

Sara Meyer

12 December 2019

Technology as a Panopticon in American Culture

Introduction: Hello, and welcome to the panopticon!

Jeremy Bentham proposed the idea of the panopticon as an architectural design capable of promoting social reform in 1791. The concept is deceptively simple: several stories of cells are arranged in a semicircle with large windows facing a central guard tower. A combination of blinds and zig-zagging doors inside the guard tower and lights shining into the cells allows for the people inside them to be constantly monitored without ever knowing whether or not they are being watched. Additionally, the individuals in the cells are unable to see or communicate with each other, so their actions are based only on the fact that they assume themselves to be under surveillance at all times (Foucault, 1975). This architectural design could hypothetically be applied to a number of social institutions -- schools, hospitals, mental health facilities, workplaces, and most notably, prisons. In theory, the fact that the people inside of the panopticon believe they are being constantly monitored should promote good behavior; or rather, behavior considered good by the governing body inside of the guard tower.

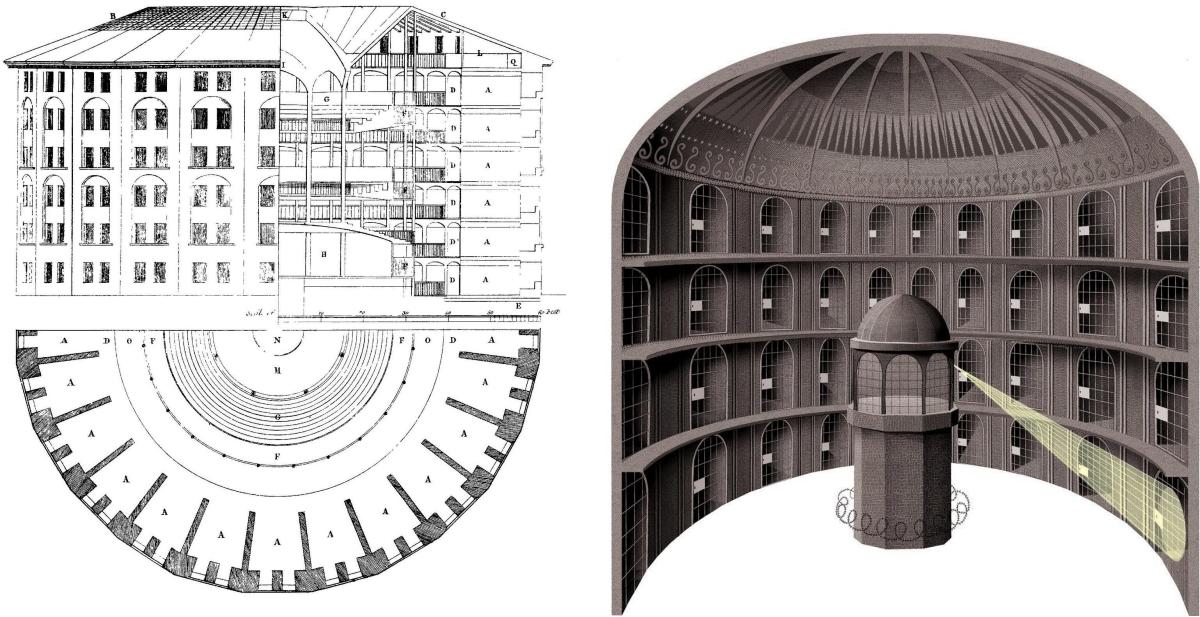


Figure 1: Left: Bentham's original sketch of the panopticon. Right: artist Adam Simpson's three dimensional rendering.

When Bentham first proposed his architectural idea, he never could have imagined its relevance to the world we live in today. However, his concept is surprisingly applicable to the day to day, minute to minute life of every person living in the United States,¹ due to the multitude of ways that technology functions as a metaphorical panopticon in modern American society. Since the advent of the internet, all types of technology have developed and evolved at a meteoric rate, taking both society at large and the lived experiences of countless individuals with them. However, it should be noted that the use of technology is not morally reprehensible in the same way that using a literal panopticon to confine and experiment on prisoners is. While technology can survey, control, and modify the behaviors, opinions, and even thoughts of its users, the degree of freedom of choice that people using technology have is much higher than a forcibly incarcerated person placed in a physical panopticon. This metaphor is meant to be just

¹ This also applies to other places, but this paper focuses on the United States.

