

A Critical Empirical Study of Surveillance and Privacy on Social Media

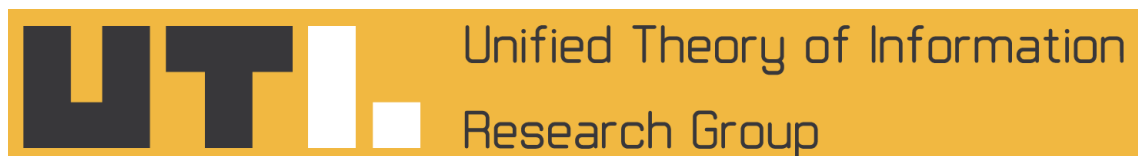
Thomas Allmer

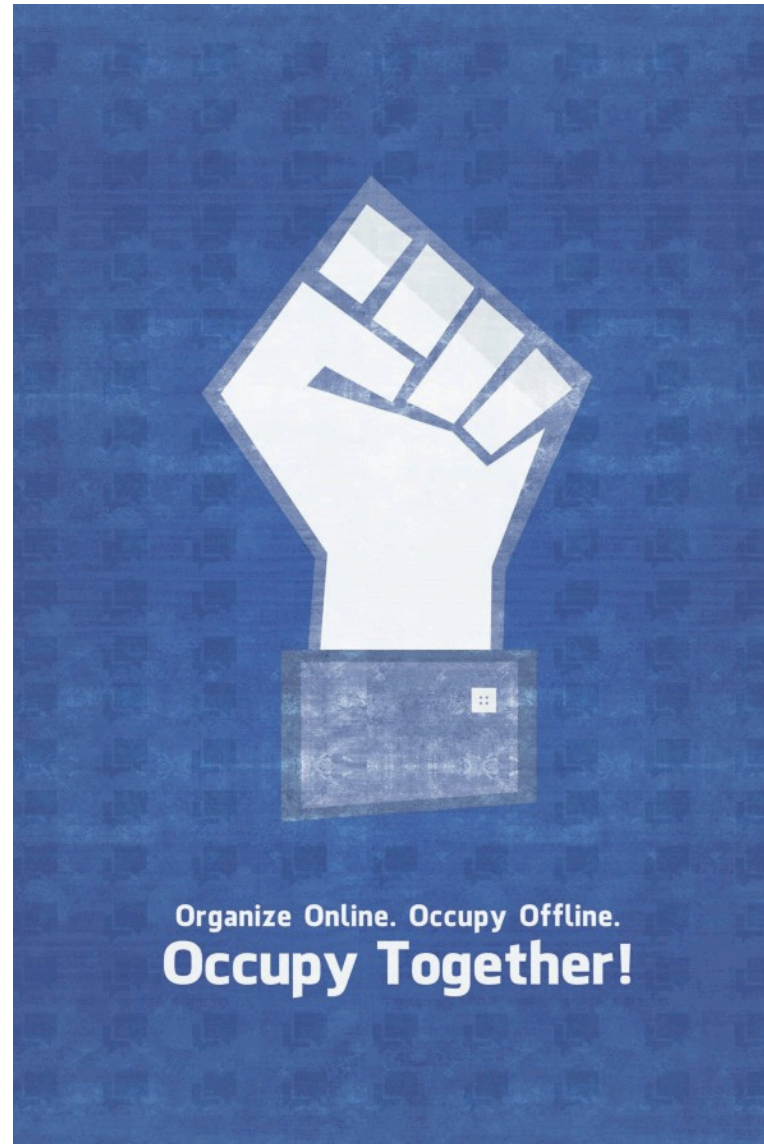
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Source: <http://www.visualnews.com/2011/12/02/occupy-movement-leverages-open-source-art>

List of Contents

1. State of the Art
2. Dialectical Critical Theory of Technology
3. Social Media as an Example for Dialectical Critical Theory of Technology
4. Conclusion and Implications of Research

1. STATE OF THE ART

Most **empirical studies of privacy and surveillance on social media** (for example: Acquisti and Gross 2006, boyd and Hargittai 2010, Livingstone 2008) focus on privacy-related issues on corporate social networking sites. These studies pay attention to one or more of the following matters concerning web 2.0 users:

- **Individual knowledge and information** towards/about privacy
- **Individual** privacy-related **attitudes/concerns**
- **Individual behaviour and practices** towards/about privacy (settings)

2. DIALECTICAL CRITICAL THEORY OF TECHNOLOGY

Dialectical Critical Theory of Technology

- The economic system is based on the dialectical relationship of **productive forces** and **relations of production**
- **Antagonism** between productive forces and relations of production in:
 - Capitalism (Marx 1858)
 - Informational Capitalism (Castells 2000, Fuchs 2008)
 - Internet Capitalism

