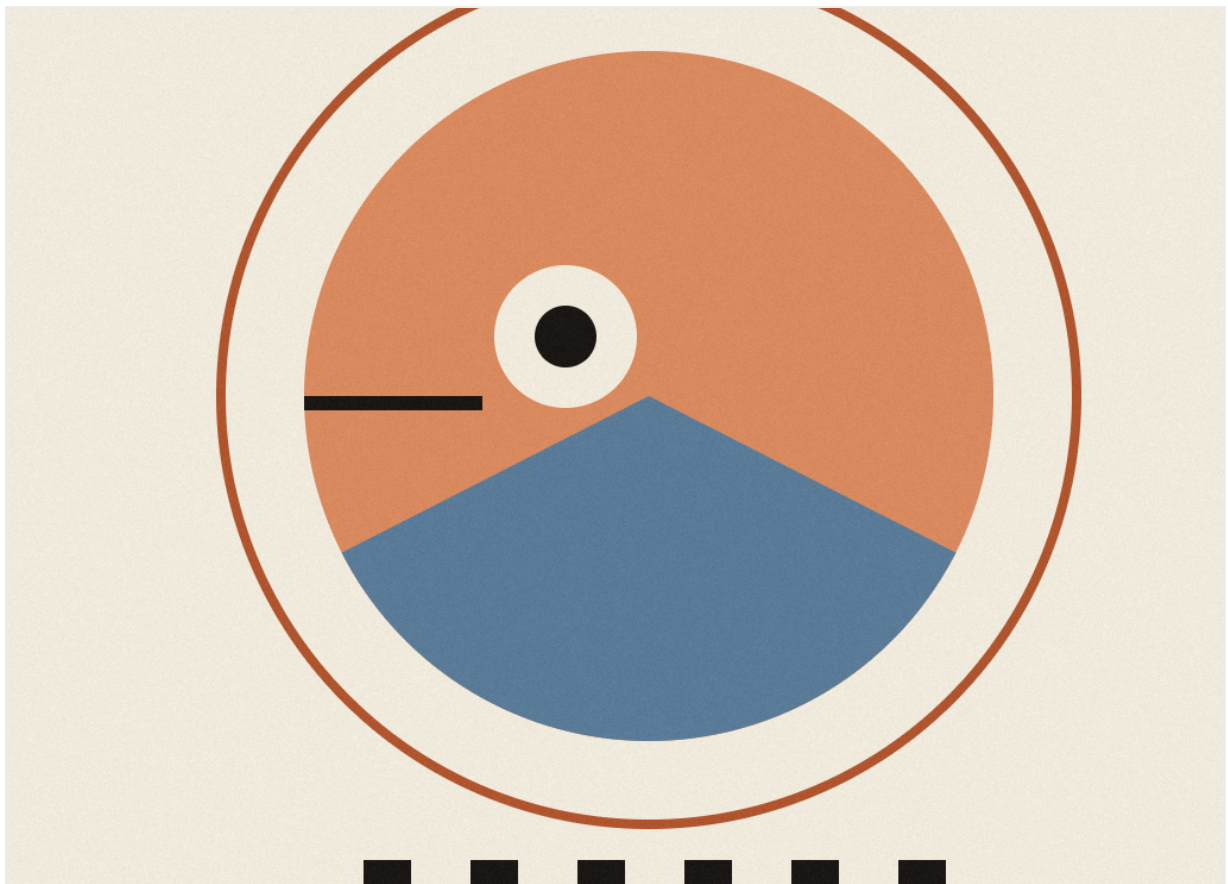


Society

We Built the Panopticon Ourselves

It wasn't Big Tech that turned the world into surveillance. It was us, phones already up the second anything happens.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ December 4, 2025 ■



Jeremy Bentham designed the panopticon as a prison in which a single guard could watch every cell without any prisoner knowing whether he was being watched at that moment. The genius of the design was that

it made surveillance cheap. You did not need to observe anyone continuously. You only needed them to believe they might be observed at any time, and they would police themselves. Michel Foucault took the building as a metaphor for modern power, a machinery of self-discipline that no longer needed a visible guard because the watching had been installed inside the watched.

The usual way to apply this to the present is to cast the technology companies as the guard in the tower. They hold the data, they run the cameras, they see everything, and we are the prisoners in the cells. This is not wrong, but it flatters us by making us passive. The more uncomfortable truth is that the most complete surveillance system in human history was assembled voluntarily, from the bottom up, by ordinary people pointing cameras at each other and at themselves.

Consider what actually happens now when anything unusual occurs in public. A dozen phones come up before anyone moves to help. The instinct to record has been trained so deeply that it precedes thought. The footage goes online, gets stripped of context, and becomes evidence in a trial by audience that the recorded person never agreed to enter. No government mandated this. No company forced it. We simply decided, one small choice at a time, that the default response to a moment was to capture and broadcast it.

What makes this a genuine panopticon rather than mere data collection is the self-discipline it produces. People now move through public space with a background awareness that any moment could be recorded, decontextualized, and circulated to millions. So they perform. They soften what they say, arrange their reactions, and keep an internal editor running at all times. The watching has been installed inside the watched,

exactly as Foucault described, except that the guard tower is not owned by anyone. It is held collectively, by all of us, aimed in every direction at once.

This should complicate the reflex to blame the platforms and stop there. The platforms built the distribution and profit from it, and they deserve their share of scrutiny. But they did not invent the impulse to watch and be watched. They found it already present and gave it a global amplifier. A prison in which the inmates cheerfully staff the tower is a stranger and more durable thing than one imposed by a warden, because there is no warden to overthrow and no one left outside the walls to appeal to.