The Panoptic Sort (2nd ed.): An Appreciation

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Oscar H. Gandy's *The Panoptic Sort* was a classic book from the start (Gandy, 1993). One of the timeliest works to emerge from this period, it created a new field—surveillance studies—and was one of the first to engage with the material social consequences of the post-Internet information society. One of its many brilliant moves was to focus less on the public Internet, that bright and shiny object that was most easy for scholars to study since many of us were both using it as a platform for socializing and getting work done, but rather on an especially difficult to study and then obscure topic: the new "relations between individuals and the corporate private sector" engendered by computerization (Gandy, 2021, p. 28). This was a typically brilliant and prescient path, for as the Internet transitioned from its role as a niche semiprofitable "cyberspace" to the capitalist behemoth that it has become today, *The Panoptic Sort*'s focus on the corporate proved strikingly prescient. Increasing numbers of scholars and users are now very aware that our digital social relations are always with the "corporate private sector," that is to say, with platforms, not with each other.

The Panoptic Sort is also a canonical text in the field of race and digital studies. In the 1990s, scholars and pundits saw in the Internet a "great reset" away from "identity politics" ushered in by ethnic studies and cultural studies and toward a new postracial libertarianism. Digital media studies in the '90s was not yet awake to the dystopian present and possibilities of the surveillance that mass data capture, storage, and commercial exchange would engender. To the extent that platform studies can study and theorize digital inequality and the economic and corporate arrangements that have allowed it to thrive, it owes a debt to *The Panoptic Sort.*

Gandy's (2021) concern for and empirical research on the means by which the "poor, especially poor people of color [are] . . . increasingly treated as broken material or damaged goods to be discarded or sold at bargain prices to scavengers in the marketplace" (p. 16) resonates today because it was well before its time. The book's high stature right out of the box backstopped many of us in the field who had to work hard to convince colleagues, students, and editors that racism on the Internet was a worthy area of study. As we have witnessed this move toward Big Tech's dominance of the economic and cultural landscape and the accompanying rise in overt forms of racism, increasing class inequality, and the platforming of White nationalism, I have often wondered what Gandy would make of social media's role in surveillance and power, sociotechnical formations such as Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) "surveillance capitalism," and the rise of misinformation.

I have taught and assigned this book to at least two generations of doctoral students for this reason, and I am thrilled to find that in this new edition Gandy (2021) has yet more wisdom to share about where we are headed today. This edition's take on social media as an engine for worsening conditions, obscure(d) and profit-driven social sorting and categorization, and overreach of all kinds arises from the premise of the original text—that automation is a powerful force that must be purposely designed, guided, and regulated at all stages if we hope to live in a democratic society.

While I am sure that it must not feel good to be right about how computers have facilitated the wholesale grading and sorting of people along the lines of race, class, and other oppressive categories, we are the beneficiaries of his continued engagement on this topic.

The Panoptic Sort was the right book for its moment, and this wonderful new edition is the right moment for ours. It provides a morsel of optimism, as well as caution, for researchers and students in the fields of media and communication studies. Ultimately, this work is itself a partial remedy for the problem that it identifies so clearly. Though it modestly claims to be diagnostic rather than prescriptive, this book's interest in collective organizing and its continued faith in the idea of a democratic world that could be reclaimed despite the computationally produced and increasing segmentation that, as Gandy (2021) says, systematically denies specific "discounted" individuals and groups access to communication competence beckons readers to roll up their sleeves and engage.

References

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