IPO 2.0: THE PANOPTICON GOES PUBLIC

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A couple years before Facebook went public on the NASDAQ trading system with a controversial initial public offering or IPO, CEO Mark Zuckerberg sat down on stage with TechCrunch founder Michael Arrington for a brief discussion of the company’s future and its constantly changing set of privacy policies and protocols. Responding to concerns about recent changes to Facebook’s privacy policies, Zuckerberg claimed that the Internet, through the introduction of new social media platforms like blogs, had ushered in a new age of publicity. A published report of the event noted that “Zuckerberg told a live audience yesterday that if he were to create Facebook again today, user information would by default be public…”

Zuckerberg’s lament for a default-publicity, however, was soon turned into action with the 2009 decision to make status updates and other shared content publicly visible via search engines. Critics claimed it was Zuckerberg’s attempt to push “people to go public,” again a strategy that mirrored the terms of Facebook’s own push to “go public” on the NASDAQ Stock Market.

Soon after Facebook announced its intention to go public on the NASDAQ the social networking site embarked on a campaign of default publicity, a push for users—and all their information and activity on the platform—to go public. Critics of the updated policies, entitled “data use policy” (notably not “privacy policy”), complained that the company was hiding its intentions by spreading the data control preferences and options throughout the platform. Such actions of course help put into context the most recent announcement by Facebook that they intend to “use its customers’ profile photos to help their friends tag them in photos. Those photos are already public, but Facebook does not currently use them to help recognize faces when

1 “Facebook’s Zuckerberg Says The Age of Privacy is Over,”
2 “The Day Has Come,”
On June 13, 2013 Facebook competitor Google—a company that has also faced much criticism over their treatment of seemingly private information and communications—filed a motion in court to address a series of complaints over the privacy of its users’ communications. Mirroring Zuckerberg’s initiative to push users to go public, Google’s legal team claimed that “a person has no legitimate expectation of privacy in information he voluntarily turns over to third parties.”

To suggest that privacy is dead is, however, not to revel in or encourage its demise, nor even to claim that it is not a desirable outcome, right, or valued policy. Rather, what this paper suggests is that in certain circumstances (increasingly on social media platforms) the privacy of users now stands in direct opposition to the stated goals and logic of the technology in question. One need not give up certain goals of privacy to recognize that business models of online companies like Facebook and Google are now entirely predicated upon the act of going public—there would be no Google search engine or Facebook social networking platform without the content, information, and demographic profiles uploaded, revised, updated, and shared by billions of users worldwide.

This paper then offers some initial thoughts on a theory of publicity, of going public in the social media age. If social media platforms are governed by ubiquitous surveillance and continuous uploading and sharing of personal information, opinions, habits, and routines, then privacy would seem only to be a hindrance to these processes. To ignore such clear mission statements,

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3 Critics have suggested that Apple has indeed gone one step further than Facebook by creating a so-called “Dark pattern” on their iPhone advertising tracking settings. Brignull (2013) notes that “A dark pattern is a user interface carefully crafted to trick users into doing things they might not otherwise do, such as buying insurance with their purchase or signing up for recurring bills. Normally when you think of ‘bad design,’ you think of the creator as being sloppy or lazy—but without ill intent. Dark patterns, on the other hand, are not mistakes. They’re carefully crafted with a solid understanding of human psychology, and they do not have the user’s interests in mind. The thing about dark patterns is that you design them from the exact same rulebooks that we use to enhance usability.”


5 @mattpackham, “Google Says Those Who Email Gmail Users Have ‘No Legitimate Expectation of Privacy’.”

6 While tempting, a discussion of the American NSA ubiquitous surveillance efforts will have to wait for another day.
coupled with repetitive attempts to undermine, display, and obfuscate so-called privacy settings, would seem disingenuous at best, and willfully blind at worst. These online platforms profit from publicity and suffer from stringent privacy protocols—their whole raison d’être is to learn as much as possible about users in order to aggregate and then sell such profiled and clustered information to advertisers and marketers. Can we really conclude that such businesses violate users’ privacy when their platforms are in the first and last instance wired for ubiquitous publicity? Or more to the point, do privacy-based perspectives provide an adequate framework for understanding users’ relationships with social media platforms and their parent companies?

