

To see and be seen

Gynaeopticism and platform surveillance in influencer marketing

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ABSTRACT

The focal point of this chapter is surveillance practices in relation to social media influencers and digital marketing. The aim is to examine how the idea of surveillance can be expanded to include both social and technological aspects that work at individual, peer, and top-down levels. Drawing on examples from the Swedish influencer industry, we discuss and problematise how surveillance can be understood in such a context and how different dimensions of surveillance are manifested, exploited, and contested. The chapter concludes that participatory and gendered peer- and self-surveillance are inherent parts of influencer culture, and that the commercial success of influencers depends upon these practices. Similarly, platform surveillance and data mining connected to digital advertising can be understood as part of a contemporary commercialised surveillance culture that is closely related to both digital technology and the political economy of the influencer industry.

KEYWORDS: influencer culture, surveillance, gynaeopticon, platform surveillance, media monitoring

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Introduction

The notion that we live in a surveillance society (Lyon, 2003) – where different techniques of watching, and of gathering, storing, and reassembling information in new forms are ubiquitous and imbedded in people’s everyday lives – raises a range of questions and concerns. One of these is what surveillance means: If surveillance is everywhere and everything, how can it be defined and analysed? Surveillance can be seen as a systematic and focused manner of observing (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015), where the collection and use of information is coupled with power (Andrejevic, 2015) with the purpose of influencing and managing those whose data has been collected (Lyon, 2003), and specifically focused on behavioural modification (Zuboff, 2015). Based on this definition, we argue, in line with Andrejevic (2019), that the notion can be understood in several ways, blurring the borders between surveillance and different forms of monitoring in a wide range of social, economic, and political settings.

In this chapter, we discuss and problematise different forms of surveillance in relation to a promotional industry that is characteristic of the contemporary moment: influencer marketing and the culture of social media micro-celebrity (Borchers, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017). How can surveillance be understood in such a context, and what types of surveillance are emerging within the influencer industry? How are different dimensions of surveillance manifested, exploited, and contested? The aim is to examine how the idea of surveillance can be expanded to include both social and technological aspects of social media influencers and digital marketing. We specifically focus on gendered forms of self- and peer-surveillance, as well as top-down data mining and platform surveillance in this context. The chapter engages with scholarly debates on contemporary surveillance practices and theories using empirical examples from the Swedish influencer industry – with a special focus on a group of successful female influencers in the lifestyle, beauty, and fashion genre – as well as the media monitoring and digital advertising industry. Most of the material has been collected through “lurking” on influencer platforms (Ferguson, 2017) as part of an ongoing research project focusing on influencer politics in Sweden (see Arnesson, 2022).

Widening the notion of surveillance

Media users today are subjected to various forms of surveillance enabled by the affordances of social media technology. While surveillance in terms of bureaucratic administration, national security, and crime prevention has played a central role in the organisation of modern society since the early 1900s, the last 20 years have seen an increased focus on diverse ways of monitoring and storing information about individuals and their everyday lives. This development has been largely enabled by technological innovations,

digital media, and the widespread use of smartphones (Andrejevic, 2015).

A couple of decades ago, the Internet was regarded by many as a sphere where individuals could “see and not be seen”; surveillance, it was believed, would be impossible in a cyberspace populated by bodiless, “unseeable” users (Nakamura, 2015). This rather optimistic view was prevalent during the early 2010s, for example, when social network sites were described as “autonomous spaces” where political activists could form networks of change without fear of surveillance or repercussions (Castells, 2012). As Nakamura (2015: 224) points out, however, the development of social media has led to a situation where, rather than being invisible, media users have become “more visible and trackable than ever”. Simultaneously, states that seek to control and discipline citizens are no longer the sole practitioners of surveillance; mediated monitoring is increasingly important for commercial organisations and the digital marketing industry. Social media users are supposed to constantly post images, comment, like, subscribe, follow, and in different ways express themselves in and through digital media – practices that generate large quantities of personal data about their lives, dreams, and needs. This data has, in turn, become a goldmine for a variety of commercial actors.

The meanings of surveillance have also widened to include modes of watching that emerge from the engagement of users. A common trope in surveillance studies has been the panopticon model deriving from the late eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s dream of a self-regulatory prison architecture. In Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, the panopticon is described as an ideal system for control and knowledge production in institutions such as prisons, schools, factories, and even cities. The idea was that when bodies were placed within a field of visibility, power and coercion would become more efficient, since (to avoid repression by their inspectors) the surveilled subjects would simultaneously become their own overseers, adapting themselves to the ruling norms.

While this understanding of surveillance – as a form of power system strongly related to the notion of self-discipline, visibility, and fixed places – is still important, other modes of more fluid and social forms of surveillance have since been developed by theorists and surveillance scholars. The feminist researcher Rosalind Gill (2019) highlighted how questions of peer- and self-surveillance are increasingly important in contemporary society, not least in digital media cultures that build on voluntariness and collaboration. These modes of surveillance emerge from the participatory practices of media users and function at a peer-to-peer level, as well as through self-disciplinary practices.

