Learning Better for the Next Thing:
Online Proctoring Services and Privacy Advocacy Outside the Library

by Sam Buechler
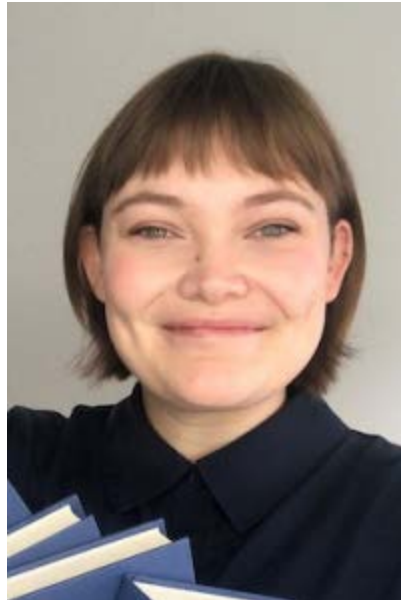
(they/them)
Student Success Faculty Resident Librarian, Washington State University Vancouver
sam.buechler@wsu.edu
@BuechlerSam

SAM BUECHLER (they/them) is the Student Success Faculty Resident Librarian at Washington State University Vancouver. Prior to their current position, Sam worked in circulation and access services departments at a variety of four-year and community college libraries. They have been a member of the Library Freedom Project since 2020. These experiences provide the foundation for their research which centers privacy and surveillance on college campuses and critical library pedagogy.

Introduction

In the fall of 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions found themselves with more time to consider how to best use and refine educational technology that had been urgently implemented or expanded during the spring and summer. Despite taking this additional time, it often felt as though the desire to provide normalcy—amongst abnormal conditions—took precedence over privacy protections. Examples such as promoting classroom engagement by requiring students to have their cameras on during synchronous online instruction illustrate this attempt to bridge normality within remote services. Another example of this tendency is online proctoring, in which the need to ensure academic integrity is used to justify the implementation of software that leverages surveillance and harmful technology.

I am employed at an institution that supports online proctoring as a method of instruction and has a contract with an online proctoring service, ProctorU. When I first learned this information, I felt a call to action. Just as a sense of urgency helped guide the implementation of online proctoring services, my own urgency guided my attempts at dismantling its use. Through this article, I will explain online and remote proctoring, the harms it poses to students, and why librarians should care about it. Furthermore, I'll outline my own efforts to eliminate proctoring software on my campus, how they fell short, and how we can envision better methods of dismantling surveillance.

Online Proctoring

Proctoring is not a new practice and has long been used to address concerns of academic integrity such as plagiarism and cheating; what is new is the increased use of online proctoring services. Online proctoring allows students to take tests that are monitored online through virtual proctors or algorithms. As a response to emergency changes in educational delivery,

online proctoring became more prominent—with certain proctoring companies claiming to have seen a 500 percent increase in use and subscription of their services (Caplan-Bricker, 2021)—and, unsurprisingly, so did the harms that they can cause.

Online proctoring generally implements an algorithm that determines when students are taking actions that can be considered cheating. Like many algorithmic technologies, online proctoring is filled with technological biases that directly impact folks with marginalized identities (Kelley, 2021; Swauger, 2020). Online proctoring and other forms of technological bias ultimately reinforce historical patterns of exacerbated surveillance, particularly of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities. This has long been researched and named by scholars such as Ruha Benjamin's (2019) "New Jim Code," Joy Buolamwini's (2016) "coded gaze," Safiya Umoja Noble's (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression,* and Virginia Eubanks' (2018) "digital poorhouse," among others.

This level of harm is seen in how online proctoring algorithms utilize facial recognition software that inaccurately captures darker skin tones or struggles to differentiate between individuals of different ethnicities. These algorithms also flag students for exhibiting specific actions related to disabilities (e.g. reading aloud, moving around) (Raji & Buolamwini, 2019;, Patil & Bromwich, 2020; Swauger, 2020). Furthermore, in order for the algorithms to even work, students must subject themselves to surveillance in order to begin the test, such as showing a form of identification that may not be indicative of their current gender identity, gender expression, or name (Swauger, 2020). Online proctoring also requires a significant amount of student labor that could better be spent studying. Before testing, students are often required to provide a 360-degree view of their space to ensure that the area is clean and free of people (Caplan-Bicker, 2021). This task is near impossible for students with childcare responsibilities, those living in multigenerational or multi-individual households, and those who are houseless. Finally, even without consideration to the exacerbated level of impact that online proctoring has on marginalized students, online proctoring impacts all students by adding additional stress factors during testing and invading their privacy (Caplan-Bicker, 2021; Harwell, 2020).

