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'It's like they're looking inside your body or inside your brain.' Internet surveillance practices in a special school

Herminder Kaur

Abstract

This chapter reflects on the struggle of a small cohort of teenagers with physical disabilities to resist surveillance when they use the internet in a special school, in England. Findings obtained from an ethnographic study with eleven students with physical disabilities in a special school revealed, students internet access and use was under two forms of surveillance, (i) physical and (ii) virtual. Each form of surveillance is discussed with reference to a case study which challenges the idea of the panopticon in the school. The first case study of a young girl, Bruna finds the physical presence of adult staff becoming oppressive and intrusive. She turns to the online realm to find a private space to socialize with friends and family. Her story highlights her daily struggle to resist the physical surveillance she is under when using the internet on her personal device in the school. The second story discusses how a young male named John, comes to learn of the virtual surveillance he is under when he uses a school laptop at home for personal use. The two stories discussed in this chapter draw on the surveillance practices as experienced by teenagers with physical disabilities in a special school. To conclude the article argues the measures of resistance expressed by the students in the school, signal their need and struggle for online privacy, and questions whether extensive measures to monitor students' use of the internet is justified by their disability.

Keywords: Internet, surveillance, disability, teenagers, privacy, resistance

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1 Introduction

The internet is described as a medium that not only offers significant online opportunities to young people. It is also perceived as a medium that is uncontrollable, unregulated, and one that exposes young internet users to multiple risks (Ey/Cupit, 2011). A perspective repeatedly reproduced by practitioners carrying out policy orientated research with young people, is one that emphasizes the internet should be safe and capital enhancing for every young user. In order to make sure this takes place much research continues to identify what these online risks are, and how they should be and are being managed by various actors such as teachers and parents (O'Neill, Staksrud/McLaughlin, 2013; Livingstone, 2006; Livingstone et al, 2013; Livingstone/Bober, 2005; Cankaya/Odasbasi, 2009; Duerager/Livingstone, 2012). Discourses on internet risks and safety end up presenting young people as vulnerable internet users, unlike responsible adults, parents, educators and governments who represent themselves as active protectors to young people. Youngsters with disabilities are particularly regarded as vulnerable to the internet. As Whittle et al (2013) argue, they may readily trust unfamiliar adults online because they develop trusting relationships with the many adults providing care in offline settings. Furthermore, they may not be as competent as non-disabled adolescents in recognizing their exposure to online grooming, or be able to manage such an encounter in and online or an offline context.

What fails to emerge from these studies, as they rely heavily on large scale surveys, is the diversity among young people and their experiences of managing online risks. The purpose of this chapter is not to delve into online risks, but to examine how the concerns around adolescents exposure to online risks and their online safety shapes the experience of using the internet for teenagers with disabilities in a special school. By discussing counter surveillance strategies adopted by teenage students with physical disabilities in the special school, this chapter supports scholars that challenge the concept of panopticism offered by Michel Foucault (1977) for studying internet surveillance practices in a school. With reference to two participant case studies this chapter highlights the struggle for internet privacy made by teenagers with physical disabilities. Before this is discussed, this chapter begins by providing a discussion on surveillance in schools, followed by a discussion on two forms – physical and virtual.

2 Surveillance in schools

In the simplest sense the term surveillance refers to the performance of keeping a close observation on someone (Staples, 2000; Lyon, 1994). Michael Foucault's (1977) famous concept of 'panopticism' has become synonymous with studies on surveillance. Foucault's (1977) work looked at the surveillance practices in a prison design. It was based on the idea that all prisoners would be placed individually in isolated, separate cells of a circular arrangement facing a central tower. The central tower in the middle of the prison would be visible from all cells. It would be from here that the prison guards would be able to monitor the prisoners in their cells whilst they would remain unseen as a light would mask their presence. Foucault (1977) discussed the notion of discipline and power in relation to how the surveillance takes place in this design. The design can be applied to other settings i.e. schools, where the students resemble the prisoners and the tower would represent how a teacher or a supervisor carries out surveillance. It presents how few people i.e. the prison guards/teachers hold the power over many i.e. the prisoners/students. Owing to backlighting the prisoners are unaware of when they are being watched and the guards in the tower can give the impression that they are constantly keeping a watch on the prisoners. This results in "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Because the tower from which they are being watched is directly in front of the prisoners, they internalize the notion of always being watched and start to measure their own behaviour against how they should be behaving according to the guards (or teachers in the school context). "It is a profound understatement to say that the panopticon dominates the study of surveillance." (Haggerty, 2006, p. 25). Although the concept of the panopticon has been disputed, it has also aided studies that have looked at surveillance in schools (Hope, 2005). Markus (1993) has noted the architectural design of schools has facilitated easy monitoring of large numbers of students by few teachers. This also takes place through the installation of CCTV cameras and ID cards in surveillance schools, which are used to detect, group and follow the movement of pupils (Taylor, 2013).

