

Viral Vigilantes: the Unblinking Panopticon and the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady

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Abstract

With the explosion of social media, we must now accept that everything we do risks being exposed by intrusive surveillance via viral Web platforms like Google, YouTube, and Facebook. Unlike top-down unidirectional surveillance by states over their populations, digitally-mediated surveillance is a horizontal, multi-mirrored Panopticon in which everyone can spy on everyone else. Digitally-mediated surveillance has become a “crowdsourced” form of social norm enforcement. This diffused power of “Little Brother” surveillance was illustrated, bizarrely, by the “Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady” incident in Coventry, England in the summer of 2010. A dowdy middle-aged English woman called Mary Bale picked up a friendly local cat, flung it in a large rubbish bin, and closed the lid before walking away. Two CCTV cameras caught Bale’s perplexing gesture on video, which was soon posted on the Web and went viral in England and around the world. The outrage to Bale’s inexplicable gesture was so intense that local police tracked her down for her own protections while a media frenzy descended on Coventry. The Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady story illustrates how the power of normative enforcement through surveillance and punishment is no longer a state monopoly, but has been diffused to everyone – posing the danger of viral vigilantism. The enforcement of social norms, and punishment for their transgression, have taken on radically new forms of coercion via DMS. The Web also present familiar challenges as states and advertisers master surveillance techniques offered by social media to extend and strengthen their capacity for monitoring and control.

Introduction

In August 2010, a dowdy middle-aged English woman called Mary Bale committed a baffling and senseless act that not even she could explain. Walking down a residential street in Coventry, she came across a local cat in front of a row house. At first Bale stopped and gently caressed the friendly tabby. Then, spotting a rubbish bin nearby, she coaxed the cat towards the large container while reaching over to open the lid. She then abruptly picked up the cat by the scruff of the neck, flung the animal inside the bin, closed the lid, and coldly walked away. The unfortunate cat, called Lola, was rescued fifteen hours later by its owner Darryl Mann who, searching for his lost pet, heard its distressed meows inside the rubbish bin.

This puzzling act of animal cruelty would have gone completely unnoticed without any serious consequences for Mary Bale – nor, happily, for the rescued cat Lola. But Darryl Mann had purchased and placed two closed-circuit cameras in front of his house for security purposes. The cameras, it turned out, had captured Bale’s perplexing gesture on video. Stunned and outraged by what he saw on the video, Mann was determined to track down the cruel woman who had flung his cat Lola into the rubbish bin. So he turned to social media, posting the short video on YouTube and setting up a Facebook page called “Help Find the Woman Who Put My Cat in the Bin.”

The feedback was explosive. The video instantly went viral on the YouTube with hundreds of thousands of views. Almost immediately, Mary Bale was recognized and named. An otherwise unremarkable 45-year-old woman, Bale was leading a relatively quiet and colourless life as an unmarried bank clerk living with her widowed mother. On the Web she was dubbed the “Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady” and branded “the most evil woman in Britain”. Someone created an anti-Bale page on Facebook that rapidly attracted 20,000 fans. When someone else started a “Cat Bin Lady” account on Twitter pretending to be a seemingly ordinary but twisted middle-aged lady who despises animals, it quickly amassed 35,000 followers. Spoof videos began popping up on YouTube mocking Bale’s thoughtless act. Most of the reaction, however, was indignation. The boiling rage towards Bale was so intense that local police in Coventry were compelled to track her down and call her in for questioning, if only for her own safety.

A media frenzy quickly descended on Coventry as scrums of reporters followed Bale’s every movement, badgering her with questions about her disturbing act. Questioned by a TV reporter on the pavement as she was fleeing the media, Bale made the mistake of retorting, “it’s just a cat”. She refused to explain her puzzling gesture, except to say that she “thought it might be funny”. Within a few days, the international media was all over on the story. Darryl Mann’s video was being played on TV newscasts around the world. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was also now involved. A spokesman for the RSPCA told the BBC: “People assume animal cruelty might be carried out by people wearing a hoodie, and it is not always the case. You can have people from all walks of life.”¹ Mary Bale, meanwhile, went into hiding, hated and ostracized and fearing that she would lose her job. She was eventually charged by police for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal.

