

CONSIDERING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VIRTUAL “PANOPTICON”: MEDIA LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The Panopticon (the Greek word for all-seeing) is a circular prison design made by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1785. The concept enables a single guard to observe a large number of prisoners from her/his tower surrounded by the cells. The prisoners cannot see the tower, because it shines bright light. Therefore, they convince themselves that they are being watched continuously in their cells, and begin to control their own behaviours. In his 1975 book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”, Michel Foucault uses the term panopticon as a metaphor for modern surveillance. The panoptic style of architecture has been used not only in prisons, but also in other modern institutions such as schools and hospitals. The rapid development of digital technologies in the last decades has paved the way for social media to be one of the most effective communication tools, and eventually a virtual panopticon. Thus, media literacy education has become an important agenda for any society to reduce the risks of social media. The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between social media and surveillance, and emphasize the necessity of media literacy education in higher education.

Keywords: Panopticon, Social Media, Media Literacy, Higher Education, Surveillance

INTRODUCTION

The technological advancement over the past two decades shaped society’s perception of communication more rapidly than ever before. Social media has changed the way people share information with each other. It would be no exaggeration to say that the human interaction evolved from physical to a mixture of both physical and digital. Today, it is possible to have a friend from the other side of the world effortlessly. As a result of globalization, cultural differences has begun to lose their significance and the world gets smaller every day. Admittedly, the world has become *a global village* (McLuhan, 1964) with the advancement of new technology.

The mass media has three main features: to give information to the audience, to educate them, and to influence their opinions. On the one hand, new media, or social media fosters a new culture by increasing the chances for participation and interaction in addition to the features of traditional media. According to Mason et al. (as cited in Thieman, 2008), “being an engaged and effective citizen today requires reading, writing, and mathematical skills; the ability to understand complex issues; and the ability to talk with people from different backgrounds.” (p. 345). On the other hand, the number of social media users continues to grow on a global scale and managing online privacy and safety becomes a growing problem in today’s society.

With the rise of new media, media literacy becomes an important agenda for all governments. In Turkey, for example, media literacy was included in the 7th grade curriculum as an elective course in 2007. The majority of media literacy education research focuses on K-12. And yet, college-aged learners and adults need to become media literate as well as children and adolescents. In their essay “The state of the field: Technology, social studies, and teacher education” (2006), Friedman and Hicks (as cited in Thieman, 2008) “articulated the need to research and evaluate the impact of the use of technology and technology enhanced instruction within classrooms” (p. 344).

The most distinctive feature of social networking sites is that they give people the opportunity to voice their opinions. Although media moguls are still the dominant media power all around the world, “media *audiences* and *consumers* are now also media *users* and *participants*, immersed in complex ecologies of divides, diversities, networks, communities, and literacies” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 1). New media influence on social and

political changes cannot be denied, especially in developing countries. For example, social media had a vital role in social movements such as Arab Spring and Gezi Protests.

In return for the advantages and, of course, the disadvantages of social media, people sacrifice their privacy voluntarily. While companies use individuals' data to make profit decisions, governments supposedly use personal data to improve services for citizens. Both companies and governments exploit new media technologies to improve their surveillance systems. The aim of this research is to make an overview of media literacy education in higher education while exploring the relationship between social media and surveillance theories.

PROBLEM

The problem that prompted the need for this study emerged from the fact that college students, lecturers, and professors do not satisfactorily use social media tools in teaching and learning processes despite the possible advantages of social media. In Turkey, nearly all of college-goers has mobile phones, and most of them has access to computer and Internet technology in their schools. However, the majority of students use their mobile phones and computers for non-educational purposes, for example, they use Facebook and Instagram to post pictures, Twitter to follow celebrities and friends, and Youtube to download or watch videos.

NEW MEDIA AND MEDIA LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Media can be defined “as technologies that communicate messages to audiences in different parts of a region, country, even the world” (Laughey, 2007, p. 1). If there is “no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers”, these media can be described as *mass* media (Luhmann, 2000, p. 2). The term mass refers to the massive amount of information transmitted by broadcast media such as television, radio, recorded music, or film. However, Lievrouw (2011) states that, over the last three decades “the proliferation and convergence of networked media and information technologies have helped generate a renaissance of new genres and modes of communication and have redefined people’s engagement with media” (p. 1).