that -- and not to say that using technology is akin to being thrown in jail. This is also not to say that either the panopticon or technology are entirely without merit. In fact, the panopticon “started life as a utopian scheme for social reform” and while it is now rather infamous, it was created with noble goals (Lyon, 1994, p. 58). Furthermore, there are benefits to a certain degree of technological surveillance, such as an increased ability to correctly solve crimes or accurately monitor a patient’s vital signs. In many respects, technological advancements have profoundly improved people’s lives. Rather than serve as a sweeping condemnation of either the panopticon metaphor or modern usage of technology, this comparison is meant to make people think more critically about their own use of technology and its societal function more broadly.

The guard tower: technological surveillance

The first of several ways that modern technology mirrors the panopticon is through its capacity for surveillance. There are security cameras on almost every corner, both in and outside of many businesses, and perched on traffic lights to ensure that no one runs a red. With constant recording of public spaces becoming so commonplace, it is fair to assume or suspect that if you are not in your home or in the wilderness, you might be on camera. Of course, there is often no way to know for sure -- just as the prisoners cannot see the guards, small, well-placed cameras can easily avoid detection. However, whether or not a person is actually being monitored does not much matter, as long as they think that they are. A “Smile, you’re on camera!” sign can be just as effective in modifying behavior as the camera itself. Furthermore, as Jeroen Van Den Hoven points out in his article *Nano-Technology and Privacy: On Continuous Surveillance Outside the Panopticon*, as nanotechnology advances, so too does the amount of surveillance people are under on a daily basis. With this evolving technology comes brand new moral

questions about how to use it responsibly, and in this relatively new and fast growing field, scientific achievements can outpace ethical discernments. (Van Den Hoven, 2007, 292). For example, new watches are coming to the market that use small sensors to monitor your heart rate and the amount of exercise you get, among other metrics of health. These watches also have the capability to connect to the internet. It is easy to see how this could become a privacy concern, as tech companies have historically failed to protect the privacy of individuals' data in the way they claimed they would.

In America, a society that claims to be founded on ideals of protecting individual liberties and respecting a person's right to privacy, one might expect to find more backlash against ever-present technological surveillance. However, as cell phones, computers, and the internet become increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday life, people are submitting to this surveillance with little resistance. The fact that your clicks are tracked online is common knowledge. No one is shocked to hear that companies have sold their personal data. And yet, nobody seems to care. The internet offers convenience at a cost that, seemingly, most of us are willing to pay. However, the reason that most people are willing to accept this trade-off is because the only way to truly avoid the constant collection and use of personal data would be to avoid the internet all together. For example, as I was doing research online for this paper, a small box popped up on the bottom of my screen. It read as follows. "We use cookies to improve your website experience. To learn about our use of cookies and how you can manage your cookie settings, please see our Cookie Policy. By closing this message, you are consenting to our use of cookies." Next to this message, there was only one choice: accept. Cookies record browsing information and track the clicks of a user -- in other words, they are constantly surveying a

person's online activity. With no way to opt out of this surveillance and with something that I wanted to read in front of me, I chose to keep reading, aware of the fact that my clicks were being tracked.

The screenshot shows a web browser interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Full Article', 'Figures & data', 'References', 'Citations', 'Metrics', 'Reprints & Permissions', 'PDF' (highlighted in green), and social media sharing icons. Below the navigation bar, the main content area has a title 'VII. PANOPTICISM AND DATA PROTECTION'. To the left of the main content, a vertical sidebar lists several sections: 'In this article', 'INFORMATIONAL EQUALITY', 'INFORMATIONAL INJUSTICE', 'RESPECT FOR MORAL AUTONOMY', 'VII. PANOPTICISM AND DATA PROTECTION' (which is highlighted in blue), 'VIII. PANOPTICISM', 'IX. DATA PROTECTION', and 'X. AN'. The main text discusses the moral reasons for data protection, mentioning two assumptions: the vulnerability of personal information and the ability to use it across different social spheres. It also refers to 'data protection' and 'panopticism'. A numbered list follows, starting with '1. Panopticism'. At the bottom of the page, a cookie consent message reads: 'We use cookies to improve your website experience. To learn about our use of cookies and how you can manage your cookie settings, please see our Cookie Policy. By closing this message, you are consenting to our use of cookies.' with 'Accept' and 'Reject' buttons.

