# The Biopolitical Network: Facebook as Foucauldian Apparatus

*'In modern politics, even the leader of the free world needs help from the sultan of Facebookistan.'*

— Rebecca MacKinnon[1]

Michel Foucault first introduced the notion of 'biopolitics' to his work during his lectures at the Collège de France. He considered the term to be synonymous with liberalism and the handover of sovereign power to 'biopower' - methods and technologies of governing social and biological processes:

'What we are dealing with in this new technology of power is not exactly society (or at least not the social body, as defined by the jurists), nor is it the individual body. It is a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted. Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem.'[2]

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[1] MacKinnon, Rebecca. *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle For Internet Freedom.* Basic Books: New York, 2012. p41

[2] Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76.* Picador Press: London, 2003. p245

Biopolitics operates upon the human body in two ways: firstly, on the individual body and its discipline ('multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and…punished'[3]); and secondly, on the body as part of a population ('massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but as man-as-species'[4]).

As part of Foucault's theorising of biopolitics, he introduces the term 'apparatus' (or dispositif in his native French). The term refers to 'a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions…the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements'[5]. Foucault uses 'apparatus' to designate the various structures (be them institutionalised, administrative, or physical) involved with the maintenance or enhancement of biopolitical power within a social body.

Giorgio Agamben attempts to clarify the definition of the apparatus in his own work by stating 'I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings'[6]. Put simply, the apparatus is anything which may have an influence on human biological and social existence: it is the mechanism through which biopower acts.

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[3] *Ibid.* p242

[4] *Ibid.* p243

[5] Foucault, Michel. 'The Confession of the Flesh', in *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. Vintage Books: London, 1980. p203

[6] Agamben, Giorgio. 'What is an Apparatus?' in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2009. p14

Using Agamben's definition it is quite clear that the internet in its entirety would fall under the category of an apparatus, capable of governing society in some way. This essay however, will focus on one specific website and its biopolitical influence - Facebook. Facebook acts as a biopolitical apparatus in two ways: firstly, it can be used to gather information and mine data from a population, which in turn can be used by corporations or governments to control or target that population; and secondly it governs and regulates its users by predetermined practices built in to the website itself.

In the first instance, Facebook uses personal information and users' interactions within the site to collect data for profit: 'Facebook is a business. It exists to take your online activity and turn it into revenue. Facebook will always be free. But there is a cost. You're paying by being exposed to advertising and allowing limited disclosure of your online activity'[7]. As of December 2013 there were 1.23 billion monthly users, and 757 million people logging on to the site each day[8]. Over a third of Britons used the website daily, as did 1 out of every 3 people in the USA[9], with the average user having 338 friends[10]. It is likely these numbers have increased since. Information on age, gender, relationship status, hometown, interests, and much more is collected from these individuals; who collectively entail around 20% of the world's population[11]. In this situation, population stops being necessarily linked to geography

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[7] Safe & Savvy, '*How to Save Face: 6 Tips For Safe Facebooking'.* <http://safeandsavvy.f-secure.com/2010/08/05/protect-yourself-facebook> Accessed 20th April 2015.

[8] Sedghi, Ami. 'Facebook: 10 years of social networking, in numbers', in *The Guardian,* 4th February 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics> Accessed 18th April 2015.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Dewey, Caitlin. 'Almost as many people use Facebook as live in the entire country of China', in *The Washington Post,* 29th October 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/29/almost-as-many-people-use-facebook-as-live-in-the-entire-country-of-china> Accessed 18th April 2015.

and becomes instead a group of individuals linked by other attributes. For an international business, it is quite obvious why information of this sort is valuable as it allows for the easy targeting of a worldwide demographic. Equally, it is clear why Facebook itself becomes a desirable space for advertising.

