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Facebook: A Technique of Modern Power

By *Monica Reyes*

Today's age of the Internet has birthed many new environments that have become societies all themselves under the label "social networks." The Internet provides interaction that varies from electronic text messages to videos, pictures, and even electronic "hugs" between users. Although these sites are fairly new, the social relations among users portrays behavior which is the subject of theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault, who published many works in the 1970s, such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and "The History of Sexuality." These pieces are considered groundbreaking and foundational, as they examine the interrelated ideas of discourse, power, and the subject. Foucault focuses on the how and why people write, say, and think about certain objects of study; what powers shape people and how; and what the self becomes once it is shaped by governing powers. While Foucault focuses his work on institutions, such as the clinic, the prison, or the school, it is possible to see these same devices at work in a much more seemingly innocuous environment: social networks, more specifically, *Facebook*. This interactive Internet site, which has attracted millions of users across the globe, has become a technique of power or a productive device in the relationships between people and society that is in constant change, and this power has the ability to produce who people are and how they see themselves (Barker 10). While Foucault's ideas were published decades ago, the concepts he describes in his literature are working in a new social environment. *Facebook* allows the pleasures of analysis and scrutiny to continue, allowing people to become docile subjects or identities that are shaped by the ever-changing discourses or ideas and statements which surround them.

It is important to understand the bedrock of Foucault's ideas in order to grasp how *Facebook* qualifies as a technique of power. In *Michel Foucault: An Introduction*, discourse is described as individual acts of language or ideas and statements, which allow people to make sense of and see

Fall 2009

things; power is said to be an intangible and productive concept, which is really a set of relationships between groups and societies which is constantly changing with time; and the subject is the identity as a product of discourses, which means that the self is not created by the self, but it is created by external ideas, statements, or discourses (Barker 10-14). Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace describe how Foucault sees discourse as a relationship between “bodies of knowledge” or groups of statements and ideas and forms of social control (26). In other words, knowledge is necessary to exercise power. Discourse must take into account the historical context which enables or prohibits writing, speaking, and even thinking about certain ideas (McHoul and Grace 31). In fact, for Foucault, the “statement” is not just a grammatical or linguistic utterance; it has socio-historical value and meaning (40). Understanding discourse in this way has profound effects on how “human subjects are formed, how institutions attempt to ‘normalise’ persons on the margins of social life, how historical conditions of knowledge change and vary” (41). Certainly, this has relevance to the idea of *Facebook* being a type of discourse; after all, it is a creation of the Internet age, a revolutionary part of the world’s history and a social environment that is fairly new.

If discourse is truly ideas and statements which allow people to understand themselves and concepts more fully, then *Facebook* certainly fits this definition; users share their status or what they are doing or thinking; they are able to write notes about any subject they desire; users are able to post pictures and messages to other users, etc. All of this discourse is viewable to “friends” who gather these messages and are able to make responses. Expounding on McHoul and Grace’s statement about how discourse can form “human subjects,” it is important to recognize *Facebook* as a real type of discourse; this social networking site has allowed various forms of communication to be sent instantly and in mass quantities. Never before has someone had so many connections at one time, making “bodies of knowledge” accessible instantly to many. This, of course, has profound implications. For example, this mass of communication that is available certainly begins to shape the users who utilize it day after day, and also impacts how people say what they say; a user is able to use photos, words, images, video, and web links to

Fall 2009

express themselves, something that is perhaps not available in a true face-to-face interaction with another human.

These varying interactions help create dynamic relationships among users, which portray Foucault's perception of power, and for Foucault, power and sexuality are interrelated concepts. Foucault describes how sex has become something to be studied and scrutinized, thus making Western civilization look at sex as a *scientia sexualis*, or a science of sexuality. Foucault explains that the true benefit from, and reason for, confession for both subject and observer lies with "spirals of power and pleasure" ("The History of Sexuality" 897). The observer exercises power by analyzing the subject's sexual life and drawing out the sexual tidbits of the subject's life, which gives the observer pleasure. Foucault describes that there is "pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out" (897). The subject experiences pleasure by having his sexual pleasures focused on, and his sexual behavior is encouraged or "power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting" (897). In this case, a *Facebook* user who receives many comments about their sexually charged photos they just displayed receives pleasure from having their sexual acts commented on, and the observers receive pleasure from their sense of power of having their comments replied to; thus, a spiral is created of power and pleasure, pursuing one another in a circular pattern.