The strange story of the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady is fascinating on many levels, but above all it provides an alarming illustration of how the dynamics of surveillance have been radically transformed by the Internet – or, more specifically, by social media. For centuries, we have associated surveillance with institutional power, especially states monitoring their populations. Most of us have watched on the television news footage from a CCTV video taken of an accident in a public place or a bank robbery. The dynamics of these traditional forms of surveillance are top-down and unidirectional. Only states, corporations and large Kafkaesque bureaucracies have been able to marshal the resources needed to monitor the actions of individuals. While these surveillance techniques can raise troubling questions, we have passively accepted that they are in place.

States still monitor their citizens, but today the Web has transformed the dynamics of surveillance. Social media, in particular, have put the tools of surveillance in everyone’s hands. In contrast to traditional top-down methods, digitally-mediated surveillance (DMS) is a networked, horizontal, multi-mirrored Panopticon in which everyone can spy on everyone else. As the example of the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady illustrated, albeit in an eccentric manner, the explosion of Web-based surveillance techniques offer new forms of coercion that enforce social norms and punish their transgression.

Social media, it is often observed, have pushed power to the periphery by removing barriers to entry and allowing everyone to participate – in everything from Wikipedia and citizen journalism to viral marketing and political protest. The revolutionary

impact of so-called “Web 2.0” platforms has been widely studied and debated.ⁱⁱ Social media networks such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Google are revolutionary because they diffuse power to the margins. We can also say that, in like manner, the power dynamics surveillance have been transformed by this phenomenon. Today states and institutions no longer possess a monopoly on surveillance as a form of coercion. If the efficiency of “Big Brother” surveillance depended on asymmetrical power favouring states and institutions, digitally-mediated “Little Brother” surveillance puts everyone on a level playing field. Today visibility is ubiquitous. Make no mistake, there can be disturbing consequences to ubiquitous visibility: cyber bullying, online sexual predation, Facebook stalking, online identity theft, to name only a few. Today we must accept that everything we do, including our smallest gestures, risks being exposed by some form of intrusive surveillance – whether on CCTV video camera or through viral Web platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Google. As Mary Bale discovered, nobody can hide, someone is watching – and the viral dynamics of the Web can expose our smallest actions to the curiosity of the entire planet.

This paper will examine how social media have diffused the coercive power of surveillance and, in particular, transformed the enforcement of social norms. It is widely understood that social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube have changed the way we construct our identities and socially interact. Online social networks satisfy in radically new ways our narcissistic desire to validate ourselves through self-display and social capital accumulation. Less attention has focused on how social media have democratized the power dynamics of surveillance. We shall argue that digitally-mediated surveillance, while not escaping the control of states, has diffused power to virtually everyone. As the perplexing case of the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady illustrates, the diffusion of surveillance techniques can produce unforeseen consequences — for both states and individuals. Social media networks like YouTube and Facebook, while undoubtedly liberating as platforms for social interaction and creativity, have also created the conditions for the emergence of new forms of surveillance, control and coercion.

Surveillance and power

Since we are discussing surveillance as a means of coercion, it might be useful to conceptualize the notion of power.

We can identify various characteristics of power. First, the exercise of power is often described as either *intensive* or *extensive*. Specifically, *intensive* power is asserted vertically inside tight command-and-control systems like an armies and bureaucracies. *Extensive* power, by contrast, is exercised over a vast spatial territory – for example, throughout an empire or inside a multinational corporation. Second, power can be *authoritative* or *diffused*. *Authoritative* power is generally associated with vertical command structures that expect obedience. *Diffused* power, by contrast, is more horizontal and exercised less coercively.

These distinctions provide insights that help us understand the network dynamics of social media in contrast to traditional forms of institutionalized power. While institutional power, and especially power exercised by states, is generally *authoritative*, *intensive*, and exercised through *coercion*, networked power is generally *diffused*, *extensive* and exercised through *cooperation*.ⁱⁱⁱ It is not our primary focus here, but it might be noted that one reason many states feel threatened by the

Web – as the WikiLeaks controversy illustrated—is precisely because the networked, diffused power dynamics of the Web are difficult for states to control.

