the pleasure of participating on the site. Because of the nature of the exchange, surveillance is not only embedded into the site – the site actively solicits certain kinds of information from the users on an ongoing basis so that information can be fed into a web of consumer transactions in such a way that promotes consumption of certain goods and services.

User profiles are therefore designed to facilitate consumer profiling by offering a menu of pre-selected alternatives that enable the site to sort users into demographic classes. The nature of the profile choices themselves can operate to constrain the social representations of identity that play out on SNS, creating a push-pull between corporate expectations and user needs. For example, users have created “apps” to expand gender options beyond the original male/female dichotomy, and university students have created viral spoof videos which poke fun at Facebook’s relationship categories (especially “it’s complicated”). That same push-pull was seen when Google introduced its SNS Buzz in 2010. Early adopters complained when the site automatically read through each new member’s email list, determined who they were most frequently in contact with, and linked to them as “friends”, because this transparency interfered with users’ negotiation of the boundaries between various types of acquaintances.

This tension between the instrumental design of SNS and the users’ social experiences and expectations is also seen in the context of a third form of surveillance as the self watching the self. This entails one’s conscious monitoring of the presentation of the self allowing for the performance of identities with a reflection back to the subject. It is, in effect, identity play without another where the individual has opportunities to experiment with his/her identity, trying on different identities for a while and seeing how they fit with one’s own conception of self or comfort level. This is especially important for adolescents who may use role-playing in games as a way of arriving at an identity (Erickson 1968). Sherry Turkle suggests that “the computer can be similarly experienced as an object on the border between self and not-self...People are able to see themselves in the computer. The machine can seem a second self” (1995, 30). Monica Whitty has explored the notion of cyberspace as a “potential space,” where connections between the external world and internal conceptions of self can be played with creatively (2003; 2008a). She acknowledges the empowering potential of the Internet and argues that researchers should learn more about the positive aspects of being online and how the Internet can enhance well-being (2008b). Much of this earlier research focuses on online dating sites, games, and sites where individuals may be able to be anonymous or use a pseudonym. Most SNS require individuals to present their “real” or “authentic” selves and thus there may be constraints on the playfulness or creativity in presenting the self.

The surveillance encountered on SNS is therefore textured and multi-layered. Top-down surveillance is built into the sites by the corporations that own them, but, running counter to the trade-off model that

would legitimate this surveillance, users are often unwilling to surrender their privacy in exchange for participation. Moreover, other forms of surveillance co-exist beside the top-down structures. Young people both watch and are watched by parents, teachers, employers and other adults within their social circle; they watch each other and themselves; they watch celebrities and appropriate and reconstitute the images of those celebrities for their own purposes in fan videos and fiction, and their videos and fiction are in turn appropriated by marketers involved in “cool hunting”. Surveillance is accordingly less bilateral than it is nodal; users participate in a type of multi-directional surveillance in which the many watch the one watching the many, and in which the self watches the self. In this context, empowerment may occur in the interstitial spaces between the top-down constraints which have been engineered into the site itself, as young people interact with each other and with their online environment.

Understanding Empowerment

Empowerment is a broad concept that is often used and assumed to be understood. Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) have begun to explore the various contexts in which the term is given meaning. They identify four levels at which empowerment can be seen and how the Internet might enhance these types of empowerment. The first level is that of the personal. Personal empowerment entails, for example, a sense of personal competence, an experience of personal growth, and feelings of self-determination (Staples 1990; Barak et al 2008). The Internet can provide young people with an environment where they can practice and master a range of skills that is non-threatening or less-threatening than the face-to-face environment. For example, Ito et al. (2008) report that the digital world has generated opportunities for young people from seven to 25 to explore social norms, experiment with self-expression, develop skills, increase independence and engage in self-directed, peer-based learning to explore new interests. Livingstone and Bober (2003) note that many pre-teens and teens prefer online communication because they can model behaviours that they perceive as being desirable before using them in a face-to-face context, and more easily manage any potential embarrassment by claiming that they were only joking.