In order to further understand Foucault's ideas of power and sexuality, it is important to grasp the concept of the technique of power that is the "confessional." In "The History of Sexuality," Foucault focuses on sexual discourse throughout history and uncovers why sexuality is discussed, studied, examined, and investigated, and he refutes that sexuality has been silenced. Through medicine, psychiatry, and even the church, sexual secrets have been confessed and put under the proverbial microscope to find out who people really are. According to the "repressive hypothesis," which Foucault refutes, the act of confessing is seen as liberating, freeing, and therapeutic. "Confessional" may very well be the literal confessional found in a Roman Catholic Church, but it "can take the form of interrogations, interviews, conversations, consultations, or

even autobiographical narratives” (McHoul and Grace 80).

Social networking sites, such as *Facebook*, allow people to broadcast, or confess, intimate aspects of their lives, including issues regarding sexuality. Relationship status, public comments to other users and even sending “hugs” and “kisses” for many other “friends” to observe fill the need that Foucault describes regarding confession. Of course, using *Facebook* is a choice, and people choose what aspects of themselves to divulge or conceal. It may be unclear why people desire to reveal such intimate details about themselves on these semi-public/public sites, but according to Foucault’s ideas, Western civilization fixates on sex as a science, and since the Middle Age, confessions about sex have become increasingly important to understand the identity and soul of a person (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 142). Foucault explains how the “repressive hypothesis” declares confessions to be commonly thought of as freeing and helpful to our mental and psychological health (41). In other words, the only way to break free from sexual repression is to talk, confess, reveal, and divulge these sexual secrets. Foucault asserts that the benefits of confession are not a proven fact, but instead, this idea is only a construct of our culture (129). People have been pushed to see confession as a helpful act because those who desire confessions have thrust this upon them.

The confessional is a concept which incites voluntarily divulging information to an observer, or one who monitors. However, McHoul and Grace describe how Foucault examines instances where observation and monitoring can take on an entirely different look than a confessional (67). For example, the observed has no knowledge who or what is observing, or the one confessing does not know whether one can hear them or not (67). Foucault uncovers how watching, studying, observing and surveying are all concepts of power (67). So, it is crucial to take into account Foucault’s thoughts regarding “disciplinary power” and “surveillance;” for, they are also alive and well in this social networking site.

Foucault consistently observes how power and knowledge have evolved and changed in

Fall 2009

relation to their historicity, and one observation is how the techniques of power have changed to suit a modern world (67). An example Foucault uses is the “Panopticon,” a surveillance system used in modern prisons that allows a mass amount of prisoners to be monitored at once (67). Through the use of the Panopticon, power is not exercised through physical threats of death, rather this modern technique “relies on ‘surveillance’ and the internal training this produces to incite states of docility” (67). In other words, the observed are taught how to behave, not necessarily through consequences of physical punishment if one is caught misbehaving, but simply through the guarantee of continually monitoring *all* behavior. Additionally, prisoners do not even have to be certain that someone is in the device watching; the very presence of the device prompts the desired reaction from the inmates.

A *Facebook* user has the guarantee, much like an inmate in a prison, of the possibility of constant surveillance by the observer(s), which regulates behavior. Interestingly, many *Facebook* users may desire this policing and regulation because of the desire to confess and divulge information. In the article “Does *Facebook* Replace Face Time or Enhance It?”, Lisa Selin Davis said, “It’s still surprising to me, however, this combination of Orwell and *WALL-E* that has humans watching one another through computer screens and socializing in quasi-isolation.” She continues by quoting from a *Facebook* user describing her online “friends,” ““I know more about them now than I did when I was in regular contact with them””(Davis). Photos, messages, activities, and statuses are able to be monitored by others. A user is reminded of this before they decide to post a photo that may show them in a compromising situation, or reply to a “friend” with a message that could incite an unwanted reaction from other users.

