Parental surveillance of teens in the digital era: the "ritual of confession" to the "ritual of repentance"

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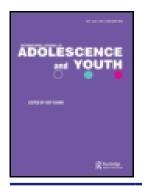
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ABSTRACT

The use of ICTs by teens are sometimes a source of fear for parents. Yet the same ICTs can be a tool and comfort to parents who need to know where their children are, with whom and what they are doing when they are far away from their gaze. This following article explores this tension, and especially how teenagers see the surveillance of their parents in the digital era. It is based on 35 interviews conducted amongst French teenagers aged 14 to 18 from October 2017 to April 2018. It reveals how the use of ICTs to monitor teens participates in the emergence of a new form of control, drawing questions not only in the realm of the family yet also in wider society.

Introduction

According to Sadin (2009), surveillance can be described as a collection of information to verify if the imagined reality conforms to the factual reality. In this case, surveillance is a way to get information without trying to change the behaviour of the people who are observed. Sadin contests that that is the difference with control, which has consequences on the acts and behaviour of people, even transforming the way they think. This can be consciously or unconsciously undertaken by the observer, with the observees both aware and unaware that they are being surveyed. These definitions of surveillance and control are not far from the definitions established by Foucault when writing about the panoptic system that can significantly modify the behaviour of people who are observed. This research verifies that there is a thin line between surveillance and control, which is crossed according to teenagers, in the context when their parents can reach them by phone at almost anytime and, in some cases, partly access their digital traces.

Firstly, the connection established between individuals owning a smartphone introduces a new norm of 'to be reachable' at anytime and anywhere in daily life (Jauréguiberry, 2014). This norm implies the requirement of response in more situations then ever before, which explains partly why more and more people complain about the invasion of others in their private lives. This is similar to how teenagers often complain about the invasive behavior of their parents (Ghosh et al., 2018a). However this norm does not affect only the separation between public and private life, it also changes the connections between the members of the same family, by allowing people the power to reach each other even if they do not share the same schedule and the same space during the day. This recent context also affects the relationship between parents and their teenagers by connecting them almost continuously. This could explain why research has shown there's more communication through ICTs between parents and children when they are grown up (Rudi, Dworkin, Walker, & Doty, 2014).

Secondly, the significant use of ICTs by teenagers provides their parents with an important source of potential information about their child (Ghosh, Badillo-Urquiola, Guha, LaViola, & Wisniewski, 2018). By exchanging through instant messaging or producing photos and videos, young people create more and more traces of their acts and behaviour. Current research shows these traces can't be seen as a perfect reflection of their reality (boyd, 2014), but they can be perceived by parents of teenagers as clues to know what they are maybe hiding to them. This complicates the position of parents who say it's difficult to find the right way to behave in this context (Jennie Lynn, Vaterlaus, Tulane, & Beckert, 2017)

In the digital era, this places parents in situations where they can access the digital traces of conversations their child has with their friends (for example, on their personal cell phone) and by consulting photos taken when they can't directly monitor them.

In the digital era, parents can try to reach their teenagers at anytime and can also try to consult their digital footprint or traces. This can be relatively tempting for significant numbers of parents who feel more and more insecure when their child becomes a teen (boyd & Hargittai, 2013). In fact, it seems as though even if teens are not more in danger than in the past, the feeling of insecurity has grown amongst parents for whom the use of ICTs can be a source of danger, particularly because of the risk of harassment by other teens and the risk of seduction by sexual predators. There's additionally been a shift on how parents see the risk taken by their child on Internet and the real ones undertaken (Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2008). There's also a paradox here: on one hand, the use of ICTs by teens are a source of fear for parents however on the other hand, the same ICTs can be a tool to reassure parents who need to know where their children are, with whom, and what they are doing when they are far away from their gaze.

