

Visibility of the Self in the Digital Space, Trolling and the Digital Panopticon

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Abstract— The phenomenal upsurge of the digital world in recent times forces us to examine the space available to the average subject or consumer to be visible, to express oneself in terms of the personal, emotive, social or public fronts. This paper examines the digital space utilized by the consumer subject and the vulnerability of the same through digital surveillance and trolling.

Index Terms: Self, digital space, vulnerability, digital surveillance, trolling.

INTRODUCTION

Projection of the self has always been an impulse of human beings existing in a social context. Nevertheless, the social context itself has transformed drastically over the past few years in terms of the availability of the internet social media spaces. Proliferation of the use of these spaces has led to significant changes in social existence or perception of the same, social behaviour, identity formation and related issues. A rather simplified historical analysis of the situation might be pertinent here.

The boom in the use of the digital world in the contemporary times is phenomenal. Merely one or two decades ago, internet use was the privilege of a few, in terms of economic, educational or geopolitical existence. The users were mostly from the higher strata of the so called “developing” countries and/or belonging to the “developed” world. Though the dynamics of these terms have been rapidly changing, we can comfortably assume that internet resources were enjoyed by a minority in various parts of the world.

The easy availability and cost-cutting policies of mobile phone companies, complemented by the relaxation in government rules and regulations made mobile phone an everyday necessity for people belonging to widely different economic strata. This had a direct and an indirect impact on various

existing equations. The transition received an impetus during the last two years of global pandemic, changing the scenario in a significant manner.

Restrictions on movements or on (social) gatherings initially imposed by the state agencies and then slowly through various media platforms led to a panic situation, creating a hesitation in the minds of people against the age old social almost ritualistic habits of coming together and enjoying a social gathering. Although there can be counter-information contesting any sort of general statements, one can at least see the dependence or rather over-dependence on social network sites instead of physical meetings or physical exchanges. Thus, there has been a massive growth in the user numbers as well as user time span of different social media platforms, specifically in a country like India.

Countrywide lockdown contributed to the growth, a rather seamless one, of the internet market space. Amazon and similar global giants entered into small towns and the nearby villages, somewhat more fervently than into the metros. Accessibility to the global brands and thus, to the global marketplace was mostly the prerogative of big cities and metros. The easy internet accessibility has opened the possibilities to the places in the periphery. This has been zealously grabbed by the market giants as well as by the eager consumers.

The introduction provided above is pertinent to understand the increased emergence, sustenance and problems with the social media space used by the people at large who do not perceive them to be consumers; whereas for the platform providers or the market business tycoons, the users obviously are all potential customers. This leads to a probable conflict of interests, which is eased out by making several tactics not obviously visible. Digital panoptical surveillance has become an un-imaginably large and emerging sector, which is academically

institutionalized today through various forms of data analyses. Though data analyses processes are considered or declared harmless, the easy availability of information has been leading to diverse forms of information analyses, including the ones used for trolling individual users.

In an interesting article on social media narratives, Calzati and Simanowski have highlighted various aspects of it. As a social media space provider, Facebook is/has been/still remains a hugely popular platform. It creates certain impressions; the most significant of them are the following:

- That it provides a social space among mutually agreed people to see one another's posts, images, comments and so on as they agree to be one another's friends
- That it provides the users some 'safe' spaces with the possibilities of locking one's profile.

With these significant aspects leading to personal satisfaction of the users of a free, safe chatting space, an un-imaginably large amount of personal information is uploaded daily in the form of pictures, comments, feeling emojis and so on. Moreover, uploaded images generally include images of other people as well, along with details of residences, discussion forums attended, holiday destinations, off-springs and relatives and their significant details and many more. Comments, expositions, emotive outbursts, creative writings in the form of narratives either accompany the images or appear individually. Keeping aside the direct marketing narratives and advertisements, the other narratives can be sub-divided largely as:

1. Direct narratives
 - i. Personal
 - ii. Fictional
 - iii. Social
 - iv. Political
 2. Indirect narratives
 - i. Comments on incidents reported in other media platforms such as Television or newspaper
 - ii. Comments on other users' comments
 - a. Known users
 - b. Unknown users
- Public figures

- Any other individual users whose comment/s can be accessed

Surveillance starts in the majority of the users almost un-noticeably and initially with some consent. For instance, Facebook suggests more friends, sometimes activities of friends one might be interested in, thus propelling more explorations and consequently spending more time in the Facebook created virtual world. Suggestions almost simultaneously pour in, not just in terms of friends, but for personal preferences of products. The user time spent on various product windows are closely monitored and similar options flood in. Advertisements with proven age old policies of discounts appear more and more frequently, with conscious compliance or compliance in some un-guarded relaxed moment on the part of the users.

