

Demassification of Social Control and De-panopticonization of Surveillance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Michel Foucault's panoptic model of social control and its historical validity in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) driven world as a turn has been marked in the realms of surveillance and social control with decentralized and algorithmic systems. Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and diffusion of its model throughout modern institutions have laid the foundation for understanding how power operates through visibility and internalization in the modern world. However, the rise of AI with collection and analysis of larger sets of data with a ubiquitous approach as well as predictive algorithms have resulted in a shift in social control compared to the Foucauldian world. This change is an outcome of the demassification and de-panopticonization that happened consequently. This study is based on a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology. The ideas of Michel Foucault, for example, disciplinary power, and biopower, are used to analyze the case. Foucauldian discourse analysis and archaeological methods are employed accordingly. In conclusion, surveillance is no longer confined to centralized spaces or panoptic regimes; social control is now embedded within dispersed networks, data flows, and automated systems, fundamentally reshaping the dynamics of power and resistance.

Keywords: Foucault, surveillance, artificial intelligence, panopticon, social control.

Introduction

Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984), a French historian of ideas and philosopher, argued that his contemporary society was structured differently from the society that preceded him as it was designed to reverse the barbarity of previous periods where punishment was effected on the body in public displays of torture, dismemberment, and obliteration (Felluga, 2015). The “gaze” of the panopticon was pervasive in the 20th century with mass surveillance with the modern technologies and it tied to the power-knowledge nexus (Backus, 1999). The power-knowledge relationship does not imply that power and knowledge are synonymous, rather it suggests that power is both a cause and an effect of knowledge (Digeser, 1986). The functioning of power depends on the knowledge that the watchtower is the place where the guards reside. In contrast, the idea that power precedes knowledge does not seem to be contained within the panoptic device, and this is a sense in which the panopticon is not a satisfactory analogy for Foucault’s conception of power.

“In the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance. An execution that was known to be taking place, but which did so in secret, would scarcely have had any meaning. The aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person: : 'In criminal matters, the most difficult point is the imposition of the penalty: it is the aim and the end of the procedure, and its only fruit, by example and terror, when it is well applied to the guilty person.’” (Foucault, 1995).

Foucault highlighted that the discourse on modern power, surveillance, and discipline is fundamentally different in the 20th century as punishment and discipline become internalized and directed to the constitution and, when necessary, rehabilitation of social subjects. Foucault observed the role of discourse, or language practices, in cementing new truths and extending the penetration of power into new areas of social life. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault pointed out that the exercise of absolute, monarchical authority, with power over life and death, has become both impractical and untenable. Instead, Foucault conceives of a modern form of disciplinary power achieved through surveillance, or rather the possibility of surveillance (Clarke, McQueen, Pnacekova & Sahli, 2020).

This attempt cannot be categorized under the negative understanding of power. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault came up with a comprehensive critique of the negative understanding of power pertaining to sovereignty discourses. Foucault's main concern was to paint a picture on the emergence of new forms of power in the 19th and 20th centuries. He mapped out how, over time, the sovereign's negative power, e.g. the power to mercilessly execute offenders, is transformed or replaced/ supplemented by fundamentally different ways. According to Foucault, this new form of power (discipline) has a range of characteristics, only a few of which will be highlighted here (Borch, 2014). To situate this discussion, the paper first revisits Michel Foucault's conception of the panoptic model. The paper highlights how AI systems are transforming disciplinary mechanisms in societies. The study then focused on surveillance and social control that have moved beyond centralized visibility of older panoptic models toward algorithmic and decentralized systems. Finally, the paper identifies how AI-driven personalization can represent fragmented, automated, and opaque forms of control.

Objectives

1. To critically examine the Foucauldian panoptic model of social control and how surveillance in his contemporary society worked.
2. To understand how transformative effects of artificial intelligence have changed modern surveillance and social control.
3. To identify how AI personalization departs from traditional disciplinary power by replacing centralized, visible surveillance with fragmented, automated, and opaque mechanisms.

Literature Review

Foucault metaphorically used Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to demonstrate how modern societies have transitioned to an era of disciplinary power rooted in constant observation and self-regulation. He observed the power of panopticon where "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). In the "panopticon" the prison is structured in a way that cells would be open to a central tower and individual prisoners are barred from interaction from each other at the same time they are monitored even in the absence of the central guard. Even the nothingness turns into an entity of power. The "discovery" behind the panopticon, as Foucault presents it, was a double one: Moral appeals, religious sermons, and the like had no effect by themselves. Rather than rely on such "normative" appeals, the panopticon made possible the operation of a set of uninterrupted exercises and activities. These worked to "turn" the gross, empirical social offender by inculcating more socially acceptable habits and dispositions. Not the "moral sense" of the already socially shaped human unit but a community of sub individuals was the object and creation of this punitive rationality" (Ransom, 1997).

