Chapter 3
Registry Culture and Networked Sociability: Building Individual Identity through Information Records

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ABSTRACT

The rise of individualism and the enhanced prominence of subjectivity that challenge inherited identities and references entail the achievement of wider margins for anonymity and personal fulfillment. On the other hand, increased registry habits generate tons of detailed information, which collides with an apparently rejected chance to better protect privacy. Identity and sociability are key concepts to understand this voluntary disclosure exerted in a context of networked individualism. New patterns of social interaction arise, and new models have to be designed to comprehend the space between individual and society. The circulation of such a great amount of information is often categorized as “surveillance,” but the control of others is just one of the possible benefits that individuals can obtain from these available flows.

INTRODUCTION

“Since you wake up every morning you start leaving a trace of ‘bits’; every time you use your mobile phone, your computer, or the credit card you are leaving a trace.” Martin Cooper, inventor of the mobile telephone, at the 31st Conference for Data Protection and Privacy.

The arrival of the information society and the central role of ITCs have been followed by an increase in the use of expressions like “age of surveillance” or “surveillance society”. This trend is not only visible in “frightening” magazine articles and TV-shows based on “orwellian” predictions, it is also present in academical circles, embedded in its language to the extent that some scholars describe their field directly as “surveillance studies” or they declare to research any aspect of the “surveillance societies”.

The purpose of this text it is not to state if the surveillance practices have increased significantly enough as for classifying our societies under such a name. This premise might be a generalized biased approach caused by the growing application of new technologies to the art of watching each
other. Nevertheless, at first sight it may also be concluded that we enjoy wider levels of anonymity than we suppose.

The underlying question here refers to the manner in which these analyses undermine the role of individual’s active decisions, conscious positions and deliberate actions. While researching surveillance processes, structural connections are excessively remarked and they become a privileged place in the foreground. At the same time, the control of personal information is depicted as a task performed by a cast of experts (whether bureaucrats or marketing managers) who hold the only responsibility in the surveillance relationships and the monopoly of data management.

Of course it is essential to approach this subject having in mind the actual asymmetry of power, and it is precisely due to the subtle nature of power relationships in the network society that it would be a big mistake to ignore the minor actions of control. Therefore, current analyses of surveillance cannot exclude those acts which take place between friends, relatives, acquaintances, etc. Moreover, it is unavoidable to point out along this “soft surveillance” the overcome of unidirectionality through the voluntary contribution of information to be shared, so that others can watch at the same time that are being watched.

After shielding our homes, sometimes even with cutting edge security systems, we leave a lot of locks to let the others see, know and judge a wide portion of what is happening in our lives. This way, a significant amount of data is revealed: what we do, where we are, with whom we spend the time with, what we have, what we think… This trend weakens the traditional approach that describes an image in which the experts of knowledge and information dream of full dictatorial powers that would let them record each movement of the citizens/workers/consumers. In the context of a network society, the old dualizing hierarchies get blurred and are more difficult to appreciate. The scheme that divides surveillance into “watchers” (empowered) versus “watched” (submitted) has to be profoundly reviewed. In networked structures, information flows circulate according to such complex patterns that it is impossible to continue sustaining analyses based exclusively on the useful but confusing and biasing traditional dichotomies.

This wrong perspective makes surveillance research to get focused in two main fields: economics (companies) and politics (governments). Scholars insist in these two topics and media’s agendas center their attention in these events. The necessary review to avoid this limitation does not come only from the acts of “outsourcing” that allow and foster “unqualified” personnel to run surveillance-related tasks (a tactic described both in distopias like 1984 and in reality like the known infiltration of GDR’s Stasi into the common people). Not only today but since the beginning of societies, what we understand as “surveillance” embraces a remarkable “third field” linked to phenomena of sociability, socialization and raw social control.

The circulation of information flows in the network society resembles to neuronal synapses: each cell is a relatively active agent that contributes to the transmission of information. An event can be experienced by an individual, who registers and shares this information throughout a network with other individuals, that receive it and may amplify it in an infinite sequence. Individuals do not just portray external facts, they also may share information about hundreds of personal issues: what they feel, where they find themselves at any given moment, what they think, what are their recently acquired belongings, which music they like, which people they meet… in short: who they are.

Western modern societies are affected by an identity crisis related to individualistic trends which might be overcome by network interconnections. This shift would mean the change from a “mass-individualism” to what Barry Wellman calls “networked individualism”. In this context, the problem of generating and communicating identities becomes a perennial, continuous, infinite
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