The second level is the interpersonal. This type of empowerment involves the ability of the individual to establish and maintain relationships with others. Establishing positive one-to-one relationships based on trust reduces feelings of loneliness and social anxiety, which research suggests may be more easily accomplished online (McKenna et al. 2002). Although these relationships often transfer to the face-to-face world, their online roots may involve anonymity or use of pseudonyms. In other instances, and something widely occurring on SNS, face-to-face relationships may deepen and endure because of the ability to continue the interpersonal relationship online. Abbott-Chapman and Robertson (2001) found that young people – as the direct recipients of popular culture messages that do not correlate with their own social experiences – look for private online spaces for group activities with friends, in order to symbolically and reflexively form a sense of self identity using the close social ties which they value.

The group level is the third level on which empowerment occurs. Being a member of a group boosts one's self esteem, enhances a sense of social belonging, and reduces feelings of alienation and isolation. The Internet provides a milieu in which individuals can rather easily identify others who share their interests, goals, and activities – and this can transfer to their offline relationships. Research conducted by McKenna and Bargh (1998) indicates that individuals who belong online to what might be perceived as a stigmatized group are further empowered to assert that group belonging in the offline world. Internet tools facilitate interactions among a group and maintenance of a group – interactions that are more costly in terms of time and resources in the offline world. Social support, development of group norms, giving voice to all participants in decision-making, and communication all occur rather easily online – although in some cases facilitated by anonymity or use of pseudonyms (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008, 1782-4). Barak et al. found that online support groups are effective in participants' personal empowerment in terms of enhancing a sense of self-control, well-being, self-confidence, positive mood, belonging and optimism (2008, 1879). They conclude that online support groups directly affect personal empowerment, giving

individuals some sense of power and control, and indirectly serve as a buffer against negative effects of distress, combating feelings of powerlessness (2008, 1880).

The fourth level is citizenship, involving engagement with others to do something or to affect some state of affairs, such as change in social or political policy (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995). The Internet provides numerous opportunities for individuals to engage in civic activity and to communicate with government, interest groups and other citizens – thus empowering citizens to feel that they are contributing to what their country or local government is doing. The Internet also lowers the cost of acquiring information so that one can engage knowledgeably in discussions about public affairs. A United Nations (2004) report argues that Internet communication therefore encourages young people to become involved in civic and political issues; however, other research has found that most young people do not use the Internet to participate in civic or political groups or events (Livingstone 2005; Media Awareness Network 2003). The 2008 presidential election in the US and the mobilization of young people through the Internet generally and SNS sites has generated new research into this question.

Models of Relationship Between Surveillance and Empowerment on Social Networking Sites (SNS)

We posit that there are four different models of the relationship between surveillance and empowerment in the context of young people on SNS. Our models are not intended to mirror Amichai-Hamburger et. al's typology; instead, we build on their insights and interrogate how and when the types of empowerment they identify can emerge within an environment structured by seamless surveillance. Below we introduce each of these with a discussion of the dynamic between surveillance and empowerment in each model and some representative examples. In the concluding section we explore whether there are particular conditions which permit empowerment to emerge in a surveillance environment.

Protest or Resistance Model

In general, research has shown that many teenagers are aware of the surveillance potential of websites and are less willing to give out their information. These teenagers tend to engage in several risk-reducing strategies such as falsifying information, providing incomplete information, or going to different websites that do not ask for personal information (Youn 2005; Burkell, Steeves and Micheti 2007). Even on SNS, where being found by “friends” is central to participation, some young people will use aliases to make it more difficult for them to be monitored by unknown others; they also delete comments and identifying “tags” on photographs which would otherwise remain in the public domain indefinitely (Raynes-Goldie 2010).

