Facebook | Panopticon: an analysis of Facebook and its parallels to the Foucaultian Panopticon

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SECTION I

February of 2004 saw the birth of a sophisticated prison system. Designed to allow for the constant monitoring of its inmates, the collection of data about its inmates, and the conditioned behavior of its inmates, this prison now encompasses a domain unprecedented in earlier generations. It houses millions of inmates, giving them each a compartment—a cell—in which to live out their sentence. This prison is not, as one might expect, located somewhere in the remote countryside, shielded from public view. It is, instead, the thing we likely see every day. Everywhere, everyday, all the time, it is present; and anyone, anywhere, at anytime, is more than welcome to join. This is Facebook.

By analyzing the work of Michel Foucault in his publication *Discipline and Punish*, striking parallels can be identified between Facebook and the Panopticon Foucault describes. Structural parallels as well as methodological parallels are present, thus placing Facebook in the realm of apparatuses used for the exercise of control. Foucault, writing *Discipline and Punish* during the 1970’s, describes the Panopticon as the ideal model of a control mechanism, and describes the methodology by which control is accomplished. To establish the parallels present between Facebook and the Panopticon, I will analyze a series of comparisons: the Panopticon’s structure versus Facebook’s structure, the Panopticon’s use of surveillance versus Facebook’s use of surveillance, the Panopticon’s use of examination versus Facebook’s use of examination, and finally, the Panopticon’s use of normalization versus Facebook’s use of normalization. Once these comparisons have been established and the resulting parallels have been analyzed, I will discuss the body of graphic design work that emerged from this research. This body of work
responds to the similarities between Facebook and the Panopticon as well as the underlying theoretical principles demonstrated through these parallels.

“Before you look at the plan, take in words the general idea of it. The building is circular. The apartments of the prisoners occupy the circumference. You may call them, if you please, the cells.”¹ These words, penned by Jeremy Bentham in 1787, are the first in Bentham’s description of his own penitentiary design: the Panopticon. The Panopticon was a prison model designed to exercise control over its inhabitants through constant surveillance, and to produce morally corrected individuals through its penitentiary process. Its name, derived from the Greek pan (all) and optikos (of or for sight), alludes to its function to allow for the sight of all. Jeremy Bentham was an influential English attorney during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After conceptualizing his Panopticon design, Bentham set about making the construction a reality. His proposal was met with a mix of acceptance and opposition in England and would not be implemented there during Bentham’s time. The design, however, gained wide acceptance in other European countries as well as in the United States during the early nineteenth-century² where it would be implemented and continues to be implemented to this day. Stateville Correctional Center—currently operational and located in Crest Hill, Illinois—including a functioning penitentiary panopticon, for example.³ The Panopticon’s unique structure set it apart


from other penitentiary designs of Bentham’s day, and its stated aim to reform prisoners aligned with much of the popular discourse surrounding prison reform that was occurring, especially in Europe, during that time. Before the latter half of the eighteenth-century, prisons were merely places to hold criminals before their execution or exile; conditions were poor and eventually a call for reform ensued. Reformers were interested in prisons that transformed and controlled criminals, the likes of which would eventually evolve, as Michel Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*, and as will be discussed in more detail later on in this essay.

The physical structure of the Panopticon itself consisted of an annular building, made up of individual cells that faced a central interior tower. In order to ensure adequate illumination of each cell, two windows were included in each—one on the exterior wall facing outwards, one on the interior wall facing the central tower. Light passed through these windows, then, in two directions, allowing for both the illumination of the cell and for the production of a backlighting effect. This effect made any figure present inside a cell appear as a silhouette, making any movement by that figure easily detectible from the central point of the complex—the tower. Featuring its own set of windows, this tower allowed guards inside to view all surrounding cells at one time; total surveillance was achieved from this central locus. From the guards’ point of view, inmates appeared as an organized multiplicity—ordered, compartmentalized, and always within view. The key to the Panopticon’s effectiveness was the fact that while guards were allowed a clear and unobstructed view of each prisoner, screening devices applied to the


windows of the tower and a series of optical illusions ensured that, from the prisoner’s point of view, the presence of a guard in the tower was never completely verifiable. An inmate would be confronted with implication that he or she was under constant surveillance, thus conditioning the behavior of the inmate to comply for fear of being seen if he or she did not. The constant presence of an actual guard was then rendered unnecessary—merely an implication or suggestion of one was enough to maintain control.

