

# Discourse Surveillance The Social

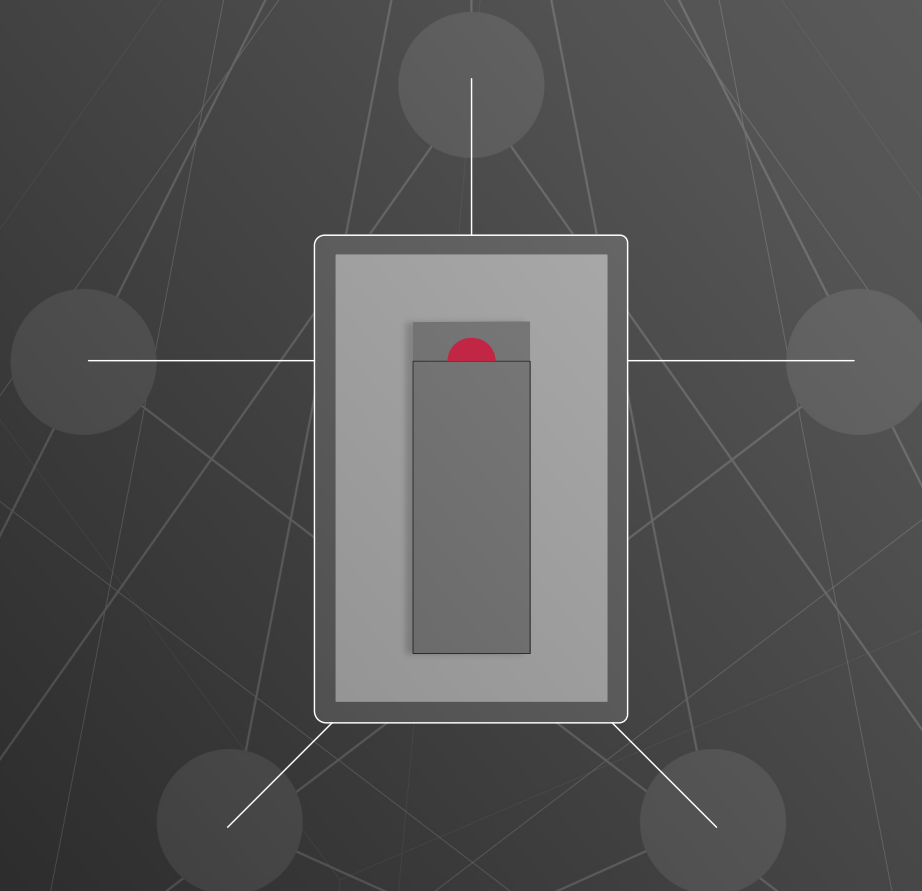
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## Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic has changed how we work and socialize. Working alongside colleagues is no longer possible, or is at least in suspension for an unknown amount of time, with communication performed solely through teleconference.

As a result, the old practice of conducting site visits to physically experience a place is no longer possible, having a direct impact on research. My research group is faced with a compounding challenge: for a site with little quantifiable documentation available, what can be done when the research completely relies on the internet?

When performing the search query of Xinjiang China, a list of articles is returned that focus on either tourism or terror. Sensational articles from western-media outlets are

outraged by the Uyghur “concentration camps” and the portrayed human-rights atrocities happening within them. Articles from Chinese media focus on positive aspects of the post-earthquake reconstruction of Kashgar, the de-extremification and integration of the Uyghur culture into the Han-Chinese culture, and newly developed cultural sites for tourism. These contrasting yet equally sensational articles constitute the majority of what is available to us as researchers. They are discourse loaded with propaganda, ideology, and mystery, received through the digital terminals of a communication network.

In the book *Transmission Towers on the Long Island Expressway*, Bertomen portrays the significance of communication networks and their effects on society, made possible by transmission towers. Communication networks enable

messages from what was once the public sphere to penetrate the walls of homes and broadcast within living rooms. At the time of publication in the late eighties, citizens interacted with communication networks via analog terminals, such as the television, radio, and telephone. The implications for their effects on social life were already dire and imminent. Thirty years later, these networks have been expanded upon and exponentially sped up, while the terminals have become digital. The personal computer and smartphone (among other devices) have also joined the list of digital terminals. The impact of communication networks and the attention economy on social life have continued to suggest grave consequences.<sup>1</sup>

As we become more dependent on communication networks and digital space becomes increasingly refined to-

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1 Michele Bertomen, *Transmission Towers on the Long Island Expressway: A Study of the Language of Form* (New York, N.Y: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991).

wards life-like representations, and the time with which we spend on our devices continues to rise, perhaps the invisible yet ubiquitous space of communication networks should no longer be treated as benign and mysterious or left to computer scientists and advertisers to construct.

