



## ARTICLE

# Discipline and Power in the Digital Age: Critical Reflections from Foucault's Thought

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**ABSTRACT.** In the ever-evolving landscape of the digital age, the theories posited by Michel Foucault four decades ago provide an insightful lens through which to view our contemporary technological society. This article underscores the shift from modern reference disciplines, such as biology, political economy, and linguistics, to the emergent domains of cognitive and computer sciences. By exploring the personalization of online user experiences via data collection and behavioral microtargeting, the study highlights the nuances of modern surveillance. This new era of monitoring bears a resemblance to Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, marked by its subtle yet omnipresent control. In a world where digital oversight by governments and corporations is increasingly prominent, the relevance of Foucault's ideas becomes significant for deciphering and traversing the intricate landscapes of power and surveillance in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Foucault, disciplinary power, digital surveillance, behavioral microtargeting, digital society

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital technologies have deeply permeated our social fabric, altering the very essence of our existence. The emergence of smartphones, tablets, and other connected devices has revolutionized the way we communicate. Concurrently, the vast amount of accessible data, coupled with the surge in computing power, has birthed a new era of artificial intelligence capable of discerning our behaviors and decisions with astounding precision.

The central thesis of this article is that, even four decades posthumously, Michel Foucault's insights provide a penetrating lens through which we can comprehend the intricate dynamics of our current digital society. Foucault probed deeply into societal structures, dynamics of power, and mechanisms of surveillance. Throughout this article, we

will delve into some of Foucault's cornerstone ideas and investigate their relevance in decoding the digital age.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault, to begin with, encouraged us to explore an 'ontology of actuality'. This standpoint infers that we are not inherently bound to the *Zeitgeist* of our age; we can, instead, cultivate an adequate critical detachment to philosophize about our prevailing historical condition. His stress on the importance of actuality seamlessly dovetails with his skepticism towards universal concepts. He proposed that these overarching notions are not self-evident; they emerge from intricate historical and cultural trajectories. Specifically, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault delineated the metamorphosis from classical to modern thought, accentuating the cessation of broad taxonomies and the disintegration of the unified mathesis. While classical contemplation veered towards the infinite, modernity pivoted to embrace finitude. This shift gave birth to novel comparative principles, paving the way for the genesis of human sciences. Foucault identified biology, political economy, and linguistics as the torchbearers of the modern epoch. However, in today's world, it seems the baton has passed on to cognitive and computer sciences, thereby accentuating the very dynamics of finitude that Foucault recognized.

Such evaluations are strikingly pertinent to today's Internet ecosystem, which is dominated by the personalization of user experiences. This customization hinges on the relentless data harvest from users, which is subsequently processed by machine learning algorithms. Complementing this is the psychographic approach; a method of classifying personalities based on traits like extroversion, conscientiousness, and openness. Such information, gleaned from users' actions, is harnessed to craft messages tailored to resonate with deep-seated motivations; an art known as behavioral microtargeting.

On another front, Foucault's musings on power and biopolitics delved into societal strategies to manage and monitor its citizens. He chronicled the evolution from a sovereignty-centered power, where authority wielded a life-and-death dominion over subjects, to a more insidious disciplinary power. This latter form permeates daily lives, molding individual subjectivities through institutional apparatuses like schools, factories, and prisons. Although this modern disciplinary force does not manifest in overt coercion (a hallmark of its predecessor, sovereignty), it culminates in a subtler, yet pervasive, social control. Such control manifests as a docile individual perfectly assimilated within societal machinery. This disciplinary paradigm prioritizes the surveillance and ensuing visibility of individuals—a notion starkly resonant with our digital age where individuals are incentivized to share themselves online, even as the monitoring entities recede from the public eye.

In this paper, we conceptualize digital surveillance as the perpetual logging and tracing of both online and offline human activities. This ambiance has emboldened governments and corporations to amass and scrutinize data for multifarious objectives, from national security to commercial interests. Revelations like those from Edward Snowden have

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, sections 1, 4, and 6 were written by Giacomini, and sections 2, 3, and 5 by Capodivacca. Section 7 was written by both authors.

ignited debates on privacy. Numerous corporations now proffer surveillance tools to law enforcement, facilitating real-time monitoring of activists, protesters, and the general populace. In a realm where every digital footprint can be traced, archived, and dissected, individuals may involuntarily assimilate these surveillance mechanisms, calibrating their behaviors and identities in harmony with the perceived expectations of their unseen observers.

The contemporary tech-centric world—marked by big data, artificial intelligence, psychographic profiling, and surveillance collaborations between states and enterprises—necessitates profound introspection. Even though Foucault could not have envisioned these technological developments, his oeuvre furnishes an invaluable conceptual scaffold to navigate this terrain.

### TOWARD A PROBLEMATIZATION OF ACTUALITY

Alongside works analyzing macro- and microscopic phenomena of human history, Foucault presented a series of contributions that beckoned his readers and lecture attendees to explore an ‘ontology of actuality’. This exploration is predicated on the belief that we are not irrevocably bound to our era; we possess the capacity to maintain a critical distance and philosophize about our present times.<sup>2</sup>

According to Foucault, the pioneer of this research approach was Kant, who posed the question ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’ in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* in 1784. Though succinct, Kant’s text is rich in content. A significant portion of Foucault’s 1982-1983 lectures delved into its analysis.<sup>3</sup> A key aspect of its significance, Foucault argues, is Kant’s emphasis on understanding the present. In this Kantian treatise, the intent is not merely to ascertain the factors in the present situation that might sway one towards a specific philosophical stance. Rather, it seeks more ambitiously to comprehend what currently generates meaning. Foucault suggests that this represents a moment where “we see philosophy—and I

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze comments: “Foucault attached so much importance to his interviews [...] not because he liked interviews, but because in them he traced lines of actualization that required another mode of expression than the assimilable lines in his major books. The interviews are diagnoses [...] that lead us towards a future, towards a becoming: strata and currentness”, Gilles Deleuze, “What Is a Dispositif?” [1989], in *Two Regimes of Madness. Texts and Interviews 1975-1995* (2007), 348. While in agreement with the idea that lines of actualization (or diagnosis, as the case may be) can also be traced in Foucault, we believe, however, that we can also discern them in texts that are not transcripts of interviews. On the relationship between Deleuze and Foucault, we recommend Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, ed., *Between Deleuze and Foucault* (2016). In particular, Paul Patton’s essay focuses on the problem of the relationship between history and actuality that we are taking up; see Paul Patton, “Deleuze and Foucault: Political Activism, History and Actuality,” in *ibid.*, 160-173.