Drawing on the work of Alison Winch (2013, 2015), we consider surveillance to be an important feminist issue, since different modes of watching have always been a way to control and regulate women – for example, through the “male gaze” in film and popular culture (Mulvey, 1989) – and this might

create an internalised gaze focused on both oneself and other women. From this perspective, the participatory culture of digital media creates a gynae-opticon – a gendered, neoliberal variation on the panopticon – where “the many women watch the many women” (Winch, 2015: 229). The gynaeopticon builds on a tightly bound community of peer-surveillance, and a range of digital self-surveillance practices such as self-tracking devices, beauty apps, and photo filters (Gill, 2019). In the first part of this chapter, we discuss how these gendered forms of surveillance are inherent to influencer culture, and how they also contribute to post-feminist commercial success.

Influencer marketing also involves more top-down surveillance practices, such as the gathering and storing of user information for commercial purposes, practices made possible through the technological affordances of platform surveillance (Wood & Monahan, 2019). Shoshana Zuboff (2015) describes this newer kind of surveillance as part of an omnipresent surveillance capitalism based on data mining. Digital advertising and influencer marketing are not exceptions: Keeping track of user data and follower engagement is a driving force for both influencers and their collaboration partners.

The centrality of platform surveillance also generates imaginative visions of the future within the industry, where new legislation and technological innovation can lead to both the disruption and evolution of surveillance practices. Sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015) as a concept focuses on the role of technologies in shaping the social fabric of everyday life. According to Jasanoff (2015: 332), these imaginaries are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology”. In the last part of this chapter, we exemplify and discuss how new technology is envisioned as a set of monitoring tools in the digital marketing industry.

Influencers and influencer marketing

Although the term influencer has become globally ubiquitous during the last decade, there is still a certain vagueness about what it really means. A general definition characterises influencers as individuals who display a narrative of their personal lives on social networking platforms or in personal blogs, and who, in different ways, interact with and capitalise upon the audience they accumulate through these platforms (Abidin, 2015). The genre of lifestyle and fashion influencers upon which we focus here has emerged from digital participatory practices such as blogging, where regular people shared their passion for fashion and built online fame by promoting themselves and collaborating with others (Duffy, 2015). Although ideals such as amateurism, authenticity, and autonomy still underpin many influencers’ self-presentations, the phenomenon has undergone rapid professionalisation, and the industry has expanded to include not just micro-celebrities and their commercial part-

ners, but also intermediaries such as agents, editors, and the media-monitoring business (Stoldt et al., 2019).

Interest in influencers has grown substantially over the past decade, in both commercial and academic contexts. Research in strategic communication shows, for example, that influencer marketing has created new ways for companies and brands to reach established or potential audiences (Borchers, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Freberg et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). Creating a strong relationship with your audience by integrating advertising and personal stories has also been highlighted as an effective way to market both products and people (Lueck, 2015).

Influencer Marketing is one of the fastest-growing and most successful marketing methods worldwide. By being a global multi-billion-dollar industry, the channel has proven to be a key factor in enabling companies and brands to grow and establish themselves much faster than just a few years ago. The methodology behind influencer marketing is based on our behaviour of preferring recommendations from like-minded people over those we receive through traditional advertising. (Cure Media, 2021: para. 1–2)

The excerpt above, taken from the Swedish influencer marketing agency Cure Media, describes influencer marketing as one of the more lucrative strategies for marketing today. It is a form of advertising aimed at influencing the purchasing behaviour of followers and their desire for various types of products, brands, and lifestyles. This is accomplished through digital advertising on the influencer's social media profiles and platforms, as well as through branded content in the form of “collaborations” between the influencer and their partner brand.

Influencer marketing is also seen as a cost-efficient marketing tool because it is not always perceived as advertising by followers (Ye et al., 2021). The parasocial relationship between influencers and their followers, based on interaction and sharing personal information, facilitates feelings of belonging and social connectedness that are often perceived as a form of friendship (Arnesson, 2022; Breves et al., 2021; Lueck, 2015; Pöyry et al., 2019). To predict and measure behavioural intentions, followers' interactions on social media are mined, monitored, and analysed on a huge scale for commercial purposes. The relationship is therefore not as equal as it might seem: Since the followers are a prerequisite for influencers' commercial success, they constitute the “audience commodity” that influencers sell to advertisers and collaboration partners (Hunter, 2016). This is achieved by means of different monitoring techniques and surveillance practices, which are further discussed later in this chapter.