For examination of the digital space, Facebook has been selected in this study as Facebook remains the often visited space for the leisurely, lonely, and/or elderly middle class as an obsessive escape space. However, Facebook has been deserted by many young users in preference of Instagram. The latter is perceived as more involved a space, with rather smarter images and consequently consciously created images of may be happy, glorious, bright, carefree moments or in some cases illusions of existence. Various 'filters' for better, more visually appealing images flood in and users do grab them for an enhanced sense of satisfaction.

How do these two terms, "illusions" and "escape" fit in here? Self-assertion does not necessarily be equated to self-projection and self-fashioning. The universal human desire for appraisal leads to an adoption of a Face saving mechanism as well as positive self-fashioning. The social media platforms create an impulse in the minds of the users for a positive projection of oneself. Consequent to more people taking recourse to it, this self-projection manifests in diverse forms. It is not just a projection of a happy, carefree life, instead it has widened up to the projection of the desolate soul, or irritation and/or displeasure over various personal as well as social matters.

Here again, a significant surveillance can be noticed and in fact it has been noticed, reported and in some cases investigated, as in the famous case of the USA Presidential elections campaigns. Newer areas

emerge almost on a daily basis, obviously because of the huge number of users and diverse ways in which social media has been generating and shaping information, leading to unprecedented consequences. For instance, announcements of visiting a place, going out of station and similar posts used to lead to burglary cases at one point of time. Thereafter, most of the users became careful not to upload images on a day today basis or at least maintain a spatio-temporal distance in terms of actual time existence as against its digital projection through images. Picking up images for commercial purposes without permission or for extortion was also extremely prevalent at one point of time. Cyber security and vigilance led to decrease in the number of such reported cases. Surveillance and sociability can be examined, for instance, in social media friendship with bosses/institutional superiors as a potential area of research with significant developments in scope.

The notion of the digital Panopticon has its origin in the Jeremy Bentham developed Panopticon design for continuous surveillance and visibility in the prison cells. Propagated in the second half of the 18th century, Bentham's Panopticon could extend surveillance and control to a large number of prison cells with very limited or no visibility of the guards. Foucault extended this idea of the Panopticon to social surveillance mechanisms such as police control in the society. The digital space provides various surveillance possibilities, which are grabbed by different agencies for multiple reasons, with very less or no visibility of the surveillance. Hence, the notion of a digital Panopticon got foregrounded in critical expositions. For a detailed analysis of the control, one can read Ünver's article on the politics of digital surveillance (Ünver 2018).

The shift from surveillance to trolling was not a natural but almost a perceivably predictable repercussion. Trolling has emerged as a frequently used interference in social media platforms in the recent times. Jonathan Bishop, in an article provides an overview of the term and its change of meaning in a historical context and a discussion of "the topic from the point of view of stereotyping, character theories and audience theory". Bishop tries to establish or destabilise the connotative connections of the term 'troll' to various etymological and contextual backgrounds, tracing it from the "Scandinavian tradition of 'trolls'" to 1960s, 1990s

and the 21st century different usages such as, "kudos trolling and flame trolling" and so on.

This kind of sub-categorisation becomes almost immediately dated because of the dynamic nature of the space and the consequent dynamism in trolling and other forms of surveillance.

In an article on Facebook and the projection of self, Robert Craig connects the tendencies of self-projection on Facebook to Dilthey and Gadamer's hermeneutic theories. His exploration establishes the shifting dynamics of communication and self-projection in today's media over visible human existences. The visibility impulse leads to expectations for appraisal from fan followers and thereafter at times leads to a depression and feeling of loneliness as well. In spite of the comparatively large number of friends in the digital space, people are becoming lonelier than ever before. This is another area where significant psychological explorations can be possible regarding the change in social behaviour and expectations in the contemporary times. Visiting a social media space like Facebook has become a habit even while sitting in the company of others, conversations have become more social media information centric and relationships have also transformed in terms of posts, pictures and accompanying narratives of individuals. While appraisal from a large number is waited for in case of the posts, negative comments have led to serious repercussions. Trolling has acquired almost completely a negative connotation, infusing irritation, intolerance and at times hatred.

Many people consciously step out of social media sites like Facebook and some of these reasons have been cited already. Some individuals avoid using it to go back to the previous social spaces and community engagements. However, the change in the society and social existences have been so transformative that it is hardly possible to revisit the previous physical spheres with the expectation that they have remained crystal clear out of the influences of online spaces. No such space is available to anyone anymore and the sooner we make positive changes in our social behaviour, incorporating the good outcomes of the physical actual real social spaces as well as the virtual spaces, the better for us. Or else in the delusion, we might lose time proven support human beings have so far derived from social existences.

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