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Final Paper

Technology, Surveillance, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Every Tuesday and Thursday, my friends and I carpool from campus up to a small church in Shoreline. I head into the room to begin setting up for the group of middle schoolers who will arrive shortly to start the tutoring session. Many of these students are second or even first-generation immigrants who immigrated to the United States from Ethiopia. It always intrigues me how they tell the stories of their friends, family, and school life. I notice the differences in the ways that I learned in middle school compared to how they are currently learning through a computer screen. Previously, I never questioned the use of computers in the classroom as they were seen as the “new method of learning.” It wasn’t until I had a conversation with one of my students about an essay that she didn’t submit where she explained, “I didn’t get to finish my essay but the teacher said it was too late because she already printed it out.” A little confused, I asked, “How did she print out an essay you didn’t turn in?” “It’s because she has access to my google docs so she looked through it to find my essay and then just printed it out.”

It was that moment where I remembered that teachers and schools have access to a student’s activity online. As technology has entered into every part of our lives, especially in K-12 schools, I am interested in the practices that have been used to monitor and surveille students. Additionally, I reflected on the ways that surveillance has shown up in schools even before the introduction of school-mandated computers. Surveillance systems have been in place in various ways and increasingly apparent in public education. Disciplinary policies are a form of surveillance that have disproportionately affected students of color and students with disabilities which is now known as the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). Now with the incorporation of surveillance technologies and online learning, how are these practices further feeding students

into the STTP. This essay will first explore the landscape of the School-To-Prison Pipeline and the rise of current Educational Technology surveillance systems. Next, these modern day practices will be connected to broader concepts such as surveillance and criminality. Lastly, a brief analysis of current solutions that attempt to address this issue will be conducted before offering critiques and possible recommendations to further dismantle this harmful system of over-surveillance. Through this paper, I hope to provide insight into a hidden issue of over-surveillance and criminalization of marginalized students as a means to reevaluate the technologies implemented in schools.

In the 1980s, zero-tolerance policies were introduced across schools in the United States which formally began the process of the STPP. Zero-tolerance standards have allowed students from poor, disabled, racial backgrounds to face harsh consequences (suspension/expulsion) for minor misbehaviors. With the rise of criminalizing minor misconducts, police officers entered into schools as a way to “discipline” these students for their unacceptable behaviors, (Heitzeg, 2009). This discipline can mean arresting a student and sending them out of schools and into jails. The politics of the 1980s focused heavily on the “War on Drugs” and “Super Predators” which heightened the operations of the prison-industrial complex and continued criminalization of Black and Brown bodies. In today’s schools, the STPP is slightly hidden. Although police officers in schools have now changed to take the title of “School Resource Officer” (SRO), the lingering presence of these authorities leaves students feeling unsafe and distrustful of education as a whole, (Anderson, 2016). Additionally, studies have shown that a school’s level of surveillance is influenced by the demographics of the student body, (Gebhart & Wang, 2020). Schools with higher populations of Black or Brown students are more likely to invest in stricter surveillance technologies which further reinforces a cycle of viewing these youth as more

criminal and therefore in need of more surveillance. The School-To-Prison pipeline is closely linked to larger socio-political issues and continues to be as surveillance technology is incorporated into all facets of life.

The incorporation of online learning tools and modern digital platforms into the classroom began in the early 2010s with the use of iPads, computers, and educational websites. However, the COVID-19 pandemic completely shifted about 93% of students into an online-only distance learning environment, (McElrath, 2020). Three years later, schools have returned to in-person sessions but computers and other technology are a core feature of learning. The investment in these technologies does not stop there. From cameras to facial recognition software to digital monitoring and filtering, schools have invested a substantial amount into Educational Technology Surveillance (EdTech) with the intention of these tools being used to prevent, “school shootings, suicides and bullying,” (Cistone, 2023). Yet, research shows that EdTech has no impact in preventing violence from entering schools and instead harms the students who are constantly watched, (ACLU, 2023). Not only are these tools ineffective but EdTech has the capacity to surveil students outside of school which collects a student’s personal information, online activity, and forms of communication, (Devia Nuño, 2022). This intense surveillance has left students avoiding using online resources. Students also shared that surveillance technologies have been shared with law enforcement and that they can be punished for online activity used outside of school, (ACLU, 2023). This is particularly harmful for marginalized students as these databases will over-surveil students who are statistically seen as criminals and thus giving SROs a reason to punish students with Black or Brown skin, once again feeding into the STPP.

Though schools across the country have implemented intense security measures, schools with higher populations of students of color are more likely to implement a stricter system of

surveillance, (Gebhart & Wang, 2020). This can be attributed to an assertion of specific neighborhoods and communities as “criminal” thus justifying the need for these “safety measures.” With more intense surveillance in predominantly nonwhite schools, students of color face stricter forms of over-policing and further pushes them into the STPP (Anderson, 2016). These technologies are often thought to be the most “objective and neutral” deciders of criminality without acknowledging how Black and Brown students are socio-historically criminalized, (Smith-Thompson, 2018). As technologies continue to take over the classroom, it is important to understand how these “tools” write narratives around inherent criminality and the need to surveille marginalized communities.

Surveillance not only violates a student’s personal right to privacy but also acts as a form of social control. Gary T. Marx lists characteristics of how social control is maintained through technologies like: 1) Data is shared and permanently stored, 2) data collection occurs without the consent of the target, 3) preventive risk through predictive means, and 4) digital innovations have made it (surveillance) more intensive and interiorizing, (Alexandre, 2023). These traits are visible in EdTech practices as companies and law enforcement may have access to a student’s information, (Broussard, 2023), and students are often unaware of how machines are tracking their data or online activity, (Devia Nuño, 2023). As mentioned earlier, the purpose of installing EdTech within schools is to prevent violence (risk) by monitoring a student in various ways (predictive means). EdTech is a technological tool that has invasive power over a student’s life which has significant consequences on how Black and Brown bodies are controlled.

