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Abstract

This article examines the production and performance of parental surveillance of children's internet activities within the family home. Through an analysis of qualitative interviews in the family homes of children aged from five to twelve years, the manner in which parents are positioned as 'instruments of surveillance' and the materiality of this surveillance are discussed. Parents' worldly surveillance of their younger children's internet use in Australian family homes can often be likened to Foucault's panopticon, where the site of central inspection is often the family kitchen. This is because the physical positioning of spatial dimensions in the standard Australian home lends itself to panopticon surveillance of children. Communal living areas provide a site where the mechanisms of fixing and containing subjects (children) can be carried out. The use of these communal family spaces lends itself to watchtower-style monitoring, where the parental gaze is always possible and where children tend to assume that, and act as if, they are being watched. This is not to say, however, that children's resistance and/or negotiation represent any lesser part of the power relationships within the panopticon kitchen.

Keywords: children; family; home; internet; panopticon kitchen; private space; surveillance

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The pedagogy of parental surveillance, whereby parents now observe, interpret and regulate their children's online behaviours, is reflective of children's re-entry into the public realm. Children's growing online presence is a sociocultural shift that sees them gaining a more personal and active public voice than they have since the eighteenth century protectionist movement (Bavelier, Green & Dye, 2010; Poyntz & Hoechsmann, 2010; Wyness, 2006). Nonetheless, children's re-entry into the public realm is also firmly grounded in the private, worldly spaces of the family home.

This article focuses on the socio-spatial dimensions of parenting practices around children's internet use within the family home. It argues that while this is the first generation in which some parents are beginning to use surveillance technology – similar to that used by the police or military – to scrutinise their children's behaviours remotely or digitally (Lyon, 2013, p. 13), most Australian parents prefer to carry out physical surveillance of their children's internet use. This physical surveillance most often occurs in communal spaces of the Australian family home and tends to amplify

and complicate the surveillance work that parents undertake compared with a few decades ago.

This article adopts a children's rights framework based on post-digital conceptions of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). The focus is on children's rights to 'protection, provision, and participation' (Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014). While children are often referred to in public talk about concerns around digital rights, there is little internet provision or regulation that specifically pays attention to children's digital rights (Livingstone, Carr & Byrne, 2015; Livingstone & Third, 2017). This rights-based approach has emerged over the last few years as an alternative to the limitations of a protectionist approach, which has tended to 'dominate research, policy and practice globally' (Livingstone & Third, 2017, p. 665).

The conceptual framework used in this project is social constructionism – the social construction of meaning. This approach asserts that what people do and say constitutes the conceptual tools that construct their actions and utterances as meaningful within wider society (Burr, 2003). A number of methodological approaches work within social constructionism to unpack these sometimes implicit meanings, helping to make them explicit and allowing them to be subject to investigation and analysis. This project is built upon qualitative research that predominantly uses in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Seidman, 2006).

The article is based on interviews with 25 families in metropolitan and regional Western Australia. The research was funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) under the Discovery Early Career Research Award titled Digital Play: Social Network Sites and the Well-being of Young Children. The overall aim of the project is to map the benefits and risks primary school aged children face when they go online, as well as the competencies they need in order to engage safely with the online world. This article, however, will focus primarily on the socio-spatial aspects of surveillance activities of parents (or other family members) of these children within the family home.

The panopticon gaze and the notion of surveillance

Within Greek mythology, Panoptes is known as the giant with one hundred eyes, and therefore seen as an exceptionally effective watchman. Designed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1791), the panopticon (named after Panoptes) is an institutional building that allows all internees to be watched from one viewpoint by a single watchman without the internees being able to know whether they are being watched or not; thus, they could never be sure whether they were under surveillance. This uncertainty (according to Bentham) would lead to all internees acting as if they were being watched all the time, consequently monitoring their own behaviour constantly (Geis, 1955).

Michel Foucault (1977) used Bentham's notion of the panopticon as his foundation for *Discipline and Punish*. He wrote of his concerns about the way there can be systematic ordering and management of a population of people through subtle and often unnoticed means. Although there are current concrete examples, such as CCTV footage and other recording devices, Foucault was more concerned with more

imperceptible or subtle forms of control, where people feel the need to behave as if they are being watched and judged. He paid special attention to situations where one is continuously being monitored and where digressions are likely to elicit judgement or suspicion. These circumstances range from institutions of obvious discipline such as schools, armies and factories through to more subtle control systems occurring within non-disciplinary spaces. Thus, Foucault's notion of discipline is neither an institution nor apparatus, but rather a form of power.