Over the years the panopticon has received much scrutiny, leading scholars to formulate alternative concepts. One attempt, as noted by Landahl (2013), is the concept of the synopticon. As discussed by Mathiesen (1997), this concept draws on the argument that many people can surveil a small number of people rather than a few people placing many others under surveillance. Hence the power asymmetry is not held by the few people but by the many. In a classroom scenario, for example, surveillance is unidirectional; the teacher is clearly visible to the students and therefore the many students can watch the few teachers, allowing them to know exactly when they are being monitored or are

likely to be monitored. As the teachers are visible to students, they in turn can gaze at them, which allows the students to know when they have the opportunity to resist by behaving in the ways the gaze of the teachers would encourage them to behave in. Gallagher (2010) found the concept of the panopticon to be insufficient when applying it to the surveillance taking place in the classroom. His study found surveillance by teachers is not constant and therefore open to resistance and does not simply operate on the basis of vision but also through hearing and sound. In contrast this study found, surveillance was constant in the classroom, students were not permitted to be without the supervision of an adult staff. Hence opportunities to resist or challenge the surveillance during lessons were unlikely. Hope (2005) looked at how students become subject to surveillance in schools when using the internet. His study also showed students actively resist school surveillance by minimizing their screens, and instead of internalizing constant surveillance, they actively tested teacher authority. In contrast, this study found that as there were many members of staff present in a classroom at a given time, the students would not be able to test the authority of all the staff members. Evidence of this taking place with physically disabled teenagers was again absent. While this section has just touched upon some of the shortcomings of the panopticon, it needs to be said there are a number of other critiques made in relation to the concept. However, this chapter recognizes the concept is multifaceted and that despite its shortcoming has not gone away (Lyon, 2006).

The concept of the panopticon has been used to see how far schools are panoptic (Gallagher, 2010) while the studies above have looked at mainstream school surveillance practices. This study uses the concept to observe the different ways the surveillance practices seen in relation to internet use in a special school for teenagers with physical disabilities diverge from panoptic surveillance. This study has found that the students want to use the internet privately without being under surveillance. In order to ensure this, they adopt measures to resist surveillance practices in the school when using the internet for personal use.

This chapter refers to the definition of surveillance by Lyon (2007), which claims that it must be “focused, systematic and routine” and pay “attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (Lyon, 2007, p. 14). The surveillance practices taking place in the school were not casual, occasional or spontaneous but purposeful and systematic. Furthermore, they were embedded in everyday routine life hence they were normalized for those doing the surveillance as much as for those subject to it. The different surveillance practices noted in an ethnographic study in a special school are clustered under two names. The first is physical surveillance, which refers to the ways internet use was under the surveillance of the watchful eyes

of adults in the school. The second is virtual, which means the surveillance of students' online activities by the school through different online software programmes it had subscribed to.

The following sections present two case studies to outline each of the surveillance practices played out in the lives of two teenager students with physical disabilities.

