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Surveillance and the Self: Understanding Privacy and Identity in Digital Environments

Alecea Ritter Standlee
Gettysburg College, astandle@gettysburg.edu

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Surveillance and the Self: Understanding Privacy and Identity in Digital Environments

Abstract

The widespread use of internet enabled devices among contemporary US adults has given rise to a series of questions about issues of identity, privacy and group behaviors. The increasing use of algorithmic systems in social media and the attendant privacy concerns among users may also contribute to increased levels of strategic management of identity among users. In order to contribute to this discussion, this project examines perceptions and practices of privacy and self-representation in digital spaces among college age adults 18-24. This project utilizes semi-structured interview data collected with college students in the Eastern United States and focuses on both behavioral and attitudinal patterns. I specifically consider the impact of strategic interventions of corporate media platforms to collect, distribute, manage and utilize individual level data on participants' information consumption, individual identity representation and group affiliation. Preliminary data suggests that participants engage partial and strategic representations of self across diverse media platforms. Patterns of self-representation are shaped by a wide variety of factors including in-group online community norms, perceptions of visibility and privacy, algorithmic distributions of information and individual perceptions of technology. Furthermore, online identity, while partial and strategically created, has the potential to impact self-identity and group affiliation in a diverse set of offline and online contexts.

Keywords

digital surveillance, social media, Facebook, Google, privacy, tracking, data

Disciplines

Communication Technology and New Media | Sociology | Theory, Knowledge and Science

Comments

Presentation given at the [Friday Forum](#) on September. 6, 2019 The Friday Forum is a series of lectures given by members of the Gettysburg College community on their personal scholarly research, creative activities, or professional or curricular development activities.



SURVEILLANCE AND THE SELF:

UNDERSTANDING PRIVACY AND IDENTITY IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

**Prof. Alecea Standlee
Department of Sociology
Gettysburg College**

METHOD

Research Questions

- To what degree do contemporary college students understand contemporary patterns of corporate surveillance as a part of their digital social environment?
- What strategic usage patterns, regarding platforms and information distribution, are impacted by individual level understanding(s) and expressions of the concept of privacy?

Method and Demographics

- 68 Semi-structured Interviews
- Gender: 59% women, 37% men, 4% other category
- 72% White, 28% non-white
- Age: 18-22
- Project Ongoing

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Blumer

- Humans act towards things (including other individuals) on the basis of the meanings they have for them.
- The meaning of things arises out of the social interactions one has with one's fellows
- Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process a person uses in dealing with the things he or she encounters.” *Symbolic Interaction (1969)*

McLuhan

- “The media is the message” *Understanding Media (1964)*
- ...And as our senses have gone outside us, big brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors. *The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962)*

CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE SURVEILLANCE

- **The Producers**

- “Networks of data surveillance”
- Facebook and Google
- Several thousand data collection sources

- **The Consumers**

- The government and law enforcement
- Political industry
- Risk Data Industry (credit, employment, insurance)
- Marketing Data Industry (consumer behavior manipulation)

- **The Brokers**

- Oracle, Acxiom, Experian, etc.



CONTEXT: WHO AND HOW?

Who?

- Retailers - loyalty programs
- Media providers
- Web trackers - advertising
- Telecom and ISP
- Devices and IOT (Internet of things)
- Marketing

