

Sequence Two Paper

We often say that people are “nice,” “friendly,” “good,” “bad,” “honest”, or any number of characteristics. We define these attributes based on others’ actions and trust that these actions are in accordance to the performer’s actual identity. We watch others closely in order to identify identity based on action. We live in a world of constant, passive surveillance. We watch, and we expect to be watched. Regardless of where we are, we are rarely outside the visibility of others. Our relationships with the others are defined by how they see us and what sorts of preconceptions we want them to have based on how we project ourselves. From this, trust emerges as a central aspect in these relationships. Trust, defined by the Oxford American Dictionary is the “firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something” and the “acceptance of truth of a statement without evidence or investigation.” Since human interaction is based on action, an individual’s overall identity is defined by his actions. We must base the “nature” of a person on his projected image of self.

The problem, however, comes from the extension of these images and the respective trust granted of others into different situations. Oxford seems mistaken in allowing trust to exist without evidence. Intrapersonal trust must be redefined as a function of context. In order to illustrate that trust and identity are not universal constants, we will examine trust in two opposing social constructs using Michel Foucault’s *panopticism* as an interface for their comparison. We will set two opposing social constructs onto Foucault’s panoptic foundation and relate their utility of trust. This will give us a clear understanding of trust and will then allow us to redefine trust based on these utilities.

Look around. Windows are prevalent; cameras are everywhere. We are constantly reminded that onlookers and possible government intervention ensure that our communications do not always remain solely our own. Buildings are designed to allow inhabitants to see each other. The watchful eye is inexorable, but for some reason it doesn't seem as such. The constant visibility is easily ignored. A similar system of surveillance is observed in Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish, a work which defines "Panopticism" and examines its abilities to control society. Panopticism "reverses the principle of the dungeon" (Foucault 321). The traditional *ruler* versus person model of power is traded for a *person* versus person model of power. Because society is visible to society (defined as "visibility" or "being visible"), all members of the society who are afraid of possible discipline must act according to society's laws and expectations of conduct. Thus, modern society is panoptic: laws and customs are designed to operate in a panoptic manner. Visibility is a perpetual possibility, but it is always an uncertainty. Since anyone has the ability to report social offenses and since there is always the possibility of being watched, one is forced to assume that any offense could be immediately reported and thus acted upon. Visibility in our panoptic society, then, is our basis for trusting each other.

Trust exists in the panoptic society as a factor of Panopticism's grounds for effectiveness. In building form, Panopticism becomes the Panopticon, a building conceived by Jeremy Bentham. In the Panopticon, individuals are isolated from one-another and are constantly reminded that any action could possibly be seen and disciplined, but can never be sure if they are being watched at any one time. Bentham originally applied the building to prison inmates and was "surprised that panoptic institutions could be so light: there were no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks," (Foucault). Individuals are kept in order by the trust that they will act in accordance to that which they are despite any outward appearance. Visibility forces

individuals to act according to their identity, and members of the society put faith in the imminent discipline of those failing to do so. If panopticism is in working order, then any variants between projected self and actual self will be seen and disciplined. Visibility leads to possible discipline in Panopticism and forces true action based on identity. Trust is central to the relations in this society.

What happens, however, when we remove constant social visibility in terms of personal accountability of identity? Can we trust that people are indeed who they say they are? Does identity truly matter if it can be completely fluid? Enter, MySpace.com, an online gathering-point for the Internet community across the globe and, more notably, an antithesis to modern society in terms of panopticism. On MySpace, individuals set up personal profiles listing their interests, their hobbies, their schools, their hometowns, personal online journals, and many other personal attributes. Members can then search for others sharing common interests and list them as “friends.” MySpace.com Inc. (referred to as simply “MySpace”) is, according to its terms of service, “a social networking service that allows members to create unique personal profiles online in order to find and communicate with old and new friends.” MySpace acknowledges on the same page, however, that “information provided by other MySpace.com Members (for instance, in their Profile) may contain *inaccurate ... material ... and MySpace.com assumes no responsibility or liability for this material*” (MySpace). That is, profiles are intended to provide an *accurate* virtual counterpart to a real-world personal identity, yet MySpace takes no active role in policing its membership in this regard. MySpace are sure to alleviate liability in the case of a misinformation, but they will do nothing in order to prevent it. And certainly it is not the government’s position to police MySpace’s membership because any false assertions are actively covered under free-speech constitutional law (Riley). Knowledge gained about others within

MySpace is in no way guaranteed to be an accurate representation of a real person. Trust, then, can only be assumed to a certain level. Without discipline, punishment, or true visibility, the only thing that gives a particular MySpace profile any credibility is the word of the profile's creator.

This MySpace society is at complete odds with the normal society in which everybody is visible, in which everybody can report social misconduct, and in which there exists a real fear of potential discipline. MySpace provides its members with visibility, yet such visibility is defined in its tacit fallacy. Discipline only exists in the form of mistrust. The only repercussion one has against another on MySpace is to tell friends about the other or to report him or her to MySpace administration who will do nothing except remove the Profile. Profiles, however, are unlimited in nature. One may have as many Profiles as one wishes. Thus, without true identity-defined-by-visibility and without the threat of meaningful punishment, MySpace is antipanoptic and can be compared to its panoptic counterpart epitomized by modern society.

