Discourse, affect and surveillance: gender conflict in the omniopticon

DARREN KELSEY
Newcastle University
Darren.Kelsey@newcastle.ac.uk

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Author biography:
Dr Darren Kelsey is Deputy Head of Media, Culture, Heritage at Newcastle University. His research has focused on journalism, media, discourse, politics, mythology, ideology and power, through which he has developed a discourse-mythological approach (DMA) in critical discourse studies. Darren's publications have focused on a range of topics including: war, propaganda, mythology and terrorism; moral storytelling during the London riots; mythological news coverage of bankers after the financial crisis; hero mythology in the discourse and rhetoric of Nigel Farage; and journalism education after the Leveson Inquiry. Darren’s research interests in power and digital media have examined surveillance cultures on social media; developing and applying critical frameworks of discourse, ideology, context, and surveillance theory to analyse digital media technologies. Darren is the founding editor of Journalism and Discourse Studies and a co-convenor of the Newcastle Critical Discourse Group. He is author of the following monograph: Kelsey, D. (2015) Media, Myth and Terrorism: A discourse-mythological analysis of the 'Blitz Spirit’ in British Newspaper Responses to the July 7th Bombings. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Abstract

This article proposes an interdisciplinary framework designed to analyse discourse, affect and surveillance. By revisiting the "omnipticon" (the many watching the many) and proposing “civeillance” as an affective dynamic of surveillance culture, it considers communicative mechanisms that reflect the interchangeable functions and normalisations of surveillance technologies in personal and public spaces. When 17-year-old Austin Haughwout was using his drone to film aerial shots of Hammonasset Beach in Connecticut, 23-year-old Andrea Mears accused him of photographing people on the beach. Mears physically attacked Haughwout, called the police and accused him of assault. During the attack, Haughwout used his phone to record the incident without Mears’ knowledge. The video was used by the police who arrested Mears for assault. The recording then featured in news stories online, where Mears was subjected to sexist abuse. The following analysis shows how affective practices and embodied meaning-making are personally, socially and technologically embedded within discursive processes of representation. Contrary to non-representational theories of affect, this framework sees affective-discursive practice as a multimodal complex of communicative components. Dialogical mechanisms of discourse and contextual complexities function through physical practices and cultural conducts, which are ideologically influenced by social relations and power structures. Discourse both affects, and is affected by, the feelings, emotions, minds, ideologies and interactive experiences that we have in personal spaces and social contexts.

Introduction

This interdisciplinary case study is concerned with discourse, affect and ideology in the omnipticon. Whilst this might offer an ambitious synergy in the breadth of its theoretical and topical scope, its conceptual intricacies demonstrate the current necessity for multimodal approaches and interdisciplinary collaborations in discursive analyses of digital media and communicative practices. As Herring (2001:625) states, “the discursive negotiation and expression of social relations in cyberspace including asymmetrical relations, constitutes to be one of the most promising areas of future investigation”. By reflecting on one event in this study, the Connecticut beach fight between Andrea Mears and Austin Haughwout, which developed into an international news story, I will offer a conceptual and analytical approach that helps to theorise and further understand the affective-discursive practices of omniptotic surveillance culture. In doing so, I will introduce the notion of “civeillance”, which I propose as an interchangeable dynamic for explaining one of the many complex and simultaneous surveillance mechanisms that operate within the “omnipticon” (see Kelsey and Bennett, 2014).

In order to appreciate the complexities of the Connecticut case, an interdisciplinary and multimodal approach is necessary in order to theorise the social and technological issues concerned. Previous approaches to multimodal discourse analysis (e.g. Jones, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2004; Machin and Mayr, 2012) have been useful in their conceptual and analytical scope, expanding beyond the linguistic construction of texts and practice to consider the multiple aspects of discourse through other visual, audio and spatial dimensions of communicative practice. In addition, I want to further account for more
recent technological and conceptual developments concerning both surveillance culture and affective practice respectively. Hence, we need to understand the “affective practice” (Wetherell, 2012) behind experiences that stimulate feelings, actions and expressions of those participating in discursive encounters and exchanges. In relation to affective practice, we need to understand how discourse and ideology influences those encounters, experiences and expressions of participants. Unlike other approaches to affect theory, which Wetherell (2012) has thoroughly critiqued in her support for discursive work in this area, affective practice in the framework below cannot be explained in purely neurological or physical terms. Equally, media technologies cannot be solely explained or understood through technological determinism. Rather, these phenomena need to be understood in their discursive and social contexts.

The theoretical framework below clarifies my position on discourse and previous approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in digital contexts. The introduction of affective practice to this literature is important for progressive research in CDA. But it is equally important to show what CDA can continue to offer in studies of affect and digital communicative practice. This framework will distinguish itself from other approaches to affect that have argued for a “post-discourse” position of non-representation based theory or, as Wetherell (2012: 19) points out, have gone as far as “rubbing discourse”. Wetherell (ibid: 19) argues that discourse often “makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means to make affect travel”. As this case study shows, gender and surveillance discourses are functioning on multiple levels throughout this discursive event; from the contextual interpretation, discursive expressions and actions of Mears, through to the sexism and abuse that she is exposed to in the user-generated content on the Mail Online.