The work of this paper investigates the nature of the discourse that is propagated in the communication networks of telecom infrastructure, with spatial implications, to discuss the consequences of researching with an internet constructed by advertisers. The arguments are built upon: Foucault's notion of discourse from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Herman and Chomsky's media propaganda machine from *Manufacturing Consent*, aspects of contemporary surveillance theory as summarized in *Bentham, Deleuze and Be-*

*yond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation*, and Jonathan Crary's reflection on the bleak future of sleep and the social under the effects of capitalism in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

## The System - Surveillance and Media

Haggerty and Ericson propose that post-panoptic theories of surveillance have moved away from the physical realm of territory into de-territorialized methods of social control (what they call surveillant assemblage), based on Foucault's prediction of disciplinary states being the future of surveillance and control (and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of control societies and assemblage).<sup>2</sup> Deleuze had also established that the focus of a post-panoptic society is to shape individuals into ideal consumers with a focus on monitoring their data double (from Deleuze's concept of the dividual), instead of focusing on the disciplining of bodies to establish social norms.<sup>3</sup> The goals of discipline (in the context of Foucault's social control) thus diverge from establishing normative behavior across social groups in a physical context, moving

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<sup>2</sup> Michele Bertomen, *Transmission Towers on the Long Island Expressway: A Study of the Language of Form* (New York, N.Y: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation," *Philosophy & Technology* 30, no. 1 (March 2017): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0219-1>.

towards a de-territorialized neoliberal agenda.

By monitoring the digital traces that our bodies leave behind through engagement with digital devices, discipline can be designed for each individual. So can the strategies for maximizing the captivity of their attention also be designed (to ultimately guide them towards their next purchase).<sup>4</sup> Discipline is thus now focused on constructing and monitoring consumer patterns to build profiles of individuals (their data double/digital representation), in order to exploit their vulnerabilities, needs, and attention for the benefit of advertisers.<sup>5</sup> Further analysis can also be performed on a profile to determine what physical spaces and information an individual should have access to.<sup>6</sup>

Information collected from internet journalism (unless published from a blog or independent journal-

ist) has been processed through a machine that Chomsky and Herman have coined as the “Five Filters of the Media Propaganda Machine.” This machine is designed to serve the interests of investors, the majority being advertisers. Since the end of the 19th century, the business model for journalism has been centered on revenue generated from advertising because paper copies and the stories themselves have not been sufficient generators of revenue on their own.<sup>7</sup> Chomsky’s research has shown that in the US, the majority of news stories come from Government entities and the stories that are published fit pre-approved agendas.<sup>8</sup> Beyond journalism, the primary motive of entertainment media isn’t to promote an appreciation and future desire for entertainment, but to encourage consumerism. The messages, their tones, and images are specifically contrived to exploit human emotion and tendencies to push indi-

viduals towards making purchases.<sup>9</sup>

The point is that media companies are far from neutral. The purpose of journalism is not to provide accurate descriptions of events for the benefit of humanity and the common good, but to stay profitable - to meet the demands of the investing advertisement agencies by offering an individual’s captured attention.

Surveillance capitalism and the agenda of media companies and their advertisers are thus working in harmony. The data collected from surveillance is used to exploit biological and social needs to capture attention for as long as possible and efficiently discipline bodies towards being productive consumers while continuing to capture behaviors to fine-tune the system.<sup>10</sup>

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4 Galič, Timan, and Koops, 20.

5 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014), 68.

6 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond,” 25.

7 Galič, Timan, and Koops, 22.

8 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 14-15.

9 Herman and Chomsky, 4.

10 Herman and Chomsky, 17-18.

## Reception - The Multitude of Terminals

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault proposes that ideology is both created and reinforced by recursive and discursive group activities, as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.”<sup>11</sup> Discourse, Foucault proposes, is the content of the messages and images exchanged in these systematic group activities.