We need not look hard to find dramatic examples of how the Web has radically diffused the dynamics of power. Wikipedia, for example, has transferred power from experts to amateurs. The emergence of a digital “hacktivist” movement has diffused power from states to individuals. During the Arab uprisings of early 2011 that led to the overthrow of despotic regimes, the role played by social media in these historic events was diversely celebrated, discussed and debated.^{iv} In liberal democracies, the push for “open government” has been driven in part by the capacity of citizens make demands on governments through the Internet. Thanks to the Web, citizens can now use Web-based techniques to gain access to information, to monitor, and hold to account the states that govern their lives. Most would argue these trends are positive. As we shall see, however, it should not be supposed that states, corporations and large institutions have not mastered digital surveillance techniques for their own purposes. It is nonetheless true that states and institutions have been dispossessed of their monopoly on the coercive powers of surveillance.

Michel Foucault provided what is undoubtedly the most compelling analysis of surveillance in his classic work, *Surveiller et Punir*—translated as *Discipline and Punish*, though the French word *surveiller* explicitly evokes the notion of surveillance.^v Foucault described how states once asserted power over people through physical punishment, including public displays of torture. The public visibility of corporal punishment, including execution, functioned as a form of social control—in a word, as a deterrent. Thus, the public spectacle of humiliating punishment or gruesome death—from the pillory to the guillotine—served to enforce social norms and command obedience. In the early nineteenth century, however, states began to adopt more subtle methods of normative enforcement aimed at controlling people’s minds and habits. Foucault’s key idea was this: power works through efficient methods of *surveillance*.^{vi}

Foucault’s theories about surveillance were inspired by 19th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, whose famous “Panopticon” was a functionally ideal penal institution in which the guards have transparent visibility of the entire prison population without being seen themselves. Prisoners who are under constant scrutiny, but cannot see their guards, can be more easily controlled. Lack of mutual visibility prevents them from self-mobilizing and plotting rebellion against the institution that has incarcerated them. Foucault understood that, when this same principle of constant visibility is extended to wider society, states can possess the means to maintain public order. He argued that this “panoptic” system of power and control would spread through social institutions in a process that he called *carceral continuum*.

After Foucault elaborated these theories, scholars were seeing panoptic techniques everywhere—in schools, in bureaucracies, even in family homes. It may be an uncomfortable truth, but as previously noted we are all subject to institutionalized surveillance. Even in free and democratic societies, it is impossible to escape some form of video detection—in parking lots, office corridors, at bank machines—during the banal course of a normal day. In the United Kingdom, most urban Britons are implicitly aware that they are captured on a CCTV camera dozens of times every day. Fewer are aware that the first public surveillance camera was installed in London’s Trafalgar Square more than a half century ago in 1960. Great Britain is the country with the most surveillance cameras in the world, one for every 14 people in 2006.^{vii} The widespread deployment of state surveillance cameras in Britain finds its origins a

specific historical context: the IRA terrorism threat in the 1970s and 1980s. The British state, possessing a monopoly on the instruments of surveillance, was countering an external threat through a technological means of surveillance of public places.

This invites us to reflect on the distinction between private and public spaces. If Foucault remains the pre-eminent thinker on the history of surveillance, Jurgen Habermas is perhaps the most famous theorist of the public sphere.^{viii} For Habermas, the public sphere emerged in the 18th century with the decline and collapse of what he called “representational” culture—such in *ancien regime* France—that was a highly ritualized form of state power or coercion. The public sphere, first in Britain and later throughout Europe, promoted free circulation and sharing of ideas based on information gained through reading pamphlets and newspapers and the discussions of public affairs in coffee shops. Historically, the flourishing of public spaces played a powerful role in the emergence of new forms of political organization that would lead to democratic institutions. Conceptually, the public sphere imagines an open space of communication where all communicators, senders and receivers are equal and where rational discourse prevails. In the 20th century, Habermas’ ideas set the stage for the media utopianism of the 1960s and 1970s when many believed in the unregulated form of communication that led to the rise of the free radio movement.^{ix}