<sup>3</sup> In the vastness of studies on Foucault in relation to Kant, see a contribution by Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, who proposes an original reading, according to which “Foucault’s reformulation of Enlightenment ideals in terms of an ethos of transgression and an aesthetic of self-fashioning is much closer to Nietzsche’s vision of a transvaluation of values than to Kant’s notion of maturity and responsibility”. See Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, “Between Nietzsche and Kant: Michel Foucault’s Reading of ‘What Is Enlightenment?’,” *History of Political Thought* 20:2 (1999), 337.

don't think I'm forcing things too much in saying that it is for the first time—becoming the surface of emergence of its own present discursive reality; a present reality which it questions as an event whose philosophical meaning, value, and singularity it has to express, and as an event in which it has to find both its own *raison d'être* and the foundation of what it says".<sup>4</sup> The philosopher's allegiance is no longer just to a particular school of thought but to their immediate reality and the collective of individuals sharing the same temporal existence. The philosopher strives to decode the evolving trajectories of this shared era. As the discourse unfolds, Foucault elaborates further during the same lecture session:

Philosophy as the surface of emergence of a present reality, as a questioning of the philosophical meaning of the present reality of which it is a part, and philosophy as the philosopher's questioning of this 'we' to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate himself, is a distinctive feature of philosophy as a discourse of modernity and on modernity. [...] A new way of posing the question of modernity appears or surfaces, which is no longer in a longitudinal relationship to the Ancients, but in what could be called a sagittal relationship or, if you like, a vertical relationship of the discourse to its own present reality. The discourse has to take its own present reality into account in order, [first], to find its own place in it, second to express its meaning, and third to designate and specify the mode of action, the mode of effectuation that it realizes within this present reality.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault's emphasis on actuality, coupled with his call to grasp the essence of one's era, stems from his broader process of historicizing concepts deemed universal. He contests these 'universal' notions, arguing that they lack explanatory power. Instead, it is these very universals that require justification. They need to be explained, thereby revealing them as outcomes of specific dynamics that falsely elevate them to an absolute, all-encompassing status.<sup>6</sup> Foucault firmly anchors philosophy to history, viewing it not as a pursuit of the absolute but as a chronicling of fractures and distinctions. Through these differences, one does not unveil a superior or inherent identity embodied by the subject. Rather, it underscores the realization that "we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks".<sup>7</sup>

In alignment with this historical-archaeological approach, *The Order of Things* outlines an epistemological tripartition, marking the progression from the Medieval-Renaissance period to the classical era and, finally, to the modern age. To this progression, we can append the 'digital age' to signify the paradigm shift that began towards the latter part of

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983* [2008] (2011), 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> See Deleuze, "What is a Dispositif?" [1989], 342.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* [1969] (2002), 147.

the 20th century and continues to be influential today.<sup>8</sup> Our use of the term ‘digital age’ is not an attempt at originality. Instead, we opt for it because we believe that the present era is defined more by its dominant technological apparatus than by its chronological placement. The digital age, as we define it, does not simply extend the modern episteme but rather introduces a new paradigm that both complements and transcends the traditional boundaries of Foucault’s modernity. This new configuration is characterized by an unprecedented level of interconnectedness, information fluidity, and technological predominance, fundamentally altering the way knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed. While the modern episteme, as outlined by Foucault, is deeply rooted in principles of classification, order, and representation, the digital age propels us into a realm where knowledge is increasingly decentralized, dynamic, and participatory. This shift does not negate the modern foundations but builds upon them, creating a complex overlay of the old and the new. Therefore, the digital age can be seen as a distinct horizon that, while emerging from the modern episteme, drives us into a new stage of epistemological development. By acknowledging this transition, we can better understand the multiple implications of contemporary knowledge structures and the profound ways in which digital technologies reshape our cognitive landscapes.

In this context, it remains apt to employ the term ‘apparatus’, drawing from the definition provided by Foucault in a 1977 interview:

What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, we must acknowledge the distinct nature of the ‘digital’ apparatus. While Foucault’s concept of the apparatus bridges diverse elements, creating a network among them, today’s Internet also connects various systems but under the proviso that they all conform to a uniform code of information. When interacting with the World Wide Web, we indeed engage with a vast array of domains (which can be related to Foucault’s enumeration: discourses, institutions, architectural forms, decisions, and so forth). However, each of these domains interfaces with others by adhering to a singular condition: they must be represented, or ‘flattened’, onto the screens of our digital devices to be accessible.

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<sup>8</sup> On the possible lines of filiation between Foucault’s thought and the socio-cultural changes that occurred after his death, we recommend reading Marco Maureira Velásquez and Francisco Tirado Serrano, “The Last Lesson of Michel Foucault: A Vitalism for a Future Philosophy,” *Athena Digital. Revista de pensamiento e investigación social* 19:2 (2019), 1-18.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh” [1977], in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980), 194. For an accurate reconstruction of Foucauldian thought, see Cosimo Degli Atti, *Soggetto e verità. Michel Foucault e l’etica della cura di sé* (2011), 23-43.

## MODERNITY AS AN ANALYTIC OF FINITUDE

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault delves deeply into the characteristics that distinguish historical and cultural constructs and the distinct effects of certain epistemes on the associated worldviews. A significant portion of this work culminates in a discussion on the ‘modern’ age, which emerged between the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Foucault, this era signifies a move away from the notions “of a universal characterization, of a general *taxonomy*, of a non-measurable mathesis”.<sup>10</sup> The classical paradigm, anchored in the infinite and viewing the finite as more of an aberration or impediment, began to fade. In contrast, the modern era embraced finitude, with phenomena, beings, and language grounding themselves in their inherent limitations. This shift prompted an analytic approach focusing on the nature and interrelationships of these elements. The overarching universal principle was replaced with principles of comparison, juxtaposition, and alignment, leading to the emergence of human sciences.

Foucault’s archaeological excavation of this period holds significant weight in our argument. Primarily, the conclusion of *The Order of Things* paves the way for further historical-epistemological evolution, signposting the so-called ‘end of man’. For Foucault, the hallmark of the modern age is the ‘creation or appearance of man’. Clearly, this is not a denial of humanity’s presence before the late 1700s. Instead, it highlights a particular epistemological framework that spurred humanity to confront its finiteness during that era. This finiteness, defined as “that upon the basis of which it is possible for positivity to arise,” positions humans as subjects to be both understood and known due to their definitive boundaries.<sup>11</sup> Yet, this very definition also insinuates the eventual obsolescence of the ‘man’ concept, suggesting its impending insignificance in historical and epistemological contexts. Born within the semantic confines of finitude, the ‘man’ concept inherently signals its forthcoming end.

