On your mark…: university grades, privacy, surveillance and control

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Abstract

This article explores the paradox that, in an age of surveillance, student results and records have become increasingly secret and private. It examines some controversies such as President Obama's refusal to release his university results and engages with Bauman and Lyon's argument that Facebook and social media have become forms of voluntary self-surveillance. It argues that Bauman and Lyon neglect ways in which Facebook and social media have become part of a larger move to give the responsibility for self-fashioning to individuals and deny the shaping power of educational achievement and social institutions.

Keywords: education, grades, privacy, transparency, university

JOSH

I really think I'm the best judge of what I mean, you paranoid Berkeley Shiksta feminista! [beat] Whoa. That was way too far.

C.J.

No, no. Well, I've got a staff meeting to go to and so do you, you elitist, Harvard fascist missed-the-Dean's-list-two-semesters-in-a-row Yankee jackass!

JOSH

Feel better getting that off your chest there, C.J.?

C.J.

I'm a whole new woman.

[West Wing, Season one]

Introduction

Claims that modern society is under increasing surveillance and that higher education is part of this trend (Brucato 2013, Nocella and Gabbard 2013) ignore a powerful counter-trend: the increasing secrecy surrounding university results and the treatment of such results as a matter of a private contract between student and institution. This paper offers a brief historical account of how individuals' results have been treated in the past and what has changed, offers a defence

of the historical practice, now overturned almost everywhere, of open and public results, and then examines some of the reasons for its demise.

The analysis focuses on several revealing controversies: the debate around President Obama's refusal to release his academic results; a student uproar at the University of Cape Town when one student took to social media to publicise another student's academic results and make fun of the student. In particular, it examines the paradox, explored by Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon, among others, (Bauman and Lyon 2013) of how the self-advertising and self-publishing of young people in particular can be seen as part of a surveillance society.

Bauman's critique of social media is that they are a subtle form of social control, but he fails to see how self-branding, particularly by young people, can be reconciled with their *pudeur* about their academic results. The failure to consider the larger shift from a meritocratic external shaping of esteem, life path and career to the self-fashioning of the Facebook era (something marked in the very advent of Facebook) means that his critique of the era of Surveillance, like many others, neglects ways in which forms of social and symbolic capital are now deployed – both as a result of political correctness and of the politically connected -- so as to avoid what we see as an earlier and more open surveillance. Ironically, Bauman's own Liquid Moderns are the greatest exemplars of this trend (Bauman 2000).

Historical outline

We are a long way from the world in which the ancient universities published their results in the London *Times* – a practice which influenced practices of publishing matriculation or school-leaving results in newspapers that still persists in South Africa, though it is increasingly controversial here. In an earlier era, results at Cambridge were published in ranked order, giving the lowest pass in Mathematics the title of 'wooden spoon' – a practice that stopped in 1909. After that, results were published alphabetically within classes.

At Oxford and Cambridge now, the results may still be published on university notice-boards, but students may ask to have their names not appear on the list – a matter of a simple request at Oxford but a request needing some form of psychological or medical backing at Cambridge (Wardrop 2009). In many British and American universities, no results are published on notice-boards and are simply given or sent to students individually.

Worldwide, since the passing of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act in the USA in 1974, the trend has been to privacy in academic results, to treat them as something akin to private medical results rather than, say, the outcome of a sporting event, the result of an open and fair competition.

The University of Cape Town has been one of the last universities to make student academic records, for all its students, from the earliest available records on line, but this practice changed in 2014 because of student pressure.

Comments on the change and how to explain it

There are several reasons to feel that public universities should publish results. If they receive state money to educate a future meritocracy, they should be willing to indicate their rankings or at least results. As the structuralists have taught us, individual marks are, as signs, essentially meaningless. A 76 at the University of Cape Town is a clear first and probably places the student in the top 1% of academic achievers; in a typical North American university, it would be a very mediocre result. Unless one has a list of results or comparisons are available, very little can be deduced. Similarly, publishing grades is a very powerful way of stopping the practice, occurring

even in major universities, of rampant grade inflation and classes where As are the norm. Recently Princeton has had to reverse a policy to limit As to only 35% of any class because of student complaints that this disadvantaged them in later life.