According to Lasswell’s model of communication (1971), there are three functions for communication in any given society: “1. Surveillance of the environment, 2. Correspondence with the parts of society in responding to the environment, 3. Transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next.” (p. 85). In addition to these three functions, social networking sites give them the opportunity to voice their opinions. New media, or social media fosters a new culture by increasing the chances for participation and interaction in addition to the features of traditional media. Moreover, educators and students of all ages and ability levels has begun to use social media tools in teaching and learning processes in recent years.

In his 1999 article “What Is Instructional Design Theory and How Is It Changing?”, Reigeluth (as cited in An & Reigeluth, 2011) stated that: “the information society needs people who can effectively manage and use ever-increasing amounts of information to solve complex problems and to make decisions in the face of uncertainty” (p. 54). The traditional factory model of education is undoubtedly in contradiction with the ever-changing demands of the information age. The factory model of education is far away from satisfying the needs of students, parents and teachers. In today’s world, students’ success depends not only on their own effort or ability, but also on the opportunities provided by their school.

Technological devices, such as computers, tablets, and smart boards are the most important opportunities that schools can offer their students in the digital age. According to the study of Aktaş and Aydın (2016), “the use of smart boards in teaching 7th grade secondary school students (in Turkey) the unit ‘electricity in our lives’ increases academic achievement and learning retention. The use of smart boards positively affects students’ academic achievement in science education.” (p. 133). Audio-visual equipment is extremely important to provide a permanent learning. In his 1991 book “Educational Technology and Education”, Çilenti (as cited in Aktaş & Aydın, 2016) claims that:

The more a planned learning activity appeals to a student’s senses, the more the event of learning is permanent. When the concept of time is fixed, people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of

what they see, 50% of both what they hear and what they see, 70% of what they say, and 90% of both what they do and what they say. (p. 127)

Furthermore, the increase in connection speeds has allowed university libraries to provide remote access for larger files. Many users no longer need to come to physical library to access digital resources. To give some statistics, according to IES National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Walton & Matthews, 2016), “in 2007-2008, about 4.3 million undergraduates, or 20 per cent of all undergraduates took at least one distance education course, while in 2009, The Chronicle of Higher Education estimated that 2.14 million students were taking only online courses.” (p. 56).

Turkey is one of those nations involved in large-scale distance learning efforts. According to Demiray and McIsaac (as cited in Jonassen, 2004), Anadolu University is a rapidly growing mega-university, “its distance education program enrolls over 600.000 students and it is one of the three largest distance education program in the world.” (p. 387).

THE PANOPTICON AND SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY

Surveillance, a French phrase for “watching over”, is used for identifying governments’ and private companies’ control over people’s lives. According to Lyon (2008), the term surveillance can be defined as “purposeful, routine, systematic and focused attention paid to personal details, for the sake of control, entitlement, management, influence or protection” (p. 2). According to Galič, Timan & Koops (2017), surveillance theories can be grouped into three phases chronologically. The first phase is Bentham’s Panopticon design and Foucault’s attribution of Panopticon which “has laid the foundations of surveillance theory in the form of a conceptual framework that still resonates today.” The second phase is “Post-Panoptical theories of surveillance” which includes Deleuze’s studies. And the third phase is “contemporary conceptualisations of surveillance” (p. 10-11).

The Panopticon (the Greek word for all-seeing) is a circular prison design made by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1785. The concept enables a single guard to observe a large number of prisoners from her/his tower surrounded by the cells. The prisoners cannot see the tower, because it shines bright light. Therefore, they convince themselves that they are being watched continuously in their cells, and begin to control their own behaviours. In his 1975 book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”, Michel Foucault (1977) uses the term panopticon as a metaphor for modern surveillance (p. 182).

The panoptic style of architecture has been used not only in prisons, but also in other modern institutions such as schools and hospitals. The rapid development of digital technologies in the last decades has paved the way for social media to be one of the most effective communication tools, and eventually a virtual panopticon. Consequently, media literacy education is essential for all individuals in a knowledge-based society. Actually, it is especially essential for higher education students to promote critical thinking and raise awareness about the perils of the digital age.

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this study is to enlighten the relationship between social media and surveillance. Another purpose of the research is to encourage the use of social media tools in universities as an innovative teaching method, therefore, all students will have equal access to information.

The Panopticon is a unique prison design, invented as a social control mechanism by Bentham in 1785. However, the Panopticon owes its popularity to Foucault who used it as a metaphor for modern surveillance in his 1975 book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”. Since now, the panoptic style of architecture has been used in prisons, schools and hospitals, but now social media is seen as a *virtual* panopticon with the rapid development of digital technologies in the last decades. In a smaller and more connected world, media literacy education has become an important issue for everyone.

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