Gynaeopticism and the girlfriend gaze in influencer culture

Although different forms of surveillance are prevalent today in most people's everyday lives, some of us become objects of monitoring to a greater degree than others, or in specific forms and contexts. In the following sections, we present and discuss some examples of gendered social surveillance in influencer culture and marketing – examples that are made possible through the specific affordances of social media.

The genre of female micro-celebrities upon which we focus here can be understood as digital representatives of “girlfriend media”, that is, magazines marketed to women that position themselves as friends to the reader, giving loving advice at the same time as certain ideals (e.g., slenderness) are reinforced and celebrated. In a Swedish context, magazines such as *Frida*, *VeckoRevyn*, *Amelia*, and *Elle* are all representative of the genre, with advice on fashion, appearance, health, beauty, and love being offered to both teenage girls and older women. Such advice is often presented in collaboration with the fashion and beauty industries, which thrive on women's regulatory gaze upon themselves and others. Their ubiquitous tips and guidance about how to discipline and transform the female body are often disguised in girlfriend rhetoric (Winch, 2013).

Like girlfriend media, influencer culture is saturated by both intimacy and scrutiny; the close affective relationship between influencer and followers mimics a form of female friendship in which girls (and women) control and discipline each other based on normative notions of beauty, femininity, and morals. Just as in other popular culture marketed to women, the body of the influencer is positioned as an object of scrutiny and anxiety – an object of both desire and critique. It is also an object of transformation and improvement in different ways. In addition to “ordinary” beauty treatments and makeup practices, non-surgical cosmetic procedures such as Botox injections that smooth out wrinkles, or “fillers” that plump and shape the lips, are becoming increasingly normalised and socially accepted – a development partially enabled by collaborations between clinics and popular influencers.

In a postfeminist culture where women's online self-representation is framed as empowering, giving them agency over their image and identity-making, the body (and representations of bodies) becomes a tool for self-expression and empowerment (Gill, 2019). In contrast to the “traditional” notion of the male gaze in film (Mulvey, 1989), digital visual culture positions women as active subjects and producers of their own “to be looked at-ness”, rather than as passive objects of another's gaze (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2015). It also enables gynaeopticism and a “girlfriend gaze” (Winch, 2013) that is not necessarily about being attractive to men, but rather about being attractive to other women who possess the interest and expertise to recognise the time and labour that goes into the maintenance of a normative body, femininity, and sexuality.

While we focus on gendered peer-surveillance in this chapter, it is important to point out that normative understandings of beauty, appearance, and agency in the influencer industry and other girlfriend media are often impacted by intersecting power structures that configure a range of subject positions in different ways. Monitoring and commenting on female bodies might, for example, be both racialised and sexualised (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2015). Recent years have also seen an upsurge in similar advice directed towards men and masculinity, since the industry is starting to tap into this previously unexploited market. There are, however, still very few male equivalents to girls' and women's magazines, and almost no men (either as influencers or followers) in the Swedish fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencer industry (Price, 2022).

Entrepreneurial femininity and forensic dissection

The recent upsurge in social media influencers, who build their online presence through self-branding and entrepreneurial femininity, is an example of how being looked at can generate both fame and wealth in digital media (e.g., Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Archer, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Genz, 2015). In the postfeminist gynaeopticon, the female body is an object of labour: an asset and a product that can be managed and developed into a personal brand that becomes “a gateway to freedom and empowerment” within the neoliberal market economy (Winch, 2015: 233). Such labour is, of course, not new to the contemporary moment, nor is it unique to influencers – it has been used by female celebrities for decades (e.g., Madonna in the 1980s) and is crucial for social media celebrities as well as “ordinary women” who invest in their looks as a form of “beauty capital” and a means to accumulate money, power, and status (e.g., Laurén, 2021). In contemporary beauty culture, however, this form of labour is often glossed over as “me-time” or “self-care”: self-improving practices that all women – not just celebrities – are presumed to deserve and enjoy, which simultaneously raises the bar for what is an acceptable and expected female appearance.

Similarly, the way in which women are invited to look at themselves and others through a normative, regulatory gaze has been a characteristic of women's magazines for many years (e.g., Winship, 2000). However, new digital tools and social practices have enhanced the ways in which the female body is looked upon and scrutinised in and through mediated images and marketing. The affordances of social media enable what Gill (2019: 155) calls forensic dissection – a form of gendered peer- and self-surveillance “operating at ever finer-grained levels and with a proliferating range of lenses”. Women, especially younger generations, are increasingly subjected to social media content that effectively erases all traces of imperfection – for example,

less-than-“flawless” skin – but they are also increasingly aware of how such effects are made possible by photo filters and digital editing, as well as the importance of angles and lighting in photography. Digital tools simultaneously inform users of the curated nature of social media representations and create new standards of appearance based on these possibilities. The beauty and makeup industry, for example, mimics the idea of digital editing by promoting products such as No7 “Airbrush Away Pore Minimising Primer” or the “Photo Finish Pore Minimizing Primer” from Smashbox.

