There is a New Sheriff in Town: Social Media

By Muhammad Ahmed Shah

**Introduction:**

The concept of identity on social media is very fragile. The user's only identification on a SNS is the user profile or page allocated to him/her. The content that appears on that space defines the user as a person. However the users themselves are not the only ones with the ability to post content on their profiles, their friends can also write on their space and hence can contribute to the online image of the user. Therefore in order for the users to ascertain that the information that appears on their online real estate reflects the image of themselves that they wish to present they must rigorously monitor and filter the content that is visible to their connections. Indeed there are exceptions to this as many users want to portray an un-doctored image of themselves and hence they do not feel the need to craft and prune their profile as much but throughout this paper we will consider the prevalent strata of users that feels a compulsion to mediate the content.

This phenomenon of constantly checking and policing one's online self has been discussed at length following the rise of the modern social networking platforms. However most of the research evidences and explains only how the anxiety introduced by the dynamics of SNSs influence the users' behavior online while the manifestation of this anxiety in the real world actions of the users remains relatively unexplored. In this paper I argue that social media institutes, to a certain degree, an atmosphere of accountability and responsibility by instilling in the people the realization that every action that they do in public can be recorded and the footage proliferated over social media.

I present the idea of an "ownership crisis" that is prevalent in the modern world. The entities that appear in a footage have no right to determine the usage of that footage, which reside solely with the possessor and hence the de facto owner of the footage. The ownership crisis raises privacy concerns and due to the ubiquity of cameras instills a feeling of being under surveillance among people. I use data collected from a diverse group of SNS users that illustrates that most of the users are aware that at any moment they could possibly be under surveillance and that the possibility this footage could make its way online is disconcerting. I further cement my claim by illustrating the heightened accountability for individuals as the footage of their inappropriate actions may get the attention of a higher authority leading to possibly severe repercussion. This is evidenced through the increasing use of social media background checks in the recruitment process by employers and the pivotal role played by social media in solving the Steubenville High School rape case. I take the argument further by describing how institutions previously considered beyond reproach can be held accountable for their actions owing to the new avenues of information proliferation opened by social media. Evidence of this phenomenon is rife in corruption prone regions like South Asia and the Middle East where citizens have brought the unlawful actions of official authorities, even governments to light through privately captured footage proliferated on social media.

**Literature Review:**

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As social media weaves itself tighter into the lives of the masses it has become possible to observe the effects it has on the social fabric in greater depth and shed light on the different possibilities it opens. There is the prevailing sentiment among scholars that social media introduces certain pressures into the lives of its users that ultimately make them more anxious and even distressed.

It is widely believed that social media tends to bestow upon its users the feeling of being constantly observed and hence compels its users to be highly mindful of what aspects of their lives are reflected in their online profile. This is reflected in Marche's observation that social media actively compels users to assert their happiness and to accomplish this they filter out any instances of sadness or failure from their online profiles. Marwick and boyd are also of the opinion that using social media is analogous to being on stage under a spotlight where one has to be extremely cautious in his/her actions however they examine the effects of this phenomenon in more non-cosmetic context. They use the idea of context collapse which occurs because social media does not respect the societal hierarchy hence deprives its users of the luxury to isolate audiences belonging to different levels of the hierarchy and alter their self presentation strategies accordingly. Since one's audience can be extremely diverse, including parents, employers and friends, the "lowest common denominator effect" arises as users tailor their content to be acceptable by the largest portion of the audience, especially the group that Marwick and boyd call "the nightmare audience". "The nightmare audience" can be one's parents, bosses or even certain friends, this label denotes the entities that must not have access to certain content, usually because the user expects serious ramifications from them viewing it. Therefor users are compelled to actively monitor and curate the content that they post online, any negligence has the potential to initiate potentially serious consequence not necessarily limited to the online world.

