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The ACRPS International Winter School

Fifth Round 2024:

“Social Media, Surveillance and Societies of Control”

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Concept Note



Social media platforms rapidly evolved from their initial purpose as information exchange hubs to profile-based, market-engaged, personalized networks for the dissemination of content. Open application programming interfaces (APIs) enabled marketed and personalized content suggestions, while the “like” button became ubiquitous across digital content. Surveillance through “focused, systematic, and routine attention to personal details for the purpose of influence, management, protection and direction”¹, became central to the functioning mechanisms of social media platforms and its monetizing beating engine.

Concerns about social media and surveillance vary according to context. In democracies, the spread of populist rhetoric and breach of privacy presents a major worry. The hegemony of multinational private corporations over public spheres also signals a new age of sophisticated authoritarianism that legislatures find difficult to regulate.² In non-democratic countries, there are concerns that the state can exploit the opportunities presented by social media to escalate its control through surveillance, censorship, and the dissemination of propaganda. Both cases indicate that social media platforms have become critical tools for surveillance, violations of privacy, and content control for both governments and mass-corporations. Consequently, research into the interplay between social media and surveillance has become necessary.

Evolving Perceptions of Social Media

In the 2000s and across the early 2010s, many argued that the dream of a public sphere with a deliberative culture and an engaging environment was bound to become reality. They later highlighted the revolutionary potential of social media platforms when studying how they were used to organize, mobilize people, and to document acts of state aggression and police harassment during the Arab revolutions of 2010-2011, the Occupy movement, the Gezi Park protests, and more recently, the 2020 protests over the murder of George Floyd and the 2021 Dignity Uprising in Palestine. Social media has been considered a revolutionary expression of “the strength of weak ties”³, that reflects an incredible ability to connect diverse groups of people and expand their social networks, leading to new opportunities and perspectives.

Nevertheless, the highly optimistic view of social networking platforms was met with a more sober approach to the topic. The latter paid attention to how social media platforms were effective tools for control rather than being a driver for political change. The diverse accounts discussing how social media functions as a tool for control indicate the multitude of authorities governing information flow on these platforms. These may be interlinked, converging in objective, but otherwise contradictory and conflicting. For instance, power is practiced by the social media companies themselves which

1 David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

2 Jan Philipp Albrecht, “How the GDPR will Change the World,” *European Data Protection Law Review*, vol. 2 (2016), p. 287; “Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights: Making Automated Systems Work for The American People,” *The White House* (October), accessed on 2/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40EY5Eb>

3 Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, no. 6 (1973), pp. 1360 - 1380.



collect data on users, monitor content, and choose when to censor speech because it does not comply with the terms and conditions they set. Social media platforms function using algorithms which continuously rely on user data to audit, curate, personalize, and organize content and marketing advertisements. These algorithms become themselves sources of power when they aid the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers and reinforce stereotypes.⁴ And while these more novel modes of power operate in the background, state power structures adapt to social media and learn to appropriate the platforms to serve their own interests.

Another form of power lies in the corporate nature of social media which thrives on selling the users data to businesses. Taking advantage of this new consumer opportunity, businesses have been targeting social media users with ads and other ways of buying goods and services. This added to the information warfare, a corporate warfare that Tik Tok controversy came to symbolize.⁵

Metamorphosis of Surveillance in New Media

The long history of surveillance extends from well before the internet era. In fact, historically the rise of the modern state and the corresponding expansion of its powers was associated with the development of surveillance technologies. State surveillance dramatically evolved during the Cold War, when governments around the world intensified their efforts to monitor their populations in the name of national security. Later, the War on Terror served to justify a significant increase in state surveillance activities worldwide.

The evolution of surveillance practices in the digital age was met with a change in our understanding of surveillance structures. Surveillance is no longer only conceived of through architectural analogies, which understand it in physical and spatial terms⁶. Instead of describing surveillance through the cone-shaped panopticon, surveillance is now being understood through infrastructural analogies such as the multi-pinnacled oligopticon,⁷ reciprocal synopticon,⁸ and the exclusionary banopticon⁹, that are better suited to understanding digital surveillance. Alongside the development of new analogies, there are now several concepts for describing the nature of surveillance in the digital age such as networked surveillance, dataveillance, access control, social sorting, peer-to-peer surveillance, and surveillant assemblage.

4 Samuel C. Rhodes, "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News: How Social Media Conditions Individuals to be Less Critical of Political Misinformation," *Political Communication*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1 - 22.

5 Cristina Criddle & Arjun Neil Alim, "Tiktok Undercuts Social Media Rivals with Cheap Ads in Battle for Growth," *Financial Times*, 10/1/2023, accessed on 26/3/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3FOAYyA>

6 Maša Gališ Tjerk Timan & Bert-Jaap Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation," *Philosophy & Technology*, vol. 30 (2017), pp. 9 - 37.

7 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 Thomas Mathiesen, "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited," *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1997), pp. 215 - 234.