For French philosopher and theorist, Michel Foucault, the Panopticon represents the very pinnacle of his discussion regarding mechanisms of control—punishments and disciplines specifically—and their evolution from Medieval methods of torture and public execution to modern day implementation of the prison system. In his book titled, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes this evolution by examining the penal process and its methodological shifts from an emphasis on the body (i.e. torture) to an emphasis on the soul (prison as a corrective and reformative mechanism). When describing the changes that occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries specifically, Foucault describes the emergence of discipline as the “general formula of domination.”

Discipline maintains control by establishing a series of techniques that order an individual’s activity and his or her location in space. In other words, discipline ensures constant subjection by controlling the very operations of its forces. The military is an overt example of an institution that maintains control through discipline—it requires a certain gait, a

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8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.
certain salute, and a certain method of conduct that is then supervised and tested. The ultimate goal is not only to dictate a soldier’s location and activity, but to create a unified and efficient whole. Therefore, as a soldier becomes more obedient, he or she also becomes more proficient in the techniques imposed through discipline, and more efficient as a single part of a larger whole.

Discipline results in what Foucault calls “docile bodies,” that not only do what is prescribed by their authorities, but operate in a way that is predetermined and controlled. Docile bodies are essentially “trained” bodies and the methodology of discipline can be more simply put as a “means of correct training.” Foucault goes on to determine three specific strategies within this means of correct training—hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination—and finds that all three are ideally implemented in the “panoptic schema” of Bentham’s Panopticon.

Hierarchical observation comes into play after noting that “the exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power…” In other words, in order for an individual’s behavior to be ordered in a prescribed way, an element of surveillance must be inserted to ensure the compliance of the individual. Architecture becomes a means by which this surveillance can be established. In the example of the Panopticon, the physical ordering of cells within the immediate sightline of the tower’s gaze ensures that all cells can be monitored at one time. The purpose of the architectural arrangement is to make those who inhabit the structure visible and knowable and, by masking the presence or absence of a guard, to provide a “hold” on

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9 Ibid., 138.

10 Ibid., 170.
the inhabitants’ conduct through fear of being constantly observed. Surveillance links the power exerted onto individuals within the system to the overall aim of controlling behavior. It also makes the power exerted simultaneously omnipresent, faceless, and discreet. Therefore, the implementation of discipline is largely governed by the physical mechanics of a structure itself—no sovereign power figure need be present; the structure can operate itself.

It is worth noting that these methods of implementing discipline, as seen in the panoptic schema, are not limited to the structure of a prison. In fact, Foucault is very pointed in stating that the Panopticon should be viewed as a “diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form…it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.” To illustrate this point, Foucault also applies the panoptic schema to the context of a workshop as well as the context of a hospital or school. I would suggest, that within the context of modern-day society, another form of panoptic schema can be found embedded in smartphones, web browsers, and the fabric of approximately 890 million daily lives.

Facebook, even at a strictly structural level, bears an uncanny resemblance to the Panopticon. To see this, one can simply analyze Facebook from a user’s perspective. Facebook, as soon as one joins the network, provides a specific identity to each user through the creation of an online persona. This persona is contained within the profile page, the “timeline”, and represented by the profile picture. From the point of creation onward, a user’s activity can be found chronologically ordered within his or her timeline. Every time this user performs an

11 Ibid., 172.

12 Ibid., 205.

operation within the network, record of that operation can also be found in his or her “activity log,” an extension of the profile page. Since every “like,” comment, photo, link, and “share” originates from and exists within the profile page, the profile page functions essentially as a Facebook user’s “cell.” It is the only place that a single user’s Facebook performance can be seen in its entirety.

Reports of this user’s activity are sent to other users within his or her network through the “newsfeed” at the time each activity occurs, providing an up-to-date report of the activity of one user’s specific network of “friends.” In its most basic form, the newsfeed reports all activity from all friends in one central locus. The newsfeed constitutes Facebook’s guard tower. From this singular point, a user can survey the activity of his or her friends and, because a user is only notified when someone interacts with a post (by liking it, commenting on it, sharing it, and so forth) a user can survey the activity of his or her friends while remaining invisible.

Users are not the sole viewers of Facebook posts. Facebook (the corporation) itself has access to all accounts, and is known to actively use user information to suggest content and target advertisements, for example. Facebook’s gaze goes largely unnoticed; however, user awareness of it comes to the forefront whenever new information is publicized regarding Facebook’s ever-evolving use of user data. In 2012, for instance, Katie Baker wrote for Newsweek International, “We all know there's no such thing as privacy in Facebook's world,”14 while discussing Facebook’s ad targeting methods. Numerous additional articles exist that discuss Facebook and the information it both sees and uses. In 2014, Facebook introduced a new, simpler privacy

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policy due to user feedback, yet writers—like Issie Lapowsky in her article titled, “Facebook Rolls Out Clearer Privacy Policy, But You Still Can’t Control Your Data,”—were quick to point out the implications:

While the revamp may make Facebook’s privacy policy easier to understand, it doesn’t necessarily make it any easier to keep your information private on the social network. Though users have the option to opt in or out of sharing information with third-party apps, they still don’t have the option to select what type of information is shared, and more importantly, the new data policy still maintains that Facebook has the right to use information people share on Facebook to target ads to them on and off Facebook.