Turkle concurs with Marwick and boyd's argument with respect to the end result it begets, which is inculcating a drive in users to achieve a pre-corrected self. She acknowledges the potential of social media as an instrument for conducting surveillance and ensuring compliance. In fact she identifies a striking resemblance between the air of paranoia and accountability that social media creates and Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. The panopticon is an architectural algorithm that would ensure, in Bentham's own words be "that the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so" (Bentham, 1843). Indeed those who respect the demands of the "nightmare audience" are, in a way, instituting a panopticon on themselves by continuously watching themselves from the perspective of the "nightmare audience". The resemblance between social media and the panopticon is further explored by Tom Brignall III in "The New Panopticon-The Internet Viewed as a Structure of Social Control" as he describes how governments and intelligence agencies have already begun to appropriate social media for surveillance purposes. However it is rather alarming that the majority of social media users i.e. high school and college students do not actually understand the true nature of online privacy (Turkle). Turkle also brings forth the very disconcerting truth that even with the knowledge of the flimsy façade of privacy and the possibility of surveillance many users would not abandon social media or even alter their usage. Because their social lives are almost in entirety build around social media these people cannot even fathom their lives without it. This makes social

media unique as an up-to-date reservoir of private information, which is unparalleled in its sheer size.

**Survey Data:** Collection:

A survey conducted over a sample of 100 social media users evidences the issues of privacy and surveillance. The respondents hailed from a wide variety of geographic locations and age groups. Though a majority of the respondents were from South Asia and the Middle East, a minority of them hailed from Turkey, USA and Malaysia. Most of the respondents were avid social media users. When asked to rate their social media usage on a scale of 1 to 5 82% rated their usage at 3 or more. The results support the hypothesis that users feel compelled to alter their behavior because of the accountability enforced by social media.

## Assess and rank your Social Media usage on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 denoting that you are a very avid user and 1 denoting that you use social media very sparingly.
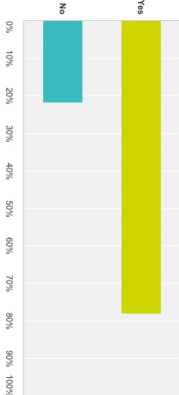
Answered: 100   Skipped: 0
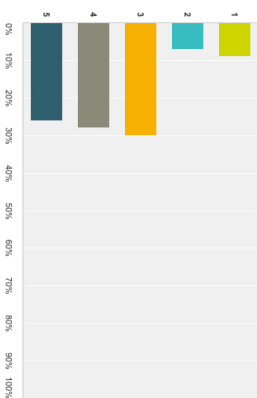


| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 9.00% | 9 |
| 2 | 7.00% | 7 |
| 3 | 30.00% | 30 |
| 4 | 28.00% | 28 |
| 5 | 26.00% | 26 |
| Total | | 100 |

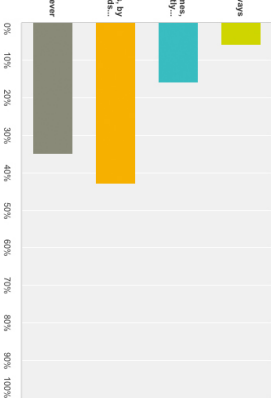## Would you prefer that before some content pertaining to you is posted your permission is sought?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 78.00% | 78 |
| No | 22.00% | 22 |
| Total | | 100 |

## How often have you been asked permission before content involving you is posted on Social Media?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Always | 6.00% | 6 |
| Some times, mostly regarding photos taken at events organized by institutions (conferences, etc) | 16.00% | 16 |
| Some times, by friends regarding photos from a party or trips | 43.00% | 43 |
| Never | 35.00% | 35 |
| Total | | 100 |

## Do you feel that every action that you perform in public can potentially be recorded, even without your knowledge?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 0
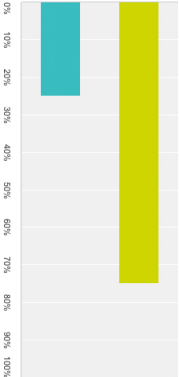


| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 75.00% | 75 |
| No | 25.00% | 25 |
| Total | | 100 |