However, the corporate surveillance embedded on SNS works against this type of resistance. For example, Facebook's user agreement requires users to use their real name and contact information, and polices this requirement with algorithms that identify “fake” accounts so they can be deleted, in effect shutting out individuals who use aliases. Interestingly, users are also barred from selling their status update and other personal information to advertisers, even though that information is sold in aggregate form by Facebook itself. That information is marketable precisely because it is comprehensive; it is no surprise that, although users can delete posts and other information about them, the site is designed to make this difficult and time-consuming (Raynes-Goldie 2010). This loss of anonymity (or pseudonymity) is particularly problematic for those interested in online empowerment for youth, because (perceived) anonymity is one of the features of online communication that enables tweens and teens to express themselves (Berson and Berson 2006), try on different identities and experience a greater sense of independence (Mendoza, 2007).

However, one of the interesting aspects of SNS is the ability of users to organize and “talk back” to those in power. Facebook, again, is an interesting exemplar. There have been several instances of users – many of whom are teenagers and young adults (see Gonzalez 2007) – protesting about policies that they believe

are surveillance-oriented in a way that decreases their control over the space and their activities on the space. This first occurred in 2006 when Facebook launched its News Feed feature whereby Facebook pushed information out to a user's friends without the user's involvement. E.J. Westlake reports that some users felt monitored in a way that made them uncomfortable, other users worried about stalking, and others were annoyed at the amount of insignificant information they were receiving (2008, 22). Users started an online petition in opposition to News Feed which caused Facebook to modify the feature. It occurred again in 2007 when Facebook users started an online petition that successfully required Facebook to restructure the Beacon program to allow users to opt out, in effect reasserting privacy rights into the online environment (Johnson and Regan 2007; Steeves 2009a). More recently in December 2009, Facebook changed its default privacy settings to make text, photo and video updates publicly visible to everyone rather than to friends only – again provoking online protests, as well as broader media criticism (Kirkpatrick 2010; Perez 2010).

Online protest therefore problematizes commercial claims that young people are comfortable with surveillance. Even when young people disclose personal information online, they tell us it is often because they feel they have no alternative (Burkell, Steeves and Micheti 2007; Chung and Grimes 2005; Lewandowski 2003; Sullivan 2009). However, the multi-directional surveillance they experience on SNS also links them to likeminded people and provides them with tools with which to communicate with each other and then with the corporations that house the sites in ways that become visible to the online community. Although there is little evidence that online communication encourages young people to become active in traditional politics (i.e. empowering them as citizens), the ability to see and link to others in the network enables direct collective action, empowering them at a group level to push back against top-down surveillance that interferes with or disrupts social interaction.

Social Capital Model

In general social capital is positive in that individuals are able to interact among others in a social network (Helliwell and Putnam 2004) and a SNS is certainly a social network. SNS empower users to maintain existing social relationships, to find old friends and renew those relationships, and to establish new relationships. Research indicates that young people use SNS primarily for the first of these purposes, to deepen and enrich their social interaction with their circle of friends (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2001; Adams 2007; Ito et al. 2008; Livingstone 2005). SNS provide an environment where individuals can increase what Robert Putnam (2000) refers to as “bridging” social capital, where there is a sense of being loosely connected to others, and also to “bonding” social capital, where individuals are tightly and emotionally bonded to their close relationships. Because of this, SNS can potentially empower the young people who populate them at the interpersonal level, by enabling them to establish and maintain relationships with other people. The same potential is seen in Haythornwaite's concept of “strong ties,” “weak ties,” and “latent ties,” all of which lay the groundwork for connectivity among others – as would be possible in an online social network (Haythornthwaite 2005).

The social capital model may account for forms of personal and group empowerment as well. A survey of undergraduate students at Michigan State University in April of 2006 suggests that Facebook was less important for maintaining or creating “bonding” social capital than it was for bridging social capital (1163).² There was also a strong interaction between “bridging” social capital and subjective well-being; the authors suggest that this may indicate that Facebook use may be helping students with low self-esteem to overcome barriers and connect with others (Ellison et al. 2007, 1163). This would in turn increase their sense of personal competence, decrease feelings of isolation/alienation and increase self esteem by helping them to successfully integrate into a group.