By 1966, approximately a century and a half post this ‘appearance’, Foucault anticipated man’s end. It remains uncertain whether this ‘demise’ has transpired or if it ever will. Notably, while Foucault earmarked biology, political economy, and linguistics as hallmarks of the modern age, today, cognitive sciences and predominantly information technology assume that mantle. These domains have burgeoned due to the focus on individual-based (yet universally transferable) information. In this light, it is pivotal to underline that the digital world’s evolution was not spontaneous; it has its foundational roots in the modern age. According to Foucault, this era witnessed language metamorphose into a knowledge domain, studied for its intrinsic inter-discursive relations. Consequently, “To know language is no longer to come as close as possible to knowledge itself; it is merely to apply the methods of understanding in general to a particular domain of objectivity”.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent paragraph cites George Boole, the progenitor of logic

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966] (2002), 236.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Thing*, 343.

<sup>12</sup> *The Order of Thing*, 322-323.

algebra in the modern age and a precursor to digital formalization (with the enduring ‘Boolean operators’ in coding). A direct lineage connects the modern objectification of language to its digital codification, albeit the latter symbolizes an epistemological shift or enhancement.

While Foucault’s insights were predominantly theoretical, it is essential to recognize their profound resonance within the tangible realm of our digital era. Let’s delve into how these philosophies have materialized in contemporary dynamics.

### THE AGE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND PSYCHOGRAPHY

Foucault’s epistemological insights find striking manifestations in today’s digital landscape. When his theoretical constructs intersect with empirical reality, the profound influence of information technology and cognitive science on our socio-political milieu becomes evident. Drawing from Foucault’s epistemic stance on finitude, our contemporary digital era employs advanced analytics to delve deeply into the nature and interrelationships of its users. This is particularly evident in the modern Internet framework, where personal experiences are tailor-made based on extensive data gathered about individuals. Every facet of human experience is increasingly seen as a ‘raw material’ to be mined.<sup>13</sup> Such data is harvested and deciphered using intricate computational systems adept at understanding vast interconnections through ever-evolving algorithms.<sup>14</sup>

In tech circles, this phenomenon is coined ‘big data’, a term that rose to prominence in the early 2000s.<sup>15</sup> This vast repository of data is continuously accumulated, analyzed, and stored. Companies like Cambridge Analytica, which gained notoriety through its role in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, procured vast datasets from ‘data brokers’ such as Experian, Acxiom, and Infogroup. These datasets, containing information ranging from financial status to reading habits, were then enriched with political insights and crucially supplemented with data from platforms like Facebook. Direct testimony from ex-Cambridge Analytica employee Kaiser asserts that their databases held between 2,000 and 5,000 discrete data points on every US adult, amounting to data on approximately 240

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<sup>13</sup> On this aspect, reference can only go to Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019).

<sup>14</sup> On the science of big data, see Hal R. Varian, “Beyond Big Data,” *Business Economics*, 49:1 (2014), 27-31.

<sup>15</sup> The three main characteristics of big data are: volume (data from a variety of sources, including business transactions, smart devices, industrial equipment, video, and social media), speed (data streams need to be managed in a timely manner through real-time processing), and variety (data are available in any format and can be either structured, organized according to a precise structure, or unstructured, with enormous semantic potential that must, however, be processed correctly). Subsequently, two further aspects of big data have been included: variability (since data flows are also unpredictable, and their meaning is changeable) and veracity (which refers to the quality of the data and the trust that can be placed in it). On these aspects, see Ripon Patgiri, and Arif Ahmed, “Big Data: The V’s of the Game Changer Paradigm,” *IEEE Computer Society* (2016), 17-24.

million individuals.<sup>16</sup> This deep data dive is a realization of Foucault's foresight into an epistemology pivoted on finitude and meticulous scrutiny of power dynamics.

To make meaningful connections amidst billions of data points, the realm of computer science has birthed artificial intelligence (AI). This AI is adept at learning tasks by recognizing patterns, much like human children. However, machines possess an edge: their capacity to learn and memorize vastly outstrips that of humans. AI, as a discipline, encompasses diverse theories, techniques, and technologies, such as machine learning, which automates analytical model-building, and deep learning, which employs expansive neural networks to discern intricate patterns. Presently, AI can autonomously convert colossal heaps of 'raw' data into actionable insights into human behavior. Central to this is the axiom that the efficacy of AI is directly proportional to the volume of data it can access. Consequently, the synergy between extensive big data collection and AI ensures that studying human behavior can yield highly accurate predictions.<sup>17</sup>

The synergistic blend of big data and artificial intelligence has enabled the large-scale deployment of the psychographic method, a psychological approach designed to characterize human traits, now predominantly used to profile Internet users.<sup>18</sup> Through psychographic analysis, complex individual personalities are deciphered and quantified. Data amalgamation facilitates the determination of levels of openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Psychologists subsequently discern the core motivations that drive individuals to act. Based on this insight, specialized communication experts craft targeted messages (videos, audio clips, images) tailored for specific personality types using the process of behavioral microtargeting.<sup>19</sup> The overarching aim of this system is to grasp the profound motivations driving individuals towards particular thoughts, behaviors, or decisions.

The foundation for such behavioral predictions rests on personality models, notably the Big Five model, DISC, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Presently, the Big Five model is arguably the most utilized. Pioneered by McCrae and Costa, this model identifies five critical personality dimensions: extroversion-introversion, agreeableness-antagonism, conscientiousness-carelessness, neuroticism-emotional stability, and openness to experience versus resistance to it.<sup>20</sup> For instance, an individual with a vast social circle might register a high extroversion score, while those who habitually plan their day might score high on conscientiousness. Digitally, users with a pronounced openness to

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<sup>16</sup> Brittany Kaiser, *Targeted. My Inside Story of Cambridge Analytica and How Trump, Brexit and Facebook Broke Democracy* (2019), 20 and 97-98.

<sup>17</sup> On the impact of AI: Kevin Kelly, *The Three Breakthroughs That Have Finally Unleashed AI on the World*, *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/future-of-artificial-intelligence/> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> For a review of the applications of psychographics see William D. Wells, "Psychographics: A Critical Review," *Journal of Marketing Research* 12:2 (1975), 196-213.