## Do you, on most occasions, seek the permission of the people that appear in the content you post (pictures, videos, notes, status updates, etc) before posting the content?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 0
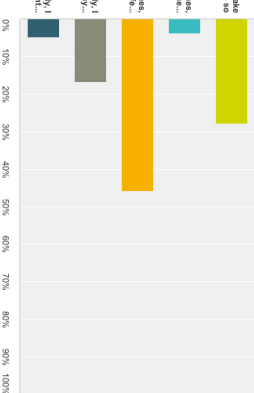


| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes, I make sure to do so | 28.00% | 28 |
| Some times, only if the people involved are easily accessible | 4.00% | 4 |
| Some times, only if they might have a problem with the content | 46.00% | 46 |
| Not really, I feel that my friends are OK with me posting stuff about them | 17.00% | 17 |
| Not really, I own the content and so I may do as I please with it | 5.00% | 5 |
| Total | | 100 |

## If it was not possible for images and videos to be uploaded to social media sites, would you be...
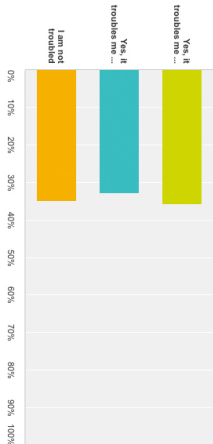
Answered: 100   Skipped: 0
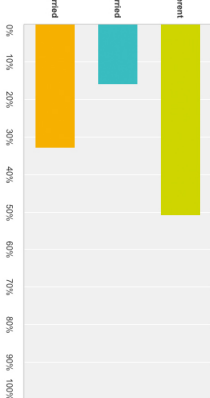


| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Indifferent | 51.00% | 51 |
| More worried | 16.00% | 16 |
| Less worried | 33.00% | 33 |
| Total | | 100 |

## Does the fact that the possessor of this footage may do as s/he wills, specifically post it online trouble you? ---Has this ever compelled you to alter your behavior prevent inappropriate footage of you being captured?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 0



| Answer Choices | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes, it troubles me but I don't feel the need to change my behavior because of it. | 36.00% | 36 |
| Yes, it troubles me and I feel the need to alter my behavior | 33.00% | 33 |
| I am not troubled | 35.00% | 35 |
| Total Respondents: 100 | | |

**Survey Data:** Analysis

In this section I use the survey data to argue that the role of social media as a surveillance tool is enforced by a "content ownership crisis". The content ownership crisis arises because the bearer of privately shot footage is its absolute owner. This owner may do as s/he pleases with the footage, regardless of the sentiments of the actual participants of the footage. The possessor, in most cases may not even seek the permission of the people appearing in the footage before using it, in fact the possessor is under no obligation, except a moral one, to do so. 35% of the survey respondents report that they had never been asked permission before content involving them was posted on social media while 43% of the respondents reported that they we only occasionally asked permission, and that too by their friends.

Another trend that is evident from the results of the survey is that people take the liberty to judge the content they post through the perspective of the other parties involved. 49% of the respondents reported that they asked permission from the people involved in their post only if *they* suspected that the other people would be offended by the content while 17% reported that they did not ask permission because they implicitly assumed that their friends approved of them posting content pertaining to them. As expected an overwhelming majority (78%) of the respondents preferred that their permission be sought before content involving them is posted.

The impact of the ownership crisis is aggravated by the freedom for any one to capture footage of any other person. This contributes greatly to the plausibility of the eminent establishment of a panoptic society as discussed by several authors. Any action that one performs in public can potentially be recorded and the footage be made property of an entity disparate from the actors in the footage such that the actors have no authority in dictating the terms of the usage of the footage, all authority rests with the bearer. The bearer of the footage may use the footage in a manner that might be injurious to the actors in the footage without any legal reproach. This aspect of social media is indeed very disconcerting.