Self- and peer-surveillance in influencer marketing

The girlfriend gaze, and forensic forms of looking at oneself and others, is woven into the fabric of influencer culture and marketing in several ways, exemplified here by the self and peer surveillance practices that contribute to gynaeopticism, generating both conflict and commercial success. As discussed earlier, traditional girlfriend media often position themselves as the ones looking at other women or encourage readers to look at themselves. Influencers, however, also invite others to look at *them*: Being noticeable through their own self-presentation is part of the labour of visibility that aspiring influencers perform to gain and maintain attention and followers (Abidin, 2016).

Being looked at – and looking at oneself – is also an important aspect of commercial collaborations between influencers and beauty brands, since, to a large extent, these build on the influencer’s own use of and judgement about certain products. Forensic dissection of one’s own appearance – specifically commenting on perceived flaws and problem areas – thus becomes part of the authenticity work that influencers perform to present themselves as relatable to their followers. When the cookbook author and lifestyle influencer Sofia Wood collaborates with the skincare brand Mantle, for example, her posts are frequently illustrated by close-up photos of her face and include detailed accounts of problematic aspects of her skin – dryness, redness, flaking, and so on (e.g., Wood, 2021). By inviting this close inspection of herself, she becomes relatable to her followers, constructing an “aspirational extra/ordinariness” (McRae, 2017) that reinforces both the notion that women need to scrutinise their appearance for flaws and the belief that such flaws can be corrected by following the influencer’s example in terms of beauty routines and products.

Forensic looking is also characteristic of the discussions in the comments sections of influencers’ own blogs and Instagram profiles. The affordances of such platforms encourage engagement, interaction, and ongoing scrutiny of – and debate about – the influencer’s lifestyle, consumption, and appearance. It is not uncommon for influencers to be asked questions about certain details in a photo, for example, an item in the background, the brand of a lipstick, or the exact colour of a wall paint. The girlfriend gaze of followers is fixed on the influencer’s representations of herself and her life in both image and

text, often coupled with an extensive knowledge of her habits, preferences, values, and aesthetics.

Being looked at by a wide range of actors – followers, haters, other influencers, the media, and so on – is, from this point of view, a prerequisite for the kind of micro-celebrity upon which influencer marketing builds. As Lyon (2003: 164) warns, however, “surveillance is always Janus faced”: It is the close monitoring of an influencer’s life and relationships (presented as “engagement”) that makes them relevant to advertisers, collaboration partners, and followers – at the same time as this constant scrutiny can be difficult to manage, especially when increasingly blurred borders between privacy and publicity are so inherent to the influencer profession.

An example of such tensions and blurred borders can be found in the case of Sandra Beijer, a “first-generation” Swedish influencer who started her social media career over a decade ago. In addition to a career in advertising and as a writer, she has predominantly built her self-brand around partying, travelling, romantic relationships, and not conforming to social norms about appropriate life priorities or fashion styles for women, specifically as she passed the age of thirty. Thus, comments urging her to “grow up” and “act her age” have been a recurring feature on her blog and social media profiles, and the issue of motherhood has also been discussed in relation to her non-family-oriented lifestyle. While Beijer never explicitly said that she did not want to have children, many of her long-term followers have certainly had that perception of her. It was, therefore, somewhat surprising to many when rumours that she was pregnant started to float around the Internet in early 2021. On 23 May, she finally revealed that these rumours were true by posting a series of photos on her blog that clearly show her pregnancy, accompanied by the short remark “yes, it’s a baby” (Beijer, 2021).

Many speculations about Beijer’s presumed pregnancy were based on detailed scrutiny of the content that she produced during this time, especially photos. Followers pointed out “proof”, such as the lack of alcoholic beverages in images from nights out, that Beijer’s clothing style and appearance had changed (“I can see it in your face”), and that she only posted pictures of herself from certain angles or that were cropped in certain ways. It is clear that this scrutiny was stressful for her at a personal level: It is a topic in several blogposts where Beijer calls out followers for posting unwanted comments about her body, clothes, and habits during her early pregnancy – comments that she had to delete to retain some degree of privacy. At the same time, it is this kind of follower attention to detail and assemblages of information that makes Beijer so successful, since the engagement of followers also signifies their perceived interconnectedness and her influence upon them.

Gossip and meta-blogging as peer-surveillance

The discussion about Beijer's pregnancy was also prominent on *Bloggbevakning*; a Swedish website whose name literally means "blog monitoring" in English. This name might sound a bit archaic but should be perceived as a testament to the site's long lifespan rather than its actual focus. Most of the content and discussions today centre upon influencers' posts and interactions on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, in addition to "the blogosphere". The caption on the blog states that it is "a blog about bloggers and social media" and, according to its own Instagram account, it has two million visitors per month (Bloggbevakning, 2021a).

