

The John M. Rezendes Ethics Essay Competition

GOOGLE'S PANOPTICON

Andrea Gammon
(Biology, Philosophy)

2010

In his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents a genealogy of disciplinary power. Though subtitled “The Birth of the Prison”, the scope of his account extends far beyond the prison’s literal walls; Foucault writes a history of power relations wherein non-criminal subjects are individualized, surveilled, epistemologically objectified, and judged in a new micro-physics of power. Foucault traces the metamorphosis of punishment from its corporeal locus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the rise of the penitentiary and a radical system of scientific, medical, and judicial techniques of power that took hold in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the western world a criminal justice system that aims to reform and rehabilitate has long replaced the gruesome public spectacle of torturing criminals to death. Foucault argues that in turning the penal focus away from bodily violence, we have given rise to a political economy of power that makes captive the bodies and minds of criminals and non-criminals alike. The penitentiary is not the only institution that trains and uses docile bodies; Foucault asserts hospitals, military barracks, schools, and factories resemble prisons and replicate their disciplinary effects. I argue that Google, in its size and scope, is perhaps the closest expression of the Panopticon in history. Running three billion searches a day (Auletta 336), Google, the most popular search engine and one of the most successful companies in the world, has transformed the way we use the Internet and is pioneering digital ideas of community and privacy, changing the way we search. I will draw heavily from *Discipline and Punish* throughout my paper, and have introduced these themes as a contextual reference. However, I will not focus on Google as a strictly *disciplinary* piece of the apparatus Foucault describes but I will apply many of his ideas to shine light on the anatomy of Google’s dominance. In my paper, I will explore the implications of the

online search, the role Google casts of the individual who stands before it, and the ethic the individual must take to ensure undistorted access to information in the digital age.

Foucault fittingly centers *Discipline and Punish* around Jeremy Bentham's architectural idea of the Panopticon. Though it was never constructed, Bentham envisioned a circular prison wherein a supervisor positioned in a watchtower at the center of the cells is able to surveil all prisoners from a single vantage. Conversely, the prisoners are subject to a staged effect of permanent surveillance, of being seen but not seeing, as the watchtower is enshrouded and the actual presence or absence of the supervisor is unverifiable. Through the tricky use of partitioning, mirrors, and sound-proofing, the prisoners are unable to see or hear the other prisoners though the supervisor may address each prisoner individually through a system of sound tubes. Each prisoner exists in total isolation as "the object of information" (Foucault 200), perfectly observable, and perfectly obedient.

The Panoptic arrangement possesses two power-wielding attributes: first, its subjugating hold on the prisoners that both deprives them the humanity of locking gazes with another and makes them implicit in their own subjection, and second, the opportunity, through observation or experimentation, for record and analysis of data on separate subjects. Foucault argues that the disciplinary society of the modern day is rife with iterations of these two forms of control in milder, subtler manifestations than the Panopticon and with nobler intentions:

The panoptic schema...was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function...its aim is to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy...raise the level of public's morality; to increase and multiply. (208)

Foucault points to military, medical, and educational examples of specialization and efficiency, of greater societal good, through the individualized observation and training of subjects. I suggest that in harnessing the potential of individuals' data from their search queries, browsing habits, email content, and even exact physical location through smart phone technology, Google benefits from a latter-day iteration of the panoptic power structure. Of course, Google's collection and organization of vast amounts of data is its service; it achieves widespread use because it succeeds at making collected information accessible and useful. Google provides a product that is both free and convenient, and millions look to Google every day to answer their queries and to direct their searches.

In its constant effort to refine the online search and thus improve the performance of its product, Google collects an enormous amount of data about its users. Steven Levy writes about the intelligence Google gathers from a single, simple Internet query:

The data people generate when they search – what results they click on, what words they replace in the query when they're unsatisfied, how their queries match with their physical locations – turns out to be an invaluable resource in discovering new signals and improving the relevance of results. (3)

