
AI translation · View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202303.00775

Connection and Alienation: The Social Evolution of Internet Users in the “Synopticon” Postprint

Authors: Yan Jiahui

Date: 2023-03-24T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

With the development of information dissemination technology, connections among internet users have grown increasingly intimate, and social structure has evolved from the “panopticon” to the “synopticon” under a spectatorship framework, subjecting users to unprecedented pressures in online social interaction. Simultaneously, social media platforms continuously roll out new features that empower users. Under the combined influence of peer surveillance, technological empowerment, and social capital promotion, the social interaction behaviors of internet users exhibit alienating tendencies. This paper, based on an exposition of alienating behaviors in online user social interaction, investigates the driving factors behind the alienation of users’ online social behaviors, analyzes the impacts generated by such alienating social behaviors, and proposes remedial measures for the alienating social behaviors of internet users, with the expectation of improving the online social environment to a certain extent.

Full Text

Preamble

Connection and Alienation: The Evolution of Online User Social Interaction Under the “Synopticon”

Author: Yan Jiahui (Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600)

Abstract: With the development of information and communication technologies, connections among internet users have become increasingly close, transforming social structure from the “panopticon” to the “synopticon” under a surveillance configuration. In this new structure, users face unprecedented pressures in online social interaction. Simultaneously, social platforms continuously introduce new features that empower users. Under the combined influence of peer surveillance, technological empowerment, and social capital, online social

behavior exhibits tendencies toward alienation. This paper elaborates on the manifestations of social alienation among internet users, explores the driving forces behind this phenomenon, analyzes its impacts, and proposes measures for improvement, aiming to contribute to the healthy development of online social interaction.

Keywords: online social interaction; social alienation; synopticon; user connectivity

With the deepening of media transformation and continuous innovation in communication technology, social structure has evolved from Foucault’s “panopticon” to a “synopticon” —shifting from a hierarchical, one-to-many vertical gaze to a many-to-one configuration of mutual surveillance where the masses can observe and exert control over individuals. In this transformation, internet information technology plays a crucial role. The internet connects people, content, and services, with interpersonal connection being its core feature. The development of internet communication technology has liquefied and reconstructed spatiotemporal sequences, freeing social interaction from the constraints of shared time and physical co-presence. Consequently, social behavior has gradually moved from offline to online, making digital social interaction the primary mode of human connection.

However, with the emergence of diverse social products and platforms, the internet has entered a stage of “over-connection.” While this appears to offer users greater convenience and expanded space for interaction, it simultaneously imposes an increasingly unbearable burden of connectivity. Particularly under the synoptic social structure, where users can conduct surveillance from anywhere through increasingly accessible communication technologies, individuals find themselves ensnared in an intricate web of relationships across various circles and contexts. This over-connection and ubiquitous surveillance in social networks has led to the alienation of users’ psychological states and interpersonal relationships. Phenomena such as virtual social addiction, anonymous venting of extreme emotions, and privacy paradoxes arising from excessive sharing of chat screenshots have become rampant, drawing growing scholarly attention to the study of alienated social behavior among internet users.

II. Driving Forces of Social Alienation Among Internet Users

(1) Multi-party Surveillance Under the “Synopticon”

French philosopher Michel Foucault first proposed the concept of the “panopticon,” arguing that in traditional society, social managers achieved more cost-effective and efficient governance through information asymmetry. He likened this social structure to a prison, with managers in the central watchtower and others in the cells. In this configuration, managers could see everyone while remaining invisible themselves, and prisoners lacked effective channels for com-

munication and information exchange. This uncertainty compelled individuals to accept external control and engage in self-discipline [1]. With the development of internet communication technology, however, information access has proliferated exponentially, enabling everyone to become a “surveillor” who can observe others from anywhere. Consequently, social structure has transformed from a “panopticon” to a “synopticon,” placing individuals under a many-to-one gaze. To establish and maintain a favorable image, users must scrutinize their words and actions more strictly. In this context, users’ negative emotions find no legitimate outlet, creating an urgent need for alternative channels of release. This has given rise to various forms of anonymous chatting and anonymous venting.

(2) Social Capital Driving Self-presentation Needs

The development of the internet and social platforms has trapped users in overly connected strong-tie networks, intensifying their need to demonstrate existence and visibility. In this environment, social interaction becomes highly performative, as every action serves not merely as personal expression but as a strategic move to cultivate one’s “persona.” Once users become commodified, others’ attention and evaluations transform into social capital. To acquire this capital, users “invest” in self-presentation to craft a more popular persona [2]. This investment demands significant time and energy costs. Living under the synopticon subjects users to others’ scrutiny, requiring them to consider the effects and consequences of their expressions from multiple perspectives, including potential long-term and far-reaching impacts. Consequently, individuals meticulously deliberate over every sentence, obsessively edit every shared image, and employ features like “group-specific posting” and blocking to precisely control content distribution, preventing inappropriate material from reaching certain audiences. From this perspective, social platforms function not only as a synopticon where others surveil individuals but also as a “circular prison” of self-surveillance. Users adjust their self-presentation based on others’ feedback while proactively imagining others’ evaluations to review and modify their own behavior. The more attention capital they accumulate and the more connections they forge, the more frequent this self-censorship becomes. As a result, users increasingly turn to anonymous group chats and dedicated complaint threads, which allow them to maintain their image and social capital while escaping constant scrutiny.