If students wish to enter careers where entry is, properly, on a competitive basis because of limited student places, then they surely need to accept the logic that they are in competition as surely as if they were in a race, and that the fairest procedure is an open publication of results.

The failure to publish results or to have them open and available for scrutiny has several possible dangerous consequences: the temptation for people to invent a university past and claim fake qualifications. In the Internet era, this tendency has proliferated and false claims, faked certificates and meaningless degrees from diploma mill 'universities' are all common. The South African government and public officials have regularly been revealed to have exaggerated CVs or falsified claims to academic qualifications – Pallo Jordan being the latest and highest-profile case. An online data-base of validated results for graduates would make fraud far more difficult, particularly in the case of falsified certificates.

The rhetorical point, of course, is that anybody gasping in horror at the thought of such public scrutiny is ceding the central argument – that universities have become places where surveillance and public scrutiny do not apply, or not in any meaningful way to individual students. If this were an area where surveillance mattered or was applied, then there would not be such a marked increase in the extent of fraudulent CVs and falsely claimed qualifications.

For privacy

What made society move from a view of student achievement as something akin to a sporting contest or fair competition to seeing it as something closer to a medical record, something semi-shameful and a sign of a less than full capacity? A post-1968 disillusionment with academic success as a valid criterion for shaping future success may be part of the reason; another force may have been concerns about racial differences and educational achievement that would have been public with the publication of results.

In the forty years since the 1974 FERPA act was passed, many European countries have followed the lead of the USA. It seems unlikely now that any university will continue to publish full academic transcripts rather than a list of graduates, possibly including any academic distinctions.

In many countries, it may be that the very fact of having attended a particular institution, particularly when entrance criteria are highly competitive, is distinction enough. To have been to a Grande Ecole in France or a graduate of a leading German or Chinese University may be more important than the result achieved within the institution.

Controversies

Does the lack of transparency and movement to privacy in academic results matter in contemporary society? What tensions arise as a result of the privatisation of higher education in the stress on the indivualisation of academic achievement rather than on the social outcomes? Does it matter if we now know far less about the academic performance of, say, political leaders, than we would have known half a century ago?

The case of Barack Obama is undoubtedly the most publicised one where political opponents charged that his failure to release his academic records amounted to a lack of necessary surveillance by the American voting public. Obama has insisted on keeping his

college records from his time at Columbia College private. When Donald Trump offered $5 million if Obama would reveal his college record and passport applications, Obama made fun of Trump, but he did not reveal the results. Right-wing theories abound (Obama was receiving scholarship money as a foreign student, for example) but, as will be argued below, the explanation may be much simpler and more sociologically revealing.

Nor, should it be noted, did George W. Bush before Obama reveal his Yale results, but the *New Yorker* managed, in its Nov 8, 1999 edition, to find out. The fact that two presidents from very different backgrounds, and probably with very different motives for wishing to keep their records private, resisted publication of their results suggests some of the complexity of accounting for this shift. Bush subsequently managed to make fun of his own poor results in a Commencement speech at Yale University where he joked that C students could, like him, become President of the United States.

A much less known case at the University of Cape Town in 2013 may have helped sway student opinion decisively behind a move to keep student results secure from public scrutiny or examination but also opens up the complex relationship between university results and social media. A student, writing under a pseudonym, created a blog, UCT Exposed, in reaction to a Facebook group, UCT Confessions, in which she attacked another student who had posted an entry on the latter site with specific reference to the second student's poor academic performance, information available online, pointing out how many courses had been failed and that the student was at risk of exclusion from the university. The writer also attacked other students because of their dress sense or on other grounds, but it was the comment on poor grades that seems to have led to the greatest outrage and concerns about 'cyber-bullying'. (Gaweda 2013, Van der Westhuizen and Gaweda 2013).