The survey results verify that this phenomenon is widely recognized as 75% of the respondents acknowledged that every action that they perform in public could be potentially recorded. 69% of the respondents reported that they felt troubled by the fact that the possessor of the footage may do what ever s/he wills. Of these respondents 48% reported that they felt the need to alter their behavior to avoid having any incriminating footage captured. Such significant is the role of social media in enhancing the potency and leverage of captured footage that 51% of the respondents reported that they would be indifferent to their footage being captured and owned by a possibly unknown entity.

**Accountability:** For Individuals

Presently social media is increasing being purposed to conduct surveillance very explicitly. A survey by the online employment website CareerBuilder found that 37% of the employers perform social media background checks on prospective employees. This emphasizes the phenomenon of context collapse introduced by Marwick and boyd as the "nightmare audience" is no longer passive but is actively searching for the incriminating information hence the users must be extra cautious as they manage their online personas.

Indeed one may tweak the privacy settings on social media or even meticulously manage the content associated with one's profile however ensuring that one's indiscretions do not surface online has become a near impossibility owing to the prevalent ownership crisis. Indeed someone, unbeknownst, to the user may be in possession of a piece of footage and this someone can at anytime decide to post this footage online. That footage could become viral and be shared by users eventually reaching the employer. The stakes are raised by the introduction of a new system specifically designed to store social media information of employees for up to 7 months.

Social media also contributes to enforcing accountability in more mundane matters. In the more conservative setting of South Asia and the Middle East footage of people engaging in acts that are considered inappropriate in the context of the prevalent norms can lead to severe repercussions. Females are most affected by this because they are expected to uphold a high standard of modesty. One survey respondent mentioned an incident in which a girl who did hijab was tagged in one of her friend's photos on Facebook due to which her family got really upset and reprimanded her.

Indeed the accountability enforced by social media has the potential to improve society. Social media can be used to supplement and assist law enforcement official in solving criminal cases. The Steubenville High School rape case is a recent criminal case that was decided, based mostly on evidence from social media posts and footage from the camera phones of bystanders. In the early morning hours of August 12th, 2013 a 16-year-old girl, incapacitated under the influence of alcohol, was taken by two high-school football players from a party to a secondary location and assaulted. The assailants were photographed as they assaulted the victim and the witnesses who captured the footage shared it with their friends at the party. When a formal criminal investigation was initiated the majority of evidence collected and presented in court consisted of text messages, cellphone pictures and posts on social media sites regarding the crime. A twelve-minute video went viral when a group of students from Steubenville High School, the Alma matter of the assailants, were filmed joking about the incident in January 2013 while the case was open. The student, who dominates the video, though not the assailant, was subjected to sever criticism and was forced to drop out of school despite being a scholarship student.

Social media's role in the apprehension of the perpetrators of Steubenville rape case was immensely significant. Due to the false impression of privacy, as recognized by Turkle, users share possibly incriminating information. Link in this case the assailants discussed the crime over social media with friends. These exchanges were confiscated by the police and used as hard evidence against the criminals. This emphasizes another dimension to the ownership crisis introduced in the previous section. When the assailants shared the footage with their friends they gave up all rights to the use and distribution of the footage. The assailants documented their actions and shared it with their friends some of whom posted the footage on the Internet from where it reached the eyes of the police, which ultimately led to the identification, and apprehension of the criminals.

The ownership crisis is amplified greatly by the ubiquity of the camera, which has become a permanent fixture of the cell phone. Consequently, recording decisions in the

modern setting are made spontaneously (Reponen et.al 2007). The presence of a camera in a gathering is proven to have the effect of making the participants more conscious of their behavior and removes spontaneity from the social dynamic (Reponen et.al 2007).