This system of control replaced the old-fashioned brutal and inhumane treatment of prisoners while surveillance was pushed to private spheres of human life with new surveillance technology. This created a new form of social organization and a single corrections mechanism was still in place. However, with the rise of the Semantic Web which is often labelled as Web 3.0 has made digital environments understand and anticipate human behavior resulting in personalized contents for the users (Szeredi, Lukácsy & Benkő, 2006). The structured data, intelligent agents, and linked information found on Semantic Web helps machines to interpret, categorize, and act on user inputs with autonomy, limiting the world of the user. The Semantic Web was initially envisioned as a framework that would enable machines to interpret and process information on the web. That allowed intelligent agents to locate, combine, and act on data to assist users in their daily online activities. However, the original enthusiasm for the Semantic Web has diminished, and it is now often discussed under the terms Linked Data or the Web of Data. Under this, it pursues a modest objective focused on automating information integration. Linked Data involves structuring and publishing web page information in a way that software can easily process. With this shift, Semantic Web methods are useful for integrating data from multiple sources and generating additional value from that information (Sánchez-Alonso & Athanasiadis, 2010).

The AI driven Semantic Web leads to digital spaces where users are exposed to a selected set of opinions and information, predominantly chosen by the bots. The reinforcement of beliefs happens, accordingly. However, this is different from the old fashioned propagandic big lies (*große Lüge*) where a gross distortion or misrepresentation of the truth is primarily used as a political gain at mass scale in totalitarian states like Nazi Germany. In such regimes, the ruling party uses propaganda and shapes communications in their favor (Gray, 2023). They prohibit opposition from political parties, disregards and outlaws the political claims of individual and

group opposition to the state, and completely controls the public sphere and the private sphere of society. In the field of political science, totalitarianism is the extreme form of authoritarianism, wherein all socio-political power is held by a dictator. The continual propaganda campaigns are broadcast by state-controlled and state-aligned private mass communications media (Conquest, 1999). In AI personalization, such state-controlled information with a mass-approach is not witnessed.

The AI driven echo chambers are basically discursive enclosures with bounded spaces where alternative perspectives are marginalized or excluded. The algorithms built on semantic data are used to predict and influence the user and they read, buy, believe, or even feel what is directed by a bot. This is basically decided on the digital footprint of the user. In a sense this echoes Foucault's idea of biopower where the user data is being to regulate themselves, not only by collective trends but by individual subjectivities (Morar & Cisney, 2016). In the contemporary world, human health, consumption, relationships, and even identity are mediated by the AI driven agents while defining norms in line with the underlying semantic structures.

This has transcended the Foucauldian idea of discipline where observance, surveillance and accumulation of knowledge extended to hospitals, schools, and factories. In his historic analysis, Foucault was successfully able to argue that the disappearance of public executions in the old world had been gradually eliminated as punishment in a society ruled by reason (Foucault, 1977, p. 10). With AI personalization a societal and collective reason has been outdated and it has been replaced with the "reasoning bubbles" that are much personalized and unique. AI personalization is acting as a biopolitical tool in the Foucauldian sense as they manage desires, shape identities, and optimize behaviors (Johnsen, 2024). According to Foucault, the new governmental reason needs freedom; therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It

must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: "be free," with the immediate contradiction that this imperative may contain (Foucault, 2008, p. 63).

It has individualized governance while transcending the traditional notion of the architecture of control and reinforcement norms with much fragmented, user-specific experiences.

“AI personalization is the process of using artificial intelligence to tailor the content and features of a service or product to each individual user. In the context of social media, AI personalization can involve analyzing a user's profile, preferences, behavior, and network to determine what kind of posts, stories, ads, and recommendations to display on their feed. AI personalization can also help users discover new content and people that match their interests and needs. The benefits of AI personalization for social media platforms are twofold.” (Musiolik, Rodriguez & Kannan, 2024)

Accordingly, Foucault's argument on panopticon and its centrality is outdated in the age of AI where the centralized control through visibility as contemporary digital society operates under more opaque, networked regimes that surpass the panoptic model as AI personalization represents a subtle and strong control through functions of personalized systems such as mechanisms of behavioral steering, normalization, and indirect discipline (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022). Those personalization algorithms are actively constructing preferences by reinforcing certain behaviors, values, and patterns of thought. This paper examines the transformation that has taken place in the realm of social control and argues that the AI-powered surveillance mechanisms represent a form of de-panopticanization. This new form of social control

is a departure from centralized surveillance toward a decentralized, demassified structure shaped by AI and algorithmic governance.