The disciplinary nature of Foucault's gaze relies on a networked system of relations, with these mechanisms of surveillance impacting on the actions and behaviour of the self (Foucault, 1977, p. 176): 'One never knows if one is being watched, so one acts as if she is under surveillance and adjusts her behaviour accordingly' (McLaren, 2002, p. 107). Thus, the power of the disciplinary gaze is based on the assumption that one might be being watched and appraised. This results in varying degrees of self-discipline – or the self-censoring of one's actions and behaviours – just in case.

Parental surveillance

There is an earlier history of anxiety about changes regarding both parental surveillance and children's media use. While there have been changes eroding children's freedom to roam and play unsupervised, there has also been ongoing missives for parents to surveil and contain their children's media use. For instance, working parents tend to have less time to supervise outdoor play (McBride, 2012); generations of parents have progressively restricted the places or boundaries where children can play unsupervised (Louv, 2005; Tandy, 1999) and, spontaneous play has progressively been replaced by adult-organised activities (Skår & Krogh, 2009). There is also an earlier history regarding the effects of media use and the need for parental surveillance. For example, the effects of television on children were anticipated to include more aggression and less reading for pleasure (Spigel, 1992); this was coupled later with an argument that video gaming also caused aggression (Dill & Dill, 1999) and that time spent on computers would adversely impair the development of children's social skills (Subrahmanyam et al., 2000; Turkle, 1984).

As far as children's current media use is concerned, moral panics about children's internet use and internet safety discourses circulated by schools and other government programs, as well as a rhetoric of 'caring and control surveillance' and 'risk reduction' presented by sellers of surveillance-enabled devices, software and apps (Barron, 2014) mean that some parents are using technologies of surveillance to oversee their children that were previously only utilised by the police or the military (Lyon, 2007, p. 13). Most parents, though, use offline surveillance techniques to ensure their children's safe use of the internet.

There are five notable styles of parental mediation. These are:
- *active mediation of the child's internet use* – the parent is present, staying nearby, encouraging or sharing or discussing the child's online activities

- *active mediation of the child's internet safety* – the parent provides guidance for using the internet safely, also possibly helping or discussing what to do in case of difficulty

- *restrictive mediation* – the parent sets rules that restrict the child's use

- *monitoring* – the parent checks available records of the child's internet use afterwards

- *technical mediation of the child's internet use* – the parent uses software or parental controls to filter, restrict or monitor the child's use (Garmendia et al., 2012 p. 3).

These styles of mediation and monitoring all involve some degree of overt or covert surveillance by parents. Many parents of younger children also restrict their children's internet use to communal living areas where intermittent presence is likely. These children can assume that they will be watched and appraised at any moment – and may self-censor their activities with this in mind.

Research has also found that technical parental restrictions, such as filtering and tracking, tend to limit children's general internet use. This acts to restrict children's 'online opportunities such as learning, communication, participation and fun' (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012, p. 1). Newer risk and resilience approaches emphasise that children and young people 'must [also] learn for themselves how to navigate the wider world, including learning from their mistakes and recovering from accidents' (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009, p. 365). Thus, as children grow older, their developing social and emotional competencies and digital skills should be acknowledged and taken into consideration as they learn to cope with an increasingly adult world.

A 2011 AU Kids Online survey found that just over one-third of parents use technical tools to restrict access or track their children's internet use: 'Over one third of Australian parents (35%) say they block or filter websites, and a similar proportion track the websites visited by their child (36%)' (Green et al., 2011, p. 46). The remaining parents, however, are limiting their parental mediation of their children's internet use through less remote means. These parents – 60 per cent – prefer to be present, stand nearby, encourage, guide, share or discuss their child's online use with them (Green et al., 2011), most often in communal areas within the home.

In addition to this, pan-European studies reveal that over-protective, risk-averse mediation of children's internet use tends to mean that older children are more susceptible to risk and possible harm on the internet. Those children – located in countries similar to Australia – who have more frequent internet use and more exposure to online risks tend to be more resilient in the face of these risks. They 'adopt positive (e.g. seek help from friends) or, more commonly, neutral (e.g. ignoring the experience) strategies to cope' (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009).