3 Physical internet surveillance

Life in a special school for students with physical disabilities entailed being surrounded and watched over by numerous members of staff. As the school catered to students with a diversity of special needs and abilities, it employed a large number of adult teaching assistants to assist students throughout the day with learning and care. The constant presence of many members of staff throughout the day becomes normalized, as their teaching, caring and assisting of the students is embedded in their daily school life routine. Class sizes in a special school consist of a small number of students, each with differing levels of abilities and ages. They consist of up to eight students and at least five members of staff. Hence when students in the school accessed the internet, it mostly took place with a member of staff caring to their needs, teaching them, or helping them to access or use the internet on a device. The arrangement of the classroom computers was designed to allow members of staff to view with ease all students working on the screens. Hence the first way in which the students in the school became subjected to surveillance is through the physical observation conducted by members of staff. This observation was eased by positioning school computers and laptops close to one another, thus allowing a member of staff working with students to overlook more than one screen, while they were assisting one student.

While peers could also overlook fellow students' screens when using the internet in class, there was no strong evidence of this taking place. Since the number of adults would match or even outnumber the students in the classroom, the need for students to monitor each other did not arise. Group work on the internet rarely took place. A common time to see a group of students around an internet device was during break times. As students were not permitted to use personal devices for internet use, students would keep a watch on which member of staff was nearby when using their personal devices that went against school rules. Some members of staff would be more lenient than others in allowing students to openly use their devices for online games. However, others were not. The proximity of a member of staff to a student using an internet device would determine the student's online activity. This shows physical surveillance was not unidirectional - while the staff were watching the

students, the students too were keeping a watch on staff to find a moment they could engage in online activities they would not be able or willing to partake in if teaching staff were present. For students without personal internet enabled devices a room with school computers was made available for them to use under the surveillance of teaching assistants overlooking their online activities. In both scenarios the behaviour of student groups around a screen could give insights into their use of the internet. If a group of students huddled around a computer screen raised their voices, this often attracted a member of staff to physically surveil what was being watched on the screen. Hence, like Gallagher (2010), this study also found sound is imperative to surveillance and not only vision her condition limits her to stretch in her chair. In order to illustrate the bearing of physical internet surveillance and its implications particularly on teenagers, let's look at one participant named Bruna. The case study reveals the ways in which being under physical surveillance in the school leads her to finding ways to access and engage in private internet use.

Bruna's tactical approach towards internet use

At school, like many students, Bruna is a user of an electronic wheelchair; her ability to move and stretch is limited when in her chair. In a daily scenario this may mean she needs to ask someone to turn on the desktop computer power switch if located out of her reach. There is always a member of staff close by to help with physical assistance. She explains "you know in this school you can't do anything without staff. It's like you don't have your personal [space], [...] you don't have a time where you're not with a staff [member]." She further elaborates, when in the rare situation a member of staff is not around she feels "a bit more free, not like under control." Being in a classroom where the ratio of staff to students is roughly equal, at break and lunch times, too, the students are surrounded by staff members. This makes it difficult for students to find a moment where they can be without the presence of adult staff. In such an environment, where Bruna is constantly feeling the presence of adult staff and "hates" attending school as the entire day is spent indoors and in classrooms. She claims "breaks and lunches are meant to be for when you get a time away from your classroom but like all day being in a classroom in the environment of a classroom it's awful." For students like Bruna, going outside to play is unfeasible. She spends most of her time conversing with teaching assistants in lessons and is unwilling to spend her break time doing the same, but has little liberty to do much else. One means of escape is the internet.

During break times Bruna would whizz to the toilets to use her iPod connected via the school wireless internet connection to access the internet privately. This gives her the opportunity to hold a conversation on applications

like Kik and Touch which are designed for free online chats. She would engage in conversations with her friends from the local temple, her cousins and a close male friend who has moved on to college. As Bruna is not able to spend all her time in the school toilets, she continues to seek ways once out of the toilets cubicle to use her iPod to get online. She does this by monitoring the numbers of staff members around her and where they are positioned. To avoid the attention of numerous staff members on duty, she would turn herself towards a corner or position herself away from adults, finding a wall to position herself against in order to avoid a member of staff standing behind her that would glare down at the screen of her iPod as she would pretend to use it for online games.. She looks for reasons to move from one area to another in the school so she can check her device while on the move, or if lucky when in a room without an adult. She also rushes to the toilets as breaks come to an end before members of staff arrive there with students to assist them in the washroom.

