

The Panoptic Principle and Information Access in UK Public Libraries

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Abstract

The Panopticon is a type of prison, envisaged by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. It is a building that allows maximum surveillance of inmates, without them being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. The fact that the inmates cannot know when they are being watched means that all inmates must act as though they are watched at all times, effectively controlling their own behavior constantly.

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, noted that the panoptic method of surveillance can be seen in various aspects of life, including schools, hospitals and other institutions. Since the panoptic principle's inception, its application to surveillance theory has been widely adopted into various areas of study, however, surveillance in libraries and its relation to the panoptic principle have been mostly limited to discussions which focus on public libraries in the Victorian era.

Thusly, this study sought to find out more about surveillance in public libraries, and whether any sort of panoptic principle is exhibited. This was done through the language analysis of public library Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) and how much language is devoted to caring and controlling aspects of surveillance: it has been suggested that surveillance is not intrinsically good or bad, but operates on a spectrum from “care” to “control”. Public library AUPs from 30 random English councils were selected. It was apparent that despite stemming from the desire to care for the patrons of the public library, the AUPs use a high amount of language that is controlling in nature. The use of this language coupled with surveillance techniques used in the public library such as the Internet filter and actual surveillance of computers by library staff has interesting

implications regarding panoptic theory. This suggested that much of the surveillance of patrons in public libraries is controlling in nature and because the public library patron has to necessarily adapt their behavior to use the public library computer the public library does therefore exhibit aspects of the panoptic principle. That is, it uses methods of both overt and covert surveillance to curb library users' behavior to what it deems is acceptable.

An online survey of library staff was also carried out to find out attitudes towards surveillance in libraries. Whilst it was noted that striking a balance between protecting patrons, individual privacy and freedom of access can be difficult, library staff generally see surveillance as a necessary tool to protect their patrons noting that the public library is a shared space, and paid for with public resources. There was concern however, that sometimes the line between protection and censorship can be crossed, as it is not always easy to tell where the line is.

The public library embodies the idea of free and uninhibited access to information. If it is apparent that these institutions are, in actual fact, restricting this access, this has serious implications for the public's access to information.

Background

This study investigated the use of surveillance and the application of the panoptic principle in the public library. The Panopticon was first envisioned by the social reformer and utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, in the 18th Century. It was designed to be a type of inspection-house, used for penitentiary purposes. It consisted of a central watch-tower, surrounded by a ring of cells, each cell was individually separated and the ring shape allowed for a 360 view of the cells from the central watch-tower, whilst the guards themselves are obscured. This design would, predicted Bentham, facilitate in controlling the prisoners. If each cell housed a single inmate, cut off from all other inmates, and they were also constantly aware of the watch-tower, this would lead them to behave well (Bentham and Quinn, 2001).

The idea of the panoptic principle – using observation as a way to control behavior - was then explored by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. He suggested this method of control can be found in other areas of daily life, including schools and hospitals (Foucault, 1991).

Since Foucault explored this idea, the idea of visual power has been applied to various aspects of life, including the school (Gallagher 2010) motherhood (Henderson et al., 2010) and the city (Koskela, 2000) in terms of the library however, it has mostly been restricted to historical, rather than present day, analysis (Black, 2001, 2005; Hewitt, 2000). Thusly, I decided to investigate the use of surveillance and the panoptic principle in the public library, and whether it conflicts with the library and the librarian's mission.

David Lyon (2001, 2003, 2007) suggests that surveillance is neither unambiguously good or bad, rather, it rests on a spectrum that runs from 'care' to 'control'. Sometimes, residing in both sides of the spectrum at once (Monahan, 2011). So whilst a teacher may be looking after children by observing them, there is also a disciplinary side of this surveillance, by attempting to curb or control children's bad behaviors.

Research Methods and Results

With this in mind, I decided to apply the themes of care and control to the public library Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). The AUP is the gateway to using the public library computer and the ideal AUP should be an informative, helpful document, establishing "safe and responsible online behaviors" (Becta, 2009, p.6). The AUP is an important document for the patrons of the library and its language is an ideal object for analyzing care and control.