In lieu of criticizing social media platforms for transgressing the privacy of users, in recognizing the core business model of social media as a monetization of personal information, this paper calls into question how the push to “go public” on social media is governed, encouraged, enumerated, and profited upon. Clearly much participation on social media involves attention seeking, a search for recognition. With the diversification and multiplication of media spaces and an intensified 24/7 always-on form of communication (Crary 2013), users now go public in exceptionally bland and repetitive ways, signaling in a sense that they are up-to-date, digitally literate, and plugged in. Users are in other words now compelled to go public, and often.

Yet there remain important questions about this intense impulse and push to “go public” with all things shocking and banal, shared information and content that at the very least complicates the privacy axiom that one should be able to control one’s personal information. Social media in other words is principally designed as a space of publicity, a place where one is encouraged (subtly or not) to divulge personal information, subtly or explicitly, knowingly or not. Again, this is not to suggest that there should not be limits on how personal information is collected and used, or that users should not be made aware of data use policies. The aim here is not to reject the importance of privacy-related matters; users clearly should have knowledge and some degree of control over their own personal information. The case is more that social media and search engines such as Google have so clearly and consistently designed their sites and platforms to make information visible, to harness and publicize the contributions of users, to such an extent that their existence (and profitability, of course) now derives from systematically rejecting the very concept of privacy. To consistently reject or ignore this publicity imperative is to reject the fundamental political economy of social media today.

Users should know about their privacy rights, and the possible implications of the loss of control over personal information, but in the new age
of social media publicity, the new age of going public, users would also be well served with an understanding of the rules (or lack thereof) by which their demographic profiles and uploaded contributions are made public, when, where, and for how long. Some may see this position as merely an inversion of the privacy debate at best, or at worst an admission that social media has triumphed in the battle for control of personal information—a position heightened by the infamous and boastful claim by Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy that “You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it” (Sprenger 1999). Neither is the case. Rather, what follows suggests that the focus on individual privacy, of individual ownership over one’s personal information (that can be extracted as surplus value as more orthodox Marxists have argued), merely reinforces the myth of individual agency, control, and ownership on social media, a myth perpetuated by the hyper-personalized content of ‘friend’ networks, first-person interfaces of social media platforms, personalized search engines, and other digital media platforms (smart phones, gaming platforms, and so forth), to the detriment of knowing how such platforms are economically designed to generate value and distribute social and economic capital. What is desperately needed today is not yet more theories and perspectives of surveillance, narrowly defined by the loss of control over personal information, a loss of privacy, but rather new theoretical frameworks and concepts that recognize how user knowledge, control, and participation is managed in a regime of corporatized publicity as such platforms and businesses themselves “go public” on stock markets. Such a framework would need to take into account how social media corporations intensify and multiply their efforts at commercializing and monetizing their core “holdings” or assets—users, their content, and the information derived from their behaviors—revenue streams and other market indicators that potentially create value for their now public shareholders.

Looking beyond the hyper-personalized social media interface and seemingly personalized advertisements, we find that the information economy of social media is an aggregated one, which is to say that clusters or profiles of users form the basic economic unit of the ecosystem. Users are not sold to advertisers, their demographics and psychographics (behaviors, likes, dislikes) are first matched with other like-mined and minded individuals (Elmer 2004, Turow 2008). And while much effort is now expended on tracking and

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7 In addition to arguing that users’ surplus labour is exploited, Marxist critic Christian Fuchs (2010) mirrors concerns from privacy advocates, claiming that: “Under our current modern circumstances, large collections of personal information pose the threat of harm to individuals because their foes, opponents, or rivals in private or professional life can potentially gain access to such data” (p. 293).
influencing opinion leaders on social media, such individuals are located and tracked through their relationships with other users and media objects—they are aggregated sources of knowledge.

The goal at hand then is one of accounting, one of enumerating such relationships, clusters, and flows of information, of understanding the means by which users’ publicity is managed, monitored and factored into the larger social media ecosphere. This paper argues that the current double imperative to go public on/for social media platforms and businesses is an effort at installing a regime of accountability (literally, a process of accounting), one that strives to define and categorize its components or “holdings,” while simultaneously offering a political and economic rationale of transparency and legitimacy (indeed a set of practices that purport to police and regulate this new transparent milieu). This paper thus rethinks the surveillance—or better still dataveillance literature (Clarke 1988)—to refocus attention on the rationale for going public, not as an evisceration of private spheres, but as a means of conceptualizing the management of an aggregated publicity, focusing in particular on how users are accounted for in—and by—social media.