The existing discussion surrounding Facebook’s “exploitation” of user data, suggests that users should not be surprised at Facebook’s ability to access information. However, as Lapowsky mentions, exactly what Facebook is accessing and when it is accessing it cannot be discerned by an individual user through Facebook’s existing interface. Facebook as corporation watches from the guard tower—the presence of its gaze never completely verifiable.

Given the parallels between Facebook and the Panopticon, it is important to point out a key variation in Facebook’s panoptic schema—Facebook users not only occupy individual cells, they simultaneously occupy the guard tower. Viewers are also viewed. Because of this, autonomy is shared at the user-level as users bounce back and forth from the position of the user/prisoner (posting his or her own activity within the cell) to the position of the user/guard (engaging in the act of watching others from the tower). Hierarchical observation establishes Facebook’s own

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gaze at the top of the hierarchy while leaving autonomy at the user-level in a state of constant flux.

The Panopticon, as discussed by Foucault, was more than merely a feat of architecture and surveillance, it was also a laboratory. This laboratory could be used to “carry out experiments, to alter behavior, [and] to train or correct individuals.” Facebook also embodies the role of a laboratory. A study titled, “Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks” was authored by Facebook’s Core Data Science Team and published in June 2014. In the experiment, data analysts altered content that appeared in the newsfeeds of a group of uninformed Facebook users. The purpose was to determine whether or not emotions could be influenced by more negative or positive content in the newsfeed (they can). Public outcry ensued once the results of the study had been published as users recoiled against the idea that Facebook might try to alter their psychological states. A former Facebook data analyst responded to the outcry, however, with what may be the most telling: evidence of the experimental function of observation and behavior on Facebook.

Experiments are run on every [Facebook] user at some point in their tenure on the site. Whether that is seeing different size ad copy, or different marketing messages, or different call to action buttons, or having their feeds generated by different ranking algorithms, etc. The fundamental purpose of most people at Facebook working on data is to influence and alter people's moods and behaviour. They are doing it all the time to make you like stories more, to click on more ads, to spend more time on the site. This is just how a website works….  

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17 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203.


Experimentation on Facebook is present and constantly occurring with the intent to alter behavior. The two remaining strategies related to correct training discussed by Foucault—normalizing judgement and the examination—forge a connection between experimentation, knowledge acquisition, and resulting discipline. Normalizing judgement works to establish penalty, or punishment, within a disciplinary mechanism. It establishes a “norm” and penalizes those who do not measure up or who depart from it. Normalizing judgement is based on improvement (alteration) and bringing those who are subjected to it onto one level playing field. In order to discern the degree of correction needed, knowledge about an individual must be gathered and used to measure gaps between an individual’s current state and the state of the norm. In the end, normalizing judgement results in the creation of both the “individual” and a homogenous social body: an individual by pointing out the differences among subjects, and a body by eliminating those differences to create a unified whole.

Normalizing judgement is a means of exercising power in a disciplinary system by subjecting those it governs to an established norm. Power, according to Foucault, has a direct correlation to knowledge. “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,” says Foucault, and as described with normalizing judgement, a constitution of knowledge about an individual is necessary to measure how far or close to the norm an individual is at any given time. So, these “power-knowledge relations,” as coined by

20 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 178.

21 Ibid., 184.

22 Ibid., 27.

23 Ibid., 27.
Foucault, not only subjugate an individual, they also create a condition by which an individual becomes an “object of knowledge.”

It can be said that the presence of power presupposes the existence of a body of knowledge, while the presence of knowledge presupposes the exercise of power. The examination—the final strategy within a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault identifies—is the tool that ultimately makes power-knowledge relations possible within a disciplinary mechanism. By combining the techniques of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement, the examination implements “within a single mechanism, power relations that make it possible to extract and constitute knowledge.”

