

Facebook and Philosophy Abstract

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Amateur Spies and Facebook Schizophrenia:

The News Feed Makes it More Difficult to Lie

The Facebook News Feed ensures that we will never be alone again—for better or for worse. By piecing together fractions of our friends' lives, it sets the tone for a dystopian-style 'ambient awareness' in which we are constantly watching each other out of the corners of our eyes. The News Feed epitomizes media theorist Neil Postman's outcry that we have become a culture controlled by our obsession with entertainment. Postman illustrates how our culture is less like that of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where Big Brother controlled society by depriving the public of information, and more like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* where the public is "reduced to passivity and egoism" as they "drown in a sea of irrelevance."

One thing that Facebook does have in common with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the other hand, is the concept of amateur surveillance. Importantly, it is the "amateur spies" of the Thought Police who pose just as great a risk as Big Brother, and who ultimately lead to the protagonists' tragic fate. With Facebook we all have the potential to be amateur spies. The ability to monitor the lives of hundreds of people at a glance is reminiscent of Michael Foucault's Panopticon, where the central guard can keep an eye on all the prisoners at once. On Facebook, the corresponding metaphor might be that each of us occupies the position of the central guard while at the same time being permanently visible as the prisoner.

Interestingly, due to our knowledge of this surveillance and the fear that any one of our friends has the power to broadcast into our News Feed, we are disciplined to be honest. Furthermore, struggles between our need to be the object of another's desire (Jacques Lacan's 'paranoid knowledge') and our fear of Foucault's "inspecting gaze", lead to a type of schizophrenia where we simultaneously divulge our most private details in the form of status updates, while being paranoid of being tagged in compromising photos. With every new friend we add we willingly sacrifice privacy for pleasure, and in doing so we become more accountable though paranoid.

Chris Castiglione is a New Media student in the graduate program at the University of Amsterdam. He holds a bachelor degree in Media Arts and Design from James Madison University.