The Panopticon Goes Public

In an effort at outlining the importance of going public in the social media age this paper returns to the seminal work of Michel Foucault, a philosopher whose work on disciplinary societies has provided a rich metaphor and model for the understanding of the architecture of monitoring or surveillance, and the subsequent forms of social control that result. The discussion, however, is not limited to Foucault’s panopticon writings; rather, what is suggested is a re-reading of the original conception of the panopticon offered by Jeremy Bentham, the English social reformer who took his own case for a prison public. The goal herein is to investigate how Bentham’s work advances an understanding of the panopticon, not merely as a site of ubiquitous surveillance, but as an institution that could serve as a model for managerial transparency, as a humane, open, and public form of social reform.

The panopticon prison has served as a common theoretical point of departure for surveillance studies (Lyon 1994, Gandy 1993), particularly for those concerned with the rise of systems and logics of pervasive social monitoring. Widely popularized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the idea for a panopticon prison was originally conceived by English social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) in the form of a series of letters and an architectural drawing. Bentham’s panopticon writings were much more than a
theory of power; they also served as a political and economic appeal for support from the English aristocracy (among others), and a liberal reform agenda.

Foucault’s (1977) interpretation of the panopticon, however, has in large part taken center stage in theoretical debates within the surveillance studies literature because of its theoretical connotation of ubiquity and automation—a technology/architecture that is designed to impel its subjects (prisoners) to self-police their behavior. Such a powerful technological symbol has provided for a more robust, post-Orwellian vision restricted to the totalitarian state, which in the Reagan years served as an obvious substitute for Soviet Communism and its attendant forms of oppression and coercion. And while there have been growing calls for a rethinking or even displacement of Foucault’s panopticon writing as a means of opening up theoretical perspectives on contemporary forms of monitoring and surveillance, much work remains focused on surveillance as a process of watching or intelligence gathering, in short, a foil for fears over privacy transgressions.

This paper suggests that one way to open up a political economy of surveillance and social monitoring, again particularly in the context of the rise and widespread uptake of social media platforms and the double move to “go public” (by users/through IPO financing of businesses), is to return to Bentham’s initial thoughts and motivations for his panopticon prison—a perspective deeply rooted in a promise of transparency, publicity, and accountability. The panopticon as both an architectural drawing and a set of letters, as interpreted by Foucault from Bentham, remains largely unexplored.

Oscar Gandy (1993) was among the very first and most important surveillance studies authors to gloss over the liberal motivation of Bentham in the seminal manuscript, The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information. The book begins with the notation that “It is from Foucault that I derive the underlying concept of panopticism...” Gandy then goes on to briefly note that “The Panopticon is the name given by Jeremy Bentham to the design for a prison...” (my emphasis, p. 9). And while the default focus on Foucault’s panopticon continues in surveillance studies, one notable exception to the rule proves illustrative. Bart Simon (2002) writes:

While poignant, the social-material architecture of Foucault’s version of Bentham’s Panopticon produces a kind of double vision; two different and sometimes divergent stories of the development of distinctly modern relations of surveillance,

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8 Kevin Haggerty (2006), for example, offers an engaging polemic on the limitations of the Foucauldian panopticon in surveillance studies.
9 Wood (2007) also briefly notes this oversight.
control and domination. First there is the story of what goes on with the supervisor or inspector in the central tower and second there is a tale of what happens to the person in the cell (the inmate, the patient, the worker, the student). The story of the supervisor takes us to a discussion of techniques of observation, information gathering, data management, simulation…. (p. 4)

Here Simon latches on to a key difference in emphasis between Bentham’s panopticon and that interpreted by Foucault—a near inverted interest in the tower and its occupants in the case of the former, and of course the latter’s stated interest in prisoner’s self-management, their assumption that they could be under surveillance at any given time by those in the central inspection tower. Having raised the question of supervision within the functioning of the panoptic prison, however, Simon glosses over Bentham’s larger social and economic goals, his reformist-liberal agenda. In lieu of following through with his reading of Bentham, Simon turns back to Foucault’s agenda and words. He writes:

For Bentham supervision is ultimately necessary only to direct the system, detect any transgression and to make good on the promise of retribution. Without this, the inmate, worker, schoolchild, patient, etc…. would have nothing to fuel his imagination to keep himself in check. The supervisor’s role in such a system is thus quite minor and easily automated such that “any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine” (Foucault 1977: 202). (p. 11)

Limited in its intent and outlook on the liberal project of utilitarianism, Simon’s use of Bentham to reaffirm Foucault’s biopolitical thesis is at least one step in the right direction. Much surveillance studies literature conversely overwhelmingly treats Bentham as little more than an aside in discussions of surveillance and social monitoring, conveniently dispelling the importance of Foucault’s selective interpretation of Bentham’s original text, the result being a focus on the automated collection of personal information (and concomitant concerns with privacy forthwith). Nevertheless, a reading of the original panopticon writings is key to appreciating not only Foucault’s critique of, but, more importantly for this paper, Bentham’s insights on publicity and accountability.