² The authors also found that Facebook was important to what they term “maintained” social capital, where individuals stay in touch with those who were previously close such as high school friends (1163-4).

Surveillance is integral to obtaining empowerment under this model. In order to realize these social capital benefits, SNS members put themselves out there to be found, as well as monitoring what others put out there. Users thus surveil and are surveilled – and both activities can lead to stronger feelings of interconnection, in turn potentially leading to both personal empowerment (feelings of personal competence and growth) and group empowerment (greater feelings of self esteem and social belonging). And this may be especially true of today's youth. More than half of the youth respondents to an Associated Press-MTV Poll in 2007 indicated that technology was an inseparable aspect of youths' lives and claimed that that the Internet or cell phones made them happy. A 2010 Pew Research Center survey confirms these trends with the Millennial generation (aged 18-29) being very positive about the integral role of digital technology in their lives. A minority of youth are aware that their privacy is being compromised online but see this as inevitable while socializing in online spaces, a practice which they regard as a necessary aspect of socialization in a modern world. For this minority privacy is required to be given up in order to be accepted by one's peer group and become part of social groups online (DiGennaro and Simun 2008). Others lament the loss of privacy, but accept it in order to get the personal and social benefits of participating on SNS (Burkell, Steeves and Micheti 2007; Raynes-Goldie 2010).

And there is a definite upside to socializing online for young people. Sonia Livingstone reports that Internet access, used primarily as a means of social networking between friends and family, enables children to feel more socially integrated (2005). Part of that feeling of integration is the fact that they can watch others and that they know others are watching them. They are connected and they know that they are connected. There is an immediate sense of being tied to others in real-time.

Surreptitious surveillance can also enhance the development of this kind of social capital. Knowledge about one's social group and about one's own place in that group is gained from peering behind network boundaries to secretly watch other people in the network. Raynes-Goldie (2010) reports that users exploit "loopholes" to browse through photo albums posted by friends of friends and "creep" the profiles of people at the edge of their circle of friends. They also use multiple accounts to "spy" on people who have blocked their real accounts. In this sense, the multi-lateral surveillance of SNS allows people to explore potential social links, subvert/transgress social boundaries and hone their social skills.

Identity/Self-Presentation Model

Within SNS youth find a space wherein they can shape and present themselves and, perhaps more importantly, where they can modify as they both see themselves in relation to others in their referent group and received feedback from that group. The self-surveillance and peer-surveillance are critical to the possibility of these empowering aspects of presenting oneself and forming an identity. Without the surveillance, the presentations would be one-way, without the feedback that is essential for there to be personal and group empowerment.

In general, research has found that teens search for online spaces where they can engage in group activities with friends or discover safe individual retreats, in order to symbolically and reflexively form a sense of self identity using the close social ties which they value (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2001). A young person is on the whole likely to post personal information on SNS, largely as a way of presenting oneself in a way that one wants others to see oneself. Youth are also able to manipulate access to online content as a reflection of social relationships. Lange found that various degrees of 'publicness' are described in the posting of online videos or photos. Online content may be 'publicly private' - where posters' names or personal information is released but content is not widely available or frequently accessed - or 'privately public', where content is widely available or frequently accessed but access to posters' identities or personal information is relatively limited (Lange 2008).³

³ Interestingly, research conducted by Sam Gosling indicates that there may be a disconnect between what Facebook users think they are portraying in their profiles and how others perceive those profiles (New Scientist 2007). In order to provide users with