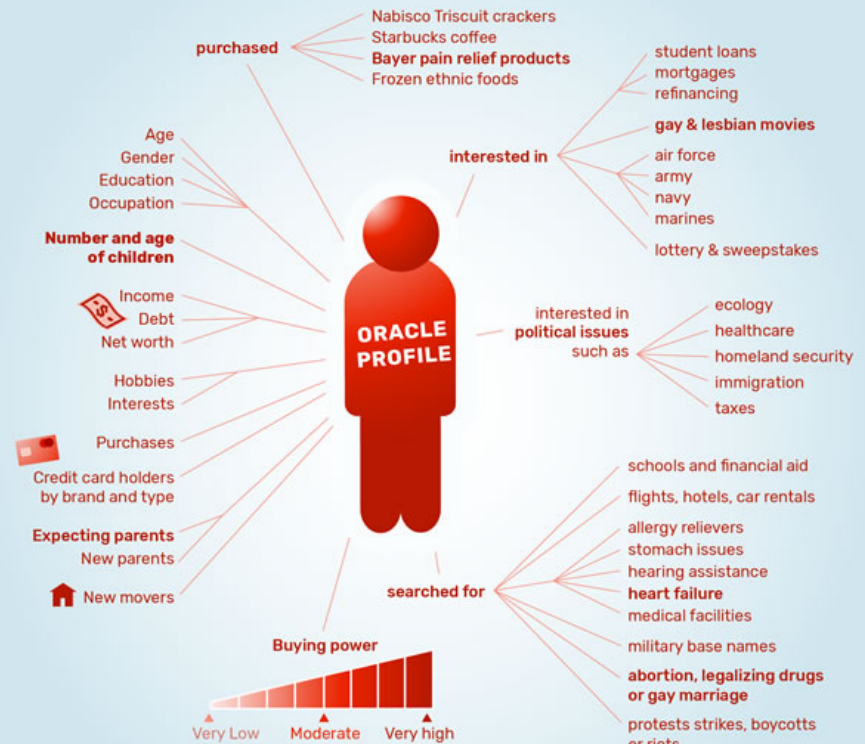
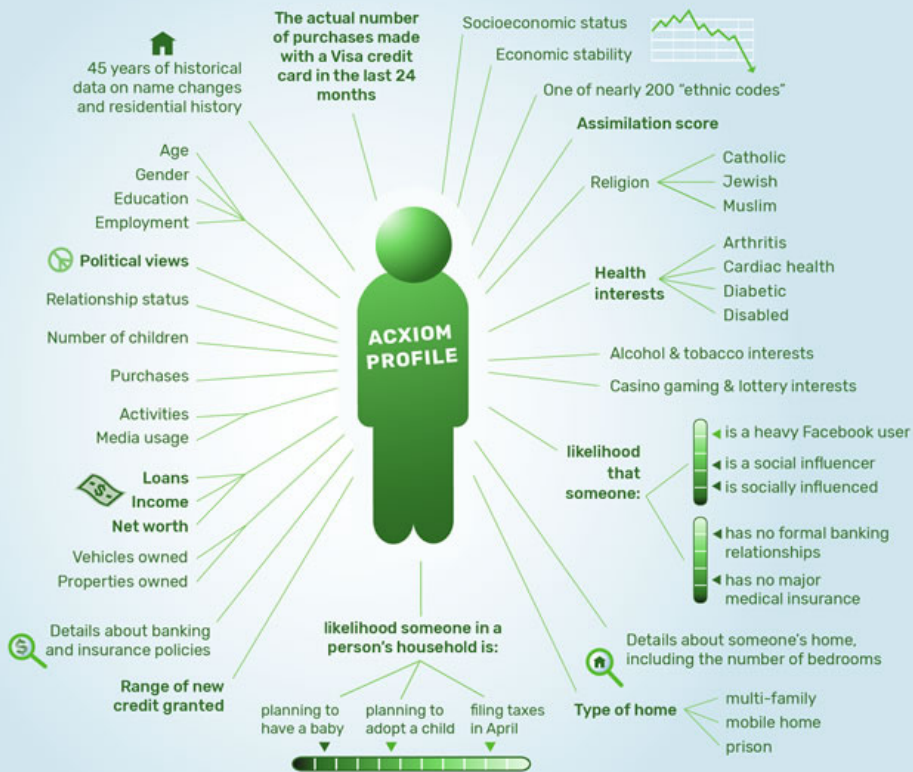
How?

- **Identity keys:** such as names, addresses, social handles, device IDs, cookie IDs, IP addresses
- **Link Keys:** e.g. connect cookie ID with an email address, or a phone number with a loyalty card number
- **Connect identities:** - create profiles, aggregating device and behavior and interactions, self-submitted info, purchase, and third-party data sources.
- **Sell identity data** for marketing, or risk management.

CONTEXT: WHAT?