Here at last we may seem to have a case of surveillance of one student by another, but as the story developed, the rather ominous surveillance became one where computer savvy students decided to track down the anonymous writer by using a set of techniques right out of the surveillance handbooks: "honey traps" to track the computer used to write a response to the original article and thus to discover the identity of the student.

This case highlights what seems to be a crucial modern development: the fault line between a right to speak with authority in the public sphere based on professional status or academic authority, against a right to speak because the holder claims some other form of social and symbolic capital. In claiming that the student-emperor had no clothes, in traditional academic terms at least, the writer broke a taboo and a central tenet of the age of social media: we do not suffer surveillance in traditional terms; we create our own being. How are we to explain this paradox and this shift?

Bauman-Lyon on surveillance

Zygmunt Bauman in a blog post in 2012, later developed into a book with David Lyon, (Bauman and Lyon 2013) noted a paradox of modern life, where new developments in technology mean that drones the size of beetles can spy on, survey, monitor us, while on the other we rush to reveal details of what would formerly have been regarded as highly intimate and private matters on social sites such as Facebook.

Bauman disputes the idea that the internet automatically leads to the death of anonymity: "As for the 'death of anonymity' courtesy of the internet, the story is slightly different: we submit our rights to privacy to slaughter on our own will. Or perhaps we just consent to the loss of privacy as a reasonable price for the wonders offered in exchange." He continues: "Having one's own complete being, warts and all, registered in publicly accessible records seems to be

the best prophylactic antidote against the toxicity of exclusion – as well as a potent way to keep the threat of eviction away."

Though Bauman and Lyon's exchanges on surveillance offer a complex and enlightening meditation, the analysis of the move to Facebook and social media more generally seems psychologically overwrought and to neglect broader social forces driving this change. More reasonably, Bauman and Lyon go on to note that, in social media, users recast themselves as commodities, carrying on the work of branding themselves while simultaneously providing valuable data to Facebook, Google and other surveyors of the online space. This argument needs to be carried further to see the deeper logic and historical development involved here, much of which revolves around the role of social media in higher education.

Liquid capitals

Why is there such a blind spot about the issue of publicly available grades, to the extent that a whole book on higher education and political correctness omits it completely? (Lea 2009) Why is it an issue which seems to speak both to George W. Bush as the heir of privilege, and Barack Obama, benefiting from affirmative action?

This analysis draws on Bourdieu's work on the role of universities and grandes écoles in France. On the one hand, Bourdieu points out that while the rhetoric of French education claims that schools provide a level playing field for a meritocratic elite to emerge, other hidden factors of symbolic and cultural capital shape results and the reproduction of a certain class. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) In this logic, results are suspect, revealing more about the assumptions of the classifiers than the classified. This logic helps give currency to notions of affirmative action and redress.

On the other hand, Bourdieu notes that the wealthy and well-connected have much to lose if their children fail to enter the elite institutions. Their recourse is to invoke, perhaps create, other institutions, schools of commerce, private institutions. (Bourdieu and Collier 1988, Bourdieu 1989, Bourdieu and Glenn 2010)

To return to Obama and Bush. My reading is that Obama benefited considerably from affirmative action criteria in his entry to Harvard Law School, including work done between Columbia College and his entry to law school. But to reveal the discrepancy between his grades and the expectations most people would have of what it takes to get into Harvard would have opened wounds -- political, social and personal -- something Obama naturally avoided, and avoids. The most revealing version of this is a right-wing blog which argues that Obama can't be wanting to hide poor-ish grades because one needs excellent grades to get into Harvard. Well, perhaps not if one benefited from affirmative action, but one suspects it would be very difficult for Obama to make this argument without revealing the extent to which he benefited from affirmative action, which might also make him a sociological case rather than the exceptional hero.

As for Bush, the logic is impeccably that of Bourdieu's second position, except that Bush, son of a major state figure, yet to become President, gained entry to a private university in the USA, probably as result of personal connections rather than outstanding school results, but wished to conceal his distance from the meritocratic ideal. When his results did become public, he took the path of making fun of them and his results and his own command of English, but still invoked the ideal of the "Yale man" in his commencement address.