In terms of presenting oneself and forming an identity within the context of SNS, there are constraints established by those sites. The first is that the interface of the SNS in terms of the information that is requested by the site contributes to the type and frequency of personal data released, with youth often claiming that they posted information online simply because there was an entry field asking for said information (DeSouza 2009). Additionally youth found their online communications restricted because of an inability to speak their minds, fearing repercussions of behaviour perceived by their peers as anti-social (DeSmedt 2006). Finally the surveillance aspect, which is positive to a point, may become negative if youth feel forced to monitor their online behaviours due to the possibility of being observed while online; as Barnes points out this panoptic gaze may alter or suppress facets of individuality which are crucial to self-development (2006). Such peer pressure – and the surveillance that enables and/or amplifies it – can be positive in terms of identity formation and self-presentation, or can be negative, depending largely on whether the individual sees it as a mirror for feedback or as a cage.

Research has also identified differences in self-presentation and identity formation online among two groups: boys and girls, and younger and older youth. In research on chat rooms, Mendoza (2009) found that girls between the ages of nine and 12 use chatrooms for identity play, which allows them to explore various facets of self and turns chat rooms into “laboratories for the construction of identity,” and for authenticity-seeking by trying to find a legitimate sense of community by divulging accurate personal information and forming “real” friendships. More girls take part in authenticity-seeking than identity play. It is likely that Mendoza’s findings would be similar for girls’ activity in SNS. Sonia Livingstone (2008) identified a second difference in that young adolescents on social networking sites tend to post elaborate, stylized, comprehensive personal profiles, while older teenagers post profiles which contain more or less authentic, straightforward information which is made available to friends and acquaintances within their circle of friends, implying a value system which prioritizes authenticity and genuine links to others. Interestingly, within each group, surveillance plays a role in empowerment as it enables the kind of visibility that is required to develop personal competence and maintain relationships with others.

Performance Model

SNS offer youth a space in which they can perform for others and in this way try on different roles or behaviors for awhile without having to commit to that being part of their persona. Adopting Erving Goffman’s (1959) concept of performance of self, E.J. Westlake (2008) argues that Facebook and MySpace social networking websites can be understood within the context of a dramatic performance whereby young people construct their identities and become subject to surveillance. Interestingly, the surveilled performance may offer them a setting in which they are empowered rather than controlled. The performance of self online versus the performance of self “on ground” constitutes a specific kind of dynamic. Westlake characterizes these online performances as “energetic engagements with the panoptic gaze: as people offer themselves up for surveillance, they establish and reinforce social norms, but also resist being fixed as rigid, unchanging subjects” (2008, 23). Members of the Facebook community use the website to build and enhance their social relationships through unique performances of online self, for which they invite the audience of their friends. Thus when users offer up themselves for surveillance in social networking sites, they do not do so passively. Rather, they set the boundaries, timing and form of their disclosure within the constraints of the Facebook architecture, in ways that may promote both personal and interpersonal empowerment.

SNS also offer youth a space in which they can record and watch their lives unfold over time. Timothy Moenk (2007) found that youth are beginning to track many aspects of their lives online, a phenomenon which is known as Lifelogging. This may also empower individuals at the personal level as it enhances their self-knowledge about the roles they play, gives them a means to evaluate the interpersonal strategies

feedback on how they were being perceived online, Gosling and collaborators developed a Facebook application, launched in late December 2009, called “YouJustGetMe” (Gosling 2009).

that seem successful, and enables them to learn from their past experiences. Such personal institutional memory can be a valuable resource for individuals.

However, the multi-lateral surveillance of a SNS also blurs the line between public and private spaces, presenting unique challenges for young people. As more of their private lives are publicized on commercially owned sites that capture and commodify their information, negotiating the boundaries of each of these performances with parents, friends and strangers becomes more complicated (Barnes 2006; Livingstone and Bober 2003). Teenagers are also increasingly being subjected to real world consequences for private behaviour enacted online, such as underage drinking (Berson and Berson 2006).