The desire to protect children takes a new form of surveillance in the digital era, however parental concern can't be seen as the only reason to access these new modalities to get information. According to many authors, individuals are also ready to freely give access to personal information on the lines if they feel they will receive something worthwhile in return (Nisseubaum, 2009; Vertesi, Kaye, Jarosewski, Khovanskaya, & Song, 2016) and teenagers seem to be encouraged to reveal more than part of their private life on social networks (Livingston, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2014). When teens have problems with their peers online, they easily accept to be monitored by their parents (Ghosh et al., 2018b). This creates a tension between parents who can access information from their teen yet try to respect their private life at the same time, and teens who want to protect their personal information however give it willingly if they feel they receive something worthwhile in exchange.

This following article explores this tension, and especially how teenagers see how their own parents monitor them by using ICTs. It is based on 35 interviews conducted among French teenagers aged 14 to 18 from October 2017 to April 2018. This is a part of wider research also conducted among children aged 9 to 11 year old (N = 22) and young adults aged 18–20 old (N = 8), with 8 additional interviews with teenagers who had experienced being geolocated by their parents[2]. The duration of the interviews were variable between 50 and 97 minutes. As highlighted in the article, these results can also provide information to verify if, from this point of view, the surveillance through ICTs can become a form of control, that can be precisely understood as the transformation of 'ritual of confession' (Foucault, 1976) into the 'ritual of repentance'. This last point will be discussed in the final part of this article.

Results

Reachable in a connected world: from 'where are you?' to 'are you still reachable?'

First, the norm of being always connected and reachable is significantly present in the discourses of all the young people involved in this research. It's almost a chiché for them to talk about the fact that they have to keep their cellphone with them at all times … In the interviews, being reachable by their parents is intimately linked with the right to go out independently, either alone or with

friends, in public areas. This shows relation with other quantitative research in France which shows that the main reason for parents to allow their child to have a cell phone is to feel safer when they are out by themselves[1]. If the duty to stay connected at all times seems to be strongly linked in the representation of young people, it is probably because they were often allowed to go out by themselves for the first time under the condition to be 'reachable':

"I know if I don't call my parents I will have problems. So, I send a message or I call them. It is normal they worry about me, but when I am with a friend where her parents are there, nothing can happen to me. It's not like if I'm going out in town at night. There's no reason to worry I think. But they want to know how I am and, in exchange, I have the right to go to my friend's home. It's a kind of deal (Estelle, 15 year old).

In other terms, the new freedom recently acquired by these teenagers can't be experienced without the condition to keep an eye on their phone, and they fear not keeping to this will lose them the right to go out alone by themselves.

In the digital era, for many teenagers, it appears to stay connected with their parents is a part of the exploration of public space and developing private relationships. All of the teens met during the research talked about the 'contract' they virtually 'sign' with their parents to get the right to go out by themselves. A contract that especially includes 'to stay connected and reachable'. However, the terms of this 'contract' is not all the time clear for the teens who are inscribed by it.

The requirement to stay connected is not only a theoretical link, because it is regularly activated by parents who verify not only if 'everything is OK' for their teens, but also to verify if the digital link is still working. It's one of the results that can be discussed and explored here: in many situations, surveillance does not exist to get information about the teens, their acts and their behaviors, but to collect information about the quality of the digital link they want to preserve 'in case of'. According to the discourses of the teens, the questions asked by those parents in these kinds of situations were not 'how are you?', 'where are you?' or even 'who are you hanging out with?' but rather 'are you still reachable?' and 'will you answer me when I contact you?'. This situation produces a paradox because, in many cases, the teenagers are not in a particularly dangerous situation, which therefore could understandably cause the parents fear, but only that those parents can't reach them at the time they were looking for a response. The digital link that should provide a feeling of security creates the opposite feeling of what they were looking for.

Among the young people interviewed, different attitudes will be taken to respond to this requirement depending if the act or reaction to the calls and the messages received from their parents and if they accepted or refused to answer them.