From both left and right, then, there are reasons to see the university as a place where different kinds of distinction, to invoke Bourdieu again, rather than academic results, should matter (Bourdieu 1979). We could invoke Bauman and his notion of Liquid Modernity to say that the modern university becomes the breeding ground, par excellence, for Liquid Moderns,

mobile, unattached, self-fashioning (Bauman 2000). Or we could invoke Castells who makes the crucial distinction in modern work as being between what he calls 'self-programmable' labour on the one hand and 'generic' labour on the other (Castells 2009).

All these accounts help suggest why older roles played by the university and its role in guaranteeing or helping guarantee certain standards and qualifications (surveying who was apt to practise medicine, or law, most obviously) now have to compete with newer forms of self-programming through self-advertising and self-surveillance. There is also a larger struggle here about the status and role of the professions, with managerial attempts to routinise professions such as pharmacy or accounting, while social media offer the illusion of self-programming.

Social networking and Facebook

The exchange between the characters CJ and Josh from *The West Wing*, prefacing this article, was written by Aaron Sorkin, who also wrote the script of *The Social Network*, an account of Mark Zuckerberg's founding of Facebook at Harvard. The exchange between CJ and Josh, bristling colleagues in this episode, shows ways in which, in the USA, social capital and identies circle uneasily around the issue of academic results and prowess – in this case between the leading West and East coast liberal/left-wing universities. If President Bartlett sports his Nobel Prize in Economics as guarantor of his nonpareil status, CJ and Josh turn university achievement into identity politics, in which results, as far as they are publishable (Josh is not on the Dean's list, his comparative failure marked by subtle absence) play a part, but only a part.

In *The Social Network*, the Zuckerberg character is established as one for whom the normal academic rules have no meaning. He has scored a perfect 1600 on his SATs, he walks out of the supposedly very difficult Operating Systems class, showing by his answer to the lecturer who thinks he is giving up, that he is beyond what the university can teach,at least in a computer science class.

Sorkin's note in the screenplay is of breathless admiration: "This is considered the hardest class at Harvard and MARK is one of the 50 students with their laptops open as the professor takes them through an impossibly difficult lesson." The real question, from a scientist's point of view is, surely, but if you are so smart, why not do something really difficult, like mathematics, or physics, and discover something? Computer coding is not scientific discovery.

But for Zuckerberg, at least in Sorkin's analysis of the Jewish insider-outsider, meaning only comes by making a billion dollars through Facebook by providing an alternative to the Final Club to which he aspires and that is the establishment face of WASP power at Harvard (the rowing club, Roosevelt's participation).

In the movie, Zuckerberg founds Facebook as an exclusive Harvard network, perhaps as an antidote to the exclusive Final Clubs, perhaps as a money-making venture. It spreads, at the beginning, to other elite universities, where it serves as a sign of belonging, through its exclusivity, to a world of academic haves, of Liquid Moderns who can transmute their everyday identities and allegiances and exclusions through selection, omission and substitution. The network spreads to other elite universities, in the USA and abroad, and then keeps spreading.

Facebook allows the assertion of another identity at Harvard and other universities other than the grades and career openings or the fraternities and clubs. It is thus at once liberatory, a work of self-programming and self-fashioning, but also a work of collective denial about the continuing shaping power of social institutions and the university as gate-keeper and guarantor of professional and academic standards.

Liquid Moderns still need degrees to be able to emigrate or work in certain professions; would-be doctors need the right grades and transcripts. As Facebook spreads, the way in which

it acted, at the outset, as an adjunct to guaranteed academic and social status, has meant that it risks deluding people, and particularly young people studying, that it is the real work they should be doing.

However surveyed we may be as citizens, consumers and netizens, we should understand the ways in which the university has surrendered a role of robust surveillance through competitive standard keeping to take a subservient place in a symbolic economy based on self-advertising and self-programming and on the ideal of endless self-actualisation and self worth. Something, it seems reasonable to argue, has been lost in that process.

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