<sup>19</sup> On the message construction procedure, in which computer scientists and psychologists collaborate closely, see Kaiser, *Targeted*.

<sup>20</sup> Robert R. McCrae and Paul T. Jr. Costa, "Validation of the Five-Factor Model of Personality Across Instruments and Observers," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52:1 (1987), 81-90.



experience might demonstrate preferences for Salvador Dalí's artwork or TED talks.<sup>21</sup> This real-world linkage ensures the method's suitability for digital domains, given the straightforward associations between observed behaviors and behavioral traits—facilitating even artificial intelligence's detection. Harnessing digital resources, the Big Five model's evaluations are potent and bolstered by access to voluminous information and substantial computational capability.

As anticipated by Foucauldian thought, entities like Cambridge Analytica demonstrate the wide-scale applicability of these surveillance techniques, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between theory and practice. The Cambridge Analytica scenario has also emerged as a standard-bearer concerning the psychographic method. Brittany Kaiser, once affiliated with Alexander Nix, Cambridge Analytica's CEO, recounted in her memoirs the firm's assembly of data scientists and psychologists. This team mastered the art of message targeting—determining both the message type and the recipient. Nix further employed analysts capable of engaging individuals across devices (mobiles, PCs, tablets, TVs) and mediums (ranging from audio to social platforms) using microtargeting.<sup>22</sup> These tangible practices of data assimilation, analysis, user profiling, and microtargeting epitomize the practical realization of the previously discussed theoretical notions.

As early as 2013, a study demonstrated that Facebook 'likes' could be employed to automatically and accurately deduce numerous private personal attributes, encompassing aspects such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, political and religious views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, the experience of parental divorce, and even substance use patterns.<sup>23</sup> By 2015, assertions emerged that the precision of digital analyses had begun to eclipse traditional analogue methods, particularly in predicting factors like 'satisfaction', 'drug use', and 'depression'.<sup>24</sup> With the trove of data harvested from social platforms and the advent of automated personality assessment tools—both precise and economically feasible—there is an unprecedented ability to delve deep into the intricacies of human behavior.<sup>25</sup>

Today's virtual landscapes are profoundly shaped by the union of cognitive science and computer science. These environments are meticulously crafted through the analysis and juxtaposition of finite elements drawn from human actions. And while the virtual

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<sup>21</sup> This is reported in Wu Youyou, Michal Kosinski and David Stillwell, "Computer-based Personality Judgments Are More Accurate Than Those Made by Humans," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112:4 (2015), 1036-1040.

<sup>22</sup> *Targeted*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> See Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell, and Thore Graepel, "Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110:15 (2013), 5802-5805.

<sup>24</sup> See Youyou et al., "Computer-based Personality Judgments," 1036-1040.

<sup>25</sup> Some studies showing the ability to penetrate intimate aspects are: Tsung-Yi Chen, Meng-Che Tsai, and Yuh-Min Chen, "A User's Personality Prediction Approach by Mining Network Interaction Behaviors on Facebook," *Online Information Review* 40:7 (2016), 913-937; Tommy Tandera, Hendro Derwin Suhartono, Rini Wongso, and Yen Lina Prasetyo, "Personality Prediction System from Facebook Users," *Procedia Computer Science* 116 (2017), 604-611.

world may seem detached, it has palpable real-world repercussions.<sup>26</sup> While Michel Foucault, due to his era, did not get to witness or contemplate the philosophical, societal, and cultural ramifications of these transformative shifts, his intellectual legacy is not merely one of prophetic foresight. It offers a precise diagnostic lens through which we can interpret and understand our current digital episteme.

## DIGITAL DISCIPLINARY POWER

When discussing recent socio-technical dynamics in the context of Foucault's work, attention often shifts to his research on biopolitics. This perspective has been reshaped and fine-tuned in light of contemporary developments. Gilles Deleuze was a trailblazer in this reinterpretation. In 1990, he penned a succinct yet influential article exploring the evolution from Foucault's 'disciplinary societies' to the emergent 'societies of control'.<sup>27</sup> Deleuze extrapolates Foucault's ideas on the microphysics of power, delving into the intricate mechanisms of domination that have evolved historically. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault expounded that up until Napoleon's era, authority manifested as sovereignty, wielding the formidable power to determine life and death.<sup>28</sup> However, the 19th century witnessed a shift where power became disciplinary. This form of power was infused into the very life force of citizens, standardizing and positioning them within institutional frameworks such as military barracks, factories, and educational establishments. Concurrently, the human body became a focal point and was segmented and conditioned by distinguishing its individual elements. As Foucault elucidated, "The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born".<sup>29</sup>

Unlike the previous sovereign regimes, in a disciplinary society, power was no longer wielded against individuals. Instead, it permeated their lives. This transition birthed the concept of 'biopolitics', a practice that perceived individuals as pliable and, more importantly, useful entities. Acknowledging that "Foucault recognized [...] the transience of this model",<sup>30</sup> Deleuze furthers his analytical exploration, noting a significant paradigm shift marking the transition from disciplinary societies to what he terms 'societies of

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<sup>26</sup> According to Floridi, there has been a transition from an analogue way of inhabiting the world to one that has made us *onlife*, in a condition, that is, in which it no longer really makes sense to distinguish when we are *online* from when we are disconnected, for the simple reason that we are never really *offline*: there are processes that affect us that work, in the *background*, even when we are not actively using electronic devices. Moreover, the condition of being *online* is no longer just a circumscribed state of affairs but a *modus vivendi* that conditions our way of thinking, influences our actions, and conditions our choices, which are also made on the basis of being able to rely on the aid of the various devices at our disposal. Luciano Floridi, ed., *The Onlife Manifesto. Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era* (2015).

<sup>27</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" [1990], *October* 59 (1992), 3-7.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1995), 280-281.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze, "Postscript," 3. On disciplinary, control, and surveillance societies, see: Yung Au "Surveillance from the Third Millennium," *Surveillance and Society* 19:4 (2021); Massimo Ragnedda, "Control and Surveillance in the Society of Consumers," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3:6 (2011), 180-188.

control'. In Deleuze's perspective, control is not totalizing but limitless. Individuals enjoy greater freedom in their movements and actions. However, these liberties are counterbalanced by pervasive mechanisms that incessantly monitor every move. We unwittingly shed a constant trail of digital footprints, which subsequently inform statistical analyses and predictive algorithms that influence our behaviors. The pivotal term for grasping control societies, according to Deleuze, is 'code'. This supplants the roles that 'signature' and 'number' or 'administrative numeration' played in disciplinary societies. In earlier times, access to institutional structures required specific credentials—a combination of letters and numbers. But in Deleuze's view of modernity, the challenge is not about gaining entry to a structure but about unlocking increasingly sophisticated layers of services and functionalities.