To this end we need to recognize that Bentham’s panoptic inspector is not a minor character; rather, he is as central as the prisoners to the goal of opening up the carceral enterprise, of taking the prison public, making its machinations seemingly efficient, transparent, and accountable. Bentham’s
panopticon insists upon the apparent “omnipresence” of the inspector to avoid coercive forms of punishment, yet he also continuously notes throughout the letters that inspection has a “real presence” (p. 45). A recognition of Bentham-Foucault as being in conversation on technologies of liberalism, thus offers insights on both the dangers of removing private spaces and control/ownership mechanisms over personal information, and the rationality of going public, the mechanisms put in place to account for appeals to the public (again in the form of communication, and/or wider forms of economic investment).

Bentham’s (1995) panoptic writings were articulated in a rather unique form, published as a series of letters and an architectural drawing of a prison. Moreover, for Bentham they served as a set of proposals that were used to seek political and financial support for the building of the panoptic prison. In modern day terms they served in part as a financial prospectus—a document that outlined the business case, the value-added proposition for potential investors. The document offers over twenty-one letters, articulating both rhetorical claims and historical contexts. The letters are brief and businesslike, almost memo-like in their intent and focus. The building or prison itself is sold to potential investors and supporters through the use of strong visual imagery of sightlines and architectural viewpoints. The brevity of the letters in the aggregate suggests a schematic plan, a set of steps required to bring the proposal to fruition, including providing engineering-like precision—exact measurements for an entire building.

More to the point, the second of Bentham’s panopticon letters offers a compelling series of remarks on the central inspector’s tower, a site largely ignored by Foucault and consequently by many surveillance studies scholars. For Bentham, the tower served much more than just an observatory center; it also doubled as a residence: “The apartment of the inspector occupies the centre; you may call it if you please the ‘inspector’s lodge’” (p. 35). Bentham further explains that as a familial, domestic space, the lodge plays a key role in the efficient monitoring of the inmates: “A very material point is that room be allotted to the lodge, sufficient to adapt it to the purpose of a complete and constant habitation for the principal inspector or head keeper, and his family. The more numerous also the family, the better; since, by this means, there will in fact be as many inspectors, as the family consists of persons, though only one will be paid for it” (p. 44). Bentham, in short, explained how and why the inspector and family were themselves made complicit in the automatic functioning of the prison:

Secluded oftentimes, by their situation, from every other object, they [inspector and family] will naturally, and in a
manner unavoidably give their eyes a direction conformable to that purpose, in every momentary interval of their ordinary occupations. It will supply in their instance the place that great and constant fund of entertainment to the sedentary and vacant in towns—the looking out of the window. The scene, though a confined, would be a very various, and therefore, perhaps, not altogether an amusing one. (p. 45)

In Bentham’s panopticon, then, the inspector and family are themselves effectively isolated, segregated, or, some might conclude, jailed, a set of characteristics more commonly associated with Foucault’s prisoners. There is seemingly little else to do but watch, which for Bentham seems to strike a rather amusing chord. More importantly, one could argue that for Bentham’s broader reformist purposes, the family of “watchers” also serve as panoptic subjects, though not ones whose privacy is invaded necessarily or who are put under the glare of potential 24/7 surveillance. Rather, for Bentham, the panopticon served to free both prisoners and its staff, including the inspector, from overt forms of discipline, coercion, and violence. On a broader institutional point, Bentham thus concludes that the inspector is freed from the burden of being subject to oversight (from judges and the like), to such an extent that the transparency of the building “…ought to be thrown wide open to the body of the curious at large—the great open committee of the tribunal of the world” (p. 48).