In the first case, many teenagers will accept to connect with their parents, mostly to ensure they feel safe. The majority of them show they are empathic to their parents fears, and they want to reassure them that they are safe when they go out by themselves. Of those teens that answer their parents, the first group responded anytime and anywhere, whatever situation they were involved in:

"I don't think I've ever been unreachable. In fact, maybe it happened but it was when I didn't hear the phone, and, when I realized they called me, I called them back within a second. I don't want to create problems with my parents, so I make an effort "(Leo, 18 years old))

"Every time my mother sends me a message, I have to answer within ten minutes" (Yann, 16 years old)

For them, checking their cellphone regularly and keeping the alarms and notifications on are the most important. They will always answer quickly to avoid worrying their paretns, and also to avoid problems with them as some teens had experienced before.

In the second case, teenagers will also keep in contact with their parents, but instead of answering when they received a message or a phone call, they anticipated their parent's wishes by sending regular messages or phoning them in a specific situation that could potentially worry their parents. This is supposing that the teens understand the psychology of their parents, and internalize them in the way they manage their time and activities, to anticipate the moment their

parents are expecting a signal from them. Like in the first group, they responded to the attempts from their parents but they didn't wait for them to give them a signal that 'everything is OK'.

> "I know I often call my parents, I send them lots of messages to tell them where I am. My parents don't know what I'm doing exactly, but in general; yes. I don't tell them all the time what I'm doing, but I tell them "I'm in town" or "I'm at my friend's home" or other things. So they know what I'm doing but not exactly. They know I'm in town but they don't know I'm in a shopping mall, I'm in a café, or if I go to eat in town. If I move or change places, I tell them. "(Gaelle, 14 years old)

> «When my mom sends me a message to know how I am,, I answer to make sure she's not worried. Because if i don't answer, she won't sleep well ! In a way, I understand, but sometimes, it pisses me off. Ofcourse I understand, a message, it's nothing. But my mom doesn't ask me to send her a message myself. I just have to answer when she sends me one » (Virgil, 17 years old)

In the third case, some teenagers decided to not answer their parents who were waiting for an answer after messaging or calling their child. The 'contract' of being reachable is temporally broken and the connection is replaced by disconnection. Here the teenagers take the final decision to not answer their parents at the moment they receive a message or a phone call from them.

> "Sometimes, my parents go too far … At a party, a few weeks ago, I refused to answer my father's calls, cause he knows very well where my friends and I were spending the evening. And there were parents present that night, so I judged it useless that he was trying to contact or monitor me." (Alexi, 15 year old)

In the fourth and last case, teenagers created situations to be sure they would not be able to answer their parents when they received a message or a phone call. This strategy is about to find a reason that can explain why they are not reachable. The principal example we found in the discourses of teenagers is that their phone had no battery.

> "Last week, my phone was dead. So no phone anymore! My father didn't' know where I was and he made a drama about it when I got home, but I was honest. My phone was just dead!" (Yann, 17 year old)

> «I was at a party. I was in Strasburg at my friend's place, and my mother was little bit sick. I talked with her for five or ten minustes but then my phone cut out. My mother worried a little after that (Hector, 16 year old)

As we can see, the first and the second group prefer to act like if they were accepting the norm of being always connected and reachable. That's the main difference with the third and fourth group that take the option to not answer their parents. However there's also a similar element that characterized the first and the third group: in both cases, they react to the situation decided by their parents who sent a message or made a phone call.

A similarity held in many of the discourses of the teenagers met during this research was that they didn't talk much about the content of the exchange they had with their parents when they messaged and called them. In fact, the act of calling or texting seems more significant then the content. In other words, the digital link is strongly tested by the parents and significantly accepted or rejected by the teens because of the symbol they give to this interaction. In fact, for the ones that accepted to keep in touch at all times, they do so it seems to respect their parents and provide them with a feeling of security. For the others who ignore the messages or reject calls, the meaning of their choice seems to take place in a logic of empowerment. There's, at least, three reasons that the teens give in their decision not to answer.