Habermas understood, of course, the tension between the private and public spheres—notably with the intrusion of commercial messages into public spaces. For those who argue that commercial mass media have produced a corrosive impact on public discourse, surveillance techniques are not indifferent to this outcome. The rise of mass media and consumerism in the early 20th century gave birth to a new movement in social science based on rational techniques of surveillance—specifically, monitoring and measurement mass “audiences” on behalf of advertisers to make commercial messages more efficient. The multi-billion-dollar advertising industry once associated with Madison Avenue was, in effect, driven by sophisticated surveillance techniques to track consumer behaviour. At the same time, states were also using the same surveillance techniques—mainly in the form of polling—monitor and track voter preferences as part of the policy process. And needless to say, political parties seeking office used the same techniques in order to predict voter preferences and measure their own political popularity.^x The power dynamic of this kind of surveillance was asymmetrical and top-down. Advertisers monitored consumers, states polled citizens, political parties tracked voters. It was never a two-way process: individuals had no capacity to monitor corporations and states.

It is tempting to argue that the Internet—and in particular social networks like Facebook and YouTube—marks a renewed flourishing of public spheres. We use Facebook and Twitter to interact socially, share ideas and photos, express what we like and dislike, circulate videos, and so on. The essential dynamic of social media corresponds perfectly, it would seem, to what we have described here as the diffusion of power. Everyone has access to social media on the Web, there are no barriers to entry, and the accumulation of social capital online has been radically democratized. The Web might even be conceptualized a new form of civil society where citizens can deliberate and mobilize. We can use YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to organize resistance against institutional forms of power—including against repressive regimes.

Social media like Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter also offer radically new, and efficient, techniques of surveillance. They open windows that look into spheres that once were opaque or impenetrable. Online social networks make everything and

everyone visible—from our “likes” on Facebook to photos posted on Flickr. What’s more, the viral distribution dynamics of the Web—notably on YouTube – can make everything visible *instantly* and *globally*. For many, this is a liberating phenomenon that should be embraced for its openness transparency, and democratic character. Facebook and Twitter are open to everyone. We can all freely express and display ourselves on the Web. Anyone can seek fame and become a viral-video star on YouTube. Online social networks are extensions of a vast electronic public sphere that empower knowledge and personal creativity. We can find just about anything on Google, and any place on Google Street View.

At the same time, online social networks function to enforce social norms – not by top-down institutional surveillance, but through horizontally networked monitoring. The Web is an unblinking, two-way Panopticon. The Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady saga offers a seemingly anecdotal, but nonetheless powerful, illustration of this normative function of networked online surveillance. The CCTV cameras that captured Mary Bale’s baffling gesture were not state-owned; they were private surveillance cameras installed by Darryl Mann. And if we agree that cruelty to animals is despicable behaviour, that is precisely our point. The viral distribution of the YouTube video exposing Mary Bale disturbing gesture, and the violent reaction to it, functioned to enforce social norms against such conduct. We might even say that the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady video was “crowdsourced” normative enforcement. Thanks to the Web-based powers of citizen surveillance, Mary Bale was discovered, tracked down, and punished by the coercive power of shame. It might even be argued that the exposure of Mary Bale’s puzzling act was an Internet-era version of the public displays of humiliating punishment that Foucault analyzed in *Surveiller et punir*.

The term used to describe this new phenomenon of Web-based normative enforcement is *shaming*. Online shaming serves the same social function as gossip—namely, enforcement of social norms. It heightens the rational social instinct to preserve a good *reputation*. By sending signals about reputational consequences, shaming constitutes a form of social control because it encourages conformity to established social norms. There are countless examples of how the Web is used, through surveillance techniques, as a normative enforcement tool through viral shaming. Online shaming often targets annoying, dangerous, or anti-social behaviour, which is captured on camera and posted on the Web to humiliate the perpetrators. Among victims of online shaming are creepy boyfriends, bad drivers, abusive nannies, people littering in public places, loud cell phone talkers, and men who whistling lewdly at women, and so on. Today delinquent acts, petty and serious, are caught on camera and posted on websites with the sole purpose of shaming the alleged culprits. Shaming victims—even when dead guilty—frequently react angrily by threatening lawsuits on the grounds of privacy invasion.^{xi} In the Internet era, public punishment through digitally-mediated surveillance is remarkably effective.