While Bruna does not engage in any activity on her iPod that one could object to i.e. chatting to strangers, she does have a reason why she avoids the physical surveillance of the school staff, which is not related to landing herself in trouble by violating school rules prohibiting the use of personal devices in school. Bruna explains:

Not that I do anything wrong, I just don't want them to see it because they already, they already look at half of my life in school actually all of my life in school and know everything about me, plus on my iPod, it's like there should be a privacy point, they've already passed it but I can't let them go through this...you know everything about me, you are always next to me, always got your eyes on me, what more do you want? It's like there're looking inside your body or inside your brain, trust me I hate it, it's like I hate the fact that there's staff everywhere.

For Bruna, internet access is not just about escape it is about her struggle to maintain a private space in her life to socialize with peers that she lacks offline and feels she can maintain online.

4 Virtual Internet surveillance

Coupled with the physical surveillance that takes place in the special school is virtual internet surveillance. An array of computer mediated observation tools exist that the special school has ascribed to in order to track and restrict the students' online activity. Online activities are logged by devices in cyberspace. As explained by Hope (2005), the computers used to access the internet also carry much information about an individual's online activities. If the student arouses the suspicion of a member of staff, all they need to do is use a few clicks of the mouse to open up the recent history of websites visited or the stored list

of documents downloaded from the Web that have been accessed. In schools, staff can also examine student computer accounts to see whether they have stored any unsuitable material on the school computer hard drive. However, during interviews with computer technicians in the school, they mentioned the various means by which students online activities can be checked but provided no incidents where they resorted to such practices. This is because, as one member of staff argued, most online activities are noticed through physical surveillance. When interviewing many members of staff and questioning how they physically monitor the students use of the internet in lessons the findings revealed there was a general consensus amid staff members that the filter software blocks many inappropriate and even appropriate sites, which heavily restricts what the students can access from the school computers, thus making their job of physical surveillance of students' use of the internet a lot more relaxed. Furthermore, as the school caters to students with different abilities, the staff normally know which students can be mischievous online and therefore they keep a closer eye on those students.

Social networking sites popular among youngsters like Facebook and YouTube are blocked from school computers. Local Educational Authorities make it compulsory for schools to use filter software to ensure students internet safety. However, this restricts students' use of many internet sites (Valcke et al, 2011; Barrow, 2006). For example, once when a student in a lesson carried out a search to find images of nuts (food item), the search engine prevented the site from showing the results. This confused the students and stopped them from completing the class task. The class teacher explained the word nuts can have inappropriate connotations, hence images may have appeared which may have upset the students had results from the search been accessible.

Meeder (2005) notes that by adopting software filters that block sites which may be considered inappropriate, schools may also be preventing students from accessing sites which are clean and educational. Aston and Brzyska (2012) have noted the internet is creating challenges for teachers. This study found this challenge stems from managing how much surveillance is sufficient for the students to enjoy the educational benefits of the internet but also from the stark differences in teachers' perceptions of what is educational and inappropriate online. We can refer to Lim et al (2013) to raise the concern placed over the misuse of the internet and the potentially grave harm it may bring to students in this school.

It was noted when students from the special school had access to internet enabled computers from different sites i.e. mainstream colleges which did not block or restrict their access to social networking sites or video channels the students still avoided using these sites, fearing their online activities on those devices may be monitored. They were worried they might land themselves in a different kind of trouble which they were not aware of yet, or the staff may

be able to see those online activities they would prefer to keep private. In presenting the case study of John, we can see some students internalized this fear of surveillance since he became reluctant to access and use certain online sites on a laptop provided by the school for use at home.

Avoiding the use of school internet devices

John has a condition that affects his coordination, movement and vision. This makes working on a computer screen difficult and he often requires a magnifier to be able to view his on screen activities. John is provided with a laptop by the school to work on and take home as it comes with a visual software to magnify what is displayed on the screen when needed. Sometimes it takes much longer for John to read and view all the contents of the webpage when using the internet. Many features go unnoticed as he focuses on features present on the screen that are of interest to him. This has led John to some difficulty with the school. His mum recalls a time when she was invited to the school after seeing that the virtual surveillance software, installed on John's laptop by the school, had detected that John had viewed pornographic material. His mum was well aware that he must have done this by accident if he was aware at all of such material appearing on his screen. In his argument John explains he was visiting a gaming website and a box popped up on his screen with such material from the site he was using. He had no intention of viewing the material nor did he. John realized even when using safe internet sites he could land himself in trouble because it would show he was doing something inappropriate online. In order to avoid such a situation, John started to restrict his online activities on the school laptop as he did not want the school finding out what he does online outside of school.