The panopticon kitchen

The open-plan design of Australian homes makes the supervision of children less demanding. However, parents' ability to carry out multiple and simultaneous domestic tasks while in the kitchen area has not always been so easy. Historically, these

household layouts have only been in vogue since the 1980s. Kitchens used to be rooms secluded from the rest of the house, which then evolved to become part of an open-plan design incorporated into communal spaces within the household. In Victorian times, the mistress of an upper class house had a supervisory role over domestic staff, so that the ideal kitchen functioned separately 'from the rest of the household' (Beeton, 1861, p. 25). In this way, the persons who performed such household tasks (domestic staff) could be separated from the family with the mistress, according to Mrs Beeton, being comparable to a commander of an army. Larger country homes had entirely separate service wings. However, in terrace houses – with their limited space – the kitchen was usually located at the back of the house or in the basement. In smaller, working-class homes, the kitchen tended to be located as a lean-to attachment at the back of the house (Craik, 1989).

The decline in domestic labour, due mainly to competing sources of employment, resulted in more domestic duties being taken over by the mistress of the middle- and upper-class house, sometimes with the help of day staff. Early twentieth-century kitchens became larger, but were nevertheless separate from the rest of the house. During the post-war era (1940s and 1950s), most kitchens were still isolated rooms (Craik, 1989).

The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright introduced the open-plan kitchen in the 1950s. However, it took decades to become popular in Australia:

> While some kitchens in the 1950s were open plan kitchens, the concept started taking root in the 1960s. An open plan kitchen wasn't a requirement, but the idea caught hold and by the 1970s, open plan kitchens became more popular. By the late 1970s, home builders were creating open plan kitchens (Schneider, 2017).

By the 1980s, open-plan kitchens were standard. This trend has continued with the open-plan kitchen being the norm in current house design. These centrally located kitchens usually have access and views to the outside (backyard) and inside communal rooms (dining, family, lounge) and can also be used to surveil family life. The modern kitchen can be seen as the panopticon of the family home. It acts as a control centre for family life, a place from which everything can be seen and with which all should comply (Craik, 1989).

Method

A total of 25 families, of parents and their children aged between five and twelve years, in both metropolitan and regional areas, were recruited using school communication channels and invited to participate in the research. Where both parents and children agreed, a research interview was set up to talk to the parent and child separately. Sometimes there was more than one parent willing to participate and more than one high school-aged child in the family also willing to be interviewed. On those occasions, all people willing to take part were interviewed, separately where possible.

The families participating in this study included single-parent (seven) and dual-parent (eighteen) families. In ten of the dual-parent families, both parents worked, and

four single parents were also employed. Those in employment had a range of positions, from semi-skilled manual jobs to skilled manual jobs such as plumbers and electricians, clerical work, sales work, middle management, and professions such as teaching and nursing. All the families lived in detached brick dwellings less than 20 years old.

The panopticon kitchen and parental mediation

Most Australian homes, with their open-plan living areas adjacent to the kitchen, lend themselves naturally to parental surveillance of children. Parents can observe what is taking place in at least two adjacent living areas, as well as the backyard and/or alfresco areas. Many parents have taken advantage of this assemblage of rooms to actively mediate their children's internet use, especially those children not yet in high school. This happens despite the increasing number of mobile touchscreen devices that are available for children to make use of in the average family home.

When being interviewed in the family dining area of their open-plan living space, ten-year-old William explained how domestic routines and spaces were used by different family members. While there is a clear division between adult and child spaces in the communal living areas of William's family home, the prospect of adult supervision still remains:

> *Interviewer:* So Mum was telling me about how your family uses the internet. So there's one work area in there – is that right?
>
> *William:* Yeah.
>
> *Interviewer:* So who mainly uses that area, then?
>
> *William:* My Dad and Mum … for their worky stuff.
>
> *Interviewer:* And there's another area other there?
>
> *William:* Yeah. Sort of like the kids' room.

Anna, the mother of three primary school-aged boys, has purposefully reorganised the open-plan spaces in the family home to accommodate the screens used by family members. These adjustments to the family home enhance her capacity to carry out parental surveillance from the kitchen.