Through epidermalization, Black and Brown bodies have been branded as commodities which dehumanized those people into groups that could be exploited, (Browne, 2015). Digital epidermalization is the process in which surveillance technologies seek to render bodies into

code, something that can be collected, monitored, and used, (Browne, 2015). Epidermalization of these bodies have classified these communities as objects, criminals, and sub-human. Through EdTech, a student's online behavior and activity creates data that is monitored, shared, and used to keep students in place. All of these forms of surveillance are part of one history that aims to maintain social control of BIPOC people, (Broussard, 2023). With the use of modern technologies that create algorithms based on previous data, BIPOC students will always be the one's designated as "the ones to watch" because these digital tools are using data that is biased in labeling BIPOC folks as previous criminals. For example, EdTech tools like facial recognition are a form of biased technology that define Black and Brown students as criminals. Facial recognition technologies scan faces and match them to the faces of those who have been arrested. People of color are more likely to be falsely matched to a picture of someone with a criminal record which not only questions the reliability of this technology, but "false positives for a student entering school can result in traumatic interactions with law enforcement, loss of class time, disciplinary action, and potentially a criminal record," (Smith-Thompson, 2018).

Surveillance technologies that create algorithms based on "objective" and "neutral" data fail to recognize the socio-historical context of racialized logic, over-policing, and criminalization of Black and Brown bodies. The process of epidermalization and general bias determine who is criminal and who needs to be surveilled in order to "prevent" a "criminal" act, (Broussard, 2023). This on-going control through surveillance and technology has allowed a narrative and practice of placing inherent criminality upon marginalized people. Criminality has been placed onto those who do not fit under the white gaze and are bodies that must be controlled. Forms of control and surveillance like slavery, segregation, over-policing, and now through EdTech are structures that define and reinforce labels of criminality over specific

communities as to maintain social control. While technologies in school may be seen as innovative, Black and Brown students are now patrolled through a digitized field. How these students act and behave in-person and online will have long term implications not only for their education but also how they encounter the juvenile justice system.

While there is currently no aggressive action being taken by any governmental agency to halt the use of EdTech in schools, various organizations have been advocates of dismantling the over-surveillance practices for quite some time now. They seek to reform EdTech surveillance tools by advocating for transparency of company products, asking for community input, and overall rejecting the new technologies that continue to watch students. ACLU has been a prominent advocate of student rights and created a toolkit to support educators in deciding whether to invest in EdTech softwares, (ACLU, 2023). Not only do they encourage policymakers and school administrators to first define a school's issue and then determine whether an EdTech product can alleviate that issue, but they also encourage schools to receive input from the students and families themselves. This solution would promote transparency between all actors and allow administrators to make informed decisions. Additionally, ACLU has drafted legislation titled *Student Surveillance Technology Acquisition Standards Act* that implements best technology practices across the country without impeding on local districts power. The final recommendation offered by the organization is to get rid of student surveillance technologies all together, (ACLU, 2023). This solution would eliminate all the harms from EdTech right from the beginning instead of attempting to reform these practices once they are already in place.

Beyond EdTech surveillance technologies, the School-To-Prison Pipeline is a system that is yet still to be dismantled. Many communities and organizations who have urged for an end to mass incarceration, detention centers, and generally the prison industrial complex, have

connected these efforts to the STPP. While these efforts range from prison reform policies to boycotts, there are also workshops to introduce this phenomena to various communities. Particularly the organization No New Youth Jail, has created toolkits to inform students and community members about this overcriminalization and surveillance of BIPOC communities.

While there are a handful of actions being taken to divest away from these forms of over-surveillance and criminalization in various settings, many students and educators are not fully informed about the prevalence of STPP. The first step to addressing any issue is to first inform and educate others so that collective action can be taken. Many advocates are asking for transparency from EdTech companies as a method of holding these corporations accountable for the misinformation and misuse of student surveillance technologies. However, I think that this is not the final solution because this blindly accepts that these technologies are necessary to begin with (a characteristic of Technochauvinism) where I argue that it is not. From this, I personally believe that all technologies in schools should be removed and re-evaluated before implementing these surveillance systems. As we've discussed throughout the quarter, technology, data, surveillance, and people are all inherently biased. Instead of accepting these methods as neutral, objective, or innovative I think that it is vital to take a step back away from technology to address the root causes of over-surveillance and the STPP: racialized logic, criminalization of communities, and the need to control social contexts.

As Broussard writes, "Reform is needed. That reform, however, will not be found in machines...The way to make the world better is not to make better recidivism algorithms, it is to stop using these types of algorithms altogether," (Broussard, 2023). I think that our society is heavily focused on investing in technology as a means of advancing but it is really pushing us away from our humanity. Technology has seeped into the daily lives of students and it is

imperative to further uncover the connections between EdTech, the STPP, and generally online learning which could be made possible through transparency, policy, and additional research. However, the role of which technology plays for the sake of innovation, safety, or whatever it may be must be re-evaluated before these practices continue to harm marginalized communities.

I take this knowledge with me as I interact with the middle school students at tutoring. I hope to use these resources to conduct conversations about what surveillance means for them as Black students. Further, I hope to learn from them about their own experiences with technology and how that is affecting their own learning and communities. Just a few days ago, I checked in with the student who didn't submit her essay. Luckily, she was able to have a conversation with her teacher about her assignment and we made a plan to help her have more control over the submission of her assignments. Out of curiosity I asked, "Do you like using the computer for all your school stuff?" She then quickly and firmly replied, "No, I really hate it."

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