When an individual ingests a message through a terminal (a message that has been run through the propaganda machine and delivered through the communication network), the discursive process involves an emotional response and decision to accept the message as worthy. If deemed worthy, the recursive process involves the multitude of ways that the message is propagated back into the communication network to be ingested by others. What this means is that the propagation of messages from the media do not stop once they reach the terminals. Rather, they are either dismissed

(if ineffective) or reinforced. Because these messages are originally designed to captivate an individual’s attention rather than promote truth, a large social issue begins to surface – that one may be less likely to apply appropriate reason when evaluating the content of a message that is exploiting a biological or social need. This results in a disregard for the source of the message, a failure to recognize the purpose of the message, and the reinforcement of potentially false or harmful discourse.

There are several social implications with the propagation of false/harmful discourse, and in the context of performing research in the Tarim Basin, one difficulty is clear: that the media discourse we find on the internet regarding the Xinjian region has likely gone through a propaganda machine and the devices with which we access them are simultaneously trying to manipulate us into giving them attention. To continue

research while actively blinded to this phenomenon, or actively ignoring it, is a failure to recognize extreme biases latent in the data and analysis.

In her essay, *Mapping Considered as a Problem of Theory and Practice*, Kurgan argues that our lives and experience are embedded within the digitally-constructed maps from satellite imagery and that extreme bias is inevitable when using them. The maps have become a type of infrastructure that we cannot separate ourselves from and that infrastructure is biased in the representation of the land. I believe that a similar approach must be taken for our internet-based research on the Tarim Basin, that the internet is now an infrastructure within which we are embedded and it is impossible to separate ourselves from the inherent bias. Instead, we need to embrace the infrastructure and its biases as a new (and critical) part of our reality.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1982), 49.

12 Laura Kurgan, “Mapping Considered as a Problem of Theory and Practice,” in *Close up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics*, First hardcover edition (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2013), 14.

## Antidotes - Oligopticon, Tactics, and Strategies

Relying on Foucault's panopticon as the sole metaphor for social control is no longer useful, because of the transition from territorial disciplinary states to de-territorialized Deleuzian societies (Deleuze's notion of a society that is based on Foucault's control societies) that utilize methods of control focusing on an individual's data double rather than their physical body.<sup>13</sup> Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon is based on Bentham's prison design and maintains reliance on physical space.<sup>14</sup>

This is where Latour and Hermant's oligopticon comes into play, where surveillance and discipline are performed through a multitude of devices that capture the smaller details of daily experience. At first glance, the oligopticon appears to be an antidote to the panopticon as a way for

citizens to maintain an equal understanding of their world in ways not available to the panopticon's control tower. However, it becomes clear that Latour and Hermant propose the oligopticon instead as an alternative that gains an understanding of the world where the panopticon fails; that to more accurately represent the social realm with data, both modes have to be maintained.<sup>15</sup>

Certeau however, does propose an antidote to the panoptic surveillance through his notion of tactics. Tactics were the ground-level decisions made in the day-to-day moment by individual citizens navigating the controlled world, a world established by the strategies of the elite that construct the built environment and their panopticon with the intent for social control. Certeau was proposing that

the panoptic view of the elites from the World Trade Center could not possibly foresee or control the detailed results of their strategies, and thus not predict how individuals would navigate their system for personal benefit, or even use physical manifestations of the strategies against them.<sup>16</sup>

While Certeau's notion of tactics is optimistic and hopeful, the unfortunate reality is that citizens have given the elites a full perspective of their daily experience through the personal computers and devices carried on their bodies. Furthermore, tactics are becoming less and less possible and effective each day because the navigation of the strategized spaces by citizens has been recorded and analyzed over decades to improve the efficiency of the strategies. The strategies have also rapid-

13 Galič, Timan, and Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond," 23.

14 Galič, Timan, and Koops, 12-16.

15 Bruno Latour and Emily Hermant, "Paris: Invisible City," 28, accessed September 23, 2020, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/PARIS-INVISIBLE-GB.pdf>.

16 Michel de Certeau and Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Nachdr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 34-39.

ly developed to counter pursuits for independence and privacy because of the willingness for citizens to give up their minute oligoptic views of daily experience.

Where tactics fail to balance modes of power in a post-panoptic society, Steve Mann proposes that the increasing availability of recording devices to citizens has afforded them the means to perform surveillance from below on the ruling bodies above in what he calls *sousveillance*.<sup>17</sup> An example of this would be the wearing of body cameras by police, or the ability of protesters to record violent responses by a government.