Library Workers as Privacy Advocates

Ultimately, there are many ways that online proctoring clearly affects students. At first glance, the issue of online proctoring still does not appear to be explicitly a library problem—it isn't distributed by the library nor is it readily available within the library or through our resources. Despite that, online proctoring affects privacy and intellectual freedom—core values of librarianship—and it is implemented within the broader systems we work in and contribute to. Within *Anonymity*, Alison Macrina and Talya Cooper write that "Librarians have long recognized the relationship between privacy and intellectual freedom; when we lack privacy, we can't have intellectual freedom, because we are less likely to read, write, and research freely when we fear that we're being watched" (2019, p. 2).

Proctoring technology exemplifies how being watched during the process of reading, writing, researching, and learning causes direct and lasting harm. Students do not have intellectual freedom when they have to mask their symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms so they don't get flagged for frequent movements, when they have to spend 20 minutes with lighting setup so cameras can pick up their facial expressions, or even when they feel they must resort to vomiting at their own desks in order to

not fail a test completely (Harwell, 2020). Macrina and Cooper provide the argument that library workers are "position[ed] to serve as advocates for political and regulatory solutions to threats to anonymity in our communities" (2019, p. 53). Library workers, particularly within academic libraries, do not work within a vacuum. As a result, when we choose not to act, when we interpret concerns that relate to our professional values as "outside" of our profession, we are also positioned as bystanders to harm.

A Study in Failure

Considering online proctoring and other surveillance technologies this way inspired me to act when my institution's provost sent out a campuswide email titled "ProctorU Statement," in late September (Chilton, 2020). By this time, there was already a vast amount of public knowledge available regarding the harms associated with online proctoring services including a recent data breach affecting ProctorU and its users (Patty, 2020). Given that students and families had begun asking questions about our continued use of the service, my expectation was for this email to mark its cancellation—it did not. Instead, this email attempted to answer or invalidate every possible concern that could be leveraged against the service and ultimately demonstrated a lack of understanding around some of the key harms that ProctorU perpetuates. For example, the email compared ProctorU security and data concerns to those of Instagram, Microsoft, or a bank's online platform without taking into account that the latter are voluntary services while the former is compulsory for student success in courses. Furthermore, the email also lacked any mention of the ways that ProctorU and other proctoring technology disproportionately targets and harms marginalized users.

This administrative email provided me with an immediate strategy in my quest to remove ProctorU from my institution: communicating how the concerns addressed within the "ProctorU Statement" were insufficient and still did not justify the continued use of online proctoring. As someone who was new to this institution, the first critical step in my path was to ask colleagues with institutional knowledge what kind of action was possible and likely to be met with success. That advice ultimately led to a lot of letter writing and meeting attendance. For example, I submitted a constituent concern to our faculty senate and brought my concerns to the attention of my campus's vice chancellor of academic affairs during a drop-in chat. After speaking and writing about this on my own, I eventually partnered with another library colleague and my campus's Accessibility Council. Through this partnership, we performed concrete outreach (e.g., presenting at Washington State University's Diversity Summit) and developed informational material for faculty who may use ProctorU in their classes (e.g., a white paper regarding the harms of ProctorU).

We were making additional headway by incorporating student leaders into these efforts and seeking feedback for our white paper when we encountered rapid changes regarding ProctorU occurring outside of our influence. First, ProctorU announced that it was moving away from an exclusively algorithmic model and then, as we moved back to in-person instruction, our campus stated that ProctorU would only be used for the Global Campus online courses. The latter ultimately became a natural stopping point in our continued action as many of the members of our team had found it to be a sufficient answer to our concerns—and in many ways it is. It is good progress that the majority of students at our institution no longer experience online proctoring, but it's not perfect. ProctorU is still on our campus, online students are still subjected to it, and, critically, there are currently no structures or agreements in place to keep it from expanding systemwide again.

A Vision of Doing Better

At this point, efforts towards removing ProctorU entirely from our campus have stagnated and it is through reflection that I have been able to see how efforts towards this and related goals can be reinvigorated. Primarily, I have been able to recognize that the largest gains in progress towards this goal occurred only when I began to work closely with others. This idea is most often elaborated amongst organizers who see a difference in individual and collective work. This is succinctly explained in an interview between Eve L. Ewing and Mariame Kaba included in Kaba's book, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (2021). Specifically, Ewing and Kaba (2019) explain the difference between activists and organizers. Kaba describes activists as

> folks who are taking action on particular issues that really move them in some specific way, but activism only demands that you personally take on the issue. That means signing petitions, being on a board of a particular organization that's doing good in the world. (p. 180)

This description of activism aligns with my beginning steps towards removing ProctorU and bringing information about surveillance in educational technology on my campus. I wrote to the faculty senate, I wrote blogs and tweeted thoughts, I researched continually and extensively to stay up to date on frequent changes and reporting. This was all individual action; even early communication with others served to seek advice on how to make change alone, where it could have instead been moments to build collective action.