Very much like the atmosphere of a prison which utilizes the Panopticon, in 2006, *Facebook* added the standard feature of “News Feed,” which is viewable every time a user logs on to the network. “News Feed” contains every action of every single “friend” since a user last visited the site. This list of news had many *Facebook* users outraged and was seen as an invasion of privacy; a petition was even started to eliminate the feature altogether. In the article “Inside the Backlash

Fall 2009

Against *Facebook*,” a user describes, ““Every action I take on *Facebook* is now time stamped . . . It’s a little strange because everyone will now know that at 10 o’clock I updated my *Facebook* profile and that I wasn’t in class”” (Schmidt). In the article “Misuse of Networking Sites ‘Could Cost You Your Job,’” public health workers are warned that sharing questionable information and photos, even from a home computer, may be cause for termination. One *Facebook* user describes her reason for using the social networking site in the article, “Facebook Wants to Read Your Mind” by Claire Suddath. She explains, “I like a quick and dirty read-through of what people are doing.” It is obvious that *Facebook* users feel watched, but they also enjoy the ability to watch others. Never before has the Panopticon been operated by the very people that are also being observed. This type of constant monitoring will lead a user to begin to self-censor. Much like a prisoner regulates his own behavior because the technological eyes are watching, a *Facebook* user is very much aware of the eyes behind the computer screen.

It is clear how *Facebook* is an example of Foucault’s description of disciplinary power. In his article “Panopticism,” Foucault establishes the criteria that disciplinary power must fulfill, including “to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost (economically, by the low expenditure it involves; politically, by its discretion, its low exteriorization, its relative invisibility, the little resistance it arouses” (207). Certainly *Facebook* fits this. The cost of joining *Facebook* is absolutely free for the user, and politically, *Facebook* has become so discreet in that it has voluntarily infiltrated the homes of millions of people across the globe. In short, it has become a part of people’s daily lives. While there has been some backlash to the surveillance applications which *Facebook* uses, it is small: A mere twenty-eight thousand users have voiced concern compared to the 2 million who use the site (Schmidt). Foucault continues with another aspect disciplinary power: “to bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval” (“Panopticism” 207). *Facebook* has a motto that shows its connection to this idea: “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life,” and the image on the website shows blank faces spread over a world map, each connected to one another. Needless to say, millions of people are using this site,

Fall 2009

publicly sharing their lives with one another. Foucault also said that disciplinary power increases “both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system” (207). It is certainly easy to control someone who voluntarily gives themselves up to a power, and in this case, the power is *Facebook*. Users comply with the surveillance on their own accord, perhaps unknown to the effects of their behavior being regulated.

Viewing several *Facebook* profiles may lead one to conclude that behavior is not being regulated at all, and “disciplinary power” is not in *Facebook*, but this is not the case. Despite the uniform layout of profiles for every user, the uniqueness of the individual is evident. Perhaps this is why users are enthralled with *Facebook* in the first place: A person’s unique life unfolds before those allowed to see it. People seem distinct and unlike the next “friend” on a user’s list because of various “applications” that are available for the users, the uniqueness of photos, personal statuses, “notes,” etc. McHoul and Grace expound on how this relates to Foucault’s ideas of how power regulates and normalizes behavior (72). For Foucault, disciplinary power, such as the Panopticon, or in this case *Facebook*, produces individuals because it causes the observer to seek out the non-normal behavior: “differences, peculiarities, deviance and eccentricities are ever more highlighted in a system of controls concerned to seek them out” (McHoul and Grace 72). In fact, McHoul and Grace describe how Foucault asserts that personality is a product of disciplinary power: “[A]s power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those upon whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized” (72). In other words, the close scrutiny of policing produces individuality.