Research Problem

What is the turn that has taken place with the Foucauldian model of disciplinary power in the era of AI-driven personalization and the Semantic Web, and what are the implications of this change in case of subjectivity, agency, and governance in the contemporary AI age?

Sub-questions

1. How do the AI personalization algorithms act as contemporary mechanisms for sustaining disciplinary power?
2. How does the Semantic Web transcend the architecture of the panopticon?
3. How are individuals' subjectivities constructed through algorithmic suggestions and reinforcements?
4. Can resistance or agency exist meaningfully within algorithmic governance and digital reasoning bubbles?

Research Methodology

This study is focused on a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology that is basically grounded in Michel Foucault's theoretical ideas linked to the disciplinary power, panopticism, and biopower. These particular ideas have been articulated in Foucault's major works such as *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978). Based on these texts, the study has adopted a Foucauldian discourse analysis that will serve as the principle examining method to understand how power manifests in AI-driven contemporary digital platforms. Foucauldian archaeology, a method of historical analysis to study how systems of thought and knowledge are formed, organized, and transformed over time, has also been used as a

method of analysis in this study. Under this method, the study delves into the layers of discourse to reveal the rules and systems of thought pertaining to surveillance. This methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis has been used to investigate the structures, and semiotics of AI-driven systems, for example AI-based personalization, recommendation algorithms, Semantic Web, hidden mechanisms of normalization and control, etc. The study is based on literature analysis and literature on algorithmic governance, AI personalization, recommendation systems, and semantic technologies are used as sources of the study. Foucauldian and post-structural perspectives are employed to understand surveillance, normalization, and the production of knowledge. Philosophical evaluation of algorithmically curated environments is employed here to understand the turn that has taken place in the realm of social control, making a shift from Foucauldian understanding of panoptic regimes, where power-knowledge interconnection has been elevated into a new dimension with preferences of the user himself, instead of a panoptic tower has become the basis for control. In the older system, though, the ability to see inmates in the panopticon allows for the exercise of power, without a single point of observation is invalid with echo chambers and personalized contents.

Accordingly, surveillance and disciplinary practices have changed their trajectories, as compared to earlier institutions such as penal systems and public health apparatuses in contrast to the modern algorithmic control. The operationalization of Semantic Web technologies has been studied in a broader discursive practice and examined how user identity and reinforcing behavioral norms have been shaped with AI personalization.

De-panopticonization of Surveillance in the Age of AI

Foucault opined that the idea of punishment evolved from bodily spectacle to internalized discipline as the 20th century dawned corporal punishment diminished and the state was able to

secure the right to administer more subtle methods of punishment and discipline. The public and brutal aspect of punishment was evaded, and according to Foucault, the modern systems emphasized reform, regulation, and normalization, paving the way to the “carceral society” (Garland, 1986). In a “carceral society” the punishment and control are deeply embedded in social structures, institutions, and everyday practices; the threat of punishment becomes normalized and internalized, shaping individual behavior and social relations.

“Foucault treats the panopticon as a metaphor for modern society, the carceral or imprisoning society, an expression reminiscent of Weber's 'iron cage. For this metaphor, Bentham's model has the relevant features of being purportedly a completely rational plan for the treatment of prisoners, thus reflecting the extent to which thought is devoted to devising ways of controlling people; emphasizing the extent to which the system is designed to encourage people to control themselves through reflection on their own conduct; conceiving the thoroughly constant and pervasive supervision of the inmate: the model represents the ideal of a totally administered society” (Cuff, Dennis, Francis, & Sharrock, 2006, p. 236).

This is a diffuse system of control as it is more focused on shaping individuals' behavior through discipline and observation. However, this observation originates from a central source. In contrast to Foucauldian analysis, in the age of AI, no central source of observation is present. The idea of the single observer of the panopticon model is obsolete in the contemporary world and the subject is monitored by multiple bots with their specified algorithms. No single source would induce self-discipline upon the users in the AI world but by a different set of bots by tracking preferences, locations, interactions, and habits. The Semantic Web-based surveillance enables a

form of ambient surveillance in which observation is constant, often imperceptible, and embedded in everyday practices and unlike traditional forms of surveillance where cameras or visible monitoring are central.

