

Assessment #2

Due: Monday, February 24th (003) / Tuesday, February 25th (002)

This assessment will be about 700-1000 words (though you can write more). It is based upon the reading shown below (available on D2L).

Michel Foucault. "Panopticon Chapter (Partial)", *Discipline and Punishment*, Vintage Books, London (1977): 195-209, 224-228.

Mark Coeckelbergh. "Power: surveillance and (Self-Disciplining By Data (Partial))", *The Political Philosophy of AI*, Polity Press (2022), p. 93-101.

These two readings are focused on the question of power, which will be an on-going theme across the entirety of the course. The excerpt from Foucault is a challenging read, but it transformed how people think about power. The excerpt from Coeckelbergh is a short overview of the concept of power and provides a conceptual framework for thinking about power in the context of AI. I'm not completely sure which is the best one to read first. **The Foucault reading in this assessment will be the most difficult by far this semester**, so be ready for a bit of a challenge!

Foucault and Why Isn't He More Clear

What I want to do here is give a preliminary answer to the question you will no doubt be thinking as you read his text: "Why isn't he more clear?!? Why does he take so long to make his point?"

Perhaps the best answer to this is to think about the world Foucault is inhabiting in the 1960s and 1970s, and put yourself in his position.

Imagine, then, you are a philosophic writer living in a world in which two antagonistic world-views (capitalism vs communism) claim that their way of seeing the world is the true one, and the other is the false. Imagine that your late teenage years were in a time (WW2) in which your government (the Vichy French regime under the Nazis) told its citizens that some of your fellow citizens were "clearly" not truly human and could be rounded up in camps or killed without compunction.

Imagine being a homosexual writer (like Foucault was), living in a society in which your behaviors and choices were not only considered unnatural but were criminalized. In such a case, you might believe, as did Foucault, that "common-sense" or "clear" ways of thinking are intrinsically coupled to the ideological perspectives of the powerful, and that the powerful distort what counts as the truth to their advantage. In 2025, I hope you can see that this belief still resonates for many.

Furthermore, imagine you are trying to explicate a truly novel social phenomenon, say, the all-powerful state of the later 20th century for Foucault, or something like ChatGPT for us. It's difficult to drill-down and unpack the truly brand new using the ideas of the old and familiar.

This is the conundrum that Foucault is facing. Metaphorically, we might say that Foucault can't just straight out say $1+1=2$, because his audience doesn't believe yet in the concepts of "1" or "2" or

even addition. In order to get his readers to see the reality of the world in a completely different way, he has to use different, unfamiliar language, and he has to make his argument in round-about ways (at least to us). This is also often a feature of the work of some writers today who are trying to understand the “deeper” or “hidden” consequences of new technologies.

So ... be patient with the reading. Be willing to read it more than once. Be willing also to skip over some of it the first time.

Take some solace in the fact that most people find Foucault’s writing and argument style difficult. Yet, despite this, Foucault is number 1 all-time on the Humanities research citation index (that is, his work has been cited by more humanities papers/books than any other author), number 7 on the Social Science research citation index, and number 3 on the Law research citation index. **Arguably, then, he may be the most influential scholar (in the non-natural sciences) of the past half century, so his writing, and this book and chapter in particular, has been considered well worth the effort.** As indicated by the excerpt by Coeckelbergh, Foucault’s writing on the panopticon is especially relevant to thinking about data, privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic governance.

Plagiarism Reminder

The difficulty of the Foucault reading may tempt you to use AI tools like ChatGPT to write this assessment. **Don’t be tempted to do this**, as last year I found the ChatGPT-enhanced essays on Foucault were especially easy to detect and it was easy to give those papers a grade of zero.

Discussion Ideas / Questions / Inspirations

This is a short essay on a very complicated and rich topic. If you are puzzled about how to approach writing about it, I’ve provided some possible ideas or questions below to consider. Please don’t answer each of these in turn in your essay. Pick a couple of them if you find them interesting or if you want inspiration. Feel free to not answer any of them.

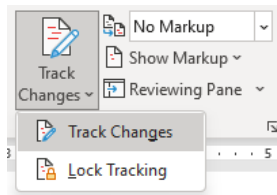
- Why have you been assigned this reading in a computers and society course? Is it still relevant? Is the Internet inside or outside the Panopticon (i.e., does it exemplify, disprove, or transcend Foucault’s views about the disciplinarity of the self due to observation)?
- What do you think Foucault would have thought about the past 10 years of news around privacy, surveillance, post-truth, and the internet? What do you think he would think about recent developments in machine learning?
- Did you find Coeckelbergh’s description of the possible ways that AI and power are connected helpful? Why or why not?

Submission Information

Add a cover page with your section number on it. Use double spacing for the lines. Print it out, staple it (don't put it in a fancy plastic duo-tang folder), and drop it off in class on the due date or in the brown drop-box with my name on it outside of B175.

You will also have to submit an electronic version of your document. You can do this in one of two ways.

1. If you compose using Microsoft Word, before you begin (or soon after), turn on Track Changes and then set the display setting beside it to No Markup. When completed, email me (rconnolly@mtroyal.ca) your Word document with the subject heading: COMP3309 Assessment 1.



2. If you compose using Google Docs, then simply share your finished document with me: rconnolly@mtroyal.ca. ALSO, send me an email as well telling me that you have shared the document with me.

What To Do

- Provide a short summary of the major themes found in the two readings (roughly 150-200 words) to demonstrate your understanding of the papers. Don't do too much summarizing! A paper that is mainly summarizing or making general statements about the reading will be flagged as AI generated!
- **The majority of the paper should be your impressions of BOTH readings. Don't be afraid to state your opinions! Indeed, what I'm mainly interested in reading in this assessment is what you thought about the readings (i.e., your analysis). This could be criticisms of the author's logic/examples/etc, or describing how a reading relates to your own lives/experience, or why you agree or disagree, etc. But don't forget to provide evidence from the texts to support those opinions!**
- The best papers will find a way to connect or link the two readings.
- Be sure to provide evidence from the texts. This means providing citations that includes page numbers.
- **All submission must use IEEE referencing style that includes page numbers.**
- **Be sure as well to provide several (2-6) direct quotes from BOTH texts.** In academic writing in the social sciences and humanities, direct quotes and citations are used to provide evidence that the author: a) has actually read and understood the material, b) maybe is knowledgeable about the topic, and c) provides additional "data" from a source other than the author that the author's position/analysis/opinion/etc is valid.