I will argue that surveillance cultures operate as affective practices since they regulate behaviour beyond merely human emotions; they influence our agency, actions and perceptions of spaces around us, through both semiotic processes and embodied meaning-making. These discursive practices are intricately bound up in processes of affecting and being affected in surveillance culture. In line with Wetherell’s approach, the following framework sees human affect as being “inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined) and the discursive” (Wetherell, 2012:20). This framework and analysis will highlight multiple levels of practice: in approaches to CDA that expand beyond the text to broader notions of social practice, ideology and discourse in action; in surveillance cultures that are forms of discursive, social and affective practices of power, control and behavioural regulation; and the affective interactions that are both influenced by discourse, whilst further stimulating other affective-discursive practices.

**Analytical framework**

*Discourse and affective practice*

It is important to clarify this framework’s synergy between discourse, affect and surveillance. The most appropriate and compatible work that I have seen in recent
efforts to theorise affect for social and discursive research is Wetherell’s (2012) approach to affective practice. There is huge ground to cover across the meandering and contentious landscape of current theorisations of affect across various disciplines. However, in response to particular theorisations that have distanced affect research from discursive approaches in social science and representation based theory, Wetherell has provided a comprehensive position that makes affect theory conceptually compatible for discursive analysis. This approach states the importance of social science in efforts to understand affect and emotion in social contexts, environments and practices. Hence I adopt “affective practice” as the most useful and substantive way of building dimensions of affect research into discursive analyses of surveillance culture.

To reassure scholars of discourse, a move towards affect does not mean “a naïve return to humanism and realism or a return to analysing affect through uncritical acceptance of people’s subjective descriptions of emotional states” (Wetherell, 2012: 76). Rather, we can actually benefit from “drawing on the more lively theory and accounts of discourse in action” (ibid: 76). These approaches enable us to move beyond one-dimensional concepts of representation by considering representation as a discursive practice, which exists within a range of discursive practices in action. As many approaches in critical discourse studies (CDS) have shown, discourse is not limited to language, and discourse analysis goes beyond just the linguistic analysis of texts: “I see discourse analysis as ‘oscillating’ between a focus on specific texts and a focus on what I call the ‘order of discourse’” (ibid: 3). Like Fairclough, we should “use the term discourse to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part” (ibid: 24).

KhosraviNik (2016) highlights the need for CDA to analyse entire processes of communicative practice on social media. By considering affective practice in this process, our understanding of these interactions beyond the text becomes increasingly enriched.

Surveillance technology can both regulate (affect) our own behaviour and, as audiences viewing surveillance footage of events, it can partly affect our emotional state, perception and response to, for instance, an act of violence. So we should think about surveillance both in terms of discursive practice, because of the social relations, tensions and processes which it is bound up in, and affective practice in terms of the ways it is used to regulate behaviour and stimulate reactions to events. As Wetherell (2012: 23) points out, studies of social practice emphasise both conventionality and unpredictability: she explains that Bourdieu and Foucault considered how social hierarchies and structures were congealing and constraining to a point that they were difficult to change, whilst Deleuze allowed for more flexibility and mutation in social roles, formations and practices. Wetherell (2012) accepts both dynamics in her notion of social practice, which the discursive-affect is part of. I argue that these dynamics are also reflected in the omni-opticon. Previous notions of panoptic power and practice are still useful in certain contexts, but we also need to look further into the unfixed and less restrictive possibilities of the many watching the many in social and technological contexts, to which I will return shortly.

Spoken, written and physical actions of discourse are often designed to affect other participants of communicative processes and exchanges. Hence, discursive and social
practices are sophisticatedly bound together and entwined through simultaneous negotiations of communicative exchanges and experiences. In the analysis below, I am approaching discourse in terms of multiple communicative practices and affective spaces that are influencing, and influenced by, the discursive orders, exchanges and environments concerned. Affective practices, which Wetherell’s approach allows us to consider in their social contexts, are bound up in processes of the discursive. This position enables us to consider, more explicitly and empathetically, the affective-discursive practices of communication; understanding how actions and discourses affect participants and how those affects stimulate other discursive mechanisms, through a process that Wetherell (2012: 7) refers to as “affective-discursive loops”.

By adopting critical approaches to discourse and affect theory, we can significantly enhance the scope of our discursive observations in CDS. Kelsey and Bennett (2014) adapted previous approaches to CDA (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998, 2001; KhosraviNik, 2014) to show how CDA could be adapted to analyse discursive practice in digital social contexts, and contribute to the development of theoretical concepts on surveillance culture. This offered an approach to analysing digital media that was not limited to the linguistic analysis of any specific text. In this paper, I argue that we need to continue expanding these conceptual approaches to account for the rapid technological growth and social prevalence of participatory media. Even within a multimodal approach that incorporates an eclectic synergy of conceptual frameworks, it is still useful to think about discourse operating on the three layers that Fairclough’s model (1995) has so usefully offered in discourse research: textual analysis, discursive practice, social practice. Within these complex and overlapping dimensions, we can account for the aspects that I cover in this analytical framework. We can start with the text(s) concerned and analyse the words and images we see and hear through the video, the news article, and the user comments. We can understand how the discursive practices of those textual elements are constructed, and constructing, meanings and exerting, exploiting, resisting or opposing forms of social power. Within the third level of social practice we can think about how culture, society, power and ideology are both influenced by, and influencing, the social relations in which they are constructed.