Starting from this analysis, one might initially perceive Foucault's disciplinary society as being historically outdated or, at the very least, preceding the society of control. Indeed, in purely lexical terms, the latter seems especially apt to describe situations now common in everyday life. While prisons, asylums, and the like may be on the periphery of many modern individuals' experiences, the same cannot be said for codes and monitored freedoms, which directly and increasingly impact a vast majority of the population. However, to view the matter this way would be to misconstrue Deleuze's message. He was the first to free Foucault from a restrictive understanding of the concept of disciplinary society, noting that "Foucault has often been treated as above all the thinker of confinement [...] But this is not at all the case, and such a misinterpretation prevents us from grasping his global project".<sup>31</sup> Moreover, to assume that the disciplinary society and the society of control are sequential without any overlap would overlook key features of the present digital era, which remains heavily influenced by the concepts Foucault emphasized.

Indeed, disciplinary power is marked by its tight connection to surveillance, which is aimed chiefly at maximizing the visibility of individuals within a specific space. Consequently, the power itself becomes more concealed, while individuals are increasingly compelled towards visibility—to present themselves and, by extension, to be observed. This line of thought, originally associated with institutions meant to address societal anomalies or spaces for indoctrination (such as correctional facilities), is readily transferable to the modern Internet landscape. Here, users are actively encouraged to share information about themselves, while the power that oversees and influences their actions grows increasingly subtle and imperceptible—yet no less intrusive. Why then, Foucault wonders, do we passively accept such an expansive reach of power?

Let me offer a general and tactical reason that seems self-evident: power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. [...] For it, secrecy is not in the

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<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* [1986] (1988), 42. On the other hand, there are those who point out the difference between disciplinary and control societies: Helen Verran, "The Changing Lives of Measures and Values: From Centre Stage in the Fading 'Disciplinary' Society to Pervasive Background Instrument in the Emergent 'Control' Society," *The Sociological Review* 59:2 (2011), 60-72.

nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation. Not only because power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates, but because it is perhaps just as indispensable to the latter [...]. Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.<sup>32</sup>

Power is most effective when it singles out actions that starkly oppose our freedom. Yet, this does not imply that its exercise is solely repressive. The core of disciplinary power is to subtly compel individuals to execute acts and adopt behaviors under its silent influence. The repressive dimension of power is merely the visible tip of an iceberg, whereas its actual influence is far more expansive and intricate. Since power prefers nudging subjects to express and observe instead of directly taking the forefront itself, “the abstract formula of Panopticism is no longer ‘to see without being seen’ but *to impose a particular conduct on a particular human multiplicity*”.<sup>33</sup> The central aim of disciplinary societies is not so much to suppress specific behaviors but more to induce others, ensuring that the subjects always remain visible under the illusion of their own free will. Power is not just reactive but proactive.

From this, two pivotal aspects of disciplinary power emerge, both of which resonate in today’s digital-centric environment. Firstly, there is the ability for subjectivation, and secondly, the ubiquitous nature of power. Concerning the latter, the fact that power largely remains out of sight for those under its influence makes it diffuse, intangible, and omnipresent. Rather than being tied to a specific location or a set of individuals, it is decentralized, making it all the more challenging to be pinpointed and consequently resisted.

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding the capacity for subjectivation, ‘subjugation’ should not be understood solely in terms of the degree of alienation to which an individual is subjected by the oppressive facets of power. It also pertains to the dynamics aimed at the constitution of subjectivity: “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise”.<sup>35</sup> Disciplinary power regulates bodies and individuals not just to subdue them but also to form them as subjects, thereby producing the modern subject.<sup>36</sup> It is both plausible and beneficial to perceive the Internet

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction* [1976] (1978), 86.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1*, 93.

<sup>35</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, 170.

<sup>36</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, “What is an Apparatus?” [2006], in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (2009), 11-12. Despite the homonymity, one should not confuse the Foucauldian apparatus with that theorized by Agamben. Frost explains: “Despite Foucault tracing a genealogy of the *dispositif* to the modern age, coinciding with the development of biopolitics and governmentality, Agamben reads a much longer history to the

as a disciplinary mechanism to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. Even in this context, power, though subtle, remains prevalent. It becomes increasingly inconspicuous yet plays a significant role in shaping a form of subjectivity. Such subjectivity risks isolation and marginalization unless it consents to continuous observation. This demand for visibility is not just promoted by social networks but is more broadly enforced by an array of applications that grant access to fundamental goods and services.

### DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR SURVEILLANCE

Delving deeper into the current digital landscape, Foucault's insights on discipline and surveillance prove especially pertinent. Even though he could not witness their applicability in the digital realm, Foucault provided us with conceptual tools, such as the notion of discipline, to make sense of the present era. With transparent individuals juxtaposed against concealed power, coupled with communication technologies facilitating control mechanisms, nearly half a century after the publication of Foucault's seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*,<sup>37</sup> his framework arguably offers the most fitting lens to understand the perils of the current digital matrix. Within this matrix, countless citizens incessantly disclose personal data, leaving tracks that are potentially traceable by both public and private entities. In modern societies, as per Foucault, discipline manifests as pervasive, often anticipatory surveillance of myriad personal behaviors. Further, power assumes bureaucratic dimensions, remaining concealed, distant, and faceless. Such camouflage enhances its efficacy in monitoring. Historically, this was facilitated by an essential communication tool: writing, the backbone of modern authority. Writing enabled indoctrination, documentation, and archiving. In light of this, the transformative potential of digital technology becomes all the more intriguing.

Foucault posits that surveillance power's acceptability for citizens stems from its covert nature. Indeed, there is an inherent necessity for any state to keep certain data, such as military intel, under wraps. However, in democratic setups, the inclination towards transparency should perpetually prevail and limit concealed activities. Even if secrecy is deemed indispensable, it should ideally operate under the purview of a discernible authority. A concerning development over recent decades in established democracies is the exponential surge in the volume of clandestinely accumulated data. As Ferraris points out,<sup>38</sup> digital technologies are instrumental not just for communication but predominantly for recording. In fact, Ferraris argues that the unprecedented ability of digital media to chronicle virtually every human action trumps even its communicative capacity.