The Promise of Accountability

Bentham’s panopticon, as an effort at rethinking punishment and the management thereof, calls into question the means through which other institutions, staff, customers, clients and others are called upon to “go public,” to make their operations not just transparent, but by extension, politically and economically accountable. If Foucault’s panopticon automated an internalization of power, it should be similarly noted that Bentham’s building automated the process of accountability—that the management of punishment was held to account by the architectural transparency of the building itself. Remember, the panopticon was itself an effort to make more efficient and less costly the process of incarceration and punishment. Scholars of financial accounting have long noted Bentham’s broader interests in governmental forms of accounting, transparency, and publicity. Gallhofer and Haslam (2009), for example, argue that for Bentham “Accounting and publicity is … a key

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10 For a discussion of reality TV and surveillance, see Mathiesen (1997) and Andrejevic (2004).
principle of management or governance, second only to [his] broad-ranging Panopticon principle” (p. 489). The authors, moreover, suggest that Bentham’s bridging of transparency, publicity, and accountability offers an emancipatory framework for the working classes and underprivileged of the 1700s, an effort at exposing the transgressions of the ruling classes.

We do know, however, through writings co-authored with his brother Samuel, that Jeremy Bentham anticipated the professionalization of accounting and its complex system of language. Gallhofer and Haslam (1999) note that “consistent with a discourse concerned to promote democracy, in their accounting texts the Benthams sought to pursue a critique of accounting language. Their concern was to simplify and de-mystify the language of accounting, ‘correcting; accounting ‘in its language’, rendering it more comprehensive and clearer in the public realm” (p. 98). Gallhofer and Haslam also remind us that Bentham conceived of accounting as a moral enterprise, one that, like his panopticon, required an “inspective” gaze, while also engaging in “information-elicitative reporting” (p. 98).

The notion of information-elicitative reporting is an intriguing one, suggesting that the language of accounting and the broader regime of accountability were not restricted to a transparency language, a simplified system of meaning. Rather, the Benthams’ use of the concept of elicitative reporting suggesting a more instrumental perspective on information and accounting, one that would not just infer meaning, but make public social, political, and economic relationships.

Mary Poovey (1998) has argued, post-reformation, that numbers, figures, and mathematics soon occupied this promised space—or more aptly put, language—of transparency, with accounting balance sheets, terms and techniques serving as a rhetorical and deeply flawed form of publicity. Crucially, then, for Poovey:

the questions to be addressed in a history of numeracy (such as Who counted? What did people count? For what social and institutional purposes did people count? And with what financial backing were large-scale counting projects inaugurated?) are now and probably will always be unanswerable. (p. 5)

Poovey’s skepticism over this new regime of accountability is not merely a concern with the epistemology of accounting and its ability to elide true/factual relationships, nor is it necessarily a concern with access to appropriate historical documentation. Rather, for Poovey, accounting, or better still
accountability, as an adjunct to a purported transparent technology or field, is best understood as a managerial tool, as an effort at managing perceptions, trust, and confidence in those who oversaw the massive amount of capital investments (and reinvestments, maintenance, operations, etc.) needed during the industrial revolution—particularly with the growth of modern railways.

While Poovey incorporates Bentham’s elicitative definition of pre-industrial accounting methods, she suggests that it merely serves to obfuscate, and constantly redraw and redefine economic relationships—that is, to elide the field of accountability, to displace the ability to hold anything or anyone to account. It is exactly this machinic or diagrammatic process that Gilles Deleuze (1988) invoked in his critique of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish—that Foucault’s focus on the panoptic mold negated an understanding of its social and economic modulations in the society of control.

The term diagram, however, is ironically one that is first offered by Foucault in his own attempts to generalize the disciplinary effects of the panopticon. For Foucault the panopticon served as a metaphor. It was not to be coupled with—or reliant upon—the very act of watching any one individual; it was conceived as a social logic. Foucault thus dubbed the panopticon a “laboratory of power,” not only to highlight its experimental nature, but also to indicate its continuous search for improvement, its “gains in efficiency.” (p. 204). But most importantly for Foucault, “the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use” (my emphasis, p. 205).

Building upon the diagrammatic and elicitive perspectives, Karl Palmås (2011) has argued that contemporary information economies engage in intensified forms and practices of surveillance—invoking the new found mantra of “big data.” Building upon panoptic theories from Bentham through to Deleuze, Palmås echoes the words of Foucault, arguing that from a panoptic perspective “corporations function as laboratories” (p. 349). In so doing, Palmås invokes Manuel DeLanda’s (1991) “panspectron.” He writes: “In contrast to the original panoptic architectures, the panspectron monitors a wider segment of frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum. In other words, the panspectron not only registers that which is visible to the human eye but also radio, radar, microwaves and so on” (p. 343).