This enables us to look at the interdiscursive mechanisms that feed into stories, exchanges, descriptions and interpretations of events, to understand how certain discourses are linked to each other across multiple texts and contexts. For example, “a discourse on un/employment often refers ... to topics of other discourses, such as gender or racism: arguments on systematically lower salaries for women or migrants might be included in discourses on employment” (Wodak, 2008: 3). Topics of discourse tend to spread and overlap with other fields and discourses, which are often “socio-functionally linked with each other” (2008: 17). As the Connecticut case shows, multiple discourses of gender, voyeurism, surveillance, (in)justice and criminality all feed into the intertextual modes and mediums of communicative practice. Producers and consumers of communicative practices draw on the familiar archetypes and mythological conventions of storytelling to tell, and understand, stories about the world (Lule, 2002; Kelsey, 2015a, 2015b). As Wetherell (2014) explains, “so much of public affect is communicative and bound up with communicative practices such as narrative.
Affective-discursive practices such as ‘doing righteous indignation’ or ‘doing being the victim’ are so salient and crucial in political life and yet are deeply methodical and mannered” (2014). The latter is particularly relevant to the Connecticut case in this analysis.

The interpretations and “recontextualisations” (Kelsey, 2015a) that we impose upon meanings and stories adopt the preferred or appropriate conventions that suit the knowledge, ideals and preferences of either the storyteller, or the person who is trying to make sense of the events that they witness, and the discursive exchange that they are part of. These complexities demonstrate the importance of context theory (see below) in our understanding of discursive practice and social relations. Furthermore, they reflect the dialogical mechanisms of communication (see Bakhtin, 1981). Language, actions and stories are understood through dialogical thought processes that are endlessly connected and interpreted through associations and connections with pre-existing knowledge, actions, stories and experiences (contexts).

Hence, dialogical mechanisms inform the contextual complexities of interpretations, feelings and responses in the socio-cognitive dynamics of discursive exchanges. By understanding the complexities of dialogical contexts, it means that we try to understand how, why and with what purpose in mind, actions and contributions to discursive exchanges are taking place. Discursive participants interpret situations, expressions and actions in order to understand or evaluate the intentions of another person. These interpretations will differ according to the cognitive resources and knowledge that a participant draws on (van Dijk, 2001). For example, a person familiar with drones, and how they are used, is less likely to react to Haughwout in the way that Mears did. Other people will be emotionally affected (or not) in different ways to Mears, according to their contextual interpretation of Haughwout’s actions. The dialogical mechanisms that influence different interpretations and reactions to events and actions hold an integral function within affective-discursive practices. The way that Mears is affected is not a matter of neurological purity. It is interdiscursively informed by other knowledge and contextual resources that draw on social and communicative objects, texts and experiences. This is where my interests lie: in that participatory media and surveillance technologies are part of discursive practices, both in the ways that they are used and how they are interpreted or talked about.

Eclectic theorisations of context provide rigorous insights into the socio-cognitive complexities of context (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014). The ways in which contexts are realised or constructed have received considerable attention across various disciplines of social, psychological and discursive fields of research. Ethnographic theories of context (e.g. Auer and Di Luzio, 1992; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992) consider “the relevant structures of whole communicative events, and not just on the structures of text or talk as part of such events, and such events also include a setting, participants, goals, etc.” (van Dijk, 2001: 19). Androutsopoulos’ (2008) ethnographic approach considers a combination of potential environmental factors and communicative practices that participants are involved in. KhosraviNik (2014:293) explains this approach in further detail:
Emphasis is also on the role of context, as in questions about users’ motivations for the use of a particular resource online, the meanings they attach to those resources, and relationship between participants. In foregrounding online ethnography, there is an emphasis on systematic observation within ‘web environments’ starting from the core to the periphery of the field under investigation, identifying core participants, and reading member's self-descriptions.

As van Dijk (2001: 19) argues in his cognitive approach to context, “whatever language users attend to in discourse is largely dependent on their model of the communicative situation. It is this model that keeps track of what the language users finds interesting or important, or otherwise relevant for their or his current aims”. van Dijk (ibid: 14) describes context models as cognitive constructions that are often biased since they carry personal opinions or perceptions informed by affiliations with certain social groups who pursue particular goals or ideological interests:

Indeed, a feminist and male chauvinist in conversation are likely to have pretty different context models, as do a liberal and a conservative, a professor and a student, and a doctor and a patient talking together. Indeed biased or incomplete context models are the source of profound communicative and interactional conflicts.

However, it is important to note that “context models are not static mental representations, but dynamic structures” (ibid: 8). Rather, context accounts for the ways that “the discourse will dynamically change the knowledge the participants have about the knowledge of the other” (van Dijk, 2001: 8). In the Connecticut case, we see how the actions of Haughwout are interpreted by Mears, and how the discursive events unfold to inform other participants through the Mail Online and its user-generated comments. Therefore, “what counts as context is not limited to the physical reality surrounding the text. Instead the focus is on the ‘models’ that people build up in their minds (and in their interaction) of the situation” (Jones, 2004:22).

Kelsey and Bennett (2014) previously argued that there are certain forms of knowledge, or aspects of contexts models, that participants might suppress or neglect according to the personal, institutional or professional pressures, responsibilities or interests in any given situation. These points are important in the Connecticut case because they inform the contextual interpretations and contributions that Mears, Haughwout, the police, the journalist and the Mail Online readers all brought to this discursive event, and the exchanges that occur throughout. Kelsey and Bennett (2014) also argued that we need to be aware of negative social relations and problematic contexts of omnioptic culture. As KhosraviNik (2014: 288) states, CDS cannot shy away from substantially engaging with the new media communications as emerging sites of discursive struggles. As we see in the Connecticut case, pre-existing conflicts of gender discourse and ideology provide instances of social tensions recurring in affective-discursive spaces that are partly influenced by technological developments. But before moving forward, I will explain the concept of the omniopticon in more detail.
The omniopticon and civeillance practice