The editor Camilla Gervide launched *Bloggbevakning* as her own private blog, although today it is hosted by *Nyheter24*, an online news site primarily targeting women aged 25–44 and which is part of the Swedish media house Life of Svea (Life of Svea, 2021). Gervide claims that she started the blog "just for fun" but soon came to believe that "something was crooked in the business", and therefore, the focus shifted to critically examining influencers and their impact on their audiences (Cision, 2021). Today, however, *Bloggbevakning* has converged with the world it set out to scrutinise; for example, it is listed on Ocast, a platform for buying and selling ad space and marketing campaigns on digital media, as a seller of "influencer marketing" for products such as ambassadorship, events, influencer collaborations, and micro-influencer campaigns (Ocast, 2021).

The gathering and storage of information is a prerequisite for the site's popularity: Without its ongoing monitoring of what is happening on the Swedish "influencer scene", it would not be relevant to its readers, whether they are occasional visitors or part of the community that has formed in its comment sections. The information is selected and presented to the audience in a flow of updates, although posts are also stored in the blog's archive, which extends back to its beginnings in 2016. In addition, posts are labelled according to which influencer forms its focus and are compiled under the subheading "Categories" on the site. It is therefore possible to follow a specific influencer for a long period of time and to assemble a large amount of information about their life, appearance, and career.

Monitoring influencers in this way also serves to change behaviour, specifically behaviour that is deemed "unethical" or deceptive by the site's editor. Among these are, for example, vacation trips to exotic places, the marketing of cosmetic surgery, or lack of disclosure when it comes to sponsored content in general. While this scrutiny might have initially had a journalistic ambition – being an outsider looking in – the integration of the site into the Swedish influencer industry, and the development of its editor as an influencer herself, makes it possible to understand such practices as a form of peer-surveillance. Naming and shaming behaviour that is labelled "problematic" is also characteristic of the comment sections, where readers (predominantly

women) engage in debate and discussions about the featured influencers, as well as about the blog itself (and the person behind it).

Like other, better-known “hateblogs”, such as *Get off My Internets* – described as “the first blogger/influencer focused gossip website” (GOMIBLOG, 2021) – *Bloggbevakning* has developed its own community, which adheres to specific social norms and ideals. Research suggests that these forums are often characterised by an ongoing deconstruction of influencers’ femininity and authenticity, as well as aggressive or satirical statements on influencers’ appearance, habits, and social media content (Duffy et al., 2022; McRae, 2017). It is clear that influencers know that they are being watched from the way in which they occasionally refer to the blog on their own platforms, or tell readers who post critical comments that, if they feel a need to criticise, they can do so on *Bloggbevakning*. At the same time, attracting attention and being the centre of public discussion is an important factor in the affective economy that underpins influencer marketing, where visibility and fame are the keys to commercial success. The emotional engagement generated by the social surveillance on sites such as *Bloggbevakning* may result in even more attention and new commercial opportunities.

The comments section of *Bloggbevakning* is infamous for its crude tone and “gossipy” culture and, until May 2021, it was almost completely unmoderated. It is a digital sphere where gynaeopticism and the girlfriend gaze can be observed in discussions concerning influencers’ appearance and behaviour, specifically in relation to cosmetic surgery and different beauty treatments. A recurring object of such discussions is Paulina Danielsson, better known under her nickname Paow, who has made a name for herself during the last decade as an influencer and reality-TV star. Her social media content is frequently featured on the blog, especially her collaborations with cosmetic surgery clinics in Turkey, where she has undergone several procedures to enhance or change certain features (e.g., *Bloggbevakning*, 2021b). Posts might be followed by hundreds of comments in which the girlfriend gaze is focused on her appearance before and after surgery. What makes these discussions interesting is the way in which they articulate the community’s ambivalent attitudes towards scrutinising and criticising other women. Some commenters remark on Paow’s “unnatural” appearance, or that she looks “sad” and “tragic” after the procedures. These negative statements are often related to forensic looking and extensive scrutiny of “before and after” pictures of the results, down to very small details in photos. Others question these judgements and instead criticise *Bloggbevakning* for framing the posts in such a way that the discussion becomes a mockery of an individual person, rather than a critique of the cosmetic surgery industry and the beauty ideals that women are invited to internalise.

Platform surveillance in the digital marketing industry

So far, we have discussed how a range of self- and peer-surveillance practices are inherent to influencer culture, and how these also contribute to the commercial success of influencers in the beauty and lifestyle genre. We now continue the chapter by discussing how advanced data monitoring is another necessary condition for the influencer marketing industry. This describes how industry intermediaries collect, analyse, and package the engagement of customers, fans, and followers into a product that can be sold to other commercial actors seeking advertising space for products, brands, and services. When discussing surveillance as data monitoring, it is fruitful to consider how digital environments, rather than social codes, affect the subjectivities of users (and other stakeholders). Such a perspective shifts the focus from Foucault's formulation of visibility as a vehicle for self-discipline and the peer-surveillance of Gill's notion of the gynaeopticon, to prediction of behaviours against the background of the platforms' design, structure, and ability to mine data.