Dialectical Critical Theory of Technology

“The contradictions and antagonisms inseparable from the capitalist application of machinery do not exist, they say, because they do not arise out of machinery as such, but out of its capitalist applications! [...] Machinery in itself **shortens the hours of labour**, but when employed by capital it **lengthens them**; [...] in itself it **lightens labour**, but when employed by capital it **heightens its intensity**; [...] in itself it is **a victory of man over the forces of nature** but in the hands of capital it **makes man the slave of those forces**; [...] in itself it **increases the wealth of the producers**, in the hands of capital it **makes them into paupers”**

(Marx, Karl. 1867. Capital: Volume 1, 568-569)

Dialectical Critical Theory of Technology

*“Technics by itself can promote
**authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as
well as abundance, the extension as well as the
abolition of toil.**”*

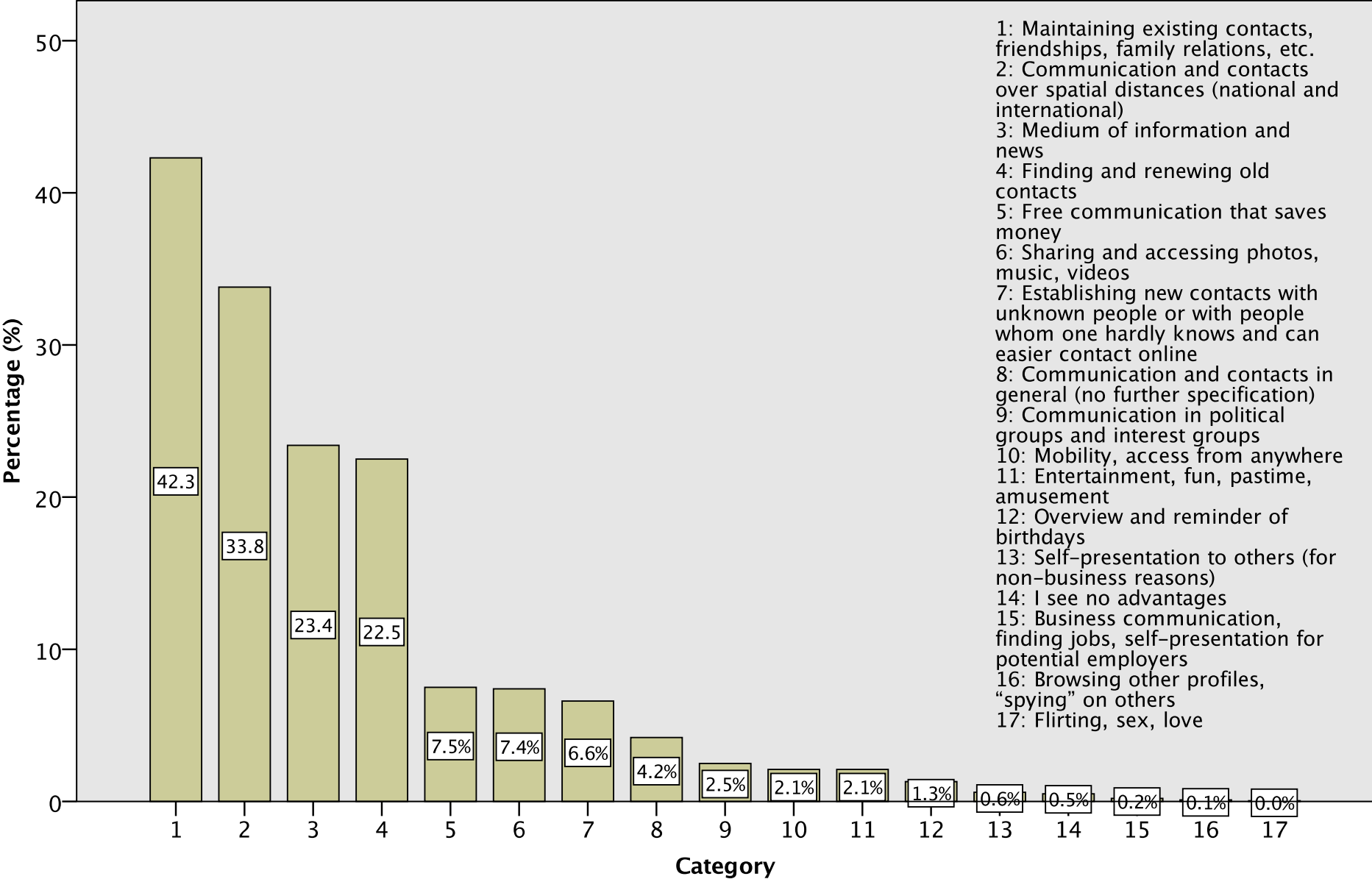
(Marcuse, Herbert. 1941. Some Social Implications of Modern Technology, 41)

