

COMP 3309-003
Assignment 2
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The works provided by Foucault and Coeckelbergh both develop on themes of power and through power, control. Foucault examines a form of power that is ever present in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a situation where the observed are constantly aware of their position, even if they aren't actively being observed, "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication." [1]. Foucault draws a line from the overt application of power for a purpose in curbing plague epidemic to visible everyday applications of power and control in hospitals, schools, and factories. Coeckelbergh presents instead a consistently invisible and more ardently influential power in AI. This is a covert system applied globally, that at first doesn't appear to restrict or constrain through physical division, instead relying on the ability to modify behaviours. Coeckelbergh claims that AI can "... seduce, coerce, or manipulate, for example via social media and recommender systems." [2], and in doing so, affects both the division and observation Foucault describes, while still appearing to allow for individual choice. Where we see the difference, or perhaps the evolution of the system of power, is in the more invasive control perpetrated by AI in everyday lives, where instead of being restricted as described by Foucault, the subject is guided by "Artificial Intelligence" towards certain outcomes.

Foucault begins by describing the measures taken by a village to prevent spread of the plague in the seventeenth century. The measures taken were taken for ostensibly good reason, "... against an extraordinary evil, power is mobilized . . . " [3], but we follow that line of thinking to an almost comical caricature of total power over another in the Panopticon. Logically, we see how this idea came to be, and logically we see that such an overpowered application of power over an individual provides the tools, by its very design, to be accessible and easy to abuse. Indeed, Bentham even remarked that the power over an individual continues when the device is unattended because the subject doesn't know when they're being observed, and the device

could be operated by almost anyone including family, friends, visitors, or servants [4]. Looking back from a position that has benefitted from active protestation against such powers in Civil Rights and Feminism, such a device as seen from a modern perspective, wouldn't even be believable in fiction. Surely, we tell ourselves, we're far beyond the times of the Gulag or the Concentration Camps. There's no way such an unjust application of power could go unhindered. This is where we meet Coeckelberghs description of AI.

Where Foucault describes systems of power that are constantly looming over the subject like a Damoclean saber, Coeckelbergh highlights the covert nature of AI in the everyday life of an internet civilian. As more and more of our lives are predicated on the assumption of constant internet access and connectivity, there is always a call to make things more and more convenient and available for the consumer. This call for convenience gave rise to more and more sophisticated algorithms to readily provide meaningful content, and was eventually integrated into advanced advertising schemes and finally, given consideration ultimately as a device that can be used covertly for observation and control over a wide populace. Coeckelbergh warns that AI can, and is used to “. . . steer the listening or buying behaviour of people by nudging them through changing the decision environment . . .”[5]. The result of this change in environment can affect every facet of our connected lives. We can find ourselves more and more consuming information without critical thinking, and even lose our ability to access information without first passing through a filter to discern what is relevant or appropriate for us, regardless of our desire.

The consequences of this covert application of power and control are multifaceted and complicated. Rather than a penetration into “...even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power . . .”[6] as in the plague quarantine efforts, we find ourselves opening up and acquiescing to an unseen

power, allowing it into our everyday lives and actions. We find ourselves more and more taking the silent advice of an unseen interlocutor and, as a byproduct, we find our world does not match the world of those around us. Often our perspective, having been shaped by forces acting entirely for their own benefit, becomes warped and our perceptions of ourselves too become warped. Where Foucault warns of a disciplinary force that is always present and imposes corrective actions, echoing Bentham's assertion that power be "visible and unverifiable." [7], we're subject to a protruding and penetrating gaze capable of changing the way we think without us knowing. This can lead to conflict in our real lives, as Coeckelbergh asserts that "... decisions, thoughts, actions, and emotions can also be controlled on purpose in order to support a particular political system." [8], and we've seen this play out in real time with the division of political parties across the globe. Actors, foreign or internal, have been utilizing the AI systems complicitly agreed upon to further agendas and give the appearance of popularity of ideas that aren't reflected in our experienced worlds.

What are we, then, to do in such a world? We appear to have reached a peak application of power in the grotesquery of the Panopticon, and rebelled against it, only instead to circle back and submit to a more invasive and parental power in the form of AI. Are we capable of looking at ourselves clearly and without our omniscient filter, and asking ourselves "What kind of perception and knowledge of the self does AI help to create?" [9], or even what benefit does it truly give us? Are we willing to accept the risk of losing our critical thinking skills and creative abilities, as well as having our lives be laid open to observers for calculated assessment and correction, without knowing fully the moral or ethical designs that guide the powers?

References

- [1] M. Foucault. "Panopticon Chapter (Partial), *Discipline and punishment*, Vintage Books, London (1977), p. 200[[pdf](#)]
- [2] M. Coeckelbergh. "Power: surveillance and (Self-Disciplining By Data (Partial))", *the Political Philosophy of AI*, Polity Press (2022), p. 97 [[pdf](#)]
- [3] Foucault, p. 205
- [4] Foucault, p. 202
- [5] Coeckelbergh, p. 97
- [6] Foucault, p. 198
- [7] Foucault, p. 201
- [8] Coeckelbergh, p. 100
- [9] Coeckelbergh, p. 101