It might be asked, however, whether digitally-mediated surveillance can constitute a troubling form of viral vigilantism. However odious her gesture, Mary Bale was unquestionably the victim of Web-based snooping and snitching—not much different, leaving aside the technology, from the pernicious ambience of neighbourhood spying that can quickly poison social relations in any small town. Bale was not only pilloried in full view of her local community; on YouTube the digital pillory was global. While the tabby Lola’s ordeal lasted only fifteen hours, Mary Bale isn’t ever likely to recover from the explosive reaction to the YouTube video that turned her in to one of the most hated people in Britain. Even the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty

to Animals acknowledged: "What was disgusting was the reaction and anger to this, which then became threatening. Things have to be dealt with sensibly. When it gets to people making threats themselves then it becomes disturbing." Beyond the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady, there are many documented examples of people whose lives have been destroyed because of shocking privacy invasion via viral distribution of videos on the Web. In South Korea, a teenage girl was shamed before the entire country when, on a train with her tiny dog, her pet pooped and the mishap was filmed by another passenger using a cell phone camera. In a country where shame is a culturally devastating stigma, the so-called "Dog Poop Girl" was so haunted by the online video campaign against her that she dropped out of university.^{xii}

States, too, have grasped the coercive power of Web shaming. Governments, for example, post the names and addresses of tax shirkers to embarrass citizens into paying their income tax. In the United States, a country where proud Americans like to be regarded as paying their "fair share" of taxes, state governments use online shaming to expose tax scofflaws, whose names are posted on sites with names like CyberShame, DelinqNet, Caught in the Web, and Website of Shame. The tactic, which inflicts public ignominy on fiscal free riders, is remarkably effective. Most people, as noted, are terrified of public stigma, and will promptly pay their taxes if they know that failure to do so will expose them to contempt in the eyes of their community. Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina and 15 other U.S. states now send notices to tax deadbeats warning them that, if they don't pay up within 30 days, their names will be posted online for all to see.^{xiii}

There is an ever-present danger, of course, that states will succumb to "Big Brother" temptations and pry into social networking sites to spy on their citizens. There are even conspiracy theories that claim Facebook was started by the CIA through alleged links between the site's original venture capital backers and the American spy agency.^{xiv} While CIA admits openly that it uses Facebook for recruitment purposes, there doesn't appear to be any operational linkage between the two organizations. The CIA's seemingly innocuous use of Facebook nonetheless has raised concerns among civil libertarians. Facebook's privacy policy states that it does not share personal information with third-party companies—but adds that, in order to comply with the law, it may give personal information to "government agencies". The American Civil Liberties Union notes that, given that the CIA has a page on Facebook and is actively mining the site, "it would be surprising if they weren't using it in other ways."^{xv} These suspicions were not diminished when, in 2009, the CIA invested in a Web-monitoring firm, Visible Technologies, which scans blogs, YouTube, Twitter, Amazon and other social sites. The name of the company says it all: on the Web, everything is *visible*. As *Wired* magazine put it: "The investment arm of the CIA and the wider intelligence community is putting cash into Visible Technologies, a software firm that specializes in monitoring social media. It's part of a larger movement within the spy services to get better at using "open source intelligence"—information that's publicly available, but often hidden in the flood of TV shows, newspaper articles, blog posts, online videos and radio reports generated every day."^{xvi}