Fuchs (2011) has differentiated between technologies and practices that either qualify (or not) as surveillance, or fall into fixed categories of neutral/negative forms of surveillance. Whilst I sympathise with some of Fuchs’ reasons for doing this, I feel they are too simplistic. Although they adhere to Fuchs’ neo-Marxist theorisation of digital media, power and exploitative social relations, his categorisations do not sufficiently account for the nuanced micro-mechanisms of social tensions that reflect the interchangeable functions of surveillance technologies, or the normalisations of surveillance practice that impact upon social relations. Fuchs (2011: 125) argues that a “neutral concept of surveillance is a disservice for a critical theory of surveillance, it makes critique more difficult and may support the ideological celebration and normalization of surveillance”. But, I argue, this does not have to be the case. It is this cultural normalisation that has seen surveillance technologies and practices become increasingly accepted (or resisted), adapted and adopted in multiple contexts, which exercise social and institutional power in different, and interchangeable, ways. These practices affect our feelings, conducts, responses and approaches towards particular social situations, institutions and environments. Hence, a neutral approach can examine surveillance cultures in critical contexts. Likewise, the neutral (yet critical) approach I also take to ideology reflects a Gramscian (1971) position on power struggles and ideological negotiations within hegemonic social structures, to which I will return shortly.

Before proceeding, I should recap some of the conceptual developments around the concept of omnioptic surveillance. This approach does not dismiss or embrace one model of surveillance theory; it reapplies aspects from previous theoretical frameworks that are most applicable, in addition to further insights that help us understand omnioptic power dynamics. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) used Bentham’s panoptic prison as a metaphor to explain how the constant, potential gaze (surveillance) of the state in modern society disciplined people through self-regulation. Since Foucault’s work, other scholars have proposed more contemporary understandings of panoptic and post-panoptic theory (Mathiesen, 1997; Doyle, 2011; Bauman and Lyon, 2013). Mathiesen’s (1997) critique of Foucault refined the application and understanding of panoptic surveillance. Without overlooking the relevance of panopticism, Mathiesen proposed the theory of synopticism. In addition to a purely panoptic process of the few watching the many, Mathiesen argued that through mass media and modern technology the many could watch the few. For Mathiesen (1997), a proliferation of synoptic culture resulted in publics becoming what he termed ‘the viewer society’. However, Mathiesen was pessimistic about synoptic practice for, in his view, its lack of liberating power, active resistance or critical engagement from audiences.

Kelsey and Bennett (2014) later demonstrated the complex dynamics of exploitative, authoritarian power in negotiation with mechanisms of resistance and empowerment. The conflictual and simultaneous negotiations of the few watching the many, and the many watching the few, demonstrate the complex dynamics of the omnioptic gaze (the many watching the many). Whilst the omniopticon had been conceptualised before
(Jensen, 2007; Jurgenson, 2013) it had not critically accounted for the vast theoretical nuances involved in the constant developments and mutations of omnioptic surveillance dynamics. As Deuze (2012: 129) points out, Jensen’s “omnopticon” is “considered by some a social system that democratizes the panopticon, and can thus neutralise centralized, top-down hierarchical forms of authority”. However, in line with Deuze, I am also reluctant to propose any celebratory notion of neutralisation or democratization. Democratic countercurrents of power might simultaneously operate against authority in the omniopticon, but they do not abolish macro power structures:

… [T]hey simply complicate and negotiate power relations within a broader social structure and dominant order. Rather like Gramsci’s … model, hegemonic power is never fixed or static since it is open to constant negotiation, resistance and change. Modern media technologies and society feature these synoptic-panoptic interplays of power through battles of control and resistance (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014).

Therefore, post-panoptic theorisations should not be absent of criticality and should avoid making technologically deterministic claims. Equally, more nuanced (yet critical) approaches to micro-macro power relations should not be categorically dismissed as naïve celebrations of internet empowerment.iii Bauman and Lyon (2013) have noted the usefulness of panoptic metaphors, but have also moved towards more complex understandings of post-panoptic and post-synoptic concepts of modern surveillance. Although “mutual” and “liquid” (Jensen, 2007; Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Jurgenson, 2013) are potentially problematic terms – given the socio-economic inequalities, power structures and social hierarchies that modern communicative systems remain situated within – it is important to recognise that technological developments have seen surveillance practices become more normalised, complex and inclusive of different social groups in ways that we have not previously experienced. Therefore, we need to use these terms with care and contextual sensitivity in order to avoid naïve celebrations of neutralised power without equally committing to the structured and inflexible surveillance categories that Fuchs (2011) has proposed.

What I am interested in here is the expansive technological, communicative and affective practices of surveillance culture that we are seeing in socio-digital participatory spaces. In doing so, I propose the notion of civeillance practice within the omniopticon. Previous work on sousveillance (Mann, Nolan and Wellman, 2003; Bollier, 2013) has considered how synoptic mechanisms enable the many to watch the few through the use of sousveillance technology, as oppose to state surveillance. But I am reluctant to adopt some of these terms in the dichotomy of surveillance versus counter-surveillance. The notion of the omniopticon allows for the same technologies to shift in their contextual uses; the same surveillance footage, technology or practice might be used by plural social groups and institutions in different ways, according to the oppositional contextual interests at stake. Instead of dichotomised conceptualisations, it is more useful to understand the vast and interchangeable functions of surveillance dynamics within the scope of the many watching the many. Therefore, I only propose the concept of civeillance as a dynamic to help us understand how civilians can watch each other and be empowered, protected or punished via practices that, in some cases,
become an extension of institutional surveillance resources. These processes, I argue, are intricately bound up in the discursive practices of representation and embodied meaning-making, which we can explain and understand through notions of affective practice and affective-discursive loops.