The examination places an individual in a “field of surveillance” while also placing him or her in a “network of writing.” Imagine the administration of a standardized test in a school system: a proctor is present to monitor students taking the test, and the written document acquired at the end is used to determine a score. The score, then, determines how close the student’s performance landed relative to the normative threshold. A physical military evaluation may be another example, in which the physical performance of a soldier is observed and recorded by authorities who subsequently calculate results. Results are then used to determine the soldier’s ability. In either example, the resulting documentation is used to “capture and fix” the individual being evaluated or examined. According to Foucault, the examination practice is accompanied by an intense system of registration and “documentary accumulation” that

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24 Ibid., 28.
25 Ibid., 185.
26 Ibid., 189.
27 Ibid., 189.
establishes certain codes, or descriptors, of individuality. These codes make it possible to “transcribe, by means of homogenization the individual features established by the examination.” In other words, the examination/documentation practice makes it possible to describe individuals and their relationship to the norm by establishing a descriptive vocabulary.

“Thanks to the whole apparatus of writing that accompanied it, the examination opened up two correlative possibilities: firstly, the constitution of the individual as a describable, analyzable object…secondly, the constitution of a comparative system….” Foucault concludes that examinations make individuals into “cases.” Cases, in turn, reduce individuals to objects of compiled knowledge and this knowledge allows for a more efficient exercise of power. As panoptic schemas were being implemented in prison systems, a system of reporting was being simultaneously implemented. Reports compiled by prison administration contained standard information about each inmate that could be used to determine—according to Belgian prison reformist, Édouard Ducpétiaux—how best to apply “treatment” to each individual inmate. Treatment, in this example, was the terminology used to describe “correction”; correction of the behavior, or nature of an individual that had brought about his or her penal sentence. Power could be exercised on individuals within the penitentiary system by using information about an individual to subsequently alter his or her behavior. This alteration constituted the correction, or normalization, of the inmate and was designed to elevate that inmate to a sociological norm. In other words, knowledge about an inmate combined with the exercise of power on an inmate,

28 Ibid., 189.
29 Ibid., 190.
would ultimately result in the
transformation of the inmate for the
benefit of society.

Facebook acquires knowledge
about its users in the form of an
“examination.” The process begins when
one creates an account since, in order to
do so, information must be entered: a
name, email address or mobile phone
number, birthday, and gender. Next,
Facebook asks for access to one’s contacts
(in order to search for friends), and
secondly, for a picture of oneself, “so your
friends know it’s you,” (figure 1). For the
purposes of illustrating this process, I
have created a Facebook account under
the pseudonym, Avery Anderson. The
screen that appears after Avery skips the
prompts to enter contacts’ information or a
profile picture, displays his newsfeed. The
newsfeed asks the question that will be
asked of Avery, every time his account is

Figure 1: Step 2, Add Profile Pic.

Figure 2: Facebook insists that new users should add
photos of themselves, and encourages users that a photo
will assist them in finding friends.

Figure 3: “What’s on your mind?” appears on the top
of a user’s newsfeed page.
accessed during the course of his Facebook lifespan: “What’s on your mind?” (figure 3).

An answer to that question, if entered and posted, will then be viewable on the profile page and reported in the newsfeeds of Avery’s friends. The most substantial accumulation of knowledge and information about a user, however, is compiled within the profile page and located in a user’s “About” section.

When Avery visits his profile page for the first time, he is prompted to “ADD PROFILE INFO,” with the explanation that filling out his profile will help him “connect with more friends,” (figure 4). If he proceeds to the “About” section, he is presented with seven larger categories to enter information into: Overview, Work and Education, Places You’ve Lived, Contact and Basic Info, Family and Relationships, Details About You, and Life Events. From there, the opportunities to enter information are seemingly endless. Facebook suggests sports, movies, Facebook pages, books, and TV shows a user may like. It asks for information about a user’s nicknames, brothers, sisters, religious views, favorite quotes, and political affiliations. A user can enter as much information as he or she pleases, though during the course of a user’s time on Facebook, the network may occasionally remind a user that his or her profile is only a certain percentage of “complete.” These reminders, along with the everyday question of, “What’s on your mind?” perpetuate the

Figure 4: Facebook insists that filling out your profile will help in finding friends as well. Screenshot taken by Stephanie Fast. March 20, 2015.
examination to span the entire lifetime of every Facebook account. Facebook gathers information as often as a user wants to enter it, and complies and stores that information for at least as long as an account is active.