In the monitoring industry, digital environments are designed, one might say, to function as sensors that categorise, collect, and predict user behaviour. An overall way to describe such monitoring is the term platform surveillance (Wood & Monahan, 2019). The platform, seen as a metaphor – a framework connected to other media technologies (interfaces, servers, devices, code, cables, etc.) – can be used, according to Wood and Monahan, to better grasp the infrastructural logic of modern digital media ecosystems and their affordances. As Wood and Monahan (2019: 3) put it:

The platform has returned to its earliest sense of a framework or, one could also say, an infrastructure. [...] Infrastructures establish contexts for practice. They enable, support, and afford certain practices while necessarily disabling, eroding, and resisting others.

Platform surveillance, they suggest, can be recognised as a kind of “governmentality” (Foucault, 2008). That is, not only networked technological infrastructures and technical information systems whose main function is to collect and analyse user data, but also a radically new form of techno-political economy through which subjects are governed. Apart from data collection, an important purpose of these infrastructures is to push and modify media users' behaviour in one way or another. Many platforms are designed to make their users stay and come back; click, like, and post content; or buy (advertised) products.

Platform surveillance bears some resemblance to Shoshana Zuboff's (2015) broader term, surveillance capitalism, which designates the logic of accumulation invented and embraced by the tech industry. Her argument is that big tech companies (and smaller ones) make profit by turning user engagement into assets, and by doing so, they provide the main source of economic rev-

enue in various markets. Measurement of the performance of online users has been described as the “asset of the 21st century” (Birch et al., 2021: 1). According to these authors, it is the monitoring and measurement of users’ behaviour that is made valuable and sold on a market (e.g., how much time they spend, how they click, their repetitive patterns of behaviour, engagement, etc.). The user per se is not what is up for sale, but personal data harvested from users is converted into economic objects that are being tracked and recorded for future monetisation.

Data monitoring, prediction, and sociotechnical imaginaries

Platform surveillance was spearheaded by companies such as Facebook and Google, but the technique is also used by numerous smaller businesses, whose entire economic model is based on tracking, storing, and selling the data that people generate when using media ecosystems such as social networking sites, search engines, web shops, apps, online magazines, and the like. In this section, we present and discuss examples of how media companies in Sweden talk about collected user data and how they value such data as assets. In the example below, taken from the podcast *Nordic Ad Tech Review*, the head of data analytics at Aller Media, a market-leading Swedish publicist in popular media with millions of readers every month, discusses the logic and importance of collecting so-called first-party data from users:

We’ll show relevant ads to our users. It benefits the users; it benefits the advertisers and in the long run it is good for us. To do this, we have two main tracks: the first is to obtain first-party data, which is obtained with consent that is clear to the user. Here is Aller Media, I as a user want to log in here and then enable Aller Media to collect certain types of data from me that will be used for things, for these purposes. It is important to have great transparency with the users. What data do we collect, what do we do with it? What do you do if you no longer want to share data? [...] We need to enable and accelerate login for our users. [...] We need a first-party data business for our IO business and for our deals [translated]. (Netric Sales, 2021–2022)

Aller Media hosts several of the influencers that we have already discussed above, and the monitoring of readers and followers is explained and justified by the belief that it is good for both the users and the industry – that it benefits everyone involved. This form of “soft surveillance” also takes place when individuals provide various forms of data to commercial companies through smartphone apps, social media platforms, or other everyday digital platforms and gadgets.

The example above illustrates companies’ desire to bind their customers with a login to gain access to first-party data to collect for future use, since

third-party data is about to be regulated. Third-party data does not result from a relationship of consent between a company and its customers but consists of the exploitation of massive amounts of user data collected from Internet and smartphone users, often but not exclusively with the purpose of personalised, targeted advertising. As a result of public demands to protect the privacy of users, and recent scandals of intrusion into the privacy of millions of Internet users (Cambridge Analytica), the death of third-party data (cookies, location, and demographic data, etc.) has been announced. The tech giant Google has declared plans to phase out the use of third-party data by 2023, and new legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation in the European Union has addressed the issue (Perrone, 2020). However, according to an interview with *Bonnier News*, the decline of third-party data is not seen as a major problem for the digital marketing industry, because companies will adjust to work more with predictions of future user behaviour:

“Digital advertising won’t die, it just won’t be as accurate. At the beginning, the user may see fewer personal ads, but this will be temporary. We’ll work more with predictions, instead of knowing as before exactly what the user is interested in based on previous surfing behaviour,” says Dilem Güler, business development manager at Bonnier News [translated]. (Ottosson, 2021: para. 11)