The ownership crisis introduced in the previous section lends credence to the hypothesis that social media might be taking us towards a society in which individuals are obliged to act more responsibly as they fear that any inappropriate behavior might be recorded and disseminated via the internet until it reaches an entity higher up the societal hierarchy which may then hold them accountable. The principle proponent of the ownership crisis and to whom the resulting anxiety can be attributed is the private ownership of footage capturing equipment. The presence of a camera in a gathering is proven to have the effect of making the participants more conscious of their behavior and removes spontaneity from the social dynamic (Reponen et.al 2007). This effect is exacerbated by the fact that the camera is becoming ever more ubiquitous due to it being bundled with the cell phone. Consequently recording decisions are becoming more immediate and spontaneous (Reponen et.al 2007). Since at any time an individual is surrounded by an overwhelming number of camera and any of them could start recording at any moment the individual is forced to behave as if s/he is actually being recorded. Individuals are compelled to weigh their actions before committing them and cannot rely on impulse to dictate their behavior.

Indeed this situation is analogous to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as noticed by Turkle, however the upon which it could potentially be implemented is unprecedented. The people would not only curate their online behavior but would also be forced to actively police their actions in real life. Even the uncrowned king of the Internet, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt, himself, though not explicitly, admits internet's panoptic effect when he says, "If you have something you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place".

In the absence of social media and the Internet, as a means of footage dissemination, the situation becomes less worrisome for most users as evidenced in the survey findings. This is because people consider it highly unlikely that a piece of footage captured by a random bystander may reach someone of import through hand-to-hand exchanges in the absence of a swift medium for sharing such as social media, unless of course the recorder knows the person. However as social media is introduced into the mix the rate at which the footage can potentially disperse increase exponentially. This causes a corresponding increase in the perceived risk of engaging in inappropriate activities, as it is more likely that the footage may reach someone who may hold the participants of the footage accountable. Consequently people are motivated to police their behavior and refrain from committing these acts altogether.

Looking back at all that has been said a picture of a movement towards intense surveillance and a highly ordered and disciplined citizenry emerges. This image bears little resemblance to reality where people have had to face serious consequence because footage of them engaging in inappropriate acts was recorded and posted online yet more of such cases continue to appear. These cases are accounted for by Turkle when she describes the existence of a group of users that while acknowledging the possibility of being under surveillance denounce the seriousness of the issue with the argument that in time every person will have

some online record of misdemeanor and hence no one would have leverage over the other resulting in a society more accepting of indiscretions. It is this stratum of users that remain unfazed by the possibility of being under surveillance on social media and refuses to alter their behavior. Notwithstanding the larger portion of social media users appreciate the gravity of the issue of privacy as evidenced by Turkle through anecdotal accounts of teenage users who express their concerns and discuss the strategies they have employed to restrict the information that goes public and corroborated by the results of the survey.

**Accountability:** for Institutions

Since the Internet is a public place of sorts it is agnostic between the entities that use it therefor not only does it enforce accountability for common individual but it also has some degree of influence on the actions of more powerful parties such as governments. The traditional societal hierarchy is constructed on the basis of power differentials between its member groups (Marwick 2012). It is the powerful establishments such as the governments and its daughter agencies, and large corporations that most often reserve the right to conduct surveillance and institute accountability. However social media challenges these power differentials by allowing those lower in the hierarchy to challenge and hold accountable those that are higher up. This results in what is called "sousveillance" where citizens repurpose surveillance equipment to watch those entities that in the traditional hierarchical structure are the ones carrying out surveillance (Marwick 2012). Owing much to the popularity of footage capturing devices and the affordances provided by social media that allows rapid and widespread proliferation of content common citizens can capture entities disregarding laws that, in some cases, they are required to uphold.

Corruption, specifically bribery is extremely common within the Pakistani police force however it is rarely the case that these corrupt official are brought to justice. Indeed many cases have been filed against corrupt police official however since the pangs of corruption have sunk so deep that many of the cases never see the light of day. However when a creative individual decided to file a case against a police officer on Facebook instead of the police station the police were forced to convict the officer in question. On July 29th, 2013 footage of police officer Muhammad Aslam accepting a heavy bribe was captured on a cellphone camera without the knowledge of Aslam. The owner of the video posted the video on the Facebook page of the Sialkot district Police Office. Such was the effect generated by it that Aslam was arrested and charged of corruption almost immediately. It is owing to social media that a transparent public trial was held of a criminal. Due to rapidity with which information propagates on social media it would have been impossible for the police to refute this case.