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term. It is this difference in their readings which undergirds their views on resistance. Agamben also considers the *dispositif* as a transcendent referent, but traces the root of *dispositif* to the Latin *dispositio*, translated the Greek word *oikonomia*, or economy", Tom Frost, "The Dispositif Between Foucault and Agamben," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 15:1 (2019), 160.

<sup>37</sup> *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>38</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Documanità. Filosofia del mondo nuovo* (2021).

The Internet and digital corporations have become essential in surveilling individuals for two primary reasons. First, a significant portion of individuals' information and communication is hosted and transmitted through the Internet; second, with the growth of big data and artificial intelligence, software and platforms have evolved into invaluable tools for investigation. Governments are increasingly collaborating with these digital entities to counter threats to social stability, especially terrorism. They demand robust artificial systems to aid in the detection, prediction, and execution of countermeasures. Unsurprisingly, these digital corporations have built their businesses on the collection and analysis of user data, leading Zuboff to label them as 'surveillance capitalists'.<sup>39</sup>

The transition from commercial objectives (by companies) to security objectives (by governments) is subtle yet significant. This transition underscores the pertinence of Foucault's reflections on power and surveillance, illustrating how contemporary digital technologies amplify these concepts. The shared goal of achieving 'certainty' has solidified the alliance between nation-states and digital corporations in the realm of surveillance. In the early 2000s, the US Department of Defense established the Information Awareness Office, intending to develop a sort of digital panopticon that would compile data (such as bank transactions, credit card purchases, health records, and other personal information) into a centralized, searchable index.<sup>40</sup> While it is believed that the Information Awareness Office was eventually disbanded, Snowden's 2013 revelations indicate that these 'digital surveillance' initiatives have not ceased. Instead, they have been redistributed among other intelligence branches and have, in fact, been bolstered as part of the ever-expanding security apparatus.<sup>41</sup>

Edward Snowden, an American computer scientist and whistle-blower, obtained confidential documents related to global surveillance projects through his work responsibilities as a contractor for US intelligence and security agencies, including the CIA and NSA. These documents suggested that the US and British governments constructed clandestine mass surveillance programs. Once these were unveiled in 2013, they sparked significant public outcry in an event later dubbed 'Datagate', which stands as potentially the most significant leak of classified information in history.<sup>42</sup> The Snowden revelations are inherently contentious. States have a recognized need to maintain secrets, and the disclosure may have inadvertently aided adversaries of the Western world, encompassing authoritarian regimes. However, the unveiled depth of surveillance, directly impinging on the freedoms of citizens in democracies, is deeply troubling. According to the divulged

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<sup>39</sup> See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

<sup>40</sup> On this project, see Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (2013).

<sup>41</sup> "U.S. Still Mining Terror Data," *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2004/02/u-s-still-mining-terror-data/> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Other relevant 'leaks' are related to WikiLeaks, an organization founded by computer scientist Julian Assange and based on a website built to receive and publicly disseminate confidential documents. Daniel Domscheit-Berg, *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website* (2011); Matthew Aid, *The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency* (2009).

documents, Snowden posits that global surveillance activities are not predicated on specific suspicions but are instead indiscriminate. His apprehensions span both private enterprises and public entities. Concerning the former, Snowden suggested potential collusion between certain US commercial and technological entities and the government, which resulted in user data sharing.<sup>43</sup> As for public entities, he argued that the interpretation of collected data is not overseen by professional investigators but by analysts with expansive interpretative leeway.

Snowden released a plethora of documents detailing intelligence programs, such as 'PRISM' and 'Tempora', in association with journalists primarily from *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*. On 5 June 2013, *The Guardian* unveiled the inaugural document, which was a highly secretive directive compelling a Verizon Communications subsidiary to relinquish metadata associated with domestic US telecommunications.<sup>44</sup> Subsequent reports divulged the existence of PRISM, a covert electronic surveillance, cyber warfare, and signal intelligence initiative tasked with managing information accrued from electronic and telecommunications service providers. This reportedly enabled the NSA to monitor e-mail, web searches, and diverse internet traffic in real time. More specifically, it is alleged that the NSA and FBI sourced data from central servers of leading US internet corporations and digital service providers, including but not limited to Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, and Apple. This data encompassed audio and video communications, photographs, e-mails, documents, and connection logs.<sup>45</sup>

Further, on 21 June 2013, *The Guardian* divulged additional details concerning Tempora, an operation helmed by the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). GCHQ, a prominent governmental body specializing in communication security, espionage, and counter-espionage, allegedly embarked on the meticulous processing of substantial troves of sensitive personal data, which it subsequently shared with its US counterpart, the NSA. A distinctive feature of this operation was its capability to amass extensive data, obtained from fiber-optic cable interceptions, which were stored for up to

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Landau, "Making Sense from Snowden: What's Significant in the NSA Surveillance Revelations," *IEEE Security & Privacy* 11:4 (2013), 54-63.

<sup>44</sup> Glenn Greenwald, "NSA Collecting Phone Records of Millions of Verizon Customers Daily," *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/nsa-phone-records-verizon-court-order> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Glenn Greenwald, and Ewen MacAskill, "NSA Prism Program Taps in to User Data of Apple, Google and Others," *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data> (accessed September 1, 2023); Barton Gellman, and Laura Poitras, "British Intelligence Mining Data from Nine U.S. Internet Companies in Broad Secret Program," *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/us-intelligence-mining-data-from-nine-us-internet-companies-in-broad-secret-program/2013/06/06/3a0c0da8-cebf-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/us-intelligence-mining-data-from-nine-us-internet-companies-in-broad-secret-program/2013/06/06/3a0c0da8-cebf-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html) (accessed September 1, 2023); Barton Gellman, and Ashkan Soltani, "NSA Infiltrates Links to Yahoo, Google Data Centers Worldwide, Snowden Documents Say," *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nsa-infiltrates-links-to-yahoo-google-data-centers-worldwide-snowden-documents-say/2013/10/30/e51d661e-4166-11e3-8b74-d89d714ca4dd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nsa-infiltrates-links-to-yahoo-google-data-centers-worldwide-snowden-documents-say/2013/10/30/e51d661e-4166-11e3-8b74-d89d714ca4dd_story.html) (accessed September 1, 2023).