As becomes clear from the discussion of the moral reasons for data protection in the previous section, two assumptions have played a central role in our thinking about privacy thus far. First, the availability of personal information and data are what makes persons vulnerable. Data and information about persons are thus what needs to be protected, and hence data and information themselves should be the focus of our moral, legal and technical interventions. Secondly, it is the ability to use personal data and information across different social spheres and sectors, in a coordinated way, and accumulatively which is instrumental in creating these vulnerabilities. This is realized in an epistemic position that transcends local and partial perspectives and allows for transgression of local boundaries and lifts epistemic barriers. We refer to these assumptions in traditional thinking about informational privacy as respectively "data protection" and "panopticism."

1. *Panopticism*. Information technology enables radical and new forms of centralization of surveillance, monitoring, and power. Bentham's Panopticon is used to illustrate this argument, and the image of Big Brother is often used as a more recent image of centralized power. Panopticism is associated with the potential to exploit and harm people, to take

Figure 2: This is a screenshot of my web browser as I did research for this paper. I found the contrast between the heading “Panopticism and Data Protection” and the box informing me that my browsing activity is being tracked to be very ironic. I also thought that this image supports the main argument of this essay quite well.

However, these cookies seem harmless enough. Red light cameras prevent traffic accidents and security cameras can help catch criminals. What, then, is the harm of living under surveillance? David Friedman addresses this question in his 2008 book *Future Imperfect: Technology and Freedom in an Uncertain World*. He compares security cameras on the street to a cop patrolling a neighborhood park. Since the stated function of both the cop and the camera is to watch for and protect the public from harm, surely they should both be perceived as positives. However, he goes on to explain why this is not necessarily true. He states:

“The problem comes when we combine this technology with others. A cop on the street corner may see you, he may even remember you, but he has no way of combining everything he sees with everything that every other cop sees and so reconstructing your daily life. A video camera produces a permanent record.” (Friedman, 2008)

The advent of facial recognition technology and the ability of modern computers to process extraordinary amounts of data at once creates a reliable database of where people are at any given time. Add that to the GPS trackers inside of our phones and you realize that the only way out of this constant, panopticon-like surveillance would be to go off the grid entirely, a choice that few are willing or able to make. While this surveillance is ever present and modifies people’s behaviors because they know they are being monitored, technology also manipulates people’s choices and actions in much more direct ways.

Social “reform” through behavior modification: technological control

Using data collected through constant surveillance, social media platforms, news outlets, search engines, and advertising, companies can control what people see, read, buy, and believe. Clicks translate to money, and the more things you click on, the more money an online platform makes. It follows, then, that websites will make an effort to show people articles or advertisements that they are more likely to click on. This is where the more problematic side of surveillance comes in. Instead of simply collecting data on individuals and leaving it at that, companies put this data to use, showing people news they already agree with or advertisements for something that aligns with their current taste. This becomes a real issue, because it traps people in echo chambers of their own, pre-existing beliefs. For example, if a person is very conservative, they are more likely to click on the headlines of articles with a conservative bias. When they click on these types of articles with a higher frequency, the algorithm designed to get the most clicks possible shows them more news reports like the ones they have already clicked

on. The same idea goes for people who primarily choose to read liberal leaning news online. In an age when many people get most of their news from the internet, this phenomenon can become dangerous and divisive. By showing people more of what they already believe in order to profit from their clicks and the time they spend reading the article that was presented to them, large tech companies are changing what people believe and by extension, how society functions. When people only read stories written from points of view that they already share, it is easier for them to lose sight of why the other side might have a point too, or even of what differing viewpoints really have to say. This results in people with increasingly polarized worldviews, and the detrimental effects of increasing polarization are being felt right now, as a divided country prepares for a presidential election.

In the same way that technology can shape what people believe based on the news sources it shows them, social media platforms can also be used to spread fake news. Sometimes these news stories are deliberately created with the expressed purpose of convincing people that a fabricated set of “facts” are true in order to serve a political or personal agenda. Sometimes the origin of misinformation can be much more innocent, but the consequences can be just as serious. There is an incredibly high volume of images and videos on the internet. Every photograph has a frame, and when taken out of context or paired with an intentionally contrived and misleading caption, real images can be made to serve a purpose that they were never meant to, and one that can be damaging to a cause, person, or organization.