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EXAMPLE FOR DIALECTICAL CRITICAL THEORY OF TECHNOLOGY

Methodology

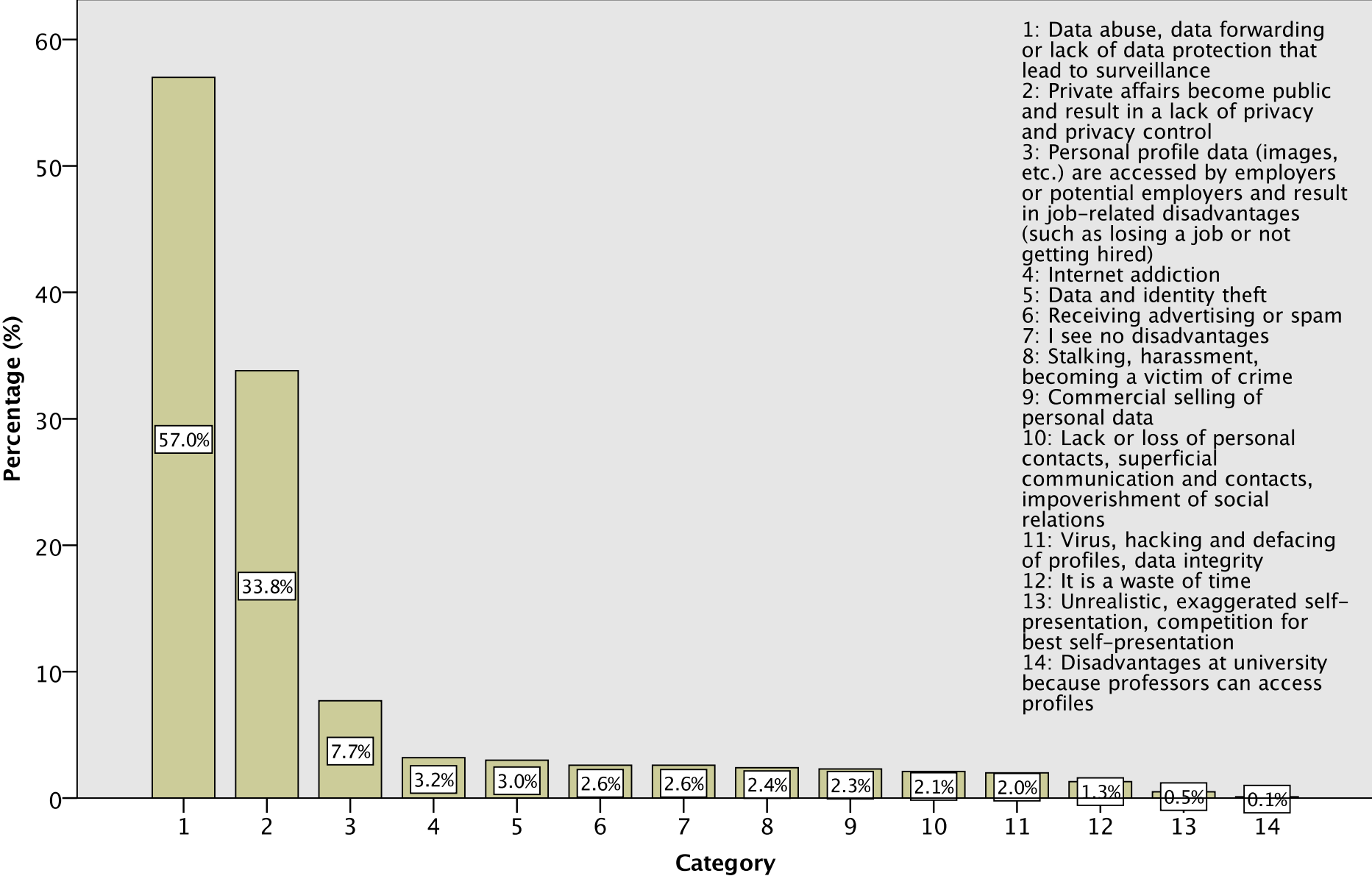
- **Electronic survey** with the help of the online survey tool SurveyMonkey
- Research was carried out from June to November **2011**
- Quantifying qualitative analysis of **social networking sites** used by **Austrian students** (N=3558)
- Open-ended questions about what students perceive as the **major advantages and disadvantages** of social networking sites