In the workplace, it's an open secret that companies conduct Web-based surveillance on their employees and routinely mine the Internet to garner information about potential recruits. Rarely a week goes by without yet another story in the media about an employee who was fired, or disciplined, for something posted on Facebook. The paradox is that many companies that ban the use of online networks during office

hours are also using these same platforms to spy on their employees.^{xvii}

Consider what happened to Inspector Chris Dreyfus, a senior British police officer in charge of special units protecting the Royal Family and top UK government figures. Seeking a promotion up the ranks, 30-year-old Dreyfus went through all the formal hoops for a position as Bedfordshire Police chief inspector. On paper, Dreyfus was eminently qualified. Prior to his current job, he'd been head of Britain's special Counter-Terrorism Proactive Unit where he was in charge of 30 officers. With those credentials, it was no surprise when he was offered the Chief Inspector's position. But then, suddenly, the offer was withdrawn. After a series of background checks on the Web, it was discovered that Dreyfus was homosexual. That wasn't the problem. The issue was his online behavior. Dreyfus had been flamboyantly advertising his gay lifestyle on his Facebook profile. Faced with the grim prospect of a career setback, Inspector Dreyfus argued that there was nothing wrong with posting details of his *private* life online. "As long as I do not do anything to disgrace the force then what I do privately is acceptable," he claimed. Maybe so. But Dreyfus' hierarchy in the Royal Family protection unit had already warned him in writing about his flamboyant Facebook existence. In the end, despite legal threats, he didn't get the job.^{xviii}

Michel Foucault would not have been surprised by this. He understood that surveillance extends into our most intimate spaces. More importantly, he understood that the more we express ourselves the more we subject ourselves to surveillance and measurement, allowing our behaviour to become understood as statistical regularities. The function of surveillance is to encourage people to behave according to established expectations because they always imagine that they are being watched. This holds true on networks like Facebook where we click on our "likes" as a gesture of self-expression. We are encouraged—and in some cases almost required—to express ourselves according to certain categories, settings, and rules. Whatever choices we make on Facebook, we are making them within a framework of ideas and knowledge that we do not choose. More importantly, every click, every word we use to describe ourselves, every opinion we express is tracked and measured so we can better understand statistically by advertisers. In 2010, the Wall Street Journal conducted an in-depth investigation, "The Web's New Gold Mine: Your Secrets", into how social networks like Facebook and many other websites track and commercialize our online behaviour for advertisers. As the newspaper put it: "One of the fastest-growing businesses on the Internet is the business of spying on Internet users."^{xix} So while Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other online social networks have a subtle power of narcissistic seduction and self-exhibition, we cannot neglect the more troubling reality that we are being encouraged to talk about ourselves, share, and reveal what we "like" so we can be more efficiently monitored, measured, and controlled. Foucault's point was this: it is precisely when people are most actively social that they are most controllable.^{xx}

Returning to the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady, the video surveillance and viral distribution of the CCTV video on YouTube not only shamed Mary Bale for her abhorrent act, but it also served to reinforce social norms—in this case, about how we should treat animals. We should not forget, however, that the video also served the interests of the police and institutions like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who took actions to have Bale arrested and charged in court. Indeed, online social networks are now widely used as a form of surveillance to assist in crime-fighting. In Manchester, England law enforcement has discovered that Facebook is a more effective—and faster—crime-fighting tool than traditional crime alerts. Facebook members who download the crime-busting application—dubbed "GMP Updates"—

can connect directly to Greater Manchester Police's website and its YouTube channel to report crimes. Anyone with a mobile devices can report—and even film—crimes in real time. The application also features a “Submit Intelligence” button that allows Facebook members to send in crime tips anonymously. Other Web-based crime fighting techniques used by police forces include the “digital wanted poster” and the “social media stakeout”.^{xxi} Web-based surveillance is similarly being deployed worldwide to bring mass responsiveness to combat anti-social behaviour. In China, local residents in Shanghai and Nanjing use sites like GoogleMaps and Sougou to draw up “thief maps” that give precise locations of areas where street crimes are committed. One Chinese online network called “Anti-Pickpocket Alliance” uses online forums and SMS messaging to combat criminality. China's online crime-fighting networks—apparently inspired by a popular Chinese movie called *A World Without Thieves*—have been described as “smart mob” crowdsourcing.

Mary Bale, meanwhile, appeared in court in October 2010 and pleaded guilty to causing unnecessary suffering to Lola the cat. The court fined her £250, ordered her to pay costs of £1,171 and banned her from keeping or owning animals for five years. Bale's lawyer told the court that his client, at the moment of her baffling act, was suffering anxiety following the recent death of her father. Since all the publicity surrounding the affair, Bale had been suffering depression from the hatred and social rejection and had resigned her bank job of 27 years. But Bale was still not able to explain her thoughtless act. As her lawyer put it: “Miss Bale, daily, almost hourly, for the past two months has asked herself that very question.”