In the AI-driven world, the central tower of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is missing. Users internalize a very personalized set of rules to adjust their behavior. No panoptic mechanism with polyvalent nature will be present in the AI age to stipulate a generalized function of power. The AI-powered Semantic Web invites the users to optimize their own behaviors with algorithmic suggestions. Accordingly, users are guided to govern themselves sans a central observation. Instead of internalization of the panoptic tower and policing themselves through a central point, their discipline originated from themselves. For Foucault, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 202-203). In this subjection, the interpellation happens from an outer cause, that is even the nothingness, or absence of the guard, himself (Žižek, 2003). The panoptic tower, or the center addresses the individuals, and thus creates them as subjects. Nevertheless, in the AI-driven echo chambers, the subject is created not from an outer but from the user himself. In this process, there is a policing tower to hail. Their specific social role or identity is created from their preference bubble itself. However, these algorithmic processes are not a natural occurrence, but are actively constructed by a range of diffused structures.

In a panoptic regime, as per the Foucauldian understanding, the internalization of norms and authority, hailed by a single source, where the individual is subjected. With AI personalization, individuals are being subjected to their own preferences and they are the subject and the object of

the interpellation process, with less resistance and higher conformity (Arac, 1986). Foucault's idea was still on a grand and totalitarian society where docile and predictable individuals are created. But in the AI age, power creeps into the private sphere of life in a personalized form. The world tactics of use of identification numbers, surveillance cameras, digital records, and location tracking devices function to create an own bubble for the user with discursive enclosures. Accordingly, the reality is demassified and users are living in a schizophrenic world created for themselves by the algorithms. The modern control systems are not guarded by one single panoptic power, but by many algorithmic bubbles based on individual preferences.

The data-centric organization of human life is unprecedented and its vocation is not to become a generalized function" (Foucault, 1977, p. 207). Hence, 20th century panoptic machines are obsolete and the Foucauldian idea of "normal" is also outdated as algorithms and personalization mechanisms reinforce discourses that are not "normal", but highly shaped by individual beliefs effectively producing subjects whose truths are individuated. Foucault argued that normalizing forms of governance constitutes individuals as subjects (Haugaard, 2022, pp. 341–371). Such normalizing practices compare individuals to one another, single them out, and rank them in a continuum from the normal to the pathological. Whereas sovereign power emphasized the individuality of rulers by means of family crests, genealogies, and legends, biopolitics aims to individualize the targets of power. Foucault opined that modern individuality is not based on some authentic experience people have of themselves, but that it emerges instead as an effect of practices where governing takes place through normalization (McWhorter, 1999). The old form of bureaucratic layers of control are diminishing in the AI age. The mechanization of control has also been personalized; subject formation happens without a dominant discourse.

The AI era has transcended the logic of surveillance, replacing traditional panoptic models with individuated algorithmic guards. This happens through the creation of bubbles with preferences of the users' overt coercion of the old world or spatial arrangements and visual observation in panoptic regimes. Data collection, predictive algorithms, and automated decision-making are pillars of control where surveillance does not need a central watchtower. Surveillance is embedded in everyday technologies, smartphones, social media, wearables, and biometric systems and bots are capable of handling vast amounts of data to predict behavior, manage risk, and influence choices. The bubbles created based on individual preferences are ambient and continuous where individuals are free from being watched by a single watchtower, they are analyzed, categorized, and nudged with invisibility and decentralization. The AI surveillance is imperceptible as compared to the Foucauldian idea and it is embedded in algorithms and cloud infrastructure.

Contemporary surveillance differs fundamentally from Foucault's panopticon. Instead of centralized observation, networked and distributed systems are observed in the contemporary world and fragment control across digital platforms is witnessed. Hence, power is not wielded or emanated from one single source, but operates through code, data, and infrastructure. AI surveillance systems do not just watch the users, but they predict, recommend, and automate.

This form of control is demassified. Personal data is harvested and used by the AI systems and they are tailored to shape experiences, decisions, and sometimes perceptions of reality. In this shift, surveillance has become asynchronous and context-aware, while being fundamentally different to the panoptic understanding of the control (Mann, 2024). For AI-driven systems, the observer is hidden in code, making it impossible to locate or confront such codes. This new form of data extraction and algorithmic judgment make individuals increasingly governed by data they

do not see, processed by algorithms they cannot understand. The ethical accountability and democratic oversight are facing new challenges as surveillance shifts from the architectural to the algorithmic. Hence, the panoptic asymmetrical visibility will not explain the social control in the AI era.