Google tracks this information constantly, employing both a workforce of engineers hired to optimize search and its billions of users. To test minor modifications in the algorithm, for example, Google engineers run the new algorithm on a small number of random users, comparing this groups' search results and rates of success with the other users who are searching by the old algorithm. None of the searchers are aware that their results are

involved in these experiments, but because engineers continuously refine the algorithm, each Google search is likely involved with several experiments. Google Fellow and engineer Amit Singhal verifies: “On most Google queries, you’re actually in multiple control or experimental groups simultaneously. Essentially all the queries are involved in some test” (Levy). Google owes its preeminence in online search to its innovative algorithm and its unremitting revision and refinement. When introduced, Google’s algorithm, named PageRank, broke with current search modes that assigned results based exclusively on keyword relevance. PageRank was the first to analyze the connectedness of a site, that is, how many secondary sites link to the primary site, how many tertiary sites link to all of the secondary sites, etc., and rank these in its search results, prioritizing commonly visited sites (Auletta 38). Google’s novel approach overrode keyword-driven searches, and this computation was only the beginning; its algorithm now incorporates more than two hundred metrics in its ranking process (Levy 1).

Later developments in Google’s algorithm represent a paradigm shift where the search engine aims to interpret the user’s query and provide individualized results. This strategy departs with keyword matching and expands the simple ranking system Google first devised; Google is trying to understand the user’s meaning, even if the user misspells words in his query or omits them altogether. To enhance its efforts, Google personalizes searches, targeting individuals based on their physical location and their search history. Google uses cookies (small pieces of data stored on the user’s hard drive) that can reveal her browsing history, advertisements she clicked on, items she purchased, and other such pieces of data. Of course, most websites employ cookies to track visitors; cookies enable Amazon to provide its users with personalized recommendations, for

instance. In compilation, all of these data sketch a discrete and individualized portrait of the user. Noting the same phenomenon, Reg Whitaker writes: “Each time you make a purchase or engage in a financial transaction...you are briefly illuminated by the now ubiquitous, decentered Panopticon” (Whitaker 140). Issues of privacy and the security of personal information in the digital age is the subject of another paper; I mean only to highlight the troves of data Google collects about all of its users as testimony to its supremacy and as progression towards search mastery.

When asked about their goals in improving online search, Google’s founders repeat that with more and more precise, individualized data, search results increase in relevance and value. They hope that they will one day achieve an algorithm that knows its user so personally that in response to her query, Google can provide not five million ordered results, but a single answer (Auletta 327). Such efforts are already underway as a default setting in all Google accounts. Known as transparent personalization, this practice uses past data collected from a user’s web activity to drive the search results that appear to that user in the future. Transparent personalization introduces a conflict between neutrality and efficiency in search results. In *The Big Switch*, Nicholas Carr voices concern about optimization overrunning objectivity:

A company run by mathematicians and engineers, Google seems oblivious to the possible social costs of transparent personalization. They impose homogeneity on the Internet’s wild heterogeneity. As the tools and algorithms become more sophisticated and our online profiles more refined, the Internet will act increasingly as an incredibly sensitive feedback loop, constantly playing back to us, in amplified form, our existing preferences. (162)

Foucault would respond that Google's function answers to its form in this example; its concentration on personalization grows out of its central position in the world wide web. As I mentioned previously, the Panoptic power structure, through observation and experimentation, enables systemic individualization, what Foucault terms "the examination". The vantage of the Panopticon documents, judges, analyzes and compares every individual to all others, marking gaps and particularities; the individual only has an identity to the degree to which he is individualized. Foucault writes "The examination is the technique by which power...instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification" (Foucault 187). He points to formalized education and medicine as examples of individualization through normalizing judgment and objectification. Google's transparent personalization that casts its users in an ever-narrowing and increasingly individualized identity is a modern-day iteration of the examination. While the examination alone has tremendous implications for the exercise of power, Google, as a corporation accountable to shareholders, differs from other examining forces. Before I proceed with Foucault's conclusions about the examination, this commercial facet of Google deserves attention.