Returning to the notion of transparency offered by Bentham and that tempered by Poovey’s discussion of the promise of accounting, a panspectric
surveillance or system of accounting strives to not only continuously collect personal information, but also to expand the field of data collection, and in so doing, seeks to establish emergent relationships and patterns in the past, present, and in a simulational context, in the future (see also Elmer & Opel 2008). So again, what panspectric surveillance offers us is a search for economic relationships (profiles, clusters, and the like), not individuals per se, but aggregated publics. This elicitative view of surveillance/accounting, moreover, serves as much more than a personal interface with capital, most commonly articulated in the terms of accounts (banks, phone companies, and the like), or as amplified by first-person interfaces on social networking sites, handheld smartphones, and gaming consoles and their attendant terms of service. Rather, what De Landa and Palmás’s panspectral perspective suggests is again a rather insidious push to go public, to be enumerated without ever having even “signed up” for such an account. In such a regime one is accounted for even in one’s absence from a platform or system—an expansion of the “range of perception” outside of the mythological contractual relationship between business and individual.

Conclusions

The need to rethink the terms of accountability on and across social media, information aggregation sites, and software/hardware companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Apple, and Microsoft, has grown exponentially with the rise of user-generated content and a string of recent IPOs. It is this coupling of the terms of going public—both for users on such platforms and technologies—and investment seeking processes, that continue to redefine relationships between new media users and corporations. It is no coincidence that Facebook, and, in short order—at the time of writing this article—Twitter have stepped up efforts at constantly rewriting their data use policies so as to aggressively increase their efforts at collecting and aggregating ever more subtle, incremental, and social data on human life (Kanalley 2013). And while some of these data-use changes are communicated to users, options for users are made difficult to find, or otherwise degrade the intended functionality of such platforms (that is, one of public recognition and visibility). Some claim that such changes cross the line—that is, they impinge upon the privacy of its users. And clearly there are many examples that support such claims. That said, as businesses that create value through a regime of publicity, this paper has suggested a new route—a recognition that the business models of such companies are inexplicably tied to, if not defined by, their rejection of privacy and their intense embracing of all things uploaded, shared, commented upon,
browsed, searched for, uploaded, etcetera, etcetera. These are the new sites of (human) accounting, these sites of potential value—or holdings. What’s more, these sites are in constant flux, particularly as a larger elicitative apparatus seeks to both draw out and redefine political and economic relationships.

A rethinking and re-reading of the panopticon through its initial author, Jeremy Bentham—admittedly as popularized by Foucault, Deleuze, De Landa, and the burgeoning field of surveillance studies—provides a starting point, a broader economic recognition of the panopticon writings and drawings as both political and economic documents. Politically, Bentham sought to expose the prison to the world through an architecture of transparency, one that would have both prison and inspector freed from coercive oversight. Foucault, of course, tempered such a project, focusing on the subtle form of self-management that such an apparatus invoked in its subjects. As we have seen, Bentham too recognized that such a system was not without its flaws—or rather, its promises—and it is here where he makes the turn from punishment, management, and transparency to a concern with accountability as a matter of language and economy. For Bentham, accounting served as a potential check on the powerful, though one that had even in his time been obfuscated by complicated terms and formats. Economically, Bentham argued like Foucault after him that the panopticon served to make punishment more efficient, and consequently its efforts at transparency would also inform his concerns with accounting as an elicitative form of surveillance—one that did not only collect information on individuals, but sought to establish links between and among economic agents and their many transactions.

It is at this stage where we see the importance and relevance of elicitative accounting and surveillance to privacy advocates and some Marxist social media critics who try to hold to account the machinations of the new digital corporation and their many demographic, psychographic, and profile hungry platforms. (Fuchs, 2010) By focusing on the subjects of surveillance, and not their aggregated relationships, such critics’ appeal for accountability continues to miss the mark. Such platforms, in the literal sense of the word, merely serve as the jumping-off point for a system of accounting, a means not just of defining the terms of potential value, but also the ongoing relationships among such sources of data (the building blocks of user profiles and psychographic clusters). Lastly, as a platform of accounting, this elicitative form of surveillance (which shares some components with De Landa’s panspectron), more importantly seeks to redefine and obfuscate the means of accountability itself—displacing the ability to redress ethical, political, and economic transgressions. Such transgressions are thus not merely directed against the individual, rather, they set the terms for a broader ethical potential.
for digital and networked media, one where intent, responsibility, and the like, are forever being rewritten, in terms of use, or by automated forms of aggregation and the algorithmic governance of such platforms.
Works Cited


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