Evidence of the manipulation of users' information can be seen in the targeted adverts which appear on an individual's various Facebook pages. These adverts are based on information and activities users have previously contributed to the site; which has been collected, sold, researched, and used to group individuals into various markets. From this it is clear that Facebook is operating as an apparatus in its intercepting and use of social and personal information for capital, and whilst so far it appears that data mining has been used for marketing and commercial purposes, it is quite easy to see how this information can be used to monitor a particular demographic, target propaganda, or hide material from a certain group. Under the right circumstances, it appears that Facebook could be used as a powerful political tool, because "if [Facebook's] News Feed is the thing that everyone sees and it controls how information is disseminated, it's controlling how information is revealed to society'[12].

The potential for Facebook to be used as a method of control is highlighted by an experiment which took part on the site in 2012. 'The experiment manipulated the extent to which people were exposed to emotional expressions in their News Feed'[13] and was conducted on 689,000 users. It worked by researchers controlling the amount of positive or

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[12] Simonite, Tom. 'What Facebook Knows', in *MIT Technology Review,* 13th June 2012. <http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/428150/what-facebook-knows> Accessed 17th April 2015.

[13] BBC News, *'Facebook emotion experiment sparks criticism'*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-28051930> Accessed 21st April 2015.

negative content displayed on a user's feed and then monitoring whether that user displayed the corresponding emotion in their own posts. The results indicated 'that emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale contagion via social networks'[14] and that 'people who were exposed to fewer emotional posts (of either valence) in their news feeds were less expressive overall on the following days, addressing the question about how emotional expression affects social engagement online'[15]. What this means is that the computer engineers (or whoever they answer to) who create the Facebook algorithms which decide what we view each time we log on are able to manipulate the moods and inclinations of a population; something which could potentially be used to create real-life action - one can quite easily imagine political situations in which it would be beneficial to have a more subdued or livelier population than the status quo. This experiment also shows Facebook's ability to have a direct influence on its user's physical body by affecting the production of serotonin and dopamine – the two fundamental brain chemicals which control mood.

Aside from its ability to be used for targeting and surveying, what the 2012 psychology research also shows about Facebook is that the people we connect with on the site have a direct impact on our offline life, and that we equally can affect theirs. Facebook has an effect on users' relationships with others, as well as potentially their relationship with themselves. Via Facebook we can be influenced by people that we do not see regularly, meaning physical distance and boundaries are no longer a barrier; something which offers biopolitical regulation on a global scale. When one considers that on average there are less than 4 degrees

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[14] Forbes, '*The Facebook Experiment: What It Means For You'.* <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dailymuse/ 2014/08/04/the-facebook-experiment-what-it-means-for-you> Accessed 21st April 2015.

[15] *Ibid.*

of separation between ourselves and any other Facebook user - "When considering another person in the world, a friend of your friend knows a friend of their friend, on average,"[16] – the potential for us to be influenced by someone we have never met (and may not even live in the same country as) is undeniable.

Whilst Facebook based upon our real-life interactions (new friends are suggested by connections with mutual friends, our workplace, university etc.), the site offers the opportunity for subjectivity, to create and curate our profile and to determine what we allow others to know about it/ourselves. As a result, there can be ruptures between person and profile. Agamben states that 'the term "apparatus" designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject'[17]. If Facebook is an apparatus then perhaps one could see the creation of a Facebook profile as the creation of a new self, a sort of online alter-ego.

Agamben goes on to say that 'he who lets himself be captured by the "cellular telephone" apparatus–whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him–cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled. The spectator who spends his evenings in front of the television set only gets, in exchange for his desubjectification, the frustrated mask of the couch potato, or his inclusion in the calculation viewship ratings'[18]. Following this, it is arguable that Agamben would say that the Facebook user acquires the mask of a virtual profile, and inclusion in the collection of data and the

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[16] BBC News, *'Facebook users average 3.74 degrees of separation'*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15844230> Accessed 22nd April 2015.