The omniopticon accounts for a multiplicity of shifting and mutating dynamics – panoptic, synoptic, surveillance, sousveillance, civeillance, etc. – that are engaged in unstable operations and negotiations of power and social practice: “synoptic-panoptic interplays of power and ‘omnioptic’ … activity will continue to impact upon the social and discursive practices of digital media” (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014). The Connecticut case study enables the development of further critical and complex insights into omnioptic culture as an affective practice, which influences physical behaviour, cognitive perception, technological agency, and discursive participation (including those extended participations of active readers and audiences online). The concentrated sample for this case study contains material from one news article and the multiple communicative practices that occurred during this event: the embedded video of the assault, the news story on the Mail Online (Gardner, 2014), and the reader comments below the article.iv

**Analysis: The Connecticut beach fight**

Whilst emotions and discursive articulations of feeling operate in every level and stage of the case below, there are physical and technological dynamics that influence processes of embodied meaning-making throughout this conflict. The semiotic, in its broadest sense, is wrapped up in these processes, since it informs the perceptions and actions of those participants in the event and exchanges that take place. The public space that Haughwout is seen to be exploiting, his use of what is interpreted as intrusive technology, and the private space of (specifically) a beach constructs physical and perceptive environments that compound in the discursive context of Mears’ accusation and attack. I begin by considering the civeillance dynamic of Haughwout’s phone as an omnioptic eyewitness source, since this technological nuance affects the contextual evidence and direction of events after the attack.

**The omnioptic eyewitness: Haughwout’s phone as civeillance evidence**

During this conflict we see Haughwout burdened with the voyeur stereotype, where he is accused of “perv’ing” on people. Watching the video, which has had hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube via multiple posts, and became an embedded feature of online news stories, there is a distinct sense of anger, anxiety and aggression in Mears’ language. Here are 4 quotes (Q1-Q4) from the video:

Q1) “Stop, stop, stop, this guy is taking pictures and trying to upload them from a camera. Can you guys get here?”

Q2) ”That’s what you get, you little pervert!”
Q3) "Maybe you shouldn’t be taking pictures of people on the beach!"

Q4) "I'm going to beat your ass, you little motherfucker."

Reflecting Wetherell’s (2014) earlier point, Mears’ actions here follow the narrative she has constructed in her interpretation of Haughwout’s agency: “Affective-discursive practices such as ‘doing righteous indignation’ or ‘doing being the victim’ are so salient and crucial in political life and yet are deeply methodical and mannered” (2014). It is here that we see the affective-discursive practice of ‘doing righteous indignation’ and ‘doing being the victim’ unfolding in Mears’ attack. Her physical assault expresses the anger reflected in her screaming and language. The punishment she believes she is serving Haughwout simultaneously informs the righteousness and victimhood that she embodies and expresses through her verbal and physical response. Of course, this discursive interpretation is based on the narrative Mears constructed herself, due to the actions of Haughwout, where his physical position of operating a drone over a beach embodied, according to Mears, a threat and agency of deviance.

Q1 makes two assertions and reflects anxieties about the internet that dialogically connect with the discourse of sexual deviance. Mears claims that he is trying to “upload them from a camera” when she calls the police. After calling him a pervert, she then reiterates the accusation that he was taking pictures of people rather than the landscape or beach. Due to Mears contextualising this as intrusion and deviance, Haughwout’s agency as “the pervert” then leaves him in a position where a physical attack, from Mears’ perspective, seems justified. As a result of this perception and accusation, Mears takes the position of moral justification in her right to respond and her obligation to give Haughwout the physical punishment that she believes he deserves. For Mears, the immoral actions of Haughwout provide a moral justification to physically assault him and call the police.

But we can only speculate about Mears’ feelings here. On the one hand, she might have been genuinely anxious and defending herself, or anyone she might have been with. However, there might have been some genuine malice or more provocative vigilantism on Mears’ part. Either way, there are dialogical connections here with other moral discourses and social contexts around voyeurism and the internet. One example of this interdiscursive context is illustrated by Mears calling Haughwout a pervert. For Mears, her perception of Haughwout’s agency has an affective influence on her emotions, expressions and responses. The dialogical process of her perception is an affective-discursive process, in that it draws on the stories, anxieties and stereotypes that she connects or relates his actions to, whilst constructing and expressing these discursive characteristics and archetypes to form a story that she tells to the police. Her false accusation of assault appears to fit the narrative that she is constructing from the perception she has of Haughwout in her attempts to have him punished.

Mears’ accusation of intrusion here was partly due to the technology that Haughwout was using and where it was being used. His physical agency and the affective practice of controlling what was believed to be surveillance equipment created this tension between public space and personal (private) interest, through the representational ambiguities of embodied meaning in his actions. The physical perception of Haughwout
standing from a distance on a beach, exploiting a space where women and young children might be, produces its own discursive context. Whilst his actions and agency are affective in a semiotic sense, the story that is told about him here is emotive and leaves him in a vulnerable position. The technology itself was also perceived in a different way to other media equipment; drones are not currently familiar in public spaces, although this is rapidly changing as the commercial use of drones becomes more common and these social tensions arise. As a fairly new and commercially unfamiliar technology in public spaces, at least at the time, there were uncertainties around the use of drones and the ethical concerns they raise. Equally, this is not to suggest that familiar equipment like cameras and phones can’t be used in ways that are perceived to be intrusive; entering someone’s perceived “personal space” on a beach, especially with recording equipment, is likely to affect that person and arouse a defensive reaction.