We will never know, it seems, why Mary Bale why flung Lola into the rubbish bin. But the Wheelie-Bin Cat Lady saga has given us fascinating insights into the coercive power of “Little Brother” digitally-mediated surveillance on the Web, its role in the enforcement of social norms, and how digital vigilantism can degenerate into a social media mob-swarm that destroys the lives of those who, whatever their deeds, suffer the publicly inflicted punishment of digital humiliation in the global Panopticon. Judged by goals of normative enforcement, digitally-mediated surveillance is powerfully efficient—and today its tools are in the hands of everyone.

Links

The CCTV video of Mary Bale throwing cat into rubbish bin:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-0j8GUua2g>

News report about Mary Bale: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVC3bXOWc88&feature=fvsr>

Media frenzy around Mary Bale: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCHEj63_M0I

Facebook page “Mary Bale Should be Locked Up”:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mary-Bale-should-be-locked-up-for-putting-Lola-the-cat-in-a-bin/154102624606697?ref=ts>

Mary Bale parody on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NooGkGdDIII>

Twitter mock identity “Catbinlady”: <http://twitter.com/CatBinLady>

i See “Internet outrage over cat dumped in wheelie bin video”, BBC News, 19 October 2010, link at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-11568494>

ii See my book, *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom : How Online Social Networks Will Transform Your Life, Work and World*, Wiley, 2009.

iii For more on these categories of power, see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

iv See “Debating Social Media’s Political Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 April 2011; and “Social Media’s Role in Egyptian, Arab World Protests”, PBS Newshour, 15 February 2011, link at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/video/blog/2011/02/social_medias_role_in_egyptian.html

v Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books (New York, 1995) p.303.

vi For an analysis of Foucault’s history of surveillance and online social networks, see Waddick Doyle and Matthew Fraser, “Facebook: Surveillance and Power”, in D.E. Wittkower (ed.) *Facebook and Philosophy*, Open Court, 2010.

vii See “Britain is ‘surveillance society’”, BBC News, 2 November 2006, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6108496.stm

viii Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, MIT Press, 1991.

ix This is best understood in the famous Shannon-Weaver model which conceives of communication as an equal exchange between sender and receiver. Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues for the reversal of the relationship where every sender could become a receiver. This was taken up the free radio movement that would seek to make all receivers senders. See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, Seabury Press, New York, 1974.

x See Mark Adrejevic, *iSpy : Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*, University of Kansas Press, 2007.

Xi Among shaming sites, see Baddriving.com, PlateWire.com, Caughtya.org, MyBikeLane.com, Flickr.com, YouTube.com, HollaBackNYC.com, LitterButt.com, RudePeople.com, and Isawyournanny.blogspot.com. For a newspaper story on these sites, see “The Snoop Next Door”, *Wall Street Journal*, 12 January 2007, available at: http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB116855242776974364-OeszoAs0Sa3YsO80IOEwzj7Vfg8_20080112.html.

xii For an analysis of the “Dog Poop Girl”, see Daniel J. Solove, *The Future of Reputation* (Yale University, 2007), ch. 1.

xiii See “States hope tax scofflaws will pay to avoid being outed on Web”, *USA Today*, 27 April 2004, available at: http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2004-04-27-tax-public-shaming_x.htm; and “Latest tax tool: ‘Internet shaming’”, *USA Today*, 22 December 2005, available at: http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-12-22-tax-shaming-websites_x.htm.

xiv For the Facebook/CIA conspiracy theory, see the Question Everything blog at http://qwstnevrythg.blog-city.com/was_facebook_started_by_the_cia.htm.

xv For the CIA using Facebook as a recruitment tool, see “CIA Gets In Your Face(book)”, *Wired*, 24 January 2007, available at: <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2007/01/72545>; and “CIA Turns to Facebook for New Talent”, ABC News, 27 January 2007, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=2829253>.

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