

Modern Day Panopticons and Star Chambers

Shôn Ellerton, August 16, 2020

In this article, I draw some comparisons between the panopticons and star chambers of old with the Internet and the power of the 'mob' today.



Two quite peculiar words, or rather, concepts, sprang to my mind the other day.

Panopticons and star chambers.

The first time I came across the word, *panopticon*, was whilst listening to a Sam Harris [podcast](#) back in June 2020; in one of Sam's more controversial takes on the aftermath of George Floyd's death and the chaos and mass hysteria that promptly ensued. As for the term, *star chamber*, I remember the use of it clearly from a movie I watched on TV when I was a teenager. The film featured Michael Douglas and Hal Holbrook and was titled, not surprisingly, [The Star Chamber](#).



With a name like star chamber, I was expecting something a little more ‘sci-fi-ish’ or something kind of weird and wonderful not unlike a Dr Who episode of a dystopian future, but alas, it was nothing of the sort. It turned out that the movie was centred around a panel of ordinary citizens, some of which hold or once held high positions in society. Taking place in crime-ridden southern California, they gather to mete out their special brand of vigilante-style justice in response to the inadequacies of the judicial system to successfully convict wrongdoers. As I recollect, the young judge—played by Michael Douglas—gets invited into this very secret panel of, what can only be described as a group of vigilantes, but soon becomes very quickly entangled in a rather sticky situation leading up to an ending with a reasonably good ‘shoot-out’ scene in a warehouse.

The movie’s title of Star Chamber was appropriate because the panel assumed the role of a kind of star chamber like that which ran from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century in England. However, in this case, it is a modern version taking place in 1980s California. The original star chamber was an English court comprising members of prominent society including judges and senior members of the privy council who took extraordinary judicial decisions held in private for those cases where the common courts would have hesitated to do so. For example, crimes committed by royalty or from those wielding extensive power were frequently not tried by members of these courts for fear of fatal retribution or, in simpler terms, ‘getting whacked’! It was, and still is, very risky business ‘taking on the big fish’.

Allow me to digress. There are those in modern history who have displayed enormous courage to bring powerful entities to trial, one example springing to mind being Rudy Giuliani, who led the federal prosecution of mafia bosses in New York City during the 1980s. For most mortals, taking on the mafia is about as close to holding a death wish as one could get. His success in doing so was instrumental in his appointment as the mayor of New York City and whether one loves or loathes him, he was inarguably responsible for slashing the crime rate in the city. Not having been to New York City myself, countless 70s movies portray the city as a graffiti-ridden, filthy, crime-ridden city. Watching the classic [*French Connection*](#) movies, every conceivable paintable surface in the New York City Subway seemed to be perpetually covered in graffiti. However, during Giuliani’s ‘clean-up’ years, movies that took place in the city during the 80s up to 2019 portrayed the city to be quite a bit cleaner than it was

prior to 1980. However, the more recent chaos and confusion of the events during 2020 have provided impetus to increasing the levels of crime and lawlessness regressing the city back to its former 70s guise. As for the Star Chamber movie, I haven't got around to re-watching it, but the context of the material portrayed would be interesting to watch today in 2020.

Not long after coming across the word, *panopticon*, for the first time, I assumed it meant something on the lines of being seen everywhere if one takes the etymological approach, splitting the word into its Greek components. Having looked it up, it transpires that it is the concept of being seen or observed but not necessarily knowing *when* or *who* is observing you. It is also, in its physical form, a correctional multistorey prison in the shape of a doughnut lined with prison cells looking inwards to the 'doughnut hole'. Within the centre or the 'doughnut hole', there is an observation tower or series of circular enclosed corridors complete with one-way windows for guards to spy on the prisoners. Apparently, an English philosopher by the name of Jeremy Bentham designed for such a forbidding correctional institution during the 18th century and its design has been in use across many prisons of today.



Traditional panopticons survive to this day; however, we might have introduced a modern-day equivalent using the technology of being able to generate near-ubiquitous livestream coverage of practically any event regardless of its significance or public interest. Riots taking place in a major city. Bomb blasts in the Middle East. Footage of police arrests. High-profile figures misbehaving or saying something that might bring unwanted consequences. With relatively cheap hardware in the form of mobile phones, easy access to the Internet from

mobile phone providers and to real-time streaming platforms, the chance of someone recording any event on a mobile device is almost certain. Some of those who capture such events may be live streaming on the fly, an activity, not that many years ago, would have been virtually impossible given the much slower data services mobile phone operators could offer back then.

Footage streamed live from observers or bystanders can be potentially threatening or damaging to the narrative of the press, the rule of government, or to the actions and policies set by other agencies of power. Many news outlets demonstrate a specific bias and often fight a continuous battle to convey the news in the light they seem most fit to broadcast to their consumers. With the availability of raw video footage, the standard practice of newsreaders showing a few photos and talking about what is going on is simply not good enough anymore. With video footage available to the public through the channels of social media, this video footage, having first gone through careful editing, must now be presented and explained by the newsreaders to create the desired effect. This is largely effective because most of today's consumers of news do not forage around looking for raw video footage or have the time to watch it. One can find plenty of raw footage on mainstream social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook, but should it be highly controversial or for some other reason it gets removed, there are plenty of 'dark corners' in the Internet where it can be found. I have stated in other writings that watching complete and uncensored footage to political debates can provide a totally different context from those contained in edited footage highlights.

The modern panopticon of ubiquitous live raw footage of events using today's technology gives us a privileged eagle's eye view of the world. The very thought of sitting in one's own armchair watching live footage of events worldwide streamed by ordinary people using their mobile phones is extraordinary. To compete with this phenomenon, it has become more commonplace for news outlets to upload full unredacted coverage to platforms such as YouTube. This is all well and good unless, of course, one happens to be on the receiving side of it in a negative way. The Internet has an infinitely long and unforgiving memory making it essentially impossible to remove content from it permanently. Once material is uploaded in the public space, it is usually indelibly etched for all time and could be, potentially, retrieved quite easily many years later, or worse, over successive generations rekindling memories or

reopening wounds as if they were fresh again. Douglas Murray wrote about this very subject in detail in his excellent book, *The Madness of Crowds*.

It is getting increasingly difficult to hide or spin events differently from what really happens much to the chagrin of many mainstream news outlets. The remarkable thing is that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. One can only imagine if we had access to this godlike technology twenty or thirty years ago. I often think how World War II would have played out if this technology existed then. What truths or untruths would be revealed?

Interlinking the concept of modern-day panopticons and star chambers gets quite interesting. Today's modern-day panopticon is the Internet, a digital interconnected world making it possible to lie down in the comfort of your own bed while watching a livestream feed to your mobile phone of someone being mugged in a backstreet of a city on the other side of the world through the lens of a live streaming CCTV camera. Today's modern-day star chamber is *us*. Or all of us collectively to be more precise. The mob rules and it is often the loud minority who upholds these rules and oversees judgment to those who breach them. Unfortunately, the silent majority is powerless as it remains silent for fear of being attacked by the mob or simply that they are either too lazy to take any action or be in a position that they simply do not care.

Combining the modern-day panopticon with the modern-day star chamber creates a potent weapon, and a frightening one at that. Unlike the star chamber of old comprising of common-law judges and privy counsellors, today's star chamber *is* 'the mob'. The very foundations of due process and fair trial is often at a state of risk for those cases of justice which have risen over the parapet in view of the mob. The mob, acting as our modern-day star chamber can exert tremendous influence on decisions taken today by our politicians and court judges. Combining this with our modern-day panopticon makes this exceedingly dangerous because it makes it virtually impossible to remain below that parapet.