As previously noted, the first reason is to not disturb the activities they were involved in at the moment they received the message or the phone call. Because they were with their friends, or sometimes with their girlfriend or boyfriend, they deem that their parents can wait for a while. In the discourses of the teens concerned by this reasoning, we can feel the desire to claim the importance of a specific relationship over another:

> "Sometimes, I may answer them later on … Because, I don't want to talk to them all evening. Last time, I was at a party at my friend's home and they called me quite late, and I wondered why they called me so late … At

another party, it was just the beginning and I imagined it wasn't important because I was with friend I hadn't seen for a long time (Dorian, 17 year old)

This is not really surprising at the age where peers and intimate relationships take more and more importance in the life of the individual over that of the family. In this case, the disconnection seems to be strongly linked with the empowerment of the teen, in a way that has been frequently reported in work including adolescants

The second meaning is how to judge the level of emergency that should be given to the message or the phone call received. Here, not answering '*yet*' gives the teens the possibility to explain why they are taking this decision by judging by themselves if, yes or not, the message or the phone call deserves to be answered quickly or later on. This behaviour is also strongly linked with their empowerment. In this way, they can produce discourses that defend the idea they know how to judge what is urgent or not, whatever their parents think.

"I don't answer them all the time. If it's important or not, because sincerely … my mom calls me for anything, to get information she can get later. In fact, if there's an emergency, yes, I think it's normal to send me a message, but if not, there's no reason" (Eric, 15 year old)

The third meaning is regarding how this kind of disconnection modifies the interaction with their parents by changing the temporality of the interaction. When teens answered a phone call or exchanged instant messages with their parents, they accepted the interaction activated in the present, whatever the physical distance that separated them. By refusing this exchange in the present, they delay the moment of the exchange with their parents. The present is preserved from the 'parent's intrusion', but it is also a way to replace the moment of the interaction in another time and another place. In most cases reported by teens, the digital exchange is replaced by a'face-to-face'conversation. The subject of the conversation is no longer surrounding 'where are you?' or 'What are you doing'. Neither is it 'are you answering on demand?'. When teens returned home after a evening without answering the messages or the phone calls made by their parents, the question was more about: 'why you didn't answer me?'. As a paradox, it becomes a chance for those teens to talk about what they were doing and, mostly, why this moment was so important over the obligation to answer in the exact moment they received the message or the phone call.

« It was this evening when my phone ran out of battery and I answered them only the following morning. They were really upset, and stressed, but I explained them, and it was ok. I just told them my phone had ran out of battery. But there were stressed I didn't answer them cause, usually, I answer, so they asked me what happened and everything, but then they were reassured (Théo, 17 year old)

New clues of evidence in the connected world?

Teens not only talked about the temptation of their parents to message or call them anytime and anywhere, they also revealed how the digital traces they create can tempt their parents when they see digital traces as a tool to get more information about their child. There are mainly three kinds of traces teens talked about when questioned on the way their parent uses (or doesn't use) the contents of their computer and cellphone.

According to more of the half of teens met during this research, the photos they take and keep in their ICTs are sometimes used by their parents. Those parents will sometimes simply ask questions when the teen shows them photos of the previous evening they spent with friends or, parents will simply ask their child if they want to show them few photos of their last activities. In both cases, it can be seen that photos become a significant tool to facilitate interactions between parents and teens; a role photos play in many relations in the digital era. However in many of the situations reported, parents also required seeing the photos that their teen kept in their ICTs. This may not seem surprising in considering how many parents reported being worried about their child. In those situations, teens must give them access to the photos they take and must answer

questions from their parents about the content of those photos. The questions asked by the parents to their child are not only 'where were you?' or even 'what were you doing?' but rather 'who is this person I see in this photo?' or 'is that alcohol I see on this table?'. The narrative is not anymore a discourse based on the elements chosen by the teen but based on the elements that appear in the photo and chosen by the parents. In other words, the narrative produced by the teens seems to be oriented by the content of the photos, by visible elements.