[17] Agamben, *Op Cit.* p11

[18] Agamben, *Op Cit.* p21

stream of status updates posted on the site. None of this constitutes a completely new subjectivity, but just provides the user with a new platform through which his actions are collected and modulated. Despite the potential differences between the user and what they appear to be online, any actions are still referential to the individual involved.

These divisions between what we choose to share, and what we choose to keep hidden, are shown at their most extreme in an episode of Charlie Brooker's Channel 4 series 'Black Mirror'. In the episode in question, entitled 'Be Right Back', a grieving woman downloads her dead partner's consciousness – taken from emails, text messages, and (mainly) his Facebook profile, in an attempt to resurrect him. What is produced however is not the man she knew (his 'true' personality, so to speak), but that which he made himself appear to be online. What this episode illustrates is how we curate ourselves and the image of how we appear to others via our online activities. One has to question just how much of our Facebook profile is really 'us', and how much of this rupture is due to Facebook's nature as a Foucauldian apparatus.

Even if the Facebook profile we create is not a 'true' representation of ourselves, it is not a completely separate identity. Each profile is based upon a real-life individual and whatever is posted or performed under said profile is traceable back to that individual. Creating a profile, even one which omits certain details about oneself, means the possibility of being offered up for judgement 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Our profile is there, waiting to be viewed, by anyone at any time. Whilst it is true that one can restrict who sees what information, it is not currently possible to have ones profile hidden from searches or casual browsing, or post anonymously. No one may ever look at our profile, but we cannot know that. This situation is reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon: a design for a prison which would allow a

single prison guard to see all of the inmates, without the inmates themselves being able to tell whether they were being observed or not. Prisoners were therefore forced to regulate their behaviour and act as though they were being watched at all times. Foucault argued that this was 'the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'[19].

The difference between Bentham's prison and Facebook however, is that the guard has been replaced with the rest of the network. Each member is both the watcher and the watched; capable of viewing others' profiles without them being aware, but vulnerable to being the recipient of such an action themselves. However, the modification of behaviour that such a state creates is still present. Knowing that they are potentially being observed and judged, users choose what content to post with the aim of impressing or pleasing a select group − i.e. their Facebook friends, or perhaps a subsection of them. Sherry Turkle, MIT psychologist, sums this selection up thusly: 'On…Facebook you're trying to express something real about who you are. … But because you're also creating something for others' consumption, you find yourself imagining and playing to your audience more and more. So those moments in which you're supposed to be showing your true self become a performance. Your psychology becomes a performance'[20]. We could perhaps think of our Facebook profile as a personal panopticon. In this light, the things we post on the site become less expressions of our inner selves than attempts to curry favour amongst our online peers.

Judgement does not just come from other Facebook users either; it also comes from ourselves when we are choosing what to share with our network. We intercept our own posts

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[19] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* Vintage Books: London, 1975. p201

[20] Orenstein, Peggy. 'I Tweet, Therefore I Am', in *The New York Times Magazine,* 30th July 2010. <http:// www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/magazine/01wwln-lede-t.html?_r=0> Accessed 23rd April 2015.

before they are published, with thoughts such as 'do I want people to see this?' and by imagining how our target audience will react. This biopolitical interruption of our natural inclinations and self-regulation of our actions may even spill out in to our non-virtual activities; knowing an event will be mentioned online (either through text or images/video) may lead us to augment our real-life behaviour in order to please a virtual audience.

The opening words of The Facebook Suicide Bomb Manifesto, written by Sean Dockray, are as follows: 'Everyone now wants to know how to remove themselves from social networks. It has become absolutely clear that our relationships to others are mere points in the aggregation of marketing data. Political campaigns, the sale of commodities, the promotion of entertainment – this is the outcome of our expression of likes and affinities'[21]. The manifesto calls for people to commit a 'social suicide'; not as one might expect by deleting their profile, but by making their profile so radically impersonal that it becomes meaningless. The problem, writes Dockray, is that 'Unlike the old days, when we could invent online identities daily, our social networks today require fidelity between our physical self and our online self. The situation is unbearable'[22]. The solution is to 'become a machine for clicking'[23] as 'every click dissolves the virtual double that Facebook has created for you. It disperses you into the digital lives of others you hadn't thought of communicating with. It confuses your friends. It pulls all those parts of the world that your social network refuses to engage with back into focus, makes it present again'[24]. Making oneself invisible in a network

