

The Digital Panopticon

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The 'Panopticon' is a project of a prison, designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. It is famous because it's quite revolutionary: a circular building with cells all around the central hole where there is a single security guard. All the prisoners are alone in their cells and they cannot know when they are being watched, doing so they will act as if they are being watched all the time [1]. The power of this concept is: on one side there is a single security guard controlling all the inmates; the other is the philosophical one: all the prisoners have no power and they have to live inside a cell being (supposedly) always controlled. Why this introduction? Because nowadays we can talk about the 'digital' panopticon. Like the prisoners we live in a society in which we are always being watched: social media, mail, vocal assistants, selfies, smart devices... Why are we being watched? Because the data are so important nowadays. For example, when we use a search engine the query we use to search is linked to our account, then it is sent to central computer systems, added to the data we already sent, those data are studied and aggregated, and then sold (anonymized) to companies that offer more. When we use Google Search and we type e.g. 'white shoes' it is common to have white shoes as ads on Youtube or other websites. Is this a problem? It depends on which type of data we are giving to companies/organizations and more important if we are aware of leaking personal data. I don't care too much about which type of shoes I prefer, but if we think about which type of data we leak daily it's a bit scarier: If we use vocal assistants our voice is recorded and it could be used for a reason we don't like; if we use a wearable device (think about a smartwatch or a fitness band), then it collects a lot of personal information: sleep patterns, type of workout you are doing, electrocardiograms, blood pressure... We could go on for days with examples: smart sex toys, Covid-19 tracking apps, social media, smart home devices, and so on. Retrieving personal data about yourself could be dangerous, but there are special types of data that if collected could result in a catastrophe. We could leak political and social ideas to companies and then they could use those to sell targeted ads trying to convince you of a political idea or use those data to estimate what you like. As written in a blog post by The India Forum: "Political ads exploit intensely emotional biases, of race, religion, caste, nation, and so on, and distort electoral outcomes by selling you leaders who should have been elected (or not) based only on rational considerations. We give our data and this gives the recipients the power to modify our behavior! For this reason, targeted political ads on social media should be banned completely" [2]. This reflects exactly my personal opinion: we cannot put our democracy at this risk.

Does a solution exist? It's difficult to say, for sure social media and other public online accounts could be avoided if we care about personal data. Another big threat is EULA and other types of user agreements, we should read them accurately, but the time is short and those documents are so long. The only thing in my mind is always to be skeptical about data collection and trust big third-party authorities like the European Union (GDPR helps!).

References

- [1] Wikipedia - Panopticon
<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon>
- [2] The India Forum - The Digital Panopticon and How It Is Fuelled by
Personal Data
<https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/digital-panopticon-and-how-it-fuelled-personal-data>