> "My mother wanted to know how the party was, so she wanted to see the photos I took. She didn't trust me because I had already lied to her by telling her I would never drink alcohol. So she felt I was lying again … So, for her, photos don't lie, so she wanted to see what my friends house was like,, if there were people I knew as I had told her before … She wanted to verify what had happened there with those photos because she knew I took photos during the party. But the photos in which we can see me smoking with my friends, I put them on my Snapchat story to take back later on. Because I knew my mom could verify the others. Finally, she only saw the photos I took "normally" (Nadia, 18 year old)

The use of instant messaging produces traces of conversations the teens sometimes keep backed up on their cellphones. Many of them relate stories in which their parents used those kinds of traces to question them about their activities. The modality of interrogation is similar then to the case when they use pictures, but here, the content does not give the teens the same liberty to interpret the situation. The content of conversation is often more precise and explicit than photos that can be interpreted by the teens. Strictly speaking the data used here by parents appears more like a kind of evidence for them, and the teens express in their discourse how it can be difficult for them to escape from the surveillance of their parents when they access of this kind of content.

> "When my mom told me: give me your cellphone, and I gave it to her and I thought everything was deleted, but no, and she saw what I sent to a guy who I wanted to buy weed from. So she understood I was smoking. But I told her: look at the date on the picture! And she saw it was quite a long time ago, four months ago I think (Julien, 18 year old)

It seems the more traces appear as objective data, the less teens have liberty to interpret the situations and also 'escape' from the surveillance of their parents. This is particularly true upon analysing the third kind of data used sometimes by parents: geotagging. In this research, teens reported having discovered that they were geotagged by one of their parents (sometimes by both of them). If they are confronted on their photos, teens can answer the question from their parents and improvise a narrative, yet when they are facing traces of conversation they can't defend themselves. Geotagging's data removes them from all possibility of expression: The objectivity of the data forces teens to silence. That's probably why among the eight teens who reported their experience of being geotagged by their parents, all of them confirm a conflicted relationship with their parents, sometimes even a few years after the teen discovered they were geotagged.

> "Once, I was at high school, and I should have been there between 4 to 6 pm for math class. I have a friend who lives just next to the school so I met him there to play videogames, and I came back at 5.50 to be in the front of the school. But my father knew I was at my friend's home cause he geotagged me on the Ipad."
>
> **Interviewer : what happened ?**
>
> "A huge crisis! Cause he asked me If I was at my math class, and I said: yes, I was. And he took his Ipad and showed me the history of my connection and he saw at 5 I was at my friend's house instead of being at school."
>
> **He asked you first if you were at school then?**
>
> "Yes, to see if I was going to lie to him. If I had been honest, things wouldn't have happened like that. It was a test, but, he showed me the Ipad and you can't say anything against that. Everything is written there. Where you were, at what time … "
>
> **Did you know you were geotagged by your father?**
>
> "No, not really."
>
> **How did you feel at that moment?**
>
> "I thought: is he's serious?! I was really surprised, because if I did that all the time I could think: yes, ok, I must stop, he will find out sooner or later, but it was the first time and he showed me that! It was shocking.

With parents enhancing their authority with this objectivity of data, the place for parental-child exchange and narrative, loses importance. In other words, the objectivity of data replaces the subjectivity of words.

Discussion

According to Michel Foucault, the control of the body by any institution can be a consequence of the way the narrative of the individual is oriented by a figure of authority. In *La volonté de savoir* (1976), the author shows how by asking questions and forcing the individual to talk about their sexuality for example, medical staff psychologists and even teachers oriented the representation of how people develop themselves and also their own behaviours. In other words, their behaviour can be controlled though narrative. Foucault calls this a 'ritual of confession', this situation when a figure of authority creates a context to force the individual to construct an oriented narrative.