30 AUPs were randomly selected online from library websites and the documents were coded using the NVivo software suite. Words, phrases and sections were coded as they related to the themes of care and control, under different 'nodes': misuse; banning; monitoring control; monitoring care; and monitoring neutral. These nodes were gleaned from the language and context of the documents. The AUPs tended to be short documents, averaging around 3 pages long. The nodes were as follows:

- Misuse – 30 AUPs featuring node
- Banning – 29 AUPs featuring node
- Monitoring Control – 23 AUPs featuring node
- Monitoring Care – 15 AUPs featuring node
- Monitoring Neutral – 7 AUPs featuring node

'Banning' and 'misuse' were featured in all 30 of the AUPs. In 2 of the AUPs, misuse covered over 50% of the whole document. 'Monitoring control' was coded in 23 AUPs, 'monitoring care' was coded in 15 AUPs, and 'monitoring neutral' was coded in 7 AUPs.

After the AUP analysis a survey was created to find out attitudes of those who work in public libraries regarding surveillance and AUP content. The survey consisted of several rated questions where library workers were asked to rate how 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' a statement is. These statements were directly lifted from the AUPs used for content analysis. There was then a series of open-ended questions regarding surveillance and the librarian's role. Respondents were recruited using the LIS-LINK and LIS-PROFESSIONAL mailing lists of the National Academic Mailing List Service JISCMail. Thus, the survey was made sure to be entirely voluntary and the specific audience for the survey was being targeted directly. A range of statements from the AUPs were used, reflecting the full range of the care and control spectrum. The choice of response was as follows:

- Very Appropriate
- Appropriate
- Neutral
- Inappropriate
- Very Inappropriate

The statements used were:

- ‘Library staff will monitor your use of the Internet and other computer software, remotely or by visual checks’
- ‘We do not filter web-sites for content’
- ‘Our management system records every time you use a computer, and what software you use. We keep this information for statistical purposes and to improve our services to you’
- ‘The Council can and will monitor access to internet sites, and access to any material in breach of these terms may be subject to further action. We reserve the right to check your internet usage logs without informing you’
- ‘The Council is not opposed to satire or controversial thought as such, but only sites whose content would, if circulated, interfere with the freedom of others to a greater extent than acceptable in a democratic society, are defamatory, pornographic etc.’
- ‘Data regarding use of the internet including email communication may be monitored and/or intercepted and held to ensure compliance with this
- Acceptable Use Agreement’
- ‘The Library and Information Service will also promote web pages that meet users’ needs and interests.’

Surveillance has been seen as a "necessary evil" (Barnard-Wills and Wells, 2012,p.230) something that is used for protection and safety, but also has an impact on individual privacy. This view was echoed in the survey responses. 73% of the respondents stated that “library staff will monitor your use of the Internet” is ‘somewhat appropriate’ or ‘very appropriate’ and 86% stated surveillance is a necessary tool for protection. In regards to the more controlling aspect of library surveillance however, respondents were more divided: ‘data regarding use of the Internet including email communication may be monitored and/or intercepted and held to ensure compliance with this Acceptable Use Agreement’. Although 29% of the respondents chose ‘appropriate’ 17% also chose ‘somewhat inappropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’. The respondents of the survey noted that being able to strike the balance between protection and privacy is difficult and sometimes protecting the welfare of others can cross a line into censorship. Several respondents also noted that the library is a shared space, paid for with public resources, so patrons should expect some kind of a limitation on their activities.

Discussion

The public library must serve the community. It is a publicly funded institution. It has to stand up for individual rights, whilst also being mindful of the larger community which it serves. Access that is unfettered and completely without restriction, leaves the library vulnerable to being used for nefarious purposes, and also potentially means shunning ethical responsibility: as Hauptman states, "to abjure an ethical commitment in favor of anything, is to abjure one's individual responsibility" (Hauptman, 1976, p.293) However, the mission of the library is to provide access to information, and even if someone else may feel uncomfortable with certain types of material, that does not mean it should be denied to someone else: "Librarians must give information assistance which is requested, even if the possible use of the information by the patron may be personally objectionable to the librarian". (Juznic et al, 2001, p.76)

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