It is understandable that this technology might create anxiety among those who are suspicious of a camera flying around above them on a beach. When potentially intrusive technology is used by a civilian in a public space, other sensitivities and contexts arise. The cognitive mechanics of this case are complex since the height and movement of a drone is different to that of a camera, with the latter it is much easier to see how it is being used and where it is being pointed. The hovering movements of the drone, and how it is looking down from a height, stimulate a different cognitive function on the part of those who feel they are being watched. This is not to suggest that a person with a regular camera would never cause offence or objection if they were seen to be intrusive, but the drone is less normalised or familiar in public spaces. The drone’s unknown use and function in this case increases existing anxieties around photography, privacy, the internet and voyeurism. This is not to suggest that new technologies generate exclusive social anxieties. Rather, the arrival of new technologies provides a space for previously existing anxieties to become enhanced, expressed and recontextualised in other cultural spaces and contexts. Ironically, Mears was under surveillance during this discursive exchange, but not when she believed she was being filmed. Neither she, nor anyone else, were personally filmed by Haughwout, until she approached him. When Mears physically attacked Haughwout, she was unaware that she was being filmed. There were multiple discursive practices of omnioptic surveillance functioning here: firstly, Mears’ perception and assertion that she and others were being watched in a voyeuristic context; secondly, her anxiety around the internet and awareness that civeillance material could be distributed online; thirdly, Haughwout’s actions when he filmed the attack and passed it on to the police. The accusation of assault against Haughwout might have left him in a difficult position without any counter evidence. However, Haughwout’s civeillance evidence worked in his favour. If Mears had known she was being filmed she would have almost certainly behaved differently and it is likely that she would not have accused Haughwout of physical assault either.

There are multiple technologies and cognitive processes that simultaneously operate through the contextual negotiations of media practices, perceptions of those practices, and the devices used in personal and social spaces. Power relations are complicated by these technological advancements, since they blur the previous boundaries of access to surveillance technology. This is why it is important that we do not draw overtly distinct
categories or boundaries between what does or does not qualify as surveillance. It is the cultural development and normalising of surveillance technology through commercial media devices that weaves together a nuanced and intricate landscape of contextual negotiations and refinements of micro-mechanistic power. Socially and institutionally, the police’s position of power remains the same – macro structures of power across society remain the same. But in a micro context, there are power struggles and interests that are in constant negotiation. They both impact upon, and are influenced by, uses of media technology that are entrenched in other normalised cultures of surveillance and social requirements for accountability, protection and justice.

Haughwout’s mobile phone footage of the assault transcended from civeillance activity (of one civilian filming another), to surveillance evidence used by the police as part of a prosecution. Therefore, the omnioptic activities and operations of the many watching the many do not function in a separate social vacuum or trivial public space that is disconnected from institutional power or practice. They are integrated, and interconnected with, the access and practices of institutions that can act and exert power through their use as evidence. Hence, this case exemplifies an extension of surveillance culture through digital media devices used by civilians on civilians in conjunction with institutions, providing another instance in which a growing awareness of being watched (accountability as possibility) might regulate individual or collective behaviours.

But this conjunction and accountability does not just function as digital surveillance evidence between the public and the police to support individual stories, accusations and defences. This footage became part of a public spectacle in media storytelling. Civeillance practice in this case had a significant impact in both cases. This is not a typical eyewitness source used by a journalist; this video significantly influences the contextual production and consumption of the news story. The source is not used to support the story, since the video is the story. Let’s look at the Mail Online (the most popular newspaper website in the world) for an example of the coverage it received and how readers responded to it.

**Gender ideology in the Mail Online**

We can look at gender from multiple perspectives in this case study. So far, we have considered Mears’ perception of Haughwout’s agency, the sense of intrusion that affected her actions, and her accusations of his behaviour. However, further omnioptic dynamics of interactive media technologies operate and reflect other ideological nuances in this case. What is interesting here is the way that the Mail Online contextualised the story through its own language and the way that some of its readers responded to the video.

When searching for this article, the Mail Online’s headline states: “Moment crazed woman assaulted a man for flying his drone on the beach and accused him of being a ‘pervert’”. At some stage this wording was changed, as the headline above the article states: “Moment angry woman assaulted a man for flying his drone on the beach and
accused him of being a 'pervert'”. “Crazed” has been changed to “angry” on the latest version. “Crazed” implies madness and insanity, which lacks the same sense of agency that “angry” implies on Mears’ part. We can only speculate about this editorial decision. Either way, the article is in no way sympathetic to Mears’ position or how she was affected by Haughwout’s agency. This is not to suggest that the article should empathise or sympathise with Mears either. The problem here lies in the fact that this became a gendered communicative process; the user comments make sexist remarks about Mears whilst expressing broader social commentary on perceptions of gender relations. Rather than contesting or condemning the mistake of Mears as an individual, some readers recontextualised this attack (ideologically) as an example of gender inequality, identifying men as the victims of sexism, injustice and double standards.

The Mail Online describes Haughwout as “a drone hobbyist” and provides a supplementary account of the video embedded in the article:

A drone hobbyist flying his quadrocopter on the Connecticut shoreline was accused of photographing beachgoers by a passing woman who then assaults the man in shocking footage he took on his iPhone. The unbelievable video has since been uploaded to YouTube and shows Andrea Mears, 23, violently knocking over the man as she calls him a pervert. But the man at no point fights back during the struggle and the video, dated May 12 he took on the sly ended up ensuring that Mears was the one hauled away by police.