If, in a panoptic schema, the examination makes individuals into cases that reduce them to objects of knowledge and set the stage for a normalizing exercise of power, one might begin to wonder why anyone would actively contribute. This question becomes even more pertinent when current discussions of online privacy and information security are introduced. Ever since Edward Snowden revealed that the NSA was actively surveilling communication records and social media sites of American citizens, discussions concerning personal information and communication have been accompanied by ones concerning privacy and security.31 For instance, in a 2014 study conducted by the Pew Research Internet Project, Americans were asked what came to mind when the word “privacy” was mentioned. Responses tended to mention one’s personal property—space, “stuff”—and concepts of safety, security, and protection.32 The same study also found that most of the Americans surveyed were aware of Snowden’s revelations about government surveillance, held an overall distrust in the security of digital communication, and yet made little to no active effort to limit digital communications or combat their loss of security in any way. Regarding social media, the study revealed that 81% of American adults felt “not very” or “not at all” secure when using social media sites to share private information with a


“trusted person or organization.” Sixty-one percent of these adults stated that they would like to do more to protect the privacy of their online information, yet, in a following study conducted in 2015, only 30% of American adults admitted to taking even one step to “hide or shield” their online information. A paradox presents itself: individuals are wary about the security of online information, and yet take little affirmative action to protect their information or distance themselves from online platforms. Director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Marc Rotenberg, theorized that this could be because users have no real choice but to accept an increasing lack of security and privacy as a by-product of living in the “digital age.” Perhaps the question to address would be whether or not threats of privacy invasion or information compromise make users want to leave networks like Facebook, and if so, why they are currently choosing to stay.

The growing number of daily active Facebook users from year to year confirms that individuals are, in fact, choosing to stay on the network. Though there may be a “fluidity” in Facebook’s population (61% of Facebook users say they have taken a break from Facebook for a couple of weeks or more) the amount of daily users is on a steady increase. For example,

33 Mary Madden, "Public Perceptions of Privacy and Security in the Post-Snowden Era."


Facebook reported having approximately 618 million daily active users at the end of 2012,77 757 million at the end of 2013,38 and 890 million at the end of 2014.39 Facebook is also considered to be the dominant social media site among competitors such as Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter.40

In the study, “A Review of Facebook Research in the Social Sciences”, authors reviewed and compiled 412 articles dealing with Facebook research, 78 of which specifically deal with why individuals use Facebook. Three of the most common motivations identified for Facebook use were to keep in touch with friends, to increase one’s “social capital,” and to fulfill “social-grooming needs.”41 The authors assess that the ability to increase social capital through Facebook is shown in how individuals can maintain both strong and weak ties among Facebook friends; how Facebook can provide a way to maintain relationships that may otherwise dissipate; or to foster relationships that may never have developed otherwise. The study suggests that activities such as gossip and small talk, which are engaged on Facebook, constitute human


38 “Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2013 Results,” Facebook Investor Relations, January 29, 2014.


parallels to the social-grooming practices that primates engage in as group-bonding activities.\textsuperscript{42} A similar perspective comes from a separate study titled, “Why do People Use Facebook?” This study theorized a two-pronged model of Facebook use that included both the need to belong and the need for self-presentation. The need to belong centers around humans’ dependency on social support from others, while self-presentation deals with a need or desire to present a curated impression of oneself—in Facebook’s case—through online personas.\textsuperscript{43} A common theme begins to appear in these studies: that Facebook use is largely motivated by a desire or need for social connectivity and/or community.

Facebook users, in spite of growing concerns about online privacy and security, are choosing to stay on the network. Additionally, Facebook users are most likely to be attracted to the network because of a psychological need for social connectivity and community that Facebook can provide. Therefore, this desire for social connectivity and community is arguably stronger than existing concerns about privacy. If this is true, then perhaps Rotenberg was correct in theorizing that acceptance of an increased lack of privacy and security is an unavoidable by-product of living in the digital age. This notion of connectivity and correlative exposure is not a new idea. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who authored numerous books on media theory between 1951 and 1970, described a phenomenon by which electric media—for him, things like TV and radio; for us, the internet and Facebook—created a global community in which “devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance” brought about a “very serious dilemma


McLuhan’s theories have been considered to be somewhat prophetic, predicting the pervasive interconnectivity made possible by the internet decades before it was invented. This interconnectivity is epitomized in what McLuhan calls the “Global Village,” a descriptive model of society in which members that make up a homogenous social group share a united environment and are able to stay connected with others globally through electronic media.

Throughout the course of this discussion, parallels have been drawn between Facebook and two of the three strategies for exercising discipline embodied in the Panopticon and discussed by Foucault: hierarchical observation and the examination. To complete the analogy, one must find the ways in which Facebook exercises normalizing judgement. As previously described, normalizing judgement establishes a norm by which all subjected individuals are judged. It is dependent on knowledge gathered through monitored examinations that determine individuals’ distance from the norm, creating a homogenous body by “correcting” differences. Facebook promotes a norm by dictating the rules that users must follow when posting content, and by punishing those who do not conform. The “norm” most overtly constitutes acceptable content, and content that deviates from the norm must be corrected. Facebook identifies unacceptable content by monitoring user posts and by responding to user reports. It then punishes or “corrects” posts it determines to deviate from the norm by blocking, or removing them to restore normalcy. As recently as March 15th, 2015, Facebook reminded its users of these dictates by releasing a set of “community standards” designed to “help people understand what is

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acceptable to share on Facebook.” In its release announcement, Facebook went on to describe the “challenge to maintain one set of standards that meets the needs of a diverse global community,” and yet maintained that it would, of course, continue to adhere to one set of standards—one set of norms.