9 Didier Bigo, "Globalized (In) Security: The Field and the Ban-Opticon," in: Didier Bigo, *Terror, Insecurity and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 20 - 58.



What is novel about surveillance on the new media is that institutional boundaries are more fluid as data travels from one context to another across different centers of power. Think, for instance, of how data on users and their social networks on a platform such as Facebook were utilized by electoral campaigners working with data analytics companies for more effective political ad targeting. The practice of control here is not confounded to institutional boundaries. The large social media data reservoirs lead different actors to enter into alliances with, purchase data from, and blacklist operations with social media platforms. These alliances influence what information flows, to whom, and what personas gain more attention producing unprecedented forms of digital surveillance. The global nature of social media networks and thus surveillance as it exists on social media has often rendered national regulations on speech and those meant to protect privacy futile. The coupling of both factors along with the culture of sharing promoted by social media has augmented individuals' exposure to surveillance and control.

Impacts on Politics and Society

Worries are mounting about the state's appropriation of social media platforms to control the flow of information, track down dissent, and disseminate propaganda. Scholars have expressed growing concerns about the rise of a "digital authoritarianism"¹⁰ with more possibilities for regimes to exert control and manipulate the flow of information than ever before. Such control has taken many different forms.

Governments have appropriated existing social media platforms for their own purposes and used them to monitor content and/or disseminate propaganda. There is a growing body of empirical literature demonstrating the widespread employment of electronic armies and bots by governments. This type of propaganda dissemination is novel and specific to social media. It enables governments to control information flow more effectively because the source of propaganda is no longer obvious, as the state employed electronic armies blend in with the other users, making it difficult for people to distinguish state actors.

At other times states have worked closely and formed alliances with social media companies to shape content censorship and to control viewership, as in the case of the alliances between the Israeli government and Facebook.¹¹ In countries such as China and Iran, control has taken a different form with both governments implementing access restrictions on global platforms in an attempt to challenge the hegemony of US based companies. Instead, the state in this case sponsored the creation of parallel platforms over which they have a stronger grip, enabling them to track and censor dissent more effectively.

¹⁰ Alina Polyakova & Chris Meserole, "Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models," *Policy Brief at Brookings*, Democracy and Disorder Series (2019), pp. 1 - 22.

¹¹ Elia Zureik, "Settler Colonialism, Neoliberalism and Cyber Surveillance: the Case of Israel," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2020), pp. 219 - 235.



Social media, however, has not only become a tool for state repression, but it has also transformed the culture of communication in our societies. With the absence of fact checking or any other content regulation, hateful messages and incitements to violence are circulated and amplified in ways that have never before been possible. Social media has allowed numerous entities and individuals to manipulate and misinform public opinion through short, overly reductive, and emotional messages. This has facilitated the spread of populism and propagation of fear, racism, and xenophobia. Furthermore, the fact that social media algorithms tend to create filter bubbles, based on users' online behavior, reinforces polarized views and entrenches cultural and ideological divides while limiting exposure to different viewpoints.

While the spotlight has been on the increasingly invasive surveillance practices on mainstream social media platforms, there is increasing interest in how users are defying these practices by using distributed Samaritan based technology such as Tor. Examples of ethnographic studies also highlight how users practice their agency to resist and elude the surveillant.¹²

The Fifth International Winter School Topic

Research concerning the interaction between social media, surveillance, and control by governments and corporations and the vulnerability of popular culture to manipulation and control through social media, and how they shape each other is critical in understanding the impact of the new media age on our societies. The vast amount of data, the ever-changing nature of social media platforms, and the sophisticated nature of surveillance, control, and manipulation techniques present major challenges for legislative bodies, social scientists, and computer scientists. Furthermore, the current gap between computer scientists and social scientists conducting research on the topic represents another obstacle.

To address these theoretical, methodological, analytical, and empirical challenges, the fifth round of the International Winter School will focus on studying the interactions between surveillance, manipulation, and control (by state and corporate and other agents) and social networking platforms, to address these issues. The WS welcomes submissions from advanced PhD students and early career scholars specialized in different social science and related computer science and engineering disciplines across the globe. Submissions based on collected and submitted data are highly encouraged. *The evidence and data collected for submissions should adhere to academic ethical standards.* Topics of discussion include, but are not limited to:

- State surveillance on social media
- Types of digital authoritarianism
- Social media and surveillance in democracies

¹² Marianne I. Franklin, *Digital Dilemmas: Power, Resistance, and The Internet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



- Populism manipulation, control, and social media
- Methodological and theoretical problems in studying social media control, manipulation, and surveillance
- Algorithmic bias and the reproduction of social, economic, and political inequalities
- Social media and counter-surveillance
- The growing powers of social media corporations
- Alternative social media platforms
- Social media and activism
- Social media, filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fake news
- Social media as a battleground for economic warfare
- The use of artificial intelligence in social media