DATA BROKERS HAVE EXTENSIVE PROFILE INFORMATION ON ENTIRE POPULATIONS

Examples of data on consumers provided by Acxiom and Oracle



Acxiom provides of up 3,000 attributes and scores on 700 million people in the US, Europe, and other regions.

Oracle sorts people into thousands of categories and provides > 30,000 attributes on 2 billion consumer profiles

KEY FINDINGS

- Awareness of issues of privacy, security and corporate surveillance varies, with participants conscious of surveillance but not always clear on who is watching
- Sense-making varies, though trends include individual disconnection, protection, apathy and resistance.
- Adaptive strategies generally take the form of strategic self presentation, control of presentation or working within the system,
- Resistance strategies typically take the form of messing with the system, and withdrawal.



MAKING SENSE OF SURVEILLANCE

- Participants are aware of surveillance. Interpretation varies.



MEANING MAKING STRATEGIES

Disconnection

- “I don’t do anything wrong or bad online”

Protection

- “I feel protected from people who do things wrong”

Apathy

- “Its bad, but I can’t stop it so who cares, its just the way things are.”

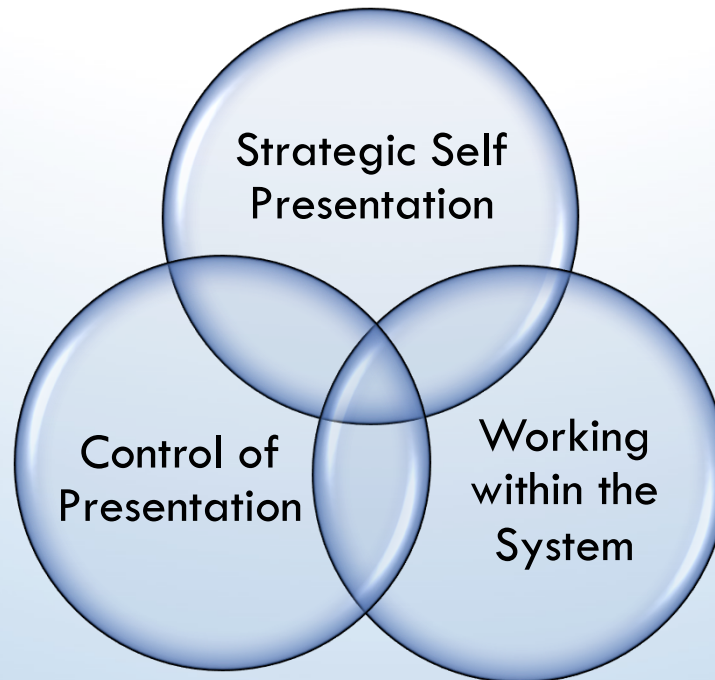
Resistance

- “I hate that there is no privacy online”

ADAPTION STRATEGIES

“...its kinda fake, people just trying to get likes, not really presenting their true self. People are fake sometimes, online especially in Instagram, they try to be cool and fun, show pictures of them looking great on the beach. But really they are just regular people.

I don't really post anything online that I wouldn't want everyone to see. Like, I wouldn't post anything online that I wouldn't want my mom see. Though she won't see it.” -MD



I have all of my accounts on private, and like with the highest security settings. I don't need to be sharing like all of that kind of information with anyone who wants to look at it. -KL

RESISTANCE STRATEGIES



**Messing with
the System**

I like to play around, search weird things, post in messed up ways. Follow random people. Change up my feed. Keep them guessing. Its all fake anyway. - JJ



Withdrawal

I am kinda paranoid, I put tape over my camera on my laptop...because people can access it the camera, like hackers and get information about me.” - MK

CONCLUSIONS

Strategic management of self representation is combined with awareness of constant observation by both immediate social circle and external actors.

Privacy vs. Protection

- Narratives of awareness predominate here. Participants indicate awareness of potential observation by tech companies and/or the government.
- Express a range of responses; from concern to ambivalence to protected about being observed.
- Some discuss stratagems to maintain privacy, acknowledging them to be ineffective



THANK YOU!

Alecea Standlee, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Sociology

Gettysburg College

astandle@Gettysburg.edu • alecea.com