Since the evidence in this video and the drone footage checked by the police demonstrate his innocence, the article is able to tell a clear story that condemns the actions of Mears without arousing suspicion around Haughwout. Mears’ actions are described as “unbelievable” and “bizarre” because of the civeillance evidence concerned. Further checks can also be made on Haughwout’s character by looking up his user account on YouTube and checking other videos that he has uploaded, which presumably informs the following extract from the article:

While it is unclear what occurred in the moments before the man began recording the bizarre incident, his YouTube account--which also hosts an edited version of the video--features several other seemingly innocent videos taken on the beach with the drone.

Whilst it is not wrong to state Haughwout’s innocence in this event, the broader contextual problem lies in the lack of attention or empathy given to concerns about privacy, intrusion and public anxieties around drone technologies. In another context, this could be a story about the growing social tensions and confusions caused by surveillance cultures and digital technologies. Again, this is not to criticise the Mail Online for not telling us this story instead. But through the dichotomy of a “victim versus perpetrator” story, in which a “crazed” or “angry” woman attacks a young man, these other complexities and attention to social anxieties are interruptive details, which might compromise the spectacle that stimulates those responses in the user comments. Nonetheless, the suppression of empathy here is significant given the multiple public discourses and anxieties around surveillance technologies, privacy, crime, the internet.
and the effect that these concerns have on peoples’ feelings, thoughts, perceptions and actions.

In the “best rated” and “worst rated” comments under this article, we can see the interdiscursive melee that this story stimulated, and the gender ideology that was central to that stimulation. There were 171 comments in total. The top 10 “best rated” comments received between 230-573 “green-up” votes compared to just 0-20 “red-down” votes. Some of these were brief, abusive and personal attacks on Mears’ physical appearance: “She’s lucky he didn’t beat her fat ass on camera”; “Her legs are on the wrong shoe”; “She needs to get a mirror. Nobody would want to take pictures of her”. But some of the most popular comments among those “best rated” were speculating over the punishment Mears would receive as a woman. The following examples are the top 2 comments (with replies indented):

C1: Clever kid for filming it. Unfortunately, without the video, the police would undoubtedly have sided with her and he would have left in handcuffs. She’ll probably get a slap on the wrist now and be on her merry way.

   R1: True. Any woman that will beat a man like that will also lie and blame him if she can get away with it.

   R2: Imagine it the other way round. 26-year-old man attacks 16-year-old girl and rips off her shirt and unzips her pants. He’s looking at serious jail time, she is looking at an inconvenient fine.

C2: She belongs in jail. Equal punishment for women for equal crime.

   R1: It is not an equal crime, if you had been paying attention in school you would know that a male body has a much greater muscle mass and therefore a great advantage physically over a female. This is no reason for women not to have equal rights however.

   R2: [R1], you are spot on. Not that we are excusing this behaviour at all from this “lady”. Her behaviour is disgusting, and she should get punished. I hope that she grows up and changes from this incident. [R1], you are right though, if a man was to attack a woman this way she would be a lot worse off. Again, no excuse on the woman’s behalf anyway. Oh, and Mike...you’re living in a fantasy world if you think most men even go to jail for assaulting women. They don’t.

   R3: From what planet do you come from where forcible confinement and assault are tolerated when women are the perpetrators and men are the victims? I’m glad you’re not a judge. The law is blind and should not take into account such things as who has the greater muscle mass.

   R4: [R1], you’re talking rubbish! Just because the female may be smaller does not make any difference at all. There are plenty of women bigger and more powerful than men.

   R5: Don’t waste your time [R4], women only want equal rights when it suits them.
R6: He was doing what that woman accused him of. She jumped the gun without getting her facts straight and that’s why she deserves to go to jail. I bet if it was the other way around you offer to burn him at the stake yourselves.

R7: [R1], what if it is a 90-pound male nerd being pummelled by a 200-pound Amazonian bodybuilder or 300-pound cow?

In this user-generated content we see feelings of outrage and injustice expressed through discourses of (in)equality, double standards, hypocrisy, domestic violence, law and order, physicality and morality. There are simultaneous dynamics operating here between the ideological context of user comments interpreting this story and the affective practices that not only stimulate their emotive responses to the article, but also stimulate the debate. These comments are another example of why we need to identify affective practice in social context, so that we can understand the symbiotic synergies between emotions, discourse and ideology through the intellectual framework preceding this analysis. There are interdiscursive practices in the argument under C2, which reflect the dialogical formation of gender ideologies that respondents are carrying, expressing and opposing through the dialogue of this exchange. Both sides of the argument attempt to empathise with their perceptions of how society and the legal system deal with gender violence. We also see Haughwout praised for filming (“smart kid”), on the assumption that he would have been charged with assault otherwise.

What is interesting about the replies that stimulated the debate, by challenging C2, is their effort to address some complexity beyond the assertions of those users who see this as a clear example of prejudice against men. This interruption to their understanding of the story is unwelcome, even though the respondents clearly state that they do not condone Mears’ behaviour and they even agree that she should be punished. The way in which the other users respond expresses a deeper feeling of resentment and injustice that does not allow any space for negotiation or compromise. Haughwout is symbolic of their ideological beliefs, in which men are subjected to prejudice and unfair treatment in society.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the “worst rated” comments under this article either attempted to engage with some of the complexities beyond simplistic dichotomy of gender conflict, or they simply resorted to a reversed discourse of mistrust towards men and drone users. Here are some examples:

C1: Some people do not like big brother spying on them. The kid was within his rights but he should have said sorry and got the heck out of there. Instead he did his passive aggressive “feman” stuff and got beat.