These examples of the ways that the internet can shape people’s worldview is very similar to the way that the design of the panopticon shapes what prisoners can see from within their cells. By allowing the guards to control what prisoners see, the panopticon controls what

they perceive to be reality. The individualized cells that prevent communication between their inhabitants are analogous to the personalized version of the internet that is tailored to each one of us -- different products advertised and different news stories and videos offered create an entirely different experience.

This is not the only way that big tech companies control the behavior of individuals, though. Owning certain pieces of technology has become an expectation rather than a luxury, almost a necessity in everyday life, because these tech companies are effectively controlling the buying behavior of many, many consumers. This is illustrated by the fact that people no longer ask if you have a cell phone, they ask for your phone number. To not own a phone would result in punishment through social exclusion. Nowadays, so many social interactions happen online that to not own technology capable of accessing the internet would genuinely result in missing out on key bonding moments. Laughing at a funny video or image on the internet creates a muted sort of collective effervescence and reinforces social bonds. Having and regularly checking a cell phone is essential for making plans with friends. Refusing to comply with the expected social norm of owning a phone and having social media (and therefore exposing yourself to the surveillance and control discussed earlier) results in the oldest of all punishments -- social exclusion. Many common punishments, from timeouts as a child to prison (in a panopticon, perhaps) or house arrest as an adult relies on the fact that humans are extremely prosocial and will actively work to avoid exclusion if at all possible. By making their products integral to routine social interaction, tech companies like Apple and Google have cemented their place in the world, as social interaction is not going anywhere anytime soon.

The guard inside the tower: big tech companies and centralization of power

Because these tech companies have so successfully inserted themselves into the social sphere, they have a lot of power to both decide how they want to operate, and consequently, how people will both spend their money and interface with the world through technology. Unsurprisingly, they use this power to make as much money as possible. Through withholding updates from older phones, changing the charging port and earbud jack with every model, and giving most phones a lifespan of about two years, Apple manipulates its customers' buying behavior to optimize its own profits. They have also figured out how to make sure people who do not own an Apple device face social repercussions. When two Apple devices are texting one another, the text messages are blue. When an Apple device texts a non-Apple device, the messages are green. Since Apple has managed to associate itself with modernity and affluence through marketing campaigns, it is priming its users' subconscious to negatively judge people whose text messages arrive in a green bubble. Furthermore, by not allowing non-Apple devices into a group message, Apple is again using social exclusion as a tool to coerce people into complying with its desires.

The walls of the panopticon: technological dependency

One of the major differences between a metaphorical panopticon and a literal one is that you are theoretically free to leave at any time; at the very least, you are not physically restrained within a metaphor. And yet, technology has become so integral to many necessary functions of daily life that it would be very difficult to abandon it entirely and continue to live a normal life. Especially for members of the new generation that have never lived in a pre-internet world, doing certain day to day tasks without technology is hard to imagine. For instance, navigating

without a GPS is a daunting task to someone who has never done it before and who does not know where to buy or how to effectively use a map.

Technology is also becoming more of a necessity to a normal life due to the increasing digitization of school and work. As more papers, textbooks, and homework assignments are transferred online, a laptop becomes progressively more necessary. The same goes for work -- as some meetings are replaced by email chains and the need to come to the office is replaced by the ability to work remotely from anywhere with internet access, technology cements itself as an indispensable part of life. Of course, humans are resourceful and would figure out to do in a world without technology, but we are also opportunists, and are very unlikely to take a path of such high resistance unless absolutely necessary.

The blinds on the guard tower: the difficulty of studying technology

The impossibility of conducting a comprehensive study on all types of technology and how they affect us is akin to how it would be impossible for individual inmates in a panopticon prison to study the jailor. While we can see our metaphorical jailor, he is always on the move, quickly changing shape and form. The future of technology “will obviously not be that of a dome-shaped prison,” but instead will “involve many invisible ubiquitous and ambient applications, with new and unexpected properties” (Van Den Hoven, 2007, 292). Even as I was doing research for this paper, a lot of the sources I found were written in the early 2000s. While this information would be considered up to date in some fields, when looking at technology, it is verging on ancient. The problem is that by the time a rigorous study can be conducted, peer-reviewed, and published, a new type of technology will have come out that makes that study dated, perhaps even before it is released. This means that we will always be playing catch

up on the effects of a new technological advancement, and only by the time that those effects have already kicked in will we begin to understand them.