Even if we support Google in its endeavor of mastering the online search for our benefit, even if we believe its intentions to be honorable, any entity with access to the wealth of data that Google amasses demands scrutiny. Still, Google consistently finds favor especially among Americans, and continues to rank among the most trusted corporations in the world (Auletta 289). Laurence Hinman explains why Google as a search engine but especially as a corporation merits a close examination:

Search engines are owned by private corporations, businesses that are quite properly seeking to make a profit. These companies, especially Google since it has become the search engine of choice for so many millions, have a crucial public responsibility but are accountable to shareholders, not the general public. This sets up a tension between the public role of search engines and their corporate accountability. (22)

Where Hinman identifies interests conflicting, I suspect Google views them converging. As its algorithm achieves an increasingly greater degree of individualization and users enjoy improved search results, advertisers can target customers with greater accuracy and achieve higher rates of return on their investments. It is in Google's best interests in serving both its users and its advertisers, to customize. In an interview with Ken Auletta, Lawrence Lessig observes the marriage between a user conducting a Google search and Google's advertising capabilities:

Google's power flows from a different source. They have produced this amazing machine for building data, and that data has its own "network effect" – the more people use it, the more data is generated, the more advertisers flock to it...Every time you search, you give Google some value because you pick a certain result...Google learns something from that. So each time you do a search, you're adding value to Google's database. The database becomes so rich that the advertising model that sits on top of it can outcompete other advertising models because it has better data...(139).

Google's popularity with online users makes it a hugely lucrative option for advertisers. In partnering with DoubleClick in 2007, Google expanded its market breadth and its databases now feed from sites affiliated with DoubleClick as well (Auletta 175). Its aptitude with information and its continuously increasing access to it have nearly guaranteed Google unrivaled success in online searching and advertising: Google

generated more than 20 billion dollars in online advertising revenue in 2009 alone, the equivalent of 40 percent of the year's online market (Auletta xi). Google pledges to keep its search results non-commercialized; so far, no one has been able to buy a top ranking in search results. Still, Google sustains its search operations by advertising revenue and stands to benefit from any way it can combine these. For instance, Gmail, Google's free email service, scans the content of messages for keywords and places relevant advertisements along the side of the user's screen. In an interview, Ken Auletta speculates on a possible marriage of information with promotion that blurs the line between advertisement and service. He describes a collaborative effort where global positioning satellite technology, phone companies, Google, and their advertising partners target likely consumers through text messages:

You're walking by a mall in Philadelphia, and they know you happen to frequent this particular store, because they have your records, right? You leave a digital footprint of everything you do, and you've been to this store, it's on your credit card, and they say, "Excuse me, but we know you're walking by one of your favorite stores, would you like to go in? They have a sale on some of your favorite items today"... they're thinking of that as a service that you would find attractive as a consumer. ("Googled': Biography Of A Company, And An Age.")

In such an example, Google's customization of the individual is crystallized in a consumer identity that matches his online activity as he moves about the physical world. Through smart phone technology, individual identity, once shielded by the marginal privacy of an IP address, loses all anonymity. Google's panoptic eye extends its gaze even further, tracing individuals outside of the browser.

I do not mean to ascribe a sinister character to Google's intentions and ambition. Google has put unprecedented amounts of information literally at our fingertips. Its online search has shaped the Internet and revolutionized our approach to asking questions and finding answers. Google has changed the way we think. If the Internet truly democratizes space and information, Google's model and continued success is largely responsible. I mean to suggest that as the users of the Internet, and especially as it gains an ever growing role in our lives for entertainment, communication, and information, we examine some of our widespread attitudes towards it. Ever more increasingly, we access the Internet at our convenience and to service our needs. Logistics and prevalence alone contribute to the impression that, no longer bound by wires or unwieldy machines, handheld devices empower *me* with instantaneous and nearly universal access to the Internet. I center its resources and amusements around *my* interests, habits, and networks. Much of my Internet experience is personalized for accommodation and passworded for security. I navigate and *self*-guide. Hyperlinks help me travel, but the choice to click is mine alone; nothing is compulsory. I am the sole director and audience of my Internet experience; it begins when I open my browser and ends when I close it. A conviction of agency pervades our online search for information: at no cost and whenever I need it, Google *serves* me by providing objective and reliable answers and information on whatever topic about which I care to ask. Designed to be free of clutter and user-friendly, both Google's appearance and its aim of customization that privileges the *idea* of individuality reinforce the sense of free agency in online search. With the exception of an uncomplicated and straightforward privacy policy, nothing on the site suggests that the Google does anything but answer search queries. Still, in light of Google's collection of

user data and its relationship with advertisers, the assumption that Google exists without any purpose but to answer its users' queries is misguided. Google enshrouds its algorithm, and though most businesses protect their trade secrets to prevent duplication, most businesses do not function as gatekeepers to a world of information. Hinman notes, again with reference to the power of the search engine, "We risk having our access to information controlled by ever-powerful, increasingly opaque, and almost completely unregulated search engines that could shape and distort our future largely without our knowledge" (Hinman 25). Google drives our search for information online while perpetuating the impression that we are in control of a self-directed search. Foucault argues that this sense of agency is mistaken, that disciplinary power generates and sustains a false sense of independence. In this case, Google's examination and personalization does not respond to our sense of distinctive autonomy like we imagine, but *creates* it with an individualizing examination of its users. Foucault writes:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society; but he is also fascinated by this specific technology of power that I have called 'discipline'. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes' it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks' it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (194)