At the same time, it is the public-private nature of the space that opens up opportunities to expose the fragility of this use of surveillance as a form of social control. For example, when George Washington University was using Facebook to identify and prosecute under-age drinkers, students began posting “red herring” party invitations. Campus police who raided one party found a cake in the room, with no students and no alcohol present. Because the students knew they were being watched, they could transform the nature of the space from private to public to transgress their role as surveillance subjects. Although this is outside the traditional frame of citizenship empowerment, it is indicative of the ways in which multi-lateral surveillance can create opportunities to engage with likeminded others to challenge government policy by purposely drawing attention to the fact that bilateral surveillance exists beside and within nodal surveillance that allows the many to watch the watcher.

On the other hand, SNS are subject to invisible “meddling” by authorities, and this meddling constrains the types of performances that are available to youth. For example, content filtering to protect children censors certain kinds of performances and reinforces heterosexual cultural norms by creating a space in which deviating from the norm can never occur in the first place (Hull 2009). In like vein, corporations reconstitute the online environment for their own purposes, by paying children (some as young as seven) to talk favourably about their products on their Facebook and Bebo pages. These companies use demographic information to tell the children which of their friends to target with which ads, and coach them in sounding “natural and unrehearsed” (Walsh and Dowling 2010). Companies also mine young people’s interests in philanthropy in order to set up charity sites that inject commercial messages into their social world (Goodstein 2008). One such site, Feed the World with a Click!, encourages young people to solve world hunger by viewing advertising (Steeves 2009b). These kinds of constraints are particularly worrisome because they can reconstruct the communications environment – the “space of flows” to use Castell’s term (Castells 2010, 250) – without the knowledge of the social actors who inhabit that space.

Discussion/Implications

Do the scales then tip in favour of surveillance or empowerment? Does surveillance negate the possibilities for empowerment? Or can they exist together? Or does surveillance itself generate new opportunities for empowerment? Our analysis seems to reveal that, although there is a clear tension between the two, empowerment can occur in a surveillance setting.

Our analysis of the four models of the relationship between surveillance and empowerment reveals that three features of the current organization of SNS, such as Facebook, act to constrain the ability of young people to use these sites in ways that would empower them. First, requiring authentic *self-identification* limits the possibility that young people will feel free to try on different identities, to join social groups whose purposes might be seen to conflict or whose members might be deemed unpopular by other groups, to engage in political speech or association, and to engage in behaviour for which there may be employment or law enforcement repercussions. The *persistence of the identification* and record of the young person’s actions and words further constrain the empowerment potential on these sites. Mistakes will not be forgotten, although they may well be forgiven at the time they occur, and are likely to be

resurrected in a way that will not empower the older version of the younger person. Finally the *commercialization* of the sites is pervasive and cannot be ignored; on these sites one is always considered a consumer or potential consumer.

All three of these constraints interfere with a young person's ability to control the boundaries among the various roles they play, in the Goffmanian sense. The business model behind SNS assumes that transparency is a defining feature of young people's sociality (you exhibit, we watch). But research indicates that young people devote a significant amount of time and energy to managing who sees what of their online performances. The empowering potential of SNS is constrained by persistent self-identification precisely because it makes it difficult for young people to play particular roles before particular audiences (I exhibit different things depending on who is watching). In this sense, top-down surveillance interferes with young people's online empowerment.

But interestingly, our analysis also indicates that the architecture and the social character of SNS do allow for empowerment to emerge in what is otherwise a surveillance environment. Although at first glance the architecture of many of these sites constrains the creativity that young people might otherwise bring to their presentations of self, social engagements, and political activity – and we don't deny that it does have this effect – the architecture also creates spaces and places that young people can and do use to empower themselves.