(3) Continuous Empowerment by Media Technology

The advancement of internet and mobile communication technologies has spawned various social platforms enabling one-to-many and many-to-many instant interactions, breaking spatiotemporal barriers to social activity. While this digital sociality satisfies people’s needs for sustained, stable interaction, the development of platforms and algorithmic recommendation technologies has pushed user relationships toward over-connection. In this hyper-connected environment, users have nowhere to hide, forced into strong or weak relation-

ships constituted by various factors [3]. Faced with excessive social pressure, users seek ways to escape online social interaction. To meet this demand, platforms continuously develop new features. Settings such as “invisible status” and anonymous chat functions grant users the right to disappear, the right to be forgotten, and control over their “connection switches,” enabling them to temporarily withdraw from online sociality or participate under an alternative identity.

III. Manifestations and Impacts of Social Alienation Among Internet Users

(1) Social Media Addiction Triggering Spatiotemporal Anxiety

Online social interaction dissolves spatiotemporal boundaries, liquefying and reconstructing temporal sequences so that user communication is no longer limited to physical co-presence but can occur in real-time [4]. Compared to traditional offline interaction, this networked sociality offers greater speed and efficiency, saving time costs and gradually leading users to become addicted to its form. In this era of universal participation, society has come to expect that users remain perpetually online. In reality, however, users constantly shuttle between cyberspace and physical space to access the latest information. This frequent transition disrupts normal spatiotemporal rhythms, creating an illusion that time in cyberspace flows much faster than in reality, thereby triggering spatiotemporal anxiety. Simultaneously, when engaging in offline social activities while remaining online, users experience a confusion of selves across two spaces, severely affecting their life rhythms. Just as individuals might turn to online social interaction for relief from work or study pressures, excessive addiction ultimately reduces their productivity and efficiency.

(2) Symbolic Interaction Leading to Self-loss

American sociologist Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory conceptualizes individuals as actors performing on stage, using various symbols to pre-design or display their images to achieve desired effects [5]. Cyberspace encompasses both strong social ties formed in real life and weak ties established through shared interests. In this hybrid public-private “pseudo-environment,” users attach great importance to others’ scrutiny and consequently shape images that seek collective validation. When posting on platforms like WeChat Moments or Xiaohongshu, content becomes symbolically meaningful, prompting users to select edited photos and carefully crafted phrases to project an idealized self-image. Meanwhile, “likes,” “shares,” and “comments” acquire specific symbolic significance. This over-symbolized self-presentation and interaction can mislead users into self-loss, making it difficult to distinguish between front-stage and back-stage personas, and causing them to become excessively absorbed in their platform-constructed identities.

(3) Over-exposure of Information Triggering Privacy Paradoxes

As online social interaction deepens, users inevitably disclose personal information, either actively or passively. In traditional media environments, such privacy breaches were strongly resisted. However, amid rampant misinformation and frequent narrative reversals online, users have grown increasingly distrustful. In this context, users engage in self-disclosure to verify their identities, sharing screenshots of personal information, chat logs, and audio recordings. Yet this information involves privacy concerns and poses significant security risks when publicly shared in cyberspace. Consequently, users' active or passive self-disclosure behaviors intensify psychological burdens regarding privacy concerns, giving rise to the privacy paradox [6]. Online social users typically desire both to expand interpersonal relationships through social networks and to protect their personal privacy, yet these two objectives often prove contradictory.

(4) Anonymous Venting Transmitting Extreme Emotions

“Bot” is an abbreviation of “robot,” originally referring to automated Twitter accounts controlled by scripts that could automatically post and reply when triggered. When the bot model entered China in 2017 and was adapted for Weibo, it underwent significant transformation. These accounts began accepting fan submissions, which were then manually screened, processed, and published if they matched the account's theme. This shift replaced automation with human curation, evolving into a model where operators manually updated content and interacted with users [7]. Submissions were posted anonymously, allowing users to disseminate information while remaining unidentifiable. Information that users found difficult to post on their personal accounts could be expressed through this “protected” format in bot accounts. Consequently, Weibo's anonymous venting bots have transformed from neutral, impersonal entities into spaces for malicious and vulgar commentary, earning them the moniker “public toilets” for garbage information and emotional waste. Moreover, since followers of a particular bot typically share similar interests, these posts often receive validation, giving submitters a sense of affirmation that encourages further dissemination of similar content. This dynamic perpetuates the spread of malicious speech, diffuses extreme emotions, and can even incite inter-group conflicts and verbal abuse.