While the industry might miss out on some of the economic opportunities of collecting user data due to these new regulations, there are numerous other ways to monitor user behaviour that the industry can utilise, such as device fingerprinting, eye-tracking, and machine learning. The head of programmatic and display at Aller Media explains some of these possibilities they see in the future:

We have built up a very strong contextual business where we use machine learning and natural language processing and divide our entire inventory into lots of contextual verticals that we can control [translated]. (Netric Sales, 2021)

In another example taken from the web-based industry magazine *AiThORITY*, the benefits of topic extraction and natural language processing are described. Natural language processing is a form of monitoring technique that is believed to produce more precise knowledge about potential customers’ thoughts, how they might behave, and what they are talking about in digital environments:

Topic extraction is the act of obtaining common themes or topics from a set of data. This can be extremely useful in order to obtain an idea of what your audience is thinking about and is a large part of what NLP [natural language processing] works off of. Within marketing analytics, topic extraction can help you understand what your audience’s inten-

tions or questions are, which, in turn, allows you to better serve their needs. For example, you can leverage NLP to gain an understanding of what customers are discussing on company forums in order to identify common interests and create targeted content for your audience. (Eng, 2020: para. 2)

The examples discussed above reflect some of the sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015) about the future of Big Data mining that are prevalent in the industry today; they can be seen as glimpses into the dreams and fantasies of commercial agencies that seek to teach computers to interpret human communication and actions online for the sole purpose of predicting consumers' behaviour and preferences. Issues that corporations previously had to ask people about in consumer surveys they now want to harvest automatically in assemblages of information that might create a never-before-seen insight into consumer tastes, behaviours, and desires.

Biosurveillance as part of the affective economy

Even more speculative is the notion of biosurveillance, which has its origins in the field of medicine and the security industry (Nemorin, 2018). Biosurveillance involves the monitoring of various types of biological and physiological data, such as the spread of diseases (e.g., Covid-19) and data related to the environmental crisis or climate change. Nemorin (2018) discusses how hopes and dreams of such surveillance have spilled over into the commercial sector as well. The argument is that the commercial sector aspires to collect biodata from human bodies (behaviours, emotions, activities, movements in time, space, and place, etc.). A concrete, yet imaginative, form of biosurveillance is so-called neuromarketing:

In simple terms, neuromarketing is the study of how the brain works when a person has to make a purchasing decision. Whether we're talking about emotional or rational decisions, understanding neuromarketing can be of great help for numerous reasons:

- If you know how to reach the customer's subconscious mind, you can communicate at an indirect or more subtle level.
- Neuromarketing helps you develop a quick rapport with your prospects.
- You can significantly boost your conversion rates by making your prospective clients feel certain feelings such as curiosity, scarcity, pleasure, or pain.

(Foster, 2020: para. 1–2)

In this example, monitoring is presented in rather imaginative terms insofar as companies seek to enter potential customers' brains at a subconscious level and thus guide them into desirable buying behaviours. Neuromarketing seeks to capture neurophysiological and biometric data, such as eye movements or facial expressions, to steer potential consumers in certain directions. One example is eye tracking as a marketing tool:

Screen-based eye tracking allows for the recording and analysis of responses to multimedia stimuli. Perform screen-based eye tracking on images, videos, websites, games, software interfaces, 3D environments, mobile phones to provide deeper insights into visual attention. Eye tracking allows you to see things from the perspective of consumers. Whether you're examining product placement, packaging design, advertising, or user experience, eye tracking accurately reveals what grabs attention, what influences purchase behavior, and how consumers engage with your product. This information helps your business become truly customer-centric. (Tobii Pro, 2022: n.p.)

Eye tracking and neuromarketing techniques can be seen as an indication that platform surveillance is not only about collecting digital traces from media users, but they might also serve as an example of the industry's dream of extending the commodification of biological data from users, such as monitoring blood flows in the brain, facial expressions, heart rate, and respiration. In an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, it is claimed that "the field of neuromarketing, sometimes known as consumer neuroscience, studies the brain to predict and potentially even manipulate consumer behavior and decision making" (Harrell, 2019: Summary, para. 1). Even though such surveillance techniques are not currently widespread, they are predicted to become cheaper and more common. While neuromarketing might arouse the hopes of a more direct route into the minds of consumers, it would probably be imagined as a nightmare by customers who are being exposed to neuromarketing.

Moreover, neuromarketing is a significant part of what Nemorin (2018) calls the "affective economy", that is, a form of commercialism that strives to influence people's consumer behaviour through the notion of emotional appeal, as in the examples above. Even though emotional appeal has been an important ingredient in various forms of advertising media during the last century (ads in the press, telephone, radio, television, etc.), the new possibilities presented by algorithmic and personalised marketing have emerged in digital media environments such as influencer marketing, which, to a large extent, builds upon fantasies of authenticity, relatability, and different forms of intimacy.

