Book Review: Social Media As Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World

by Blog Admin   January 25, 2013

*Within a few years social media has become an ordinary part of our everyday lives. So too increasingly have fears about the impact this technology has had on privacy. In **Social Media As Surveillance, Daniel Trottier** presents empirical research with a range of interested parties, using this a basis to explore the relationship between social media and surveillance. **Paul Bernal** found the book impressive and timely, particularly with regards to the insight its data offers into contemporary practices and anxieties.*

Social Media As Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World. Daniel Trottier. Ashgate.

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The near ubiquity of social media – and of Facebook in particular – can be seen as one of the defining features of modern society in many parts of the world. The ways in which social media acts as surveillance is something about which people are becoming increasingly aware, which makes Daniel Trottier's book on the subject particularly timely. It is an unashamedly academic book, which has both its upsides and its downsides, but even for a lay reader there is both interesting and illuminating material to be found here.

Trottier's approach to the subject is interesting – the heart and soul of the book is a set of detailed semi-structured interviews with a range of interested parties. He interviewed students, university employees, marketers and online businesses, police and other security personnel, and used those interviews to investigate some of the many different ways in which social media is used both *as* surveillance and *for* surveillance. Those interviews tell us a great deal about both what is happening and what people think is happening, and give a fascinating insight into both the positive and the negative sides to the issue, as well as a warning as to some of the possibilities for the future.

Trottier looks at four different aspects of surveillance: interpersonal surveillance (through which we spy on each other), institutional surveillance (through which institutions such as universities or employers watch over their students or employees), market surveillance (through which businesses spy on their customers, potential customers and indeed almost everyone) and 'policing' surveillance (through which 'authorities' might spy on pretty much anything). Trottier devotes a chapter to each aspect: it is those chapters, and what the interviews reveal, that is what makes this book well worth reading. Some of what is said seems obvious. But some is not, and the picture that emerges, of a mixture of naïveté and 'savviness' amongst both the users and the 'spies' is insightful.

The students emerge as both spies and the spied-on, and aware of both aspects. They know (and dislike) being spied upon by their parents, their potential employers, their exes and friends, but they accept it and admit to doing what they call 'creeping' and 'stalking' themselves. One says at one point: 'I think creeping, from what I've heard, is more of a friendly way of being like 'I was so bored that I was just kind of clicking on people's profiles and looking at what was going up'." The sense too is that students see Facebook as something they *have* to be on, even if they don't like it. They also admit to altering their own behaviour both online and in the 'real' world as a result of their awareness of the surveillance – that too is revealing and needs to be understood and taken seriously.
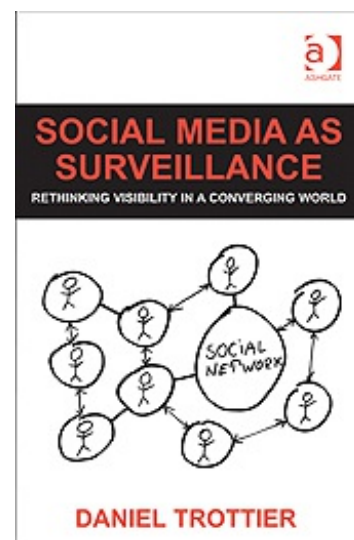
The chapters on the role of institutions and businesses paint a picture of organisations still ill at ease with social media, still trying to work out what is going on and how to deal with it. The struggles that the interviews suggest may not be representative (even being interviewed on the subject must raise the interviewees' consciousness about the issues) but they reveal a good deal. The chapter on policing social media is even more revealing, showing even more complex issues and challenges for the authorities. They cover such things as self-policing by the online community, policing by consent, police 'visibility' and outreach, undercover activities online and so forth. It does, however, reveal some of the fundamental challenges for the book, challenges which the book does not quite manage to meet.

In particular, the world of social media has moved on significantly since the author completed his interviews, and even since he completed his manuscript, early in 2012. Some crucial issues do not appear in the book, from Facebook's 'real names' policy to its acceptance and adoption of a real 'deletion' policy, after pressure from EU regulators. In the policing chapters, there is nothing on the increasing use of prosecutions for certain social media activities. In the UK, for example, under various communications and public order laws, there have been prosecutions – and indeed imprisonments – and there are likely to be more. That doesn't make it into Trottier's book, partly because it hadn't emerged as an important issue when he did his research and partly because the book's interviews were largely in Canada, which has a different approach to freedom of expression than that in the UK, and prosecutions are less likely and hence less of an issue. Though Trottier cannot be blamed for not including these issues, it might have been possible to find some way to anticipate the possibility of changes a little better than he manages.

There are other issues with the book. The first two chapters are highly theoretical and include an extensive literature review, without really hinting at the good material to come in the substantive chapters, which make them a little challenging even to an academic reader. Persistence is needed so as to get to the good things in the later chapters. The language is at times a little too loose (e.g. 'Before accumulating nearly a billion users, Facebook was a struggling startup alongside many competing services' or 'Facebook is synonymous with privacy violations') and sometimes overly informal (e.g. "…these interviews were semi-structured, and I brought extra batteries to make sure that we were able to explore these aspects"). Having said that, once the strong substantive chapters are reached, it is much easier to overlook this kind of thing.

The concluding chapter, inevitably perhaps, asks more questions than it answers, and though the subject of how the different aspects of surveillance augment each other is raised it isn't really taken as far as it might be. Nonetheless, there are good concluding thoughts, and the impression left at the end of the book is that this is an important subject which is becoming more relevant all the time. Though the perspective taken by the book is very much a sociological one, academics from a number of fields – including lawyers and technologists – could get a lot from reading it.

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Paul Bernal is a lecturer in the UEA Law School, specifically in the fields of Information Technology, Intellectual Property and Media Law. He completed a PhD at the LSE in early 2012, having been supervised by Conor Gearty and Andrew Murray. His research relates most directly to human rights and the internet, and in particular privacy rights. You can follow Paul on Twitter @PaulbernalUK. Read more reviews by Paul.