IV. Measures to Improve Social Alienation Among Internet Users

(1) Implement Real-name Systems and Strengthen Platform Governance

Creating a healthy social environment and promoting the sound development of online social interaction requires enhanced platform supervision and strengthened gatekeeping roles. First, the anonymous nature of social platforms provides space for direct expression but also breeds vulgar speech and cyber violence

due to inadequate oversight. Therefore, establishing a real-name registration mechanism is necessary to institutionally constrain user behavior through personal information verification. Second, platforms should develop anti-addiction systems for minors to strengthen supervision of underage usage and protect healthy youth development. Third, platforms must establish user monitoring and reporting mechanisms to jointly maintain a healthy social environment. Finally, platforms should protect users' right to be forgotten and employ technical measures to safeguard users' rights to "offline" status and privacy.

(2) Enhance User Media Literacy

Media literacy refers to the ability to properly utilize mass media resources, including the capacity to select, question, critique, process, and produce media information. While social alienation in cyberspace results from multiple factors, users—as the primary actors in online social interaction—should consciously improve their media literacy to facilitate healthy digital sociality. First, regarding privacy breaches, the fundamental issue lies not in secondary dissemination by others or external controls like technology and legal norms, but in privacy risks triggered by users' own active sharing. Therefore, enhancing self-protection awareness and media usage literacy has become urgent. Users should practice restrained disclosure based on content sensitivity and audience assessment, effectively reducing privacy leakage risks while developing appropriate privacy concerns to minimize opportunities for exploitation [8]. Second, users should establish correct values and social responsibility awareness to constrain their self-presentation within legal and ethical boundaries. In online social interaction, they must be able to distinguish truth from falsehood, uphold moral standards, avoid blind conformity, reduce the transmission of vulgar and abusive information, and collectively build a healthy social environment.

(3) Government Guidance and Regulation

In contemporary society, social platforms have achieved tremendous development and application while simultaneously generating numerous social problems, including internet addiction, privacy violations, interpersonal trust deficits, and cyber violence. To address these issues, government departments should strengthen guidance and regulation of social platforms by formulating and issuing relevant laws and regulations, employing both technical measures and legal constraints to manage phenomena such as interaction alienation and moral anomie. Simultaneously, authorities should reinforce guidance on socialist core values among online users, utilizing social platforms to publicize and implement government principles. Through measures such as promoting real-name registration systems and legally pursuing accountability for violators, the government can constrain the spread of vulgar content and unhealthy social behaviors, thereby purifying the environment for online social development.

With the development of internet communication technology, online social interaction has gradually become the primary mode of human connection. Yet

while enjoying its convenience, people also face pressures from the synopticon and over-connection, causing online social behavior to exhibit increasing alienation. Phenomena such as social media addiction triggering spatiotemporal anxiety, symbolic interaction causing self-loss, over-exposure of personal information creating privacy paradoxes, and anonymous venting transmitting extreme emotions have emerged incessantly, profoundly impacting the online social environment. To address these issues, governance should proceed from three dimensions: strengthened platform supervision, enhanced user media literacy, and government guidance and regulation, thereby promoting the healthy and sound development of online social interaction.

VI. References

[1] Yu Guoming. The Release of Social Discourse Energy Requires a “Safety Valve” –On the Transformation of Social Fields from “Panopticon” to “Synopticon” [J]. News and Writing, 2009(09):56-57.

[2] Peng Lan. Connection and Anti-connection: The Swing of Internet Laws [J]. Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication, 2019, 41(02):20-37.

[3] Li Biao, Liu Ziwei. From “Interaction” to “Alienation” : A Study of Like-giving Behavior and Social Subject Alienation in Friend Circles [J]. News and Writing, 2022(06):5-13.

[4] Brother Mao Team. The Alienation of Social Media [EB/OL]. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/lkLsks1XvG2b6I>. 2018-06-19/2022-12-20.

[5] Qian Xinxin, Yu Wenjun. “Establishment” and “Maintenance” : Interpreting Celebrity Personas from the Perspective of Dramaturgical Theory [J]. Southeast Communication, 2022(09):76-79. DOI:10.13556/j.cnki.dncb.cn35-1274/j.2022.09.005.

[6] Chen Subai, Gu Chenyu, Lü Mingjie. “Lying Flat” or “Protecting” : A Study on the Paradox of Social Media Privacy Protection Behavior—U-shaped Relationship and Digital Intergenerational Comparison [J/OL]. Journal of Intelligence:1-10[2022-12-30]. <http://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/61.1167.g3.20221202.1519.004.html>

[7] Chen Ruoyin. Content Crowdfunding and Emotional Resonance: An Analysis of the Rise of Manual Bots on Weibo [J]. Public Communication of Science & Technology, 2021, 13(15):123-125+136. DOI:10.16607/j.cnki.1674-6708.2021.15.041.

[8] Quan Yan. A Study on Trust Alienation in Social Networks in the “Post-truth Era” [J]. Nanjing Journal of Social Sciences, 2017(07):112-119. DOI:10.15937/j.cnki.issn1001-8263.2017.07.015.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.