As disciplinary power in the AI era operates through surveillance, normalization, and examination, AI personalization algorithms make individuals self-regulated. This happens in line with platform norms. This directly addresses the first research question—how AI personalization algorithms act as contemporary mechanisms for sustaining disciplinary power—as systems such as social media feeds, recommendation engines, and targeted advertising continuously monitor user behaviors, including clicks, watch time, and interaction patterns. This also happens in the absence of a centralized panoptic authority.

Regarding the second research question—how the Semantic Web transcends the architecture of the panopticon—the Semantic Web operates on a fundamentally different logic of control and visibility (Colomb, 2007). The central observer is missed in AI systems and it uses distributed, networked systems to structure, codify, and interconnect information. Power, in such cases, becomes less architectural and more ontological. Therefore, power will be embedded in the data structures and algorithms that organize and govern digital interactions.

The third research question—how individuals' subjectivities are constructed through algorithmic suggestions and reinforcements—is addressed by observing that AI-driven systems actively shape preferences, choices, and behaviors (Muhlert, 2025). The curated feeds, recommendations, and targeted content are instrumental in creation of subjectivities of the users and limited to platform logics, rather than centralized oversight coming from an external source.

Therefore, algorithmic tracking of micro-actions guides users to internalize norms and expectations encoded by the system itself.

Finally, in relation to the fourth research question—whether resistance or agency can exist meaningfully within algorithmic governance and digital reasoning bubbles—it is evident that agency still exists but manifests differently. This is different to traditional disciplinary systems and the realm of control is not clear and observable in contemporary AI systems. Individuals' exercise of agency is constrained and shaped by the infrastructure, ontologies, and algorithmic logics.

Reexamination of Foucault Surveillance

This study set out with three main objectives: first, to critically examine the Foucauldian panoptic model of social control and the ways in which surveillance operated within his contemporary society; second, to understand how the transformative effects of artificial intelligence have reshaped modern surveillance and mechanisms of social control; and third, to identify how AI-driven personalization departs from traditional disciplinary power by replacing centralized, visible surveillance with fragmented, automated, and opaque mechanisms.

In addressing these objectives, the paper argued that AI-driven systems mark a shift in the logic of social control. The older panoptic model emphasized centralized visibility and the interpellation of subjects. That happened within a disciplinary framework. However, contemporary algorithmic systems operate through networked, individualized, and opaque processes. This transformation has subtly influenced behavior, identity, and preferences. This shift entails both a “demassification” and a “de-panopticonization” of surveillance. Accordingly, power is no longer exercised through overt centrality. In this de-panopticonized model, power is exercised with personalized systems embedded in everyday digital interactions.

Foucault's insights remain crucial for understanding how power circulates and diffuses within society (Foucault, 1980). However, to fully grasp the implications of AI and data-driven surveillance, his idea has to be reinterpreted. The diffusion of power in the AI age can be understood as a phenomenon where control can be exercised even without a central surveillance authority. This signals a profound transformation in the relationship between surveillance, subjectivity, and social order.

Therefore, "de-panopticonization" is theorized with this paper to highlight the shift that had taken place with the rise of AI, Semantic Web technologies, and algorithmic systems. In contrast to Foucault's world, surveillance, at present, is embedded in data flows, predictive algorithms, and digital personalization rather than physical institutions. AI personalization mechanisms construct the reality for the users with their own reasoning bubbles than the reasoning originating from a panoptic tower; curating content and shaping user experiences to limit their worlds to echo chambers (Wang, 2025). These echo chambers and algorithmic filtering act as "reasoning bubbles" as coined in this study, resulting in fragmented realities. While marking its difference from traditional propaganda models in totalitarian regimes, AI surveillance is not mass-directed, but has an individualized nature, shaping influence through digital footprints.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argued that AI-driven systems have made a shift in social control with the transformation of surveillance techniques. Instead of the traditional panoptic model the networked, individualized, and algorithmic systems have been able to control the users without a panoptic centrality, that missed the interpellation "constitute" the human subjectivity. This change marks a "demassification" on one side and "de-panopticonization" of social control on the other; where power is exercised not through overt visibility like in the panoptic model, but through

personalized systems that shape behavior, identity, and preferences of the people. Foucault's theories remain relevant in understanding how power could be diffused but must be extended and reinterpreted to fully grasp the implications of AI and data-driven social control where diffusion of power is witnessed even without a central surveillance system.

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