And yet, trust plays a very important role on MySpace. Yamiko Nara and Tetsu Iseda, Japanese philosophical researchers, conducted survey-based studies in Japan and the United States asking participants to "compare their own online and offline ethics." The study surprisingly reported "relatively small differences" (Feenberg 5). Participants in the online community approach the community with the same ethics they have offline. The online community of MySpace is constantly reminded of the dangers of online communication, but the ignorance-is-bliss attitude remains unfortunately prevalent. This attitude leads to an extension of the trust given to societal individuals (peers in "real life") to Internet individuals (peers within the MySpace user-base). Users are quick to forget how fluid identities truly are in such an antipanoptic society as MySpace, and they are quick to assume that the MySpace Profile they see

is an accurate representation of an actual person outside of the MySpace sphere. The study says that a trusting person offline is likely to be just as trusting online. This leads to a very serious problem when the trust in the antipanoptic society is strong enough to permit a meeting of the two individuals in the panoptic society.

In our modern social construct, crime is not overwhelming in most people's lives, and we remain cognizant that most any action could be seen. Foucault's panopticism lends a decent contribution. Decent, however not perfect. Crime does exist and murderers still go unpunished. Michel Foucault's Panopticism remains a perfect ideal: it functions only to a certain extreme. The fear of being seen only exists where it is possible to *be* seen. The temporary anonymity found in not being seen, then, easily lends itself to the complete removal of personal agency. In order for panopticism to be perfect, there can be no way to hide. And since our world is full of hiding places, panopticism remains only a foundation for societal control. Our implementation of panopticism is effective but not perfect.

What modern society is to panopticism is what the Internet is to anti-panopticism. As much as people are defined face-to-face, they remain anonymous online. There is about as much chance of being caught in being caught in a misdemeanor online as there is in *not* being caught in a misdemeanor *online*. The two oppose each other in terms individual identity and action-versus-consequence. In his essay on online communities, Andrew Feenberg notes that "universal connectedness and the stripping away of context blur human values and choices in a universal relativism. " He notes that all information is "equally valuable and every communication partner is equally present." He then discredits the agency of MySpace-like communities by saying that "the critics conclude that nothing is really valuable and no one is really present" (Feenberg 10). This says that users *should* place no import in whomever they meet online

because “no one is really present.” It is so easy to be dishonest on MySpace because of the narrowness of the communications channel. People, identities, and interactions are based on text and pictures that are to be taken at face value, when in fact both are easily falsified. Yet because “participants are often able to overcome the narrowness of the communications channel and find ways to create personal images of each other despite it,” users tend to overlook the possibility of a false identity because they are trusting individuals and, again according to Yamiko Nara and Tetsu Iseda, one’s ethics online parallel those offline (Feenberg 12).

A forty-seven-year-old sex-offender may, for example, pose as a fourteen-year-old girl on MySpace and seek “friendship” with other fourteen-year-old girls. The fourteen-year-old girls are naïve and are easily manipulated and are fast to give more information to this online “friend” who seems to have so much in common with her publicly-available list of interests. The sex-offender, having bait, now simply has to instigate a meeting between the two. I will leave the graphic details to the imagination of the reader, but the dangers are quite incontestable. More concretely, “in December [2005], a 27-year-old [Raymond, Oregon] man was convicted of sexual misconduct and other charges as a result of a relationship he had with a 14-year-old girl he met through her MySpace site,” reports the Portland Herald.

The happenings of this unfortunate girl are a hapless example of the overlapping of a panoptic society with an antipanoptic society. She lived in a society that was ruled by social visibility and identity by visibility. People tend to act similarly online and offline, and her naivety brought about inappropriate levels of trust in an individual whose online identity differed vastly from his real identity. Certainly there is no problem in misplaced trust provided nobody gets hurt in the end, but unfortunately this is not the case some amount of the time. The man’s online identity was completely false but was not subject to any sort of scrutiny and was not met

by any sort of discipline because discipline in the online, anitpanoptic society simply does not and cannot exist. Both this false identity and the true one are capable of co-existing--they simply represent virtual representations of possible real-world persons. It is only when the girl trusted that the virtual representation was accurate of the real-world person that the real-world person was able to manipulate the holes in the panoptic society (i.e. being able to hide) to deadly ends.

We can now define “trust” as the ability to connect one’s portrayed and visible actions to one’s true identity within the trust’s context. The difference, however, between online trust and offline trust is that of projection. Walking down the street, one is, in general, able to judge a certain degree of a person’s identity based on his self-portrayal or actions. Online, however, projections of self are only to be trusted to the extent where their context runs thin. The online projection of self can only be trusted online. It is when the trust is falsely extended to the offline context that collisions between projection and truth occur, and in extreme cases, end in the worst way possible. Comparing opposing societies on the platform of Panopticism, we have redefined the basis for human interaction: trust. Trust can only be defined person-to-person, society-to-society, projection-to-projection. Social relations defined by trust with or without panopticism, then, are subject to much different gravity on any different contexts. This is perhaps why staunch political fans or avid proponents of certain authors are profoundly disappointed after having met them outside of their original context. The politician may be meek off the stage, and the author may be taciturn in personal exchanges. This essay cannot extent as far as to say that projected identities always differ or that they always change by context or even that they can never be trusted. It simply defines trust in terms of context. Since trust is a function of context, a changing context could mean a proportionately variable amount of warranted trust.