Forum on Gandy's *The Panoptic Sort*

Introduction

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This is a somewhat unusual Forum, and I will introduce it by taking an editorial prerogative. Let me begin with some disclosures. I have known Oscar Gandy since his days as a master's student at Penn's Annenberg School, where I served as the advisor on his master's thesis. I stayed in touch with Oscar once he left to teach (TV production!) at UC San Diego and then to undertake doctoral studies at Stanford, where he turned toward political economy, and then to Howard, where he served on the faculty until, finally, joining the Annenberg School as a tenured faculty member. In all this time, I was steadily engaged and impressed with his originality and tenacity as a scholar, and with the generativity of the ideas he developed (I have been including his important work on information subsidies in my teaching for decades).

When Oscar began the research that resulted in the publication of *The Panoptic Sort* in 1993, I readily confess that I was among the skeptics who resisted understanding the full import of the patterns he was discerning at such an early point. Before the World Wide Web and the entire, now familiar, structure of the Internet was in place, Oscar was connecting the dots and identifying dangers that were still only faintly visible.

Remember, in 1993, the World Wide Web had not yet become a familiar part of the landscape; Steve Jobs was in his NeXt interlude between Apple stints; googol was a large number; Microsoft Windows 95 was two years away; and Mark Zuckerberg was in middle school. In other words, this was a prehistoric era in cyber time.

Before the entire, now familiar, structure of the Internet was in place, Gandy was connecting the dots and identifying dangers that were only faintly visible. With a perspective honed by political economy, and an unerring understanding of the predictable workings of capitalist logic, Gandy was able to issue an early warning. Of course, as usually happens, the voice of Cassandra was drowned out by the chorus of techno optimism, and futuristic dreams of the wonders to come.

Today, we are all familiar with the critiques of surveillance capitalism, and we nod in agreement with the dire warnings now commonplace in academic and popular accounts of the digital era. Of course, we are also scrolling through our Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok feeds; buying too much from Amazon; and perhaps investing in the latest cybercurrency. We are worried, sometimes, about our privacy being invaded, our data being sold, our public sphere being corrupted by misinformation.

Once the book was published, and I had the opportunity to follow the arguments Oscar was making as he laid out a compelling case for concern, and resistance, I was better able to grasp the import of this pioneering work. Subsequently, I was forewarned and armed for skepticism and resistance to the siren songs endlessly spinning from Silicon Valley, and, I believe, this made me a much more effective teacher in urging my students toward a critical stance in the face of the chorus of techno-utopian cheerleading.

As it turns out, of course, Oscar was quite correct, and his pessimism and skepticism have proven to be prescient. The book has certainly stood the test of time. When I learned that Oxford was publishing a second edition, with a new Foreword and Afterword, it seemed appropriate to solicit reflections on the work from a number of scholars with far more subject-relevant expertise than I possess and to publish a Forum on the book.

Happily, the scholars I approached (Mike Ananny, John Cheney-Lippold, Kate Crawford, Lisa Nakamura, Joseph Turow, and Diami Virgilio) were equally enthusiastic about the book and the Forum and agreed to contribute brief reflections. Fittingly, Oscar has provided a brief response to their comments and reflections, and thus he gets the last word.