30 days, facilitating intricate data analysis. Two salient facets underscore the omnipresence of such surveillance mechanisms. First, GCHQ's overarching objectives are encapsulated in its catchphrases, namely, 'Mastering the Internet' and 'Global Telecoms Exploitation'. Secondly, the expansive scope of monitoring extends beyond specific individuals, encompassing broad segments of the populace. As reported, 'GCHQ and the NSA are consequently able to access and process vast quantities of communications between entirely innocent people, as well as targeted suspects'.<sup>46</sup> In this framework, the distinction between suspects and ordinary citizens becomes nebulous, rendering both categories susceptible to surveillance. Such indiscriminate scrutiny resonates with the citizen's perpetual sense of being observed, echoing Foucault's discourse on asymmetrical and pervasive oversight.

Furthermore, corporations with expertise in digital surveillance are keen to market their innovations not merely to intelligence units but also to police forces. Richards<sup>47</sup> cites CellHawk, a software system employed by police departments, the FBI, and private detectives in the US. This tool translates data accrued by mobile service providers into visual representations, delineating individuals' locations, trajectories, and interconnections. According to its creators, CellHawk can efficiently automate tasks that formerly demanded intricate manual intervention. Operating as a web-based utility, it can import call logs, illustrate communicative networks, and manage locational datasets sourced from mobile phone tower connections. Such capabilities frame CellHawk less as an occasional investigatory tool and more as an instrument of ceaseless surveillance, transcending the episodic data offerings of cellular providers.<sup>48</sup>

Geofeedia, in recent years in the spotlight of *The Intercept*, *The New York Times*, and *Inverse*, also deserves to be mentioned.<sup>49</sup> Drawing data from an array of social media

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<sup>46</sup> Ewen MacAskill, Julian Borger, Nick Hopkins, Nick Davies, James Ball, "GCHQ Taps Fibre-Optic Cables for Secret Access to World's Communications," *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/21/gchq-cables-secret-world-communications-nsa> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Sam Richard, "Powerful Mobile Phone Surveillance Tool Operates in Obscurity Across the Country," *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2020/12/23/police-phone-surveillance-drag-net-cellhawk/> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Moreover, it appears that the legal requirements for obtaining such information are sometimes unclear. The American Civil Liberties Union in 2014 called the legal standards for such practices 'extremely murky', while in 2018, a report by the Brennan Center at New York University stated that courts were 'divided' on the handling of such dumps. See Katie Haas, "Cell Tower Dumps: Another Surveillance Technique, Another Set of Unanswered Questions," ACLU. <https://www.aclu.org/blog/national-security/privacy-and-surveillance/cell-tower-dumps-another-surveillance-technique> (accessed September 1, 2023); Rachel Levinson-Waldman, "Cellphones, Law Enforcement, and the Right to Privacy. How the Government Is Collecting and Using Your Location Data," Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. [https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018\\_12\\_CellSurveillanceV3.pdf](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018_12_CellSurveillanceV3.pdf) (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>49</sup> Lee Fang, "The CIA Is Investing in Firms That Mine Your Tweets and Instagram Photos," *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/14/in-undisclosed-cia-investments-social-media-mining-looms-large/> (accessed September 1, 2023); Jonah Engel Bromwich, Mike Isaac, and Daniel Victor, "Police Use Surveillance Tool to Scan Social Media, A.C.L.U. Says," *The New York Times*.



platforms, Geofeedia appears to embody Foucault's apprehensions concerning the suppressive potentialities of surveillance mechanisms. At its core, Geofeedia is an avant-garde enterprise dedicated to harvesting geo-tagged posts from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, offering real-time monitoring of events, notably public demonstrations. The platform not only pinpoints the whereabouts of activists and protesters, encompassing notable figures from trade unions or organizations such as Greenpeace, but also constructs tailored threat indexes. This is achieved by assimilating text, images, and videos collated from major social media outlets. Consequently, software users are equipped to glean insights about ground realities by perusing content specific to a location, circumventing the need for manual searches using words or hashtags.<sup>50</sup>

While technological strides in the domain of security harbor the potential to shield the 'free world' from overarching threats, encompassing not only acts of terror but also aggressive national entities such as Russia, there is an imperative to ensure that this 'free world' preserves its defining freedoms. Specifically, there is a pressing need to guarantee that technological deployment does not infringe upon the fundamental rights of citizens within democratic societies. Among these rights is the sacrosanct protection of personal data. Foucault's discerning exposition on the inherently disciplinary character of power cautions us against the temptation of these very technologies. They could inadvertently amplify the encroachment of surveillance on global citizens and render such invasions palatable – all under the guise of opaque operations.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Big data and artificial intelligence are far from neutral entities; they encapsulate and profoundly shape the sociocultural fabric of our era. In a historical condition where each click, search, and digital engagement is susceptible to meticulous tracking, analysis, and archiving, there is a pressing need to probe the ramifications of such pervasive monitoring. It is precisely this milieu that draws us back to Michel Foucault. His incisive reflections on power, knowledge, and surveillance offer a lens to dissect the intricate contours of our prevailing digital topography. Foucault's ontology of the present day beckons us to contemplate not just the impact of technology on our lives but also the underlying

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/technology/aclu-facebook-twitter-instagram-geofeedia.html> (accessed September 1, 2023). John Knefel, "Your Social Media Posts Are Fueling the Future of Police Surveillance," Inverse. <https://www.inverse.com/article/8358-your-social-media-posts-are-fueling-the-future-of-police-surveillance> (accessed September 1, 2023).

<sup>50</sup> Lee Guthman, head of business development at Geofeedia, told journalist John Knefel that his company could predict, for example, the potential for violence during Black Lives Matter protests using the location and sentiment of tweets. In fact, the software offers a function called 'sentiment' that can predict violence by protesters. For example, Guthman explains, when during the riots in Baltimore, or Ferguson, there was a drop in sentiment, or when there was an increase in posts, this predicted a change in the attitude of the crowd. Technology can assess sentiment by associating positive and negative points with certain phrases while measuring the closeness of certain terms to other precise words. Knefel, "Your Social Media Posts Are Fueling".

motivations that propel us, as a collective, to entrust such technologies with the task of defining and molding our lived realities.

