

# Reviewing the Ethics and Philosophy Behind Social Media's Crowdsourced Panopticon

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## ABSTRACT

Philosopher Jeremy Weissman theorizes a new approach to social media surveillance by utilizing a familiar theoretical model: the Panopticon. In effect, Weissman argues that social media has transformed ordinary people into prison guards within the Panopticon's public watchtower and endowed ordinary individuals with the power to track, survey, and discipline elite officials, once shielded from public scrutiny. This new power, however, comes with a catch. Social media subsumes individuals within an anonymous, de-individualized public, which erases individual difference while simultaneously and paradoxically promising to amplify that very difference. This review critically examines this paradoxical tension and the ethical concerns and challenges raised by social media's propensity to elicit anonymity.

## KEYWORDS

Anonymity, Digital Technologies, Ethics, Panopticon, Philosophy, Privacy, Social Media, Surveillance

In *The Crowdsourced Panopticon: Conformity and Control on Social Media*, philosopher Jeremy Weissman explores social media's potential to endow ordinary people with the power to track, survey, and censor others across the globe. In recent years, social media's potential to enhance government and corporate surveillance has become one of the most pressing issues impacting contemporary society, but little research or academic work exists on social media's potential to enhance ordinary people's power and surveillance over others, including those at the highest realms of political and economic power. When studied from the perspective of ordinary people, social media is not necessarily a tool of governmental or corporate control. Rather, it simultaneously and paradoxically unravels centralized systems of control by giving people the power to be anonymous. Weissman's insight is reminiscent of Wendy Chun's 2008 monograph, *Control and Freedom*, which traced how the paradoxical tension between control and freedom animates digital media's allure and growing influence. Weissman's unique contribution here is on the allure of anonymity to ordinary people and the processes by which individuals can be subsumed into the anonymous, de-individualized mob whereby they can act free from consequence. There is then a central paradox at the heart of our engagements with digital media. On the one hand, we are promised that social media amplifies marginalized voices and increases awareness and understanding of human difference. On the other hand, the hyperconnectivity of social media necessitates people's conformity to trends, hashtags, and algorithmic patterns.

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Weissman explores the paradoxical tensions inherent to digital media across three separate sections. The book's first section draws on the works of Plato, John Stuart Mill and Eric Fromm and critically interrogates how the practice of conformity animates ordinary people's engagement with digital media. Put simply, we agree to conform to social media's trends, because doing so allows us to influence, survey, and control others. This attractive power depends to some extent on individuals subsuming themselves and their unique individual identities to the anonymity of the crowd or mob. As Weissman explains, "Through the ever-increasing gaze of a pervasive audience online, we may become overly pressured, even coerced toward collective opinions, as social media's mechanisms of likes, dislikes, friends, and followers constantly subjects us to the crowd's judgment along with that gaze" (22).

Weissman argues further that the allure of social media grows in the midst of a breakdown of community structures which once offered people the ability to connect and develop bonds of intimacy while pursuing their own individual growth and development. With the elimination of these community structures and institutions, ordinary people must lean on social media to find some semblance of connection. Social media's innate public nature, however, does not allow individuals to make mistakes or 'silence the noise of the external world' and work toward what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has described as essential to the process of self-actualization (45).

The second portion of the monograph examines social media's unique ability to produce new methods of control. Here is where the idea of Bentham and Foucault's Panopticon is explored at length. Peer-to-peer surveillance (P2P) has given ordinary people the power to survey and control others, including those typically immune or shielded from public scrutiny, such as elite officials or media personalities. These surveillance powers are what enables the contemporary systems of public shaming and punishment to function. Thus, the empowerment of ordinary users on social media is best described as automation of police surveillance systems in that individuals are now responsible for monitoring and sanctioning each other. As Weissman explains, "While major social media apps such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram can be used to keep in touch in new and even potentially liberating ways, they can also be used to keep a constant eye on one another with alarming detail" (83). This paradoxical tension between empowerment and control in turn leads one into self-censoring one's behavior in order to avoid detection by the public mob. In effect, we have all become prison guards in the watchtower of the Panopticon in which we all now live.

The third and final section of the monograph is devoted to the possibility of resistance. Spontaneity and anonymity are explored at length in these final chapters as Weissman details how new technologies, such as CV Dazzle, might allow people to evade digital media's intrusive presence within our lives by seizing upon digital anonymity's potential to evade public detection. The most obvious and perhaps potent form of resistance is of course to leave social media altogether, an insight which Weissman explains is gaining in popularity but only among those who already enjoy a certain level of economic and political status. Leaving social media is consequently increasingly out of reach for most ordinary people.

In addition to disengagement or spontaneity, perhaps the best recourse against digital surveillance mechanisms' hegemonic controls is to gain mastery over them. By examining how the promise of a community over the web delivers a panopticon instead, Weissman ultimately raises the possibility for ordinary people to assume the role of the watchguards over elite officials. Apart from close relatives, colleagues, or friends, social media also offers ordinary people the opportunity to scrutinize political and corporate officials for indiscretions which in the past were commonly known but shielded from public exposure. The #MeToo Movement and recent controversies around the speech and behavior of media and political personalities, for example, testifies to social media's unique ability at fomenting fear of rebuke among elite officials who previously transgressed societal norms without any consequence or public hearing.

The power to subvert digital surveillance technologies is perhaps made possible by the inversion of social media's digital gaze. The hacker, for example, ultimately uses the very same mechanisms

sold and marketed to corporate executives as ‘cybersecurity tools,’ such as user authentication, to break into their institution’s network. Weissman’s monograph thus leaves the reader wondering if digital media’s chief allure hinges upon the reversal of the public gaze whereby ordinary people can try elite officials, once shielded from public scrutiny, in the realm of public opinion. Put simply, perhaps we need to accept anonymity as a condition of self-actualization for people to be willing to speak freely in social media’s public square.

While philosophers like Kierkegaard condemned the anonymity of newspapers at his time, people often have important reasons for keeping their identities a secret. Kierkegaard himself knew the power of anonymity and routinely used pseudonyms. Oftentimes, hackers from anonymous collectives can join with activists on the ground to empower their movements and enact real change against government or corporate surveillance systems. Can someone live a whole life anonymously? Can communication potentially become more personal only through anonymity? Will social media make us all anonymous at some point?

Ultimately, Weissman’s monograph leaves the reader with a number of questions about digital media’s possible futures and makes an important and significant contribution to academic studies into social media surveillance. In particular, the monograph’s ability to ingeniously interweave ancient and modern philosophical discourses and treatises into larger debates about digital media’s applications and uses within contemporary society sets it apart. Guiding the reader through a rich and dynamic body of philosophical literature, Weissman’s ability to foreground historical works, such as the tale of the Ring of Gyges from Plato’s Republic, alongside discussions of Twitter and Instagram controversies among Gen Zers provides a path for both novice students and expert academics alike to understand complex and evolving philosophical debates. The monograph serves as an excellent resource for professors and teachers looking to connect historical philosophical debates to contemporary debates. I therefore recommend the monograph within a classroom setting, since it elicits important connections between academic literature, historical philosophical works, and contemporary debates.

## **REFERENCES**

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