Within this affective economy, it is not only media users who are monitored in the industry's visions of the future, but also the influencers themselves. Bishop (2021) writes about what she calls influencer marketing tools, which

are a form of automated tool for monitoring the impact of content generated by different influencers from the perspective of the brand stakeholders. Influencer marketing tools provide analyses of public data from social media and algorithmic calculations of specific influencers' impact on a certain brand. Bishop (2021) argues that brand safety is of central concern, and this is also the rationale behind the surveillance that is carried out by marketing stakeholders using influencer marketing tools to identify bad behaviour and fraud by hired influencers. In a Swedish context, there have been some reports of high numbers of “fake followers” recorded for influencers by the influencer marketing tool *follower check* (Nilsson, 2017). The previously successful Swedish influencer Isabella Löwengrip, for example, has seen most of her brand and commercial success crumble during the last few years based on reports of fake followers and less-than-transparent “engagement” accounts (Lundin & Winberg, 2020). While peer-surveillance by followers and other influencers is an inherent part of the affective economy, as discussed earlier in this chapter, surveillance practices that serve to monitor and regulate influencers seem to be increasingly important in the relationship between influencers and their commercial partners as well.

Conclusions

Surveillance can be understood in many ways in contemporary society, where different modes of watching and seeing, and of gathering and storing information about individuals' everyday lives, arguably serve specific purposes for a range of actors. In this chapter, we have examined what could be called the “sociotechnical imaginaries” of surveillance and how the notion of surveillance can be expanded to include both the social and technological aspects of social media influencers and digital marketing. As we have tried to show in this chapter, imaginaries of technology are rendered in optimistic ways from the perspective of the influencer industry (including digital marketing). However, there are also more pessimistic or critical accounts of imaginaries of the normative relationship between technology and surveillance, as well as the role of technology and “girlfriend media” in shaping gender identities and power relations. We have specifically discussed gendered forms of self- and peer-surveillance, as well as top-down data mining and platform surveillance in this context.

A common characteristic of both gynaeopticism and the surveillance of user data gathered by platforms is that it depends, to a certain extent, on the participation of social media (prod)users, who, through the affordances of digital media, engage in practices that make new forms of surveillance possible. These social and technological surveillance practices are also a prerequisite for success in the industry, for both individual influencers and digital advertising companies. Influencer marketing has grown to be a cultural and economic phenomenon during the last decade, specifically within

the beauty and lifestyle industry that particularly targets women. This makes the emerging surveillance cultures of influencer marketing an interesting case from both feminist and political-economy perspectives on the character and impact of online surveillance.

Our examples, taken from the Swedish influencer industry, show that gendered social surveillance is an inherent part of influencer culture, and something that both causes conflict and underpins commercial success. Influencer marketing is situated within a context where the promotional interests of the fashion and beauty industry are coupled with postfeminist notions of emancipation and empowerment through entrepreneurial femininity and self-expression: an ideological construct that both encourages and challenges the “girlfriend gaze” that women are socialised into adopting when looking at themselves and others. Regulatory discourses on femininity and the body, as well as the forensic dissection of visual influencer content, are integral parts of the industry and the social practices that generate online fame. At the same time, the participatory culture of comments sections and meta-discourses around popular influencers show that gynaeopticism can be both reinforced and contested on these platforms.

The imaginaries relating to monitoring thoughts, social relationships, behaviours, conversations, and actions in digital environments – and perhaps, above all, relating to obtaining knowledge and predictions about future relationships and actions – seem to be another important aspect of platform surveillance in this context. The industry promises that – out of the collection and monitoring of data from digital platforms and bodies – there will arise more mapping, refined predictions, and greater influence over individual consumers’ behaviour. There seems to be a notion that information gathering is never quite sufficient. More and more comprehensive data monitoring is presented as the key to success. While panoptical surveillance rests on self-discipline and coercion through the gaze of the inspector, this newer kind of “automated surveillance” can be described as an “always-on ubiquitous monitoring, and the implicit understanding that there is always the need for more” (Andrejevic, 2019: 10). Predictions, responses from users, emotional outcomes of content, and biometrics collected from human bodies are therefore lauded as both the driving forces for the ongoing monitoring practices and their legitimation.

Finally, there seems to be another common characteristic that binds together the social and technical aspects of surveillance in the influencer industry: the body, specifically visions of monitoring, using, and shaping the physical appearances and functions of both influencers and their followers. These invasive and corporeal discourses are found in both the gendered social surveillance of gynaeopticism and the utopian (or dystopian) visions of the future within the digital marketing industry – a characteristic that highlights the need for critical research in this area.

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