As we increasingly utilize Google for information, we increasingly shape our search around its offerings. Our browsing activities, though impulsive or meaningless one click at a time, compound into complex and rich data that shapes the landscape of the Internet, determines what information we access or can access, and transforms our interactions

and communities. Collectively, our clicks construct our identities. By this reasoning, Foucault would argue that Google Suggest, for instance, the service that provides a user with suggested search results that appear before she has finished typing, or perhaps even thinking, her query, in fact does not serve her but instead exemplifies the commercial and manipulative machinery of a disciplinary apparatus. Virginia Heffernan notes:

You start typing "Am I -- " and like an impatient therapist Google Suggest interrupts you with a drop-down list of concepts seemingly culled from the unconsciousness of the human race... Type "A" and Google proposes Amazon. "J" gets you JC Penny. "T" is for Target. These sites, and 23 others are Google's first suggestions for each letter of the alphabet. (20)

The information available to an individual user is clearly wrapped up in the wealth of others' search patterns and histories. She enters into the online search perhaps envisioning herself unbound to others and imagines her query to be self-directed. In searching, she gives to Google a wealth of individualized information that is hardly personal or sensitive, though this information shapes Google's individualization of her, and combined with similar bits of data from billions of other users, provides Google with a rich, deep, and hugely concentrated and valuable reserve of intelligence.

Foucault writes:

Bentham dreamt of... a network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption in space or time. The panoptic arrangement provides the formula for this generalization. (209)

Foucault's description of a decentralized and ubiquitous surveillance network nearly perfectly describes Google. Whether Google will actively exploit the disciplinary power its brand of surveillance affords remains to be seen. Google's users, at once objects in its

gaze and consumers of its product, have a twofold interest in turning a critical eye on its practices to uphold ethical considerations. Without an effective structure of oversight, there currently exists no other recourse for assuring informational ethics in the digital age than to enact an individual ethic. I do not advocate a rejection of the framework; Google is a tremendous resource we utilize in nearly all of our informational searches. At the same time, Foucault's idea that disciplinary power authors our identity, in this case by directing our searches and shaping our actions online, is not inevitable with Google. My identity as a searcher and a thinker preceded Google's existence, but using Google, I see my identity bound up in the falsely beneficial individuality Google draws for me. If we are to resist the objectifying gaze, it should be by separating our selves from the online portraits Google assumes. By withholding and safeguarding our individual data, we minimize our profile in Google's gaze and limit the data it collects from us. We can resist surrendering all of the informational control to its panoptic gaze by simple acts of disabling cookies, clearing browsing histories, and using non-digital sources for information. However, only in keeping our Google-drawn individuality vague can we enact an individual ethic wherein the searcher holds informational power.

Works Cited

Auletta, Ken. *Googled*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2009. Print.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Big Switch*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. Print.

Foucault, Michael. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheriden. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.

"'Googled': Biography Of A Company, And An Age." *Fresh Air*. Maine Public Broadcasting Network: WMEH, Bangor, 2 Nov. 2009. Radio.

Heffernan, Virginia. "The Google Alphabet." *New York Time Magazine* 14 Feb. 2010: 20-22. Print.

Hinman, Lawrence M., "Esse est indicato in Google: Ethical and Political Issues in Search Engines." *International Review of Information Ethics* 3. (2005): 19-25. Web. 26 Mar 2010. <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/inhalt/003/003_hinman.pdf>.

Levy, Steven. "How Google's Algorithm Rules the Web." *Wired Magazine* March 2010: 1-3. Web. 19 Mar 2010. <http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/02/ff_google_algorithm/>.

Whitaker, Reg. *The End of Privacy*. New York: The New Press, 1999. Print.