Facebook also employs subtle forms of normalizing judgement in addition to the more overt method of establishing a norm for posted content. Facebook, as discussed previously, integrates a series of subtle prods that encourage a user to input information and complete his or her “About” section. One way Facebook prods its users is by integrating a progress bar onto the profile page that indicates the percentage complete a user’s “About” section is at any given time. The use of progress cues in general has been studied relative to the psychological effect it has in motivating individuals to complete tasks. In a study titled, “Climbing the Goal Ladder: How Upcoming Actions Increase Level of Aspiration”, the effects of progress cues were analyzed by determining how individuals’ aspirations to complete one task or goal, and then to move on to another, more advanced task or goal, was altered or enhanced through the use of progress cues. Progress cues that indicated completed actions rather than remaining actions signaled that “the current goal [was] valuable, such that people [felt] committed to engage in the goal….” A separate study, this time in the context of consumer psychology, found that progress cues


increase motivation as people get closer to achieving the goal or completing the task.\textsuperscript{47}

Interestingly, Facebook’s progress bar indicates a substantial amount of progress after only a small amount of information has been entered. Avery Anderson’s progress bar for example, after entering only the information required to sign up for a Facebook account, indicates that Avery’s profile is 44% complete. Given the assertions of these studies, I would suggest that Facebook’s progress bar works to motivate users to input more content and reach the end goal of an “About” section that is 100% complete.

By creating a structure suited to the compartmentalization and surveillance of its users, by continually gathering information from its users, and by enforcing norms, Facebook embodies its own panoptic schema. Just as the Panopticon utilizes strategies of hierarchical observation, examination, and normalizing judgment to exercise power through discipline, so Facebook utilizes parallel measures to establish a disciplined social body of its own. Users, though generally aware of Facebook’s surveillance of their activity, choose to stay on the network in spite of rising concerns. Thus, Facebook embodies a panoptic schema—a disciplinary apparatus—with a particular advantage: inhabitants enter and stay within the confines of Facebook on their own accord.

What is the effect, or the implications, of such an apparatus in our everyday lives? In later years, Foucault continued to discuss the relationship between power and knowledge that he found to be made possible through the disciplines and the apparatuses they permeate. Foucault asserted that power is more than just a negative force designed for repression or prohibition;

rather, “if power were never anything but repressive if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” Foucault continues:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body…."

Power produces; it produces things that we desire and moreover, it produces new domains of knowledge. To describe this point, Foucault paints an illustration of the type of medical discourse that brought about hospitals designed as disciplinary institutions. Through the evolution of this discourse, says Foucault, individuals began to be classified and inspected, categorized as insane or sick or criminal. From this, there emerged individuals who “made it their business to involve themselves in other people’s lives,” in other words, from this new medical discourse arose an interest in health, housing, and nutrition which brought about the creation of new experts, new discourses, and new forms of knowledge. To put it differently, the power-knowledge relations existent within the medical discourse led to the discovery of new forms of knowledge—social work, public hygiene, psychology—that required new individuals to investigate and expand the new knowledge and, in doing so, create new discourses and fields of study.

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49 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 119.


51 Michel Foucault, “Body/Power,” 62.

52 Ibid., 62.
What new forms of knowledge do the power-knowledge relations existent in Facebook produce? What is the effect of Facebook’s disciplinary apparatus and what have we gained from it? If power induces pleasure and forms knowledge, as Foucault argues, then perhaps the induction of pleasure has been addressed, at least in a rudimentary way, by discussing why users stay on Facebook in spite of privacy concerns. There seems to be something about the social connectivity provided by Facebook that users want, or perhaps that they feel like they need. This connectivity may be possible to attain in ways other than through Facebook; however, Facebook is the dominant social network of the current age. This connectivity, though, is different than connectivity in the traditional sense. It is detached because it exists on the internet, users can interact with others without ever meeting face-to-face or confronting the ramifications of a face-to-face interaction. They can be “connected” while physically separated by hundreds or thousands of physical miles. Possibly, this detached connectivity begins to change the way we communicate; perhaps it begins to change us sociologically, or influence the way we perceive social interaction. Regardless, the panoptic schema within Facebook has made this new connectivity easy and as it continues to evolve, so will we continue to evolve with it.
SECTION II