What are the greatest advantages of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc. for you? N=3531



- Productive forces
- Arab Spring
- Occupy Movement
- Web 2.0 enables information, communication, and cooperation of protest movements (Hofkirchner 2007; Fuchs 2008)

What are your greatest concerns of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc? N=3534



- 1: Data abuse, data forwarding or lack of data protection that lead to surveillance
- 2: Private affairs become public and result in a lack of privacy and privacy control
- 3: Personal profile data (images, etc.) are accessed by employers or potential employers and result in job-related disadvantages (such as losing a job or not getting hired)
- 4: Internet addiction
- 5: Data and identity theft
- 6: Receiving advertising or spam
- 7: I see no disadvantages
- 8: Stalking, harassment, becoming a victim of crime
- 9: Commercial selling of personal data
- 10: Lack or loss of personal contacts, superficial communication and contacts, impoverishment of social relations
- 11: Virus, hacking and defacing of profiles, data integrity
- 12: It is a waste of time
- 13: Unrealistic, exaggerated self-presentation, competition for best self-presentation
- 14: Disadvantages at university because professors can access profiles

- Relations of production
- Web 2.0 activities enable the **collection, analyzes, and sale** of personal data by profit-oriented web platforms
- Massive provision and storage of personal(ly) (identifiable) data that are systematically evaluated, marketed, and used for **targeted advertising**
- Important aspects for guaranteeing the production of **surplus value** and accumulating **profit** (Andrejevic 2010; Fuchs 2012)
- **Commodification** of social relations (Scholz 2008)

- Not only advantages and disadvantages, rather **various effects that contradict each other**
- Impression of the majority of the respondents: Social media enable **communicative advantages** and bring **risks of surveillance**
- The economic and political logic that shapes the strategies of profit-oriented social networking sites produces an **antagonism between communicative opportunities and surveillance threats**. This points out the antagonistic structure of communication technologies in capitalism.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

- The first recommendation is that support is needed for **critical privacy movements** in order to develop **counter-hegemonic power** and advance **critical awareness** of surveillance.
- “Such public awareness of surveillance issues could further be raised through professional groups and organizations, especially those directly concerned with computing, information management, and so on.” (Lyon 1994, 223)
- Furthermore, Lyon (2001, 127) states the importance of **political activism** by critical citizens: “Films, consumer groups, Internet campaigns and international watchdogs are just some of the ways that ongoing surveillance practices are brought to the surface of our consciousness, and thus overtly into the realm of ethical evaluation and political response.”

- According to Fuchs (2009, 116), “critical citizens, critical citizens’ initiatives, consumer groups, social movement groups, critical scholars, unions, data protection specialists/groups, consumer protection specialists/groups, critical politicians, critical political parties **observe** closely the relationship of surveillance and corporations and **document** instances where **corporations and politicians** take measures **that threaten privacy** or increase the surveillance of citizens”.
- In addition, it is recommended to support cyberactivism and “counter-surveillance” (Lyon 1994, 159) in order to surveil corporate surveillants or rather to **watch the watchers**.

- Parenti (2003, 212) suggests civil **disobedience, rebellion, and protest**: “It will compel regulators to tell corporations, police, schools, hospitals, and other institutions that there are limits. As a society, we want to say: Here you may not go. Here you may not record. Here you may not track and identify people. Here you may not trade and analyze information and build dossiers.”
- A further recommendation is to create non-profit, non-commercial social networking platforms on the Internet such as **Kaioo**. Kaioo is owned by the non-profit organization OpenNetworX, has been available since 2007, and has currently about 30.000 users. Kaioo’s privacy terms are created in common and can be edited online by every user. In addition, the data belong to their users (<http://kaioo.com>). OpenNetworX can do so, because they are not interested in targeting advertising and they do not need to produce surplus value and to accumulate profit.

- “To try to advance critical awareness and to surveil corporate and political surveillers are important political moves for guaranteeing civil rights, but they will ultimately fail if they do not recognize that electronic surveillance is not a technological issue that can be solved by technological means or by different individual behaviours, but only by bringing about **changes of society.**” (Fuchs 2009, 116) Therefore, Internet surveillance has to be put into the **larger context of societal problems in public discourse.** “We should look at the whole macro picture.” (Ogura 2006, 292)
- Finally, **surveillance is** caused by economical and political issues and is inherent in modern society. It is neither just a technical issue, nor an individual problem, but **a societal problem.** Surveillance in general and Internet surveillance in particular are crucial phenomena, but there are a lot of other features in contemporary society such as information, neoliberalism, globalization, and capital.

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