> *Anna:* Yeah, we've been quite intentional with that. So we have our home office, which is the home theatre that we converted into an office. And most of the devices are there. And then for the boys, we set up that area there, and that's their screen zone. And that was deliberate so that we …
>
> Interviewer: So that's in the family room area?
>
> Anna: Yeah. And it was intentional. Those screens are there so that I … when I'm in the kitchen I can see them all the time. And so there's no screens in [bed]rooms – we don't do that. My husband does, reads the phone in bed. But, yeah, that … it's pretty much confined to the areas that are family spaces rather than others.

Figure 1: *The family theatre converted to the multiple screen room – the northwest corner*

Figure 2*: The family theatre converted to the multiple screen room – the southwest corner.*

Other parents use their open-plan living areas to selectively target a device, platform or apps that particularly worry them. Janna, mother of Kiara (seven) and Johnathon (eleven), explains how she only lets her children watch YouTube at the weekend, and then only in the open-plan living area:

> YouTube is sort of – yeah there's so much stuff on there that they can access. That's why they're only allowed on it on Saturdays and they're only allowed to use it in the living room. [I] walk up and pick up their device and check out what they're looking at. It's really hard, because you can only restrict it to no YouTube or YouTube. There is no in between, sort of. You can do the 18 and under [filter] … But, it's not overly effective.

With older children, parents tend to loosen the ties to the panopticon kitchen. AU Kids Online figures indicate that 'private use in the child's bedroom is strongly differentiated by age. For younger children use is generally in a public room, while teenagers often have private access.' (Green et al., 2011). Calley explains how her twelve-year-old daughter, Maddie, plays with her Playstation in her bedroom:

> *Calley:* Yeah. But yeah, we don't sit down and play games or anything so. I bought her a second controller for her PlayStation so that we could and we never have, but now she plays with her mates so that's good ... and [do you] think am I being too slack? But it's her stuff. Yeah, I don't know. I suppose others [watch what's] ... going on from the kitchen sort of area.

> *Interviewer:* They're all different; all the families are different.

> *Cally:* Yeah and that I suppose you get your level by talking to the parents of her friends, yeah. And we're all similar, like Sophie's parents are a little bit younger than me 'cause I'm probably the oldest mum and Patrick's parents are about the same age so we're all in that similar ... like in our forties. And maybe that's a bit of it too, we're a little bit more relaxed about things; we probably know less about computers but we're more relaxed about the whole thing.

The physicality of children's internet consumption and production in the family home is closely associated with their age and parental mediation styles. While younger children tend to be tethered to areas within sight of the panopticon kitchen, older children's autonomy and agency are acknowledged, as they are allowed to retreat into the private spaces of their bedrooms.

Conclusion

Children's engagement with the internet is part of an ongoing history of anxiety about children's media use. With moral panics about children's internet use circulating in news outlets (the latest being very young children's use of touch screen technologies), and cybersafety messages being circulated through schools and other government authorities, parents have been positioned as solely responsible for their children's online safety. Parents in this study tended to take these messages seriously and conscientiously surveil their younger children's internet activities. In order for parents to carry out this surveillance effectively, younger children's internet activities were often restricted to communal living areas of the family home. These surveillance mechanisms are reminiscent of Foucualt's panopticon, with children located in spaces where physical surveillance is not constant or consistent, but is a possibility.

The introduction of internet technologies into the family home has not necessarily resulted in a major reconfiguration of home design. Rather, parents have taken advantage of the open-plan living areas typical of Australian houses (Dowling, 2008) to surveil their younger children's internet use. This surveillance of children's internet use by parents is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, there is a limited amount of research regarding the effects of this type surveillance upon children. Such research

suggests that overly restrictive surveillance is related to a restrictive parenting style (Helsper et. al., 2013). In the context of children's online engagement, a restrictive parenting style is generally associated with fewer risks being experienced and a restricted range of online competencies and activities carried out by children. In turn, this means that such children forego many online opportunities and digital skills development.

This is not to say, however, that all parents who surveil their children's internet use from the panopticon kitchen use a restrictive parenting style. Instead, many of them use an active mediation style. They are inclined to be present and active in their mediation. They tend to be co-present while their children use the internet and encourage, guide, share and discuss their child's online use with them. In addition, this parental co-presence diminishes as children get older, with parents often freeing their teenagers from the surveillance regime of the panopticon kitchen. As teenagers gain more autonomy and personal agency, their parents allow them to retreat to private spaces such as their bedrooms. Thus, the manner in which socio-spatial dimensions are enacted within the family home reflect generational power relationships and these socio-spatial relationships change over time as children mature.

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