Privacy, Transparency, and Liberty in an Age of Publicity [Abstract]
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My dissertation, “Privacy, Transparency, and Liberty in an Age of Publicity” is focused on the erosion of privacy through new ubiquitous information and communication technologies (ICTs). More specifically, I consider how smart devices and social media programs give rise to a profound new power for ordinary people to monitor, track, rate, and rank each other on a global scale and the force of social control this unleashes. In addition to more contemporary works on privacy and the ethics of emerging technology, I draw upon a number of influential 19th and 20th century philosophers and social critics, in particular J.S. Mill, Erich Fromm, Kierkegaard, and Foucault, whose analyses provide a series of valuable lenses through which we can better see the possible dangers presented by our new ubiquitous ICTs in terms of conformity, alienation, nihilism, normalization, and domination.

Building upon Mill in On Liberty, I argue that the social pressures being generated by the digitally-connected public risk forming a social tyranny that interferes with one’s capacities for self-determination and individuality. Drawing upon Fromm, I argue that while to an extent we may voluntarily conform to social pressures via ICTs as a coping mechanism for gaining a sense of connection, in the process we risk becoming estranged from ourselves, and never fully attaining the belonging we need. Kierkegaard argues that in order to deeply bond with others, we must first become strong individuals passionately committed to a calling that we find inside ourselves apart from the crowd. Only then can we transcend ourselves in a community with others who are mutually devoted to a shared passion. Our compulsive use of ICTs, however, risks distracting us from the inwardness needed to find our calling, and connects us only to a ghostly and shallowly bonded public.

As we risk losing ourselves in digital publics, becoming a mere reflection of collective entities, publics may also strike down upon and punish those who offend its collective opinion. This growing capacity to punish offending groups and individuals is combined with a growing capacity of the public to keep watch over individuals via the combination of search engines, social media, and ubiquitous recording devices. Through these ICTs our everyday speech and behavior risks becoming routinely judged by anonymous, and often hostile publics, whose pressures reach across, and blur the context between every social sphere of our lives. Drawing upon Foucault, I argue that this allows the pressures of the crowd to become an increasingly coercive external force that disciplines individuals into continually performing publicly approved speech, behavior, and forms of identity.

The public’s expanding power to surveil and punish risks giving rise to a new power of governance that is unconstrained by the rule of law and liberal democratic norms of justice thereby threatening domination by the public. The rights that prevented the encroachment of the crowd upon individual liberty are becoming no longer adequate to protect individuals and their associated communities in a world where our online and offline selves are merging and reputational scores can mark an individual for life. In order to resist this encroaching social power, from a Foucauldian perspective individuals and small groups must actively subvert the pressures of social conformity when necessary in pursuit of their virtuous passions. But from a Millian perspective, there must be a newly expanded right to privacy for the “onlife” age in order
to protect the liberty of both individuals and their associations, one which more effectively allows people to reasonably control information that circulates about them online.