John had little understanding of how this internet surveillance system worked until he found himself once again being called into the principal's office. When using the laptop at home, John realized he was able to access the websites that would be otherwise blocked in school. He continued logging onto his favourite social networking site until his private messages, which he was exchanging with a friend online, were flagged up and sent to his school principle. The principle brought up his entire conversation with his friend and John tried hard to explain that though it was being interpreted as inappropriate, the conversation was nothing more than teenage banter. After this experience John realized that even when he thinks his activities online are private, he really has no privacy at all when accessing the internet from home on the school device. This experience left him feeling cautious, weary and annoyed with the school. Today John strictly limits his activities on the school laptop to educational use and does not use it outside of school. Instead he uses his personal

computer and tablet for personal use, thereby avoiding school surveillance and maintaining his online privacy. Even during break times, he connects his personal internet device to the school Wi-Fi connection, and switches between his Facebook chats and a music application when a member of staff is close by. By plugging in his earphones and quietly engaging with his tablet, he attracts little attention and gives the impression he is listening to music or playing games on his device. By accessing the internet during school breaks, it allows him to socialise briefly with his friends online that have moved on from the school.

5 Does disability justify Internet surveillance?

This chapter has raised many points. Firstly, internet surveillance takes place in many ways, physical as well as virtual. Secondly, surveillance practices are not always panoptic, measures to resist surveillance can be implemented by those under surveillance as was also found by Gallagher (2010) and Hope (2005). Students were able to engage in resisting and challenging these practices by avoiding the use of the internet when it is under surveillance, and accessing it in ways which would ensure their online activities remain private. The smartness of the students that are able to resist and challenge the surveillance practices in the school raises the question of whether disability justifies the level of surveillance the students in the school become subjected to. These two forms of internet surveillance, whether combined or taking place individually, constrain the way in which the youngsters in this study were able to access but also use the internet. However, the study found the majority of the students in the school were unable to engage in resisting the physical and virtual gaze. As the school catered to students of different abilities, some students benefitted from the protection the surveillance practices provided them. Those students that were able to some degree resist the gaze of school staff or learn about how their online activities were being monitored and tracked through online surveillance were able to actively engage in measures to maintain their internet access and privacy. Issues of online privacy are embedded in everyday life. This study has tried to understand where those issues fit into the lives of young physically disabled students. Privacy is a multidimensional concept and challenges excessive surveillance (Bennett, 2008). At root the term privacy means the extent to which individuals have control over personal information (Kanter et al, 2012). While much policy research, as shown by Steeves and Jones (2010), has been concerned with youngsters' personal data being collected online by market driven organisations in a way that raises concerns for their data protection and privacy, this study has found out that the participants are not only concerned about disclosure of information online. Rather, they would like to have control over where, when and to whom information concerning their internet access

is disclosed. Boyd (2014) argues that privacy is important for marginalized groups, and this study agrees. Hence teenagers in this study consistently tried out new ways to resist the control or to avoid it altogether. When they were unable to resist it being exerted by educators through surveillance practices, it was perceived as a form of oppression by the students.

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Biography

Herminder Kaur completed her Master's degree in Social Research at University of Warwick in 2012. After which Herminder secured a three year funded scholarship from the Graduate School at Loughborough University to study for a PhD. Whilst at Loughborough University, Herminder has been a co-convenor for the Culture and Media Analysis Research Group. She has also taught across various undergraduate modules that focused on social research methods, communication, media and cultural theory. She has been a visiting lecturer at Bishop Grosseteste University, teaching content analysis and sociology of the moving image with a focus on British television. Herminder's research interests centre on understanding the uses of the internet by teenagers with physical disabilities. There are four key themes in her research: the enactment of disability; internet surveillance and its resistance; the rhythmic practices of internet use and how it is that teenagers build and maintain relationships online.

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