

Public good - You can look but you better not touch

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George Orwell wrote in *1984* about a future where every home had a screen which could spy on you. And in a way, he was right - the only difference is, we put the screen there ourselves.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes about the panopticon - a circular prison with a central observation tower like the hub of a wheel, the point being that the inmates, each in his cell, would always be potentially visible to a guard in the tower. The theory was that the constant surveillance would stop the inmates misbehaving, a bit like the way surveillance cameras are supposed to work. The panopticon gives power over people's minds through architecture. The reality, however, is a bit more complex, because we are to some degree complicit in the process ourselves.

I actually went to one of those anti-government anti-GCSB protest rallies the other day - the funny part was when I got home and looked at my Facebook account. Someone had posted a picture of me at the protest - and (surprise) it wasn't the government. We put the screen there ourselves. We're all spies.

The internet, and more broadly, digital technologies like cellphones have changed the game as far as private and public space are concerned. It's not so much that the state is snooping on us (though that can happen) but that once we're online, we're in public whether we like it or not. Nowadays we voluntarily put large parts of our formerly private lives on display, or other people do it for us. Posting photos of our lunches, our pets, our body parts, the view from our kitchen this morning etc. When we go out, others snap us - working, playing, drinking, socializing, protesting. That's what social media are for - "sharing" our lives. But the corollary of all that visibility is that increasingly, anyone can see what we're up to, and the distinction between voluntary and involuntary exposure starts to blur. Our private space is now a public space, and vice versa. It's similar with a cellphone - you can be followed anywhere and harassed at any time - and what's more, you consented to it.

It's a Faustian pact - convenience and accessibility come at a price. You're never alone (but who wants to be alone?) On the other hand you're never entirely *with* anyone either - cue joke about texting during sex. Perish the thought you might be recording it anyway. As its name implies, private property is also implicated in this pact - as any record company or Hollywood film company will tell

you. A computer works by copying and reproducing things and this includes information. It used to be that some kinds of information were sort of protected, mainly by the difficulty of reproduction - a film, for example. Not any more. What's yours is mine, sort of.

The Big Brother model: "the government is spying on us!" is old news. It's based, like 1984, on the idea that power operates from the top down - i.e. that the authorities, the state, the corporations, some kind of global conspiracy - oppress the powerless - ordinary people like us. In the past, they used physical force (outside the first world, they still do) - steal a sheep, lose a hand, an eye for an eye, capital punishment, state force - these days, they spy on us - trusting that the fear of being caught is enough to keep us in line, with coercion as a last resort (1984 again). While this is all well and bad, it's not so far removed from "benevolent" State intervention (nanny state!). The bigger picture here is not about the politics of left and right, collectivism and individualism or even of totalitarianism and democracy but what Foucault calls bio-politics. Modern societies are founded on a certain kind of power relations which we might call regulatory and surveillance based, as opposed to arbitrary or coercive.

There's a bigger picture here, in my view: seeing is believing; you can't hide from the truth; I have a vision statement ... am I making myself clear? We're living in a world dominated, not by corporations or government agencies, but by sight. Sight equals truth - you can't believe everything you hear, smell is smelly, taste is a matter of... taste, and touch is too risky (see below). The other senses are untrustworthy, but sight is tidy - separating and delineating objects so we can organize our action upon them. However, the price we pay for the reign of the eye is very high – splendid isolation.

In the panopticon the inmates are all separated. It's a philosophy of radical individualism. Everyone is watched, but no one can be touched. The anti-smacking bill is only one example – all teachers and health professionals know the risks of "inappropriate" touching, whatever the motive. Any touch these days is sexual or violent. Each man is an island, dwelling in his lonely castle of dreams. Touching is messy – that's why it had to be phased out. Poking only happens on Facebook. Meanwhile we watch – ourselves and others. You're overweight; you're in my space; you're famous. *Noli me tangere*. Don't try to hold me. This is the price of infinite mobility – you can never be at rest. Jimi Hendrix, ezy riding down the highway - flying his freak flag high. Freedom is slavery.