Obviously, discourse and power are at work in *Facebook*, and for Foucault, those two components work together to create the “subject.” This would mean that the self is not a product of consciousness or self creativity, but rather a product of the powers and discourses that discipline them, an idea that Foucault asserts in his early work (Danaher, Schirato and Webb 116). Barker describes this thoroughly: “The soul which in our epoch provides the lodging for freedom and humanism is already the effect of power and subjection. A certain substantive form

Fall 2009

of existence comes into being as a consequence of practices of domination and subjection” (50-51). In other words, human souls and bodies are molded into subjects by the powers that surround them.

Additionally, once the body is subjected, it is now an “object” of scrutiny for whatever field the observer desires. For example, “the juridical and penal systems serve as exemplars for the possibility of transforming and subjecting bodies and constituting them as objects of different kind of knowledges: scientific, juridical, philosophical, political and so on” (Barker 51). Barker comments how Foucault describes that the nature of subjection was almost always brutal, physically violent, public and torturous in earlier times (51). The subjected bore the scars of the physical beatings that demanded a confession, for example. Foucault asserts that through time, methods of subjection became less physically violent and more an issue of widespread surveillance, for example, the emergence of the Panopticon, security and traffic cameras, etc. (“Panopticism” 259). Obviously, this relates to the present Internet age and the utilization of *Facebook* and how this constant surveillance creates “self-subjecting” users (Barker 62). If the self is only an entity created by outside powers and discourses, then Danaher, Schirato, and Webb describe that the “subject can’t pre-exist the social order, or be the source of meaning” (122). A subject changes in relation to what context they find themselves. So a *Facebook* user may provide a type of themselves on their profile that may not be who they are most of the time in the context of their home.

Danaher, Schirato, and Webb expound on Foucault’s ideas by describing the transformations which people undergo in relation to their surroundings: “[P]eople do not have natural and unchanging characteristics. Rather, we are produced out of a network of discourses, institutions and relations, and always liable to change according to the circumstances” (123). A “subject” is then a slippery and fluid entity that reacts to its contextual powers and discourses. This idea leads to Foucault’s declaration of the “death of the subject,” or the thought that humans are being erased because it is created by external rather than intrinsic qualities, making it unstable,

Fall 2009

changing, and unreliable. Danaher, Schirato, and Webb provide insight of how this relates to *Facebook*: “[I]n our contemporary world most of us are artificial because ... we are connected to machines for most of the time (computers, for instance)” (123). With this in mind, it is easy to understand *Facebook* as a discourse, or a group of statements and ideas that change with time, and how *Facebook* creates subjects, or identities that are products of discourses.

In addition, Foucault describes how the self attempts to achieve subjectivity through what he describes as “technologies of the self,” one of which is “self-knowledge” or knowing the self (129). This idea, which is predominately Western, encompasses self-evaluation through verbalization or writing, for example, keeping a journal. Those in power use these ideas to create subjects that would be better for society as a whole, the premise being people who self-evaluate will be better citizens, leading to a better society (130). Interestingly, *Facebook* recently changed their status question from “what are you doing right now?” to “what is on your mind?” (Suddath). This question certainly prompts the user to dig a little deeper into their consciousness and perhaps evaluate themselves. Of course, the idea of *Facebook* is a chance for users to create a page all about themselves or “the self.” Viewing a profile page provides a user with this self-knowledge that Foucault describes in creating subjects.

Through understanding Foucault’s ideas concerning discourse, power, and subjects, it is quite clear that *Facebook* is a modern technique of power that is in use in today’s Internet age. Users are both the observer and the observed, and they receive both power and pleasure through their surveillance of one another. Interestingly, Foucault emphasizes the importance of looking at discourse as inextricably linked to history; the era produces what type of communication is acceptable or prohibited. This idea is appropriate in terms of looking at the Internet age producing a type of discourse: *Facebook*.

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Fall 2009

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