Our choice to navigate the currents of our digital world through Foucault's insights is far from serendipitous. We have ventured into his theoretical realm, earnestly engaging with his oeuvre, endeavoring to discern reflections of contemporary digital dominion within his philosophical tapestry. Even four decades post his demise, revisiting the well-spring of his thought and his profound articulations serves dual purposes. It is simultaneously an homage to his intellectual prowess and an essential endeavor in these times. In a world where information can often be watered down, taken out of context, and repurposed, anchoring ourselves in Foucault's foundational ideas shields us from cursory or skewed interpretations. This sentiment resonates with numerous scholars of our time, as evidenced by a burgeoning inclination to recalibrate, reinterpret, and reimagine Foucauldian concepts in response to the unique quandaries of the digital age.<sup>51</sup> Such a revival underscores the persistent resonance and versatility of his philosophical constructs.

The confluence of Foucault's philosophy—particularly his focus on the intricacies of power and surveillance—with the multifaceted challenges presented by the digital age is an area of keen exploration for philosophers and sociologists, notably Zuboff, Rouvroy, and Han. Shoshana Zuboff's seminal work on 'surveillance capitalism'<sup>52</sup> delves into the emergent capitalist paradigm wherein personal data, frequently procured without individuals' cognizance, becomes instrumental in predicting and molding human actions. This iteration of capitalism pivots not on the production of tangible goods or standard services but on the relentless and systematic aggregation of data. Zuboff underscores the peril this poses not merely to individual privacy but also to the very autonomy and sovereignty of individuals. Her critique elucidates how tech conglomerates, in synergistic alignments with political entities, wield the capability to subtly shape and influence our decisions, often in manners eluding our consciousness.

Antoinette Rouvroy's conceptualization of 'algorithmic governmentality'<sup>53</sup> sheds light on our escalating reliance on decisions driven by algorithms. Traditional decision-making processes, transparent and contestable, stand in stark contrast to these algorithmic determinations, which frequently emanate from inscrutable 'black boxes', obfuscating their foundational logic. This form of governmentality, dictated by algorithms, surpasses conventional legal-centric governance, heralding a mode of control that is both omnipresent and often imperceptible.

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<sup>51</sup> See Bernhard J. Dotzler and Henning Schmidgen *Foucault, Digital* (2022), 9.

<sup>52</sup> *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

<sup>53</sup> Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation: Disparateness as a Precondition for Individuation Through Relationships?," *Réseaux* 177:1 (2013), 163-196. For a definition of the concept of governmentality in Foucault, see the lectures of 1 and 8 February 1978 collected in Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78* [2004] (2007), 126-185. Rouvroy directly confronted Foucault's thought, proposing an actualization of it in the digital age, in Antoinette Rouvroy, "De Big Brother à Big Data. De la surveillance au profilage: Contribution au Hors série 'Michel Foucault: Le courage d'être soi'," *Philosophie magazine* 36 (2018), 60-63.

Lastly, the discourse on ‘psychopolitics’, initiated by Alexandra Rau, and subsequently expanded upon by Byung-Chul Han,<sup>54</sup> probes the nuanced mechanisms of wielding power through psychological avenues. As contemporary society grapples with an incessant deluge of digital stimuli, Han highlights the potential of harnessing this informational surfeit to navigate and steer our emotional and cognitive landscapes. Psychopolitics deploys seduction rather than overt coercion, nudging individuals towards voluntary adherence to the dictates and aspirations of the prevailing power structure.

The intricate tapestry of the digital realm, woven with threads of surveillance and control, has been unravelling in an increasingly sophisticated and pervasive manner. As contemporary scholars shape unique paradigms to comprehend these digital dynamics, their indebtedness to Foucauldian foresight becomes unmistakable. Foucault’s discerning eye pre-emptively perceived many of the present-day challenges, reminding us of the perennial pertinence of questioning the power structures that mold our digital reality. Indeed, we stand at a crossroads, beset with questions demanding introspection: as we propel ourselves further into the digital realm, what liberties and autonomies do we unwittingly relinquish in our quest for convenience, efficacy, and security? What boundaries delineate our right to privacy in this digital surveillance era? Can a delicate equipoise between national security interests and civil liberties be achieved? How do we shield individuals from undue profiling and discriminatory biases inherent in amassed data? Finally, amidst this ubiquitous surveillance milieu, how can one retain a semblance of autonomy and freedom?

While Foucault may not have lived to engage directly with these concerns, his theorizations present an invaluable foundation for those following in his footsteps to decode and confront the intricate interplay of power and resistance in our current digital context. Aligning with his analytical perspective, Foucault viewed power not merely as a repressive entity but equally as a conduit for resistance.

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [...] These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. [...] Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible [...].<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Alexandra Rau, *Psychopolitik. Macht, Subjekt und Arbeit in der neoliberalen Gesellschaft* (2010) and Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* [2014] (2017). For an overview of Han and Foucault’s relationship on psychopolitics, see Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, “Biopolitics in the ‘Psychic Realm’: Han, Foucault, and Neoliberal Psychopolitics,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49:4 (2023), 477-491.

<sup>55</sup> *The History of Sexuality* 1, 95-96.

Power is not seen as a stagnant, monolithic entity but as a fluid relationship, ever-changing and adaptable. It is within this dynamism that the potential for resistance arises. Where there is oversight, there is potential for vigilance; where there is control, there is room for subversion. Essentially, digital tools are a double-edged sword. They can be wielded to monitor, surveil, and control, but they can also be employed to mobilize, educate, and resist. The key lies in the manner of their application and the consciousness of their users. Decentralized digital platforms, encrypted communications, and open-source movements are emblematic of the resistance against the monopolistic and surveillance tendencies of the digital behemoths. They underscore the potential to use the same digital tools that can constrain to also liberate. Foucault's insights into the nature of power, where it resides not just in overt acts of control but also in the more subtle realms of knowledge and discourse, can be directly applied to the digital domain. In a world awash with information, control over discourse—what gets amplified and what gets silenced, what is deemed 'truth' and what is dismissed—becomes a potent form of power. Therefore, resisting the dominant narratives, creating alternative digital spaces, and advocating a democratized and decentralized digital ecosystem are all forms of resistance.

In sum, the Foucauldian perspective provides not just a diagnostic tool for understanding the complexities of the digital age but also an inspirational blueprint for action. It emphasizes that while power dynamics in the digital realm are intricate and daunting, they are not insurmountable. With vigilance, collective action, and a commitment to preserving the core tenets of democracy and human rights, it is possible to forge a digital future that is both progressive and humane.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Gabriele Giacomini, *The Arduous Road to Revolution. Resisting Authoritarian Regimes in the Digital Communication Age* (2022).

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