The attempt to build a movement without community is where my effort stalled. Progress towards removing online proctoring at our institution began only when I started working closely with others. More people joining our efforts meant more ideas were brought to the table, more institutional knowledge was available, and we had a wider base to establish connections. This aligns well with Kaba's (2019) description of organizing:

> Organizing is both science and art. It is thinking through strategy, and then figuring out who your targets are. It requires being focused on power, and figuring out how to build power to push your issues, in order to get the target to actually move in the way that you want to. (p. 181)

By the time a shift was made to building a community of people acting towards a common goal, the use of ProctorU on our campus changed. Primarily, conditions changed in a way that left some of us feeling as though we had reached a satisfying conclusion. Our group hasn't been able to move beyond this initial progression because, amongst other external factors, we lacked the time needed to build a strong common goal as well as the resilience needed to continue working towards it.

When it comes to our stagnation in continued action, I think of adrienne maree brown's book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.* A key facet of brown's vision of emergent strategy is "Moving at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships" (brown, 2017, p. 42). When we fail to do this, we can end up with results similar to that of my own experience—where we come to a conclusion in action not because it meets an end goal, but because we haven't built the relationships needed to push past initial progress towards something that works for all of us.

As a profession, and as individuals, we can start to move at the speed of trust by building or joining communities centered on privacy advocacy and privacy-mindedness before the next wave of surveillance technology is implemented within our communities. There are spaces within our field writ large (e.g., the Library Freedom Project) but we also need to understand the unique situations in our places of work, in our institutions, and in our communities that can benefit from our expertise as library workers. Symphony Bruce (2020) provided an example of this in a Library Freedom Institute session where she spoke on building a community of practice among staff, faculty, and administrators at her institution. Bruce (2020) explained that her success came in finding an "inciting incident" that could engage folks, particularly those with broader scopes of responsibility and influence, with the work of privacy advocacy and then organizing them around their reactions to that incident through education and action.

For me, it was a colleague who felt as strongly as I do about our use of ProctorU and the Accessibility Council on my campus who saw it as an issue for students with disabilities. By utilizing emergent strategy and organizing principles, we can start building stronger connections with partners across the systems we work in and build stronger movements as a result.

Conclusion

The use of online proctoring technology is my example of an inciting incident, but it is not the only example of technological harm on our campuses and within our communities. Through my attempt to remove online proctoring from my institution, I have found a distinct difference between individual and collective action. Taking time to build a strong community with a shared vision is crucial to ensuring that we not only remove surveillance technology but also prevent its continued invasion. Comparable technological surveillance is being implemented around us daily (e.g., facial recognition software, video doorbells) and it's essential that we know how to leverage our knowledge as library workers to enact change and prevent harm; and critically, we have to remember that we must do it together.

References

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code.* Polity Press.

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds.* AK Press.

Bruce, S. (2020, October 15). *Building communities of practice: Privacy talks with staff, faculty, & administrators.* [Presentation at Library Freedom Institute]. Library Freedom Institute.

Buolamwini, J. (2016, November). *How I'm fighting bias in algorithms.* [Video]. TED. https://tinyurl.com/yhd4fe42

Caplan-Bricker, N. (2021, May 27). Is online test-monitoring here to stay? *The New Yorker.* https://tinyurl.com/2p9e9f69

Chilton, E. S., Cillay, D., & Pillay, S. (2020, September 25). *ProctorU Statement.* Washington State University. https://from.wsu.edu/provost/2020/ProctorU/166027-browser.html

Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor.* St. Martin's Press.

Ewing, E. (2019, Fall) Mariame Kaba: Everything worthwhile is done with other people. *ADI Magazine.* https://tinyurl.com/2s3t3bjs

Harwell, D. (2020, April 1). Mass school closures in the wake of the coronavirus are driving a new wave of student surveillance. *The Washington Post.* https://tinyurl.com/2p9y4cmr

Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transforming justice.* (pp. 176–186). Haymarket Books.

Kelley, J. (2021, June 22). A long overdue reckoning for online proctoring companies may finally be here. *Electronic Frontier Foundation.* https://tinyurl.com/bdcr6efa

Library Freedom Project. (n.d.). *Library Freedom Project.* https://libraryfreedom.org/

Macrina, A., & Cooper, T. (2019). *Anonymity.* American Library Association.

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism.* New York University Press.

Patty, A. (2020, August 6). Hackers hit university online exam tool. *The Sydney Morning Herald.* https://tinyurl.com/ycks3ucy

Patil, A. & Bromwich, J. E. (2020, September 29). How it feels when software watches you take tests. *The New York Times.* https://tinyurl.com/2p886t9e

Raji, I & Buolamwini, J. (2019). *Actionable auditing: Investigating the impact of publicly naming biased performance results of commercial AI products.* Conference on Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and Society. https://tinyurl.com/szhp3n8w

Swauger, S. (2020, April 2). Our bodies encoded: Algorithmic test proctoring in higher education. *Hybrid Pedagogy.* https://tinyurl.com/dx2zx94u