R1: Dumbest response ever.

C2: Good for her.

C3: I can understand her feeling. These drones pop up all over the place with men saying they are just using the technology - Riiigggghhht NOT.
R1: as long as you are not naked on public land (which you should not be) what's the problem? (unless you are shooting up or doing something else illegal). By the way, CCTV records you pretty much anywhere anyway.

C4: He’s a weirdo, she’s an idiot.

R1: Why? Because he was flying a drone? You need to get a life.

C5: Problem is, it's a drone. Nothing wrong per se, but the negative reaction was predicted months ago.

R1: They’re just helicopters. No big deal.

R2: So what you are saying, if I take a camera to the beach, it's fair for someone to attack me?

There is an awareness of surveillance culture in these remarks, whether they are critical of Haughwout or not. C1 does not blame Haughwout, but empathises with “some people” who do not like being watched by “Big Brother”. This reflects an awareness of the tensions and anxieties around technological and cultural expansions of surveillance practices. C3 is more critical of Haughwout and generally suspicious of men using drone technology. But as the response to C3 points out, there is a broader awareness of CCTV and constant surveillance in other spaces. C5 is more balanced in its response to the attacks, by empathising with the reactions that drones were predicted to cause when they first came into public use. The replies to C5, in addition to other comments above, also demonstrate my previous point about discourses around drone technology and perceptions of their use, which create affective dynamics due to their symbolic and intrusive appearance in public spaces. These dynamics are complexly entwined in constant negotiations between personal perceptions, (mis)understandings, (mis)conceptions, feelings and anxieties in multiple contexts, concerning more than just technology but also other social groups (genders) and institutions (police and courts). These affective-discursive practices account for the intricate operations of social exchanges, from the initial conflict on the beach to the police intervention, the dissemination of the video online to its production as a news story, its consumption by readers to the comments on the story and subsequent responses. This data reflects the development of discursive, contextual and ideological components, occurring through the simultaneous negotiations of these affective-discursive processes.

Conclusion

Through our current cultural experiences within the omniopticon, we have become increasingly aware of how we might be recorded by civilians as much as the state. Surveillance cultures operate as affective practices since they regulate behaviour and influence our agency, actions and perceptions of spaces around us. The prospect of unwittingly appearing on social media or embedded in a news article gives us further reason to check our behaviour or who is watching us. Social or professional judgement via unintended exposure online can have as much of an impact upon our feelings or personal circumstances as other legal or penal punishments. As this case study has
shown, pre-existing discursive struggles, cultural prejudices and ideological biases are actually reinforced through the complexities, contradictions and unpredictable volatility of the omniopticon. Contextual and interdiscursive interpretations inform both Mears’ emotive response to the drone as well as the critical responses of Mail Online readers. In a precarious balance between feelings, actions and expressions, we see affective-discursive practices in simultaneous circulation and negotiation. Hence, this case study has shown why we need to monitor the social conflicts and tensions that take place within the complex power relations of omnioptic surveillance culture. In doing so, a discursive approach to affective practice provides us with a comprehensive analytical framework: a multimodal and interdisciplinary approach to discourse and affect helps us to understand the communicative practices, emotive tensions, active agency, cognitive perceptions and social dynamics of omnioptic surveillance culture.

There has been a tendency in recent research on affect theory to move away from “discourse” or “representation”. Of course, it is helpful to consider communicative events and discursive practices as more than just representation; current and previous concepts of surveillance theory have already demonstrated how the regulation of behaviour through surveillance is, essentially, a form of affective-discursive practice. Affect and discourse are so intertwined and complimentary in our interactions, reactions, behaviours, embodied meanings, interpretations and perceptions across multiple social contexts, that we cannot truly separate these concepts in social research. This article has shown that affect is inextricably linked to discourse and social practice. Affect can be studied and theorised in the field of CDS more often and more explicitly than it currently is. Contrary to what non-representational theorists might argue in their definitions of affect, I understand discourse as a multimodal complex of communicative components that are socially and technologically bound up with affective practices. Discourse is not limited to sight and sound since it is part of physical practices and cultural conducts, which are informed and influenced by the social relations and power structures that we are part of. Discourse both affects, and is affected by, the feelings, emotions, minds, ideologies and interactive experiences that we have in personal spaces and social contexts.
Bibliography


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1 CDS refers to a broad field of discourse research across multiple disciplines, whilst CDA refers to particular theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches designed to analyse discourse in specific ways.

2 There have been minor variations in the spelling of omn optic/omnioptic among different scholars.

3 Christensen has been critical of what he sees as simplistic misrepresentations of nuanced arguments, in which Fuchs (2011) has criticised his ‘celebratory’ perspectives on mainstream media power: “In the latest edition of the Global Media Journal: Australian Edition Christian Fuchs (2011) - in an article on the political economy of WikiLeaks - I was accused by Christian Fuchs (2011) of ‘celebrating’ the power of the mainstream media. Considering the ideological and intellectual implications of actually ‘celebrating’ the mainstream media, this is no small accusation. ... Fuchs’ piece on WikiLeaks was thorough in terms of his use of theory and empirical data, yet the misrepresentation of my argument about the relationship between WikiLeaks and the mainstream media, and, in turn, his dismissal of this important topic as relevant to a thorough political-economic analysis of WikiLeaks, warrants response and discussion. ...” Christensen’s full response can be found here: http://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/archive/v5_2011_2/rejoinder1.html

4 The comments selected for this analysis have been anonymised and corrected for grammatical errors. The rationale for this selection is explained through indicative data on the user rating system of the Mail Online.