Section I outlines the theoretical basis for this particular body of graphic design work. To describe the Panopticon along with the negative connotations that accompany imprisonment, and to then map the same language onto Facebook—something that we have ubiquitously accepted into our lives—creates an uncomfortable juxtaposition. From this perspective, something that once passed as a way of staying in touch with friends becomes a complex apparatus suited to surveillance, the acquisition of knowledge, and judgement. I am also interested in the detached connectivity that Facebook allows through its internet platform and how, though connected, users are simultaneously dislocated or distant. My goal in making this body of work has been to exploit the similarities between Facebook and the Panopticon by staging a series of dislocating events. These events force a viewer to consider Facebook in a different way, and elicit questions that may alert a viewer to Facebook’s position as a surveillance zone as well as a place where knowledge can be acquired and used.

To this end, I engaged in a form of code-switching. Code-switching, in the traditional sense, constitutes a linguistic phenomenon in which bilingual individuals mix and use two different languages—codes—in a single correspondence. More recently, however, code-switching has come to be understood more broadly. For example, NPR now contains a blog called “Code Switch,” in which writers have taken interest in how individuals switch between different linguistic and cultural spaces “and different parts of [their] own identities—sometimes within a single interaction.” Code-switching, then, does not have to refer to mixing two


languages literally—i.e. Spanglish—but can refer to mixing cultural references or mixing communication contexts. The significance of this procedure is that in mixing “codes”, the differences between each individual code becomes more apparent through contrast.

Before deciding how to engage this process specifically, I was interested in exploring how other artists have used social media in their work. An Xiao’s work uses social media and other forms of technology to address the idea of presence. In her project titled, *Nothing to Tweet Home About*, Xiao created an exhibition of “tweets” inscribed on postcards that she mailed to the gallery setting one at a time. Each postcard contained some short statement (140 characters or less), a “geotag” in the form of a postmark, and was then hung on the wall once it arrived in the mail. The result was a collection of nearly 100 postcards with a record on Xiao’s thoughts during that specific period of time. Through the course of the project, Xiao sought to explore how tweet-like updates, once displayed as a whole, could form an “impression of an individual, a living self-portrait aggregated from minutiae from [her] daily life.”

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Peter Halley positions his work to comment on our modern-day society. At first glance, his paintings do not appear to be much more than formally compelling, brightly-colored compositions of geometric shapes; however, in his writings he describes those shapes as representations of our physical world, the geometry of the cubical, of the assembly line, of the highways, and how “the regimentation of human movement, activity, and perception accompany the geometric division of space.”

His compositions provide a rich commentary on how, in his opinion, we have adopted a “Baudrillardian deterrence” to the prisons we create for ourselves in our every day lives.

I engaged in a form of code-switching by replying to Facebook posts through mailed cards. My process began by designing a set of stationery including folding “comment” cards, “like” postcards, and two additional postcards for recipient replies. These reply cards were designed to give a recipient the same options that a comment on Facebook would have afforded him or her: the option to comment in reply, or to “like” my comment. These postcards included

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57 Peter Halley, “Deployment of the Geometric,” In Theories And Documents of Contemporary Art, 166.
postage as well as my address, and were sent to recipients in the same envelope as the comment card.

The process of determining which Facebook posts and friends to reply to began by first browsing my own Facebook account. Ultimately, I decided to focus on posts based on whether or not I would have felt compelled to reply to said posts on Facebook under normal circumstances. The next step was then to determine how to engage with the post: to “like” it, “comment” on it, or both. To “like” a post, I transcribed a notification of my “like” on a “like” postcard. A “like” might read as follows: “Stephanie Fast likes your post: “I haven’t done that since…” March 20th at 7:22 a.m.” This syntax corresponds to the syntax of the “notification” since, on Facebook, “liking” something is one way. The person who’s post has been “liked” receives a notification, but does not receive a means to reply. To “comment” on a post, I transcribed what I normally would have said on Facebook onto a blank “comment” card. Cards contained messages like the following: “Dear Amy, To comment on your post from March 20th at 3:24 p.m., that’s awesome! Your friend, Stephanie Fast.” By using this particular syntax, Facebook notification syntax is combined with my own writing. Thus,
in both examples, by inscribing Facebook syntax onto a written card—by removing that language from the digital and placing it in the analogue world—I have engaged in code-switching by changing the context of that particular code.