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[21] Dockray, Sean. 'The Facebook Suicide Bomb Manifesto', in *Wired,* 31st May 2010. <http://www.wired.com/2010/05/the-facebook-suicide-bomb-manifesto> Accessed 23rd April 2015.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Dockray, *Op Cit.*

requires dispersing in to that network as fully as possible via maximum participation and 'a flood of meaninglessness'[25]. In doing so, we disrupt the calculations and algorithms which Facebook has attached to our profiles, preventing corporations using our data in a productive way, and abandon the 'seriousness and belief' attached to curating and maintaining a virtual profile and self.

The manifesto is in part a response to two websites/art projects, *Web 2.0 Suicidemachine* and *Seppukoo.com.* Both sites were founded in 2009 and offered users a 'digital suicide' from Facebook, although they have both since been shut down after legal issues with the site. One can still visit the pages however; *Seppukoo.com* simply announces that thanks to the controversy 'our suicidal services are now useless'[26], but *Web 2.0 Suicidemachine* still offers visitors that chance to 'improve your relationship! Get rid of stalkers! Stop self-procrastination!' and 'Sign out forever!'[27] from Twitter, Linkedin, and Myspace. By committing digital suicide via one of these websites, the user and all their linked information is removed from the site and prevented from rejoining.

Rita Raley describes 'tactical media' – 'art forms that use practices such as hacktivism, denial-of-service attacks and reverse engineering'[28] which aim to disturb the system in which they work: 'In its most expansive articulation, tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which

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[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Seppukoo. <www.seppukoo.com> Accessed 24th April 2015.

[27] Web 2.0 Suicide Machine. <www.suicidemachine.org> Accessed 24th April 2015.

[28] Karppi, Tero. 'Digital Suicide and the Biopolitics of Leaving Facebook', in *Transformations,* Issue No.20, 2011. <http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_20/article_02.shtml> Accessed 24th April 2015.

signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible'[29]. One could argue that tactical media does not seek to work against its target, but exploit breaches within the system in order to facilitate change. This is clearly how *Web 2.0 Suicidemachine* and S*eppukoo.com* operate, as they are both forced to work within Facebook's own boundaries. However, despite this both sites use Facebook's own policies and interface for their own benefit too. *Seppukoo.com* uses the participant's password to log on to their profile, and create a memorial site using information taken from it. Users are able to share some 'last words' and testimony of their suicide which are then sent to their Facebook friends. By utilising a viral strategy like this (something often seen in 3rd party adverts featured on Facebook), *Seppukoo.com* hopes to encourage more people to commit digital suicide. *Web 2.0 Suicidemachine* on the other hand, works in a surprisingly simple way: by changing the user's password and thus preventing them from logging on. The program also changes the user's profile picture to its own noose logo and adds them to a Facebook group called "Social Network Suiciders': both actions which are visible to the suicider's connections on the site. The Facebook Suicide Manifesto, whilst being a call for action rather than a programme which enables it, could potentially also be considered 'tactical media' as it calls for readers to work *with* Facebook's intended usages rather than oppose them.

Whichever method one believes is most effective, both the act of signing out forever and dissolving in to the network can be seen as moves to escape from the influence of biopower inherent in using Facebook. Despite this, it is arguable that one could never fully remove oneself from Facebook's biopolitical influences. Even if we delete our profile, it is almost

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[29] *Ibid.*

certain that the majority of our social circle will still be users. If Facebook has an effect upon their behaviour, that effect will be passed on to us via physical interactions, phone calls, or any form of communication we may have with them. It appears as though one does not necessarily need to be a Facebook user in order to be part of this social network.

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