However, it seems unlikely that the same level of data made accessible to corporations and ruling entities is also accessible to citizens, nor do citizen's have the same degree

of access to surveillance equipment. So while *sousveillance* does offer an opportunity to balance the playing fields, the opportunity is limited.

Crary doesn't provide a solution to the effects of capitalism on sleep and social life (where both are in danger of being either eliminated or appropriated by the market) in his book. Rather, he demonstrates the importance of sleep and the social as final defenses against capitalism – that the two are dependent on each other and the natural cycles of the earth, and that as we disconnect them from each other and the earth's rhythms, our lives become evermore surrendered to capitalism with depressing outcomes.<sup>18</sup> If we defend sleep and the social, we defend basic organic properties of humanity that were once considered public rights.<sup>19</sup>

I don't believe that the situation is as necessarily dire as portrayed by Crary. It may be true that our own lives and personalities have already been fully charted and analyzed beyond our ability to separate from them, but perhaps we can limit the pervasiveness of surveillance by supporting physical spaces dedicated to all things social and a defense for sleep.

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17 Galič, Timan, and Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond," 31.

18 Crary, 24/7, 98; Crary, 71. Notions of the communal and social have been under attack or undermined by neo-liberal capitalism. Without a dependance on the cycles of natural light, time becomes a social construct.

19 Crary, 24/7, 27. The ability to sleep in public was once supported, but since the 17th century has become unsupported and unprotected.



## Conclusion: Erosion of the Social

The average time I spend indoors since the COVID-19 Pandemic has risen to almost 22 hours per day. Eight of those hours are spent sleeping and perhaps two-to-three are spent doing chores or talking on the phone. The rest, about eleven hours worth, are spent on the internet in some fashion. All of this time is spent in front of a device, eyes open, and the brain applying meaning to the symbols and imagery that appear. Eleven hours in sixteen hours of being awake means that the majority of time spent is not spent interacting with or understanding the physical world around me, but engaged with the digital world projected from the computer screen. The majority of time is spent in another world, a world of digital symbols and imagery, while still inhabiting my body in real space but the attention is elsewhere.

If I'm in front of my laptop screen preoccupied with a task presented to me through the bright blue light, the mind theater is active. It's simultaneously interacting with the images and symbols on the screen while distracted by other biological inputs. These images and symbols carry language that the mind theater reconstructs through understanding. At what point does the mind theater become a real type of space instead of an additional layer of consciousness? Bertomen argues that the digital world is increasingly becoming more lifelike and our ability to distinguish between ideas and reality is diminishing.<sup>20</sup> Crary argues that our increased exposure to a constant flow of information has been a contributing factor to what he calls a cultural "mass amnesia, sustained by global capitalism" that has both rendered us incapable of

sustaining critical thought for long enough to challenge the status quo and has made all images (and statements) disposable.<sup>21</sup>

I am physically inhabiting the digital space, but the digital space is interacting with and being altered by the screen's projection. Its construction is a collaboration between the brain where meaning is conjured and the messages from the screen's projection. Whatever exists in the brain affects the space constructed, and so does the projection on the screen.

The mind theater affects my body through the chemical releases of emotional response and impacts how I interact with the physical world. Traces of objects from the mind theater linger in my mind and apply residual meaning to the objects that I interact with within the physical space. The

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20 Bertomen, *Transmission Towers on the Long Island Expressway*, 52.

21 Crary, 24/7, 35.



physical world thus becomes an extension of my body that is affected by the mind theater. The inverse statement is also true, that the digital world becomes an extension of my body that is affected by physical space.

The mind theater is a metaphor for a complex process of interaction and engagement, ready and ripe for ridicule and critique. Yet I believe that the core implication is sound, that it is a type of space whose construction is affected by our interaction with the symbols and language projected from a screen – constantly building, clearing, and shifting, and we are spending more and more time engaged in it.

The implication that the mind theater is largely influenced by advertisers and computer scientists

is alarming. This heavily influential space is being constructed by those with little consideration for experience or the human body because their professional occupation or monetary interests have a separate agenda. This is an opportunity for academics to begin taking this space seriously as a real thing with social consequences and to begin surveying and marking the territories. The spaces created by computer scientists and advertisers appear to be (unfortunately) unregulated, uncharted, and according to Crary, eroding the virtuous aspects of community and the social.<sup>22</sup>

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22 Crary, 98.

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