

**(HOW MUCH) IS
EDUCATION
BEING
SURVEILLED?**



Datafication = surveillance



Education

Surveillance through digital technologies is something that, at least since the so-called “Snowden revelations” in 2013, most people have already heard of. Despite the wave of protests that these revelations triggered; and although the right to privacy is – at least in some countries – protected by law, digital technologies still harbour considerable risk for the privacy of internet users. With the growing “datafication” of our societies, more and more data about citizens are being collected and analysed, not only through people’s private use of the internet, but also in many other societal areas. Examples include the use of big data systems in the judiciary, by the police, in the credit sector, in urban management, social services and by insurances.

Lacking involvement of citizens

Apart from people’s lacking knowledge about datafication, also their lack of involvement in decision-making processes about the implementation of such systems is problematic. If, for example, a city decides to become a “smart city” or a school begins to use data systems for tracking learning progress, citizens and students often have no say in these decisions. Without a public debate about these developments, there is a danger that citizens might inadvertently and maybe even unknowingly end up in a completely datafied, surveilled society as it is being described in novels such as “The Circle” or “Qualityland” (German).

Also the education sector has seen a growing trend towards more quantification, “optimisation” and monitoring in recent years. Particularly new learning analytics technologies are often explicitly being developed to “optimise” learning processes through data analytics. However, such personalisation always comes with risks of surveillance. Education software collects numerous data points about students (such as keystrokes, answers and response times) and shares the resulting analyses as well as further behavioural and learning data with teachers and often also with parents. Ethical guidelines do not necessarily prevent such practices, they sometimes even provide a legal framework. Particularly in times of Covid-19, when learning and teaching increasingly takes place digitally, educational institutions and teachers should always raise questions about the benefit of such data collection and the surveillance that comes with it. Not all systems that are available bring real added pedagogical value, and one should critically consider if the collected data are really relevant for the pedagogical setting, or if they constitute a mere quantification of reality. Moreover, educational institutions should offer a protected space for students. Surveillance through digital systems endangers this protected space and jeopardises pedagogical freedom. For this reason, more and more educators call for a deliberate abandonment of monitoring in educational settings, and instead for the preservation – or recreation – of unobserved spaces.

Learning analytics contribute to a culture of surveillance in schools

Apart from obvious examples, such as video surveillance (CCTV) or facial recognition software in schools, also learning analytics software comes with many risks of surveillance. The popular app “ClassDojo” is a prime example. ClassDojo is used worldwide and enables teachers to assess their students in real-time with points, thereby – allegedly – improving classroom climate, discipline and collaboration. The points are awarded automatically on the basis of “positive indicators”, shared with teachers and parents and collected in behavioural profiles, which can also be taken into account when it comes to grading. The researchers Manolev, Sullivan and Slee have examined ClassDojo and have found that the app serves as a “mechanism for behaviour control” and contributes to “a culture of surveillance that has become normalised in schools”.



Questions

- How much surveillance comes with the system? Does it bring real added pedagogical value or does it constitute a mere quantification of reality?
- Which problems are we trying to solve with digital monitoring? Which other potential solutions do we know?
- How much unobserved and unmonitored space remains? Is the autonomy of students and teachers safeguarded?
- Which consequences on unobserved spaces and times arise as a result (e.g. social behaviour outside of monitored spaces)?
- To what extent does the monitoring and surveillance (also unintentionally) support an image of humanity that educators might not agree with? Do we confuse digital control with care for students?
- Are we protecting our students’ right to privacy? Which data points should concern teachers, which should not?
- How does the real-time sharing of data with parents affect the relationship between teachers and parents?

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Datified surveillance in the field of education

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Authors: Ina Sander, Heidrun Allert, Karin Amos, Paula Bleckmann, Izabela Czarnojan, Annina Förschler, Sigrid Hartong, Sieglinde Jornitz, Manuel Reinhard.



UNBLACK THE BOX is a network initiative founded in 2019 by researchers from education science, sociology, information technology, media and health education, as well as teachers in schools, universities and pedagogical training. Our goal is to enable educational institutions and teachers to respond to the growing datafication and digitization of education with enlightened, critical and conscious decision-making, even without extensive IT knowledge.

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