After finding a post and writing a reply, the next step in the process was to locate a home address for the recipient using information available on a recipient’s Facebook profile page and in his or her “About” section. For instance, if I was not already familiar with what city a person lived in, in almost every case, that person had included their “current city” in the “About” section of their Facebook profile. When using online resources such as WhitePages to locate addresses, Facebook information was also useful in narrowing results. For instance, WhitePages will sometimes display multiple results for one searched name, thus making it difficult to determine which entry corresponds to the person for which one has searched. However, under each listing WhitePages also includes names of individuals that the person may or may not be connected with. Oftentimes these are parents’, siblings’, or spouses’ names, so on many occasions, cross-referencing that information from WhitePages with people listed in the “family” section of one’s Facebook profile confirmed which of the multiple same-named entries on WhitePages correlated with the person I was trying to find.

If WhitePages could not deliver what I believed to be the correct address for a “friend,” there were several more options to try. In Hamilton County, Tennessee, a register of deed information is available in a database online. Marriage licenses are also viewable online, and include the addresses of both parties at the time the marriage occurred. The deed database was useful in finding property owners’ names and addresses, and could also be used to locate
individuals whom I could determine, by perusing their Facebook accounts, lived with their parents—granted that I could determine the parents’ names as well.

Once the address was located, the next step was to mail the set of cards. The time at which a recipient receives one of these cards is the moment at which the dislocating event I am interested in staging ultimately occurs. Once an individual has received one of these cards, questions most likely ensue; perhaps ones like, “Why is she doing this?” or “How did she find my address?” The first question, “Why is she doing this?” or “Why isn’t she replying on Facebook?” is a product of the act of code-switching. By dislocating the context of the communication, it is obvious that something different has occurred. One might search for meaning in the written comment, however, when confronted with it, it reads merely like a Facebook post. The comment is also dislocated in that it alludes to the post it is referring to (with a timestamp) but requires the recipient to either recall the post or go to Facebook and find it. The second question, “How did she find my address?” alludes to the fact that somehow I, in the context of a Facebook correspondence, have located that individual not only in the digital world, but in the physical world as well. These questions ultimately draw attention to the fact that Facebook posts are, in fact, viewed, and that information available on Facebook can be acquired and used for any number of purposes. Just as activity within the Panopticon can be viewed and information used to assert control, so too can Facebook implement similar techniques.

These questions also allude more subtly to Facebook and its panoptic schema by capitalizing on the idea of detachment and the detached connectivity propagated on Facebook. By taking digital correspondence and making it analogue, the detachment allowed on Facebook is maintained in that there still is no use of face-to-face contact; yet, it is destabilized by forging a
connection between the digital and physical worlds. Once transcribed into the physical world, a Facebook post no longer exists as merely an ephemeral thing suspended in cyberspace, but something that arrives at one's home, in a place where one can be physically located. If there was ever a sense of protection associated with the detached characteristic of Facebook connectivity—in that one could communicate without being required to approach another face-to-face and deal with the ramifications of such an approach—then that protection is at least called into question when the distance between digital and physical suddenly becomes much shorter. Several of the responses I received from my comment cards support this idea of sudden awareness, or of questioned security as a result of connecting Facebook to the physical world. In the end, however, whether respondents had replied to the cards or not, the act of sending and receiving a card is the point at which the intricacy of surveillance and the implementation of disciplinary strategies made possible by Facebook’s structure come to the forefront. We live in an age where new kinds of connectivity are being made possible through both digital and physical means. When the nature of our communication becomes so fundamentally different than that of previous generations, and so integrated with panoptic elements like surveillance, examinations, and norms, we must ask ourselves what we have become as a result of the digital age, and what we may become in the future.
Bibliography


Fast, Stephanie. Facebook | Panopticon.  
Artist Statement

Facebook is a platform; it allows users to document their own lives in front of an audience, to perform and be acknowledged by their “friends”. Facebook is a dataset; it perpetually gathers and asks for information from its users (i.e. “What’s your hometown?” , “What’s on your mind?”). Facebook is a network; it can make users accessible to each other regardless of their physical location. To sign up for Facebook is to make oneself seen. To enter personal information on Facebook – the names of family, email addresses, the things one likes, the things one cares about – is to allow oneself to become known.

The Panopticon was a carceral model designed in the eighteenth century. Its primary objective was to exercise control over its inhabitants through constant surveillance, and to gather information. Information was used to document inhabitants, to reduce them to analyzable knowledge that could be used to exercise control. To be imprisoned within a Panopticon was to be made seen. To be documented and analyzed within the Panopticon was to become known.

Everything seen here has been made possible by that which can be seen and known through Facebook. Facebook is a form of Panopticon and we, as users, occupy the roles of both inhabitant and overseer. We can see others, but we can also be seen ourselves. We can know others, but we can also be known ourselves. The irony is that we are not being held against our will, we signed up for this.
Fast, Stephanie. *Facebook | Panopticon*. 48”x48”
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