In the turbulent Middle East many instances of brutality by the security forces have been recorded by citizens and posted online for the world to witness. In these war torn regions, the dictatorial regime had a strict check on the print and television media as well as the news agencies. No news of the blatant disregard for human rights exhibited by the regimes was allowed to surface. It is only owing to the availability of cameras and the ability of social media to propagate information that these gross infractions came to be seen by the global community.

It is to the credit of social media that it allows people to connect not only on the basis of geographical proximity but also on the basis of ideological commonality. Social media can function as a bulletin board for broadcasting information on a global scale. If there is an issue that several users, across continents even, feel strongly about they can come together online and discuss it. Gone are the days when one would have to stand in the town square with brochures about the upcoming protest or rally. Social media has made this dissemination of information extremely fast and efficient hence allowing movements to be organized quickly. Social media, notably Facebook, has the ability to unify people behind a cause that allows them to challenge an established organization (Kirkpatrick, 2011) such as a law enforcement agency or even a government. The rapidity with which the public can now react to the infractions of the authorities compels theses authorities to be mindful of the actions they do in public. If these institutions were caught engaging in illicit activities the news would spread like wildfire across the Internet thus diminishing their credibility and nourishing opposition against them. The ownership crisis is evident here as the footage is property of the bearer and if the bearer chooses to share that video on a platform as vast as social media the number of bearers could increase exponentially. Indeed the authorities may use force to coerce the bearer to destroy the footage but it is highly likely that the footage is already in the possession of someone on the other side of the world.

## Conclusion

Social media with its vast troves of information is the Holy Grail for entities that are trying to conduct surveillance. With the realization that information on social media is accessible with relative ease people alter their online personas to portray an image of themselves that is most acceptable to their audience. This phenomenon assumes that people have control over the content that appears on their online profiles and hence they can sculpt the image that they desire for themselves. However the reality paints a different picture. Social media users do not have absolute control over the content associated with them online. Other people, even complete strangers, using the camera in their phones can capture one's footage and post it online. Since simply appearing in a post does not grant one any authority to determine the usage of the content the possessor, and in effect the de facto owner of the content may do as s/he wills with it. If the content were such that if viewed by a certain audience certain repercussion would ensue there would be no way for one to prevent the aforementioned audience from viewing it. Due to the pervasiveness of camera phones one can never tell if s/he is being recorded or not therefor the only way that one can surely avoid the repercussions is if one does not commit the prohibited action at all. Social media, hence, is taking the existing society towards a more self-conscious one where everyone has a heightened sense of accountability.

One may debate on the merits of such a society. It seems as an idealistic prospect that everyone checks their actions and ensures that they fall within the confines of the prevalent norms and laws. The power differential between the rulers and the ruled would be reduced and a fairer system could possibly emerge where neither the indiscretions of the powerful nor those of the common folk would go unpunished. In reality however it is highly unlikely that a ruling entity would have the same degree of accountability as the ruled. If this is the case then the accountability instituted by social media will result in an Orwellian society. Such a society is

never desirable because it does not make the people better rather it forces them to be good. Then the question would arise who defines what is good? Is it the regime or the prevalent values? On the flip side this air of accountability could bring about a change in the prevalent definitions of good and bad. Values may change and the distinction between permitted and prohibited would grow lighter as people might become immune to the possibility of being watched by blatantly rejecting the norms. As more and more people do this then society overtime will conform this new good and bad leading to a net detriment in societal values when compared to the initial state of the society. It is essential that these aspects of social media be examined as it weaves itself ever tighter into our lives to ensure that society progresses and not regress.

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