Our earlier examples about Facebook users forming Facebook groups to protest new privacy settings of new features illustrate this – the group feature of the Facebook architecture can be used to organize against Facebook policies. Similarly the photos and announcement features allowed students to advertise false parties in order to make law enforcement officials look silly. In both these examples, the top-down surveillance embedded in the site was reversed – the uni-directional gaze was transformed by a concerted resistive behaviour that unmasked both the watcher and the limits of the watcher's control. This indicates that top-down surveillance will be tolerated unless and until it disrupts the social interaction that is the primary reason young people participate in a SNS. The site provides a private space in which they can deepen their social interactions, shape and present themselves, and experiment with social roles; and nodal surveillance is central to these forms of empowerment. However, the fact that they are also watched “from above” provides an opportunity to publicize that private space and use it to “talk back” to the institutional watcher who seeks to constrain and control their social interactions.

The inherently social character of SNS, which is reciprocal in nature, allows for the somewhat spontaneous, or at least uncontrolled from above, creation of or reconstitution of interstitial spaces where young people can engage with each other in ways they find to be empowering. It is noteworthy that this space is not independent of the surveillance capacity but plays with the surveillant features to find autonomous spaces that exist within it and can be used in ways that are empowering. Interestingly this space appears to emerge not because of conflict between the instrumental design, or architecture, of the space and its social use, but because the architecture and social character work in tandem to create new spaces available to users to experiment with as they wish.

This raises the question of whether or not the reconstituted space is created or enabled by the presence of surveillance in the first place – in other words, is surveillance empowering or do people push back to find empowerment that interrupts the original surveillance and makes it something else? It seems that young people do not change or challenge the surveillant capacities; instead, they act beside or within them. Two features of the surveillance on SNS, such as Facebook, appear to enable surveillance to be empowering rather than controlling. One key aspect of the surveillance is that it, not only allows others to watch the self, but also provides opportunities to see the self reflected back to the self. The self can use that self-reflection in ways that enable her to act unencumbered by the original surveillance and to act in ways that are empowering. This appears to relate to the notion of self expression through intersubjective

communication that potentially removes the other subject or replaces it with a virtual mirror; in the process, the other watchers become irrelevant to at least some of the possibilities the subject imagines.

Another aspect of the surveillance that takes place within the space of SNS is that there are many watchers – not just advertisers, or “friends,” or Facebook the company, or the self, or lurking watchers (such as law enforcement official and employers) – who can each watch the other. It may be that the mere multiplicity of watchers dilutes the power that any one watcher is able to yield. When the Stasi are the only ones who have access to the surveillance, then that surveillance cannot be empowering to others. By definition, the others are all subjects of the uni-directional gaze and all they can do is submit or resist. However, the architectures of surveillance embedded in SNS are not solely uni-directional and they are not fixed; they need to be populated by social content and, when they are, the reciprocity that is central to social interaction opens up possibilities for empowerment that can find expression in the liminal social spaces that exist within and beside the uni-directional gaze. The fact that the surveillance young people experience on SNS is multi-directional and open in some ways creates spaces in which everyone may benefit individually from the information they gain through their surveillance of themselves and others, as well as spaces which allow individuals to join together to call power into account, including for example the power of advertisers, Facebook the company, bullies, and law enforcement officials.

In conclusion, the surveillance that young people encounter on SNS is textured and multi-layered, and can best be understood by expanding the traditional top-down conceptualization of the panoptic gaze to take other forms of surveillance into account. Simple models that posit that young people willingly embrace surveillance in the context of a trade-off between privacy and social participation fail to account for the many ways in which they resist top-down institutional surveillance. Interestingly, it is the surveillance itself that empowers them to resist because it provides a channel through which they can collectively challenge institutional control. At the same time, the surveillance architectures on SNS are not merely uni-directional and they are not static. They are designed to be filled with social content and therefore the watching that occurs on these sites is reciprocal. The resultant visibility within and between social actors on these sites provides opportunities for young people to empower themselves by strengthening their social capital and experimenting with their self-presentation. However, the empowering potential of SNS continues to be constrained by competing corporate imperatives that seek to privilege top-down surveillance in order to mine and commodify young people’s social world.

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