Conclusion: So we live in a panopticon...now what?

One response to this realization, as I mentioned before, would be to go completely off the grid and live in the woods somewhere. However, this is a deeply impractical solution for the vast majority of people. More realistically, we could accept that we live in a panopticon and try to minimize the negative effects. One way to do this would be through responsible and diligent media consumption. The metaphorical walls of the cell created by internet algorithms are not inescapable -- by intentionally consuming reputable, bipartisan news sources, we can effectively work to reduce political polarization. Furthermore, we can try to harness the power that modern technology has to create positive change. By actively working to mitigate the negative effects and enhance the beneficial potential of rapid communication, increased availability of information, and a higher degree of global connectedness, we can harness the kinetic energy that comes with such fast paced change to help make the world a better place.

Thinking actively about the past, present, and future of technology is essential, especially as the rate of innovation only intensifies. The next big questions on the horizon are likely what roles virtual reality and artificial intelligence will play in society in the coming years and decades. Since every major technological advancement effectively has a very large group of humans as its test subjects, it would be useful to look at these future advancements through an anthropological lens. Needless to say, the internet would look very different (and probably a lot better and more mindful) if it was run by anthropologists, but that ship has sailed. Virtual reality and artificial intelligence have yet to become pervasive in mainstream culture, though, so using

the Principles of Professional Responsibility established by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in regulating how this technology can responsibly interface with the public could have a very positive impact. For instance, implementing the practice of “obtain[ing] informed consent and necessary permissions” could make a big difference in how people use and interact with new technologies (AAA, 2012). The current method of obtaining permission to use a person’s data or getting them to agree to the “terms and conditions” of a particular website is to make people check a box at the end of an extremely long and dense paragraph (or several pages) of legalese that no one has the time to read and very few could understand if they tried. The purpose of such a release is not to protect the user of the website, but rather the big company behind it. By switching from protecting the company to protecting the human consumer, some of the detrimental or even malicious effects of technology could be reduced.

Another principle of professional responsibility put forth by the AAA is to “weigh competing ethical obligations, due collaborators, and affected parties” (AAA, 2012). This involves thinking deeply about how to protect vulnerable populations that you are working with. Too often, companies inventing new technology are so focused on maximizing profit and producing new, eye-catching innovations that they do not consider the real, lasting impact that their product could have on a human population, and make minimal effort to protect their customers. If anthropologists were to work with tech companies and the sectors of government that regulate the tech industry, the future of technology could be much more human centered, with technology serving to enhance the human experience, not the other way around. Human-centered ideas and ethical leadership could even become a marketing strategy, because as people are becoming more socially conscious (in part because of the internet), they want to be

responsible consumers. This idea of protecting the human users of technology is more important now than it has ever been before, as we stand on the edge of the next phase of big technological change. It is not too late to change the way that we interface with technology and the world. Understanding that technology creates a panopticon in our society is useful in that it can make us more aware of the way we use technology as individuals. As a collective, we can peek around the sides of our cells and work together to make sure that the next big wave of technology is better for people and society than the current one, and infusing anthropology into the tech sector would be an important first step in the right direction.

References

- AAA Web Admin. “Principles of Professional Responsibility .” *Ethics Forum*, American Anthropological Association, 1 Nov. 2012, ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/.
- Benthalm, Jeremey. “Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Diagram.” *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/23/panopticon-digital-surveillance-jeremy-bentham#img-3.
- Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. “Panopticism .” *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, edited by Michel Foucault , NY: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 195–228.
- Friedman, David D. “Surveillance Technology: The Universal Panopticon.” *Future Imperfect: Technology and Freedom in an Uncertain World*, edited by David D. Friedman, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 66–80.
- Lyon, David. “From Big Brother to the Electronic Panopticon .” *The Electronic Eye: the Rise of Surveillance Society*, by David Lyon, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 57–80.
- Simpson, Adam. “3D Rendering of the Panopticon.” *The New York Times*, 18 July 2013, static01.nyt.com/images/2013/07/21/books/review/0721-bks-SHONCover/0721-bks-SHONCover-jumbo.jpg?quality=90&auto=webp.
- Van Den Hoven, Jeroem, and Pieter E. Vermaas. “Nano-Technology and Privacy: On Continuous Surveillance Outside the Panopticon.” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 27 June 2007, pp. 283–297.