

Apart from several backlashes arisen from moral panics (with regards to pornography / accessibility to children), it could be considered that the general consensus of the Internet's qualities is represented as utopian. Often referred to as 'the world's largest library', the wealth of information available (via the comfort and privacy of the home) from infinitely diverse sources, suggests that the World Wide Web offers an endless utopian solution for all sections of gender, race and belief. Two of the most common areas of theory relating to the implication of the Internet relates to the issues of community and identity.

As noted in Daniel Littler's article at newmediastudies.com, the potential of the Internet as a new way of communication holds wider significance than in the terms of a mere technological advancement. The tools and social meanings of computer-mediated communication (CMC) allow for new interpretations of discourse with regards to community, identity, power and surveillance. Although CMC has given the individual an opportunity to participate within "a global uncensored mass of communication", exactly how much power and authority the individual can attain is highly debatable.

Before examining how the Internet represents the elements of power, surveillance and identity, it is necessary to understand the physical differences between 'face-to-face' (everyday, real life) and 'CMC' (textually based) interaction with regards to community and identity.

Initially social psychological theory deemed that "the online medium provided an impoverished basis for social activity" – thus suggesting that the limited physical interactions of CMC led to "impersonal, inflammatory, cold and unsociable interactions". However, these early theories, commenting upon CMC's 'physically limited' textual discourse fail to acknowledge possible utopian solution that the new faceless communication afforded an individual. Whilst face-to-face communication relies upon verbal and body language, it is how CMC represents the individual in cyberspace (in relation to power, surveillance and identity), which will form the crux of this study.

Significantly it is the potential of CMC to give the individual more control over the expression of their identity that illustrates the success / popularity of the Internet. Whereas face-to-face mediation imparts a more stable representation of identity – the individual is identifiable therefore accountable for his/her responsibilities and concerns regarding desirability / social ability, CMC offers an almost escapism alternative. CMC's ability to construct more flexible representations of identity (away from the fluidity of essentialist identities) enables, in theory, the individual to maintain anonymity through experimentation with multiple identities, therefore the capacity to fulfil the expression of the individual's illicit fantasies, needs and desires.

Identity within CMC therefore assumes a new flexibility and control over self-presentation, a wider opportunity for experimentation in which an individual can create a 'front' that includes emotions, appearance and manner. The ability to control not only one's own private information, but partake in the private information of others, has arisen the opportunity for commodifying and commercialising certain elements of CMC, and also affecting the individuals power status within the virtual community.

The introduction of CMC and subsequent success of web cams has given the opportunity for existing theoretical models of power and surveillance to be reapplied and revaluated with regards to these new 'anonymous' online identities and how they function within the online medium.

Bentham's conception of the panopticon illustrates the architectural model of a unique prison;

"The design of the panopticon consisted of a tower in the centre surrounded by a ring shaped building composed of cells, each housing a prisoner. The panopticon allowed for the continuous observation of inmates, while simultaneously requiring few supervisory resource"

Although being a simplistic description of the architecture of the prison, the Foucault's re-examination of the model suggests that panopticon's status as a perfect model for power – of surveillance, discipline, and therefore social control.

From the 'central watchtower' of the panopticon. One can view the captive individuals held within the cells of the surrounding building. Though the figure of the watchtower has this ability to see these 'prisoners' through the use of lighting, the prisoner does not own the same privilege.

"The sidewalls prevent him [the prisoner] from coming into contact with his companions", thus each individual in each cell is isolated, robbed of the ability to see anything except the silhouette of the central watchtower, and unknowingly, the gaze of the tower's figure.

From this architecture, one can gain a sense of how the panopticon is a model for power, firstly through the power of anonymous surveillance – the facts that the prisoner knew that they could be examined without realisation, and subsequently the power of information – "He [the prisoner] is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication". Importantly, the isolation of each prisoner allows for analysis of individuality; "the crowd, compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities, merging together as a collective effect is abolished, and replaced by a collection of separated individualities.

To be able to attain the position of 'guardian' of the watchtower makes it possible to "perfect the exercise of power".

The model of the panopticon, and the notions of social control that it describes have been applied to many elements of the public sphere. Community, politics, education, medical treatment and punishment are all functions of society in which the structure of the panopticon can illustrate, however when the panoptic is applied to the functions of a new medium, such as the internet, is when the solid structure of Bentham's model can be debated. Within the Internet and all that it entails, cyberspace, online communities, how is the panopticon challenged, or conformed to? If the panopticon is applied to the limitless boundaries of the World Wide Web, can it expose who or where or what holds the power in the virtual society of cyberspace?

As the internet could be described as a new medium, and therefore debate regarding its position and sociological 'effects' have the potential to become dated with haste, theories employing models of the panoptic has arisen. Thus a consistently re-occurring question, that of whether we are moving towards an electronic panoptical society has been seriously acknowledged and debated.