As seen in the discourses of the teenagers interviewed, the existence of ICTs in their day-to-day life seems to change at least two dimensions of the narrative they construct to explain what they are doing after they have been away from their parent's gaze. The first dimension concerns the moment this narrative is constructed because, in a connected world, this narrative can be made through ICTs anytime and anywhere when parents or even teens decide to send a message or make a phone call. The second dimension concerns the role of data in the construction of this kind of narrative. Parents can use it as a clue of what happens in the life of their teen or as evidence of their behaviour. In other words, the 'ritual of confession' established between parents and child is sometimes expressed in a new context that can significantly change the modality of surveillance. Sometimes digital traces become a tool to construct the narrative about what's happened.

Paradoxically in the connected world, we discovered that the teens could express their empowerment by refusing to take calls or not answering their parent's messages. They also refused to take part in interaction when their parents are asking for it. This disconnection appears here as an act of de-synchronisation which can be seen as a sign of empowerment. It is firstly an act that signifies to parents their position, and after refusing to answer 'in the moment' they generally have to face their parents and exchange with them. However, as we have seen, this moment of face-to-face interaction can also be modified by the uses of digital data when parents utilize the digital traces produced by the activities of their teens. If those teens can express their empowerment by choosing to disconnect themselves and partially refusing the contract they are involved in with their parents, in many situations their narrative are oriented (and sometimes eliminated) by the authority of the data.

Hence this can reveal not only the emergence of a new form of 'ritual of confession' in the digital era among the families, but also, in some cases, the replacement of the 'ritual of confession' by a 'ritual of repentance'. In fact the narrative of the confession is replaced here by the feeling of deep regret amongst teens, and at times even the deep feeling of betrayal. When faced with the 'objectivity' of the data, the narrative lost the space it needed to be developed. In those situations, not only the form of surveillance is changing, yet additionally the way to collect information about the teen is also changing in the digital era. A new form of control is revealed in the families involved here because of the obligation to explain what happens is replaced sometimes by the fear to 'be seen' through the data produced in the digital era. Sometimes the obligation to comment on digital traces, and, in other situations, to accept the objectivity of the data like in the case of the geotagging furthers this creation of a new form of control. This has resulted in why many of the interviews teenagers simply said they 'assume' the situation, not viewing conflict or arguing as a possibility even though they felt it was a breach of their rights and privacy.

Conclusion

According to the discourses of the French teenagers met in this research, it can be asserted that the surveillance of teens by parents in the digital era brings about a new form of control. Their discourses highlight how teens are changing the way they behave to adapt themselves to the behaviour of their parents. The teens involved in this research sometimes anticipated when the right moment to contact their parents was. They sometimes needed to know what they fear. They are obliged answer or refuse phone calls or messages, and in this way, take a position to face their parent's behavior. As demonstrated, some of them manage their time in this way or they develop strategies to escape from the surveillance of their parents who use digital data. In other words, they are forced to adjust their behaviour in this double context characterized by the possibility to be reachable at anytime by their parents and to be questioned through digital traces and ICT resulting data. This work also highlights the importance of the issues surrounding the surveillance of personal data, and control of the population. This draws questions that concern not only the government and companies such as Facebook or other social networks, but also that of the individual and civil society. As the individual is now the prescriber of this new norm of connexion by asking their relatives to see and consult their digital traces, the family becomes one of the allies of the connected world and actively participates in the emergence of a new form of control.

Notes

1. Observatoire Bouygues Telecom: « Des pratiques numériques des Français – PARENTALITÉ NUMÉRIQUE », 2ème édition – Septembre 2018. https://www.corporate.bouyguestelecom.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ObservatoireBouyguesTelecom-PratiquesNumeriquesFran%C3%A7ais-SEPT18.pdf.
2. These interviews come from the work of Yann Bruna published in the article « La déconnexion aux technologies de géolocalisation : une épreuve qui n'est pas à la portée de tous », Réseaux, n° 186 (4), p. 141-161 (…)

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Jocelyn Lachance is a researcher in sociology (University of Pau, France), Phd graduate in educational science from Laval University (Quebec city) and Phd graduate in sociology from University of Strasbourg He is also a member of CNRS UMR 5319 Passages.

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