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Tech companies want to control every aspect of what we do, for profit. A bold, important book identifies our new era of capitalism



▲ Apparently benign ... a Pokémon character appears in a London street during a game of Pokémon Go.
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The alarm beside your bed rings, triggered by an event in your calendar. The smart thermostat in your bedroom, sensing your motion, turns on the hot water and reports your movements to a central database. News updates ping your phone, with your daily decision whether to click on them or not carefully monitored, and parameters adjusted accordingly. How far and where your morning run takes you, the conditions of your commute, the contents of your text messages, the words you speak in your own home and your actions beneath all-seeing cameras, the contents of your shopping basket, your impulse purchases, your speculative searches and choices of dates and mates – all recorded, rendered as data, processed, analysed, bought, bundled and resold like sub-prime mortgages. The litany of appropriated experiences is repeated so often and so extensively that we become numb, forgetting that this is not some dystopian imagining of the future, but the present.

While insisting their technology is too complex to be legislated, companies spend billions lobbying against oversight

Originally intent on organising all human knowledge, Google ended up controlling all access to it; we do the searching, and are searched in turn. Setting out merely to connect us, Facebook found itself in possession of our deepest secrets. And in seeking to survive commercially beyond their initial goals, these companies realised they were sitting on a new kind of asset: our “behavioural surplus”, the totality of information about our every thought, word and deed, which could be traded for profit in new markets based on predicting our every need – or producing it. In a move of such audacity that it bears comparison to the enclosure of the commons or colonial conquests, the tech giants unilaterally declared that these previously untapped resources were theirs for the taking, and brushed aside every objection. While insisting that their technology is too complex to be legislated, there are companies that have poured billions into lobbying against oversight, and while building empires on publicly funded data and the details of our private lives they have repeatedly rejected established norms of societal responsibility and accountability. And what is crucially different about this new form of exploitation and exceptionalism is that beyond merely strip-mining our intimate inner lives, it seeks to shape, direct and control them. Their operations transpose the total control over production pioneered by industrial capitalism to every aspect of everyday life.

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The extraction is so grotesque, so creepy, that it is almost impossible to see how anyone who really thinks about it lives with it – and yet we do. There’s something about its opacity, its insidiousness, that makes it hard to think about, just as it’s hard to think about climate change, a process that will inevitably undo society as we currently understand it, yet is experienced by many of us as slightly better weather. Likewise the benefits of faster search results and turn-by-turn directions mask the deeper, destructive predations of what Shoshana Zuboff terms “surveillance capitalism”, a force that is as profoundly undemocratic as it is exploitative, yet remains poorly understood. As she details in her important new book, ignorance of its operation is one of the central strategies of this regime, and yet the tide is turning: more and more people express their unease about the surveillance economy and, disturbed by the fractious, alienated and trustless social sphere it generates, are seeking alternatives. It will be a long, slow and difficult process to extricate ourselves from the toxic products of both industrial and surveillance capitalism, but its cause is assisted by the weighty analysis provided by books such as this. Combining in-depth technical understanding and a broad, humanistic scope, Zuboff has written what may prove to be the first definitive account of the economic – and thus social and political – condition of our age.



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Zuboff is no stranger to this territory. In her 1988 book [*In the Age of the Smart Machine*](#), she addressed at the moment of their appearance in the business world many of the issues that have come to achieve dominance in our everyday life. Embedded within a large pharmaceutical company in the 1980s, she observed first-hand how new tools for internal communication, first welcomed by employees as novel social spaces in which they could better converse, plan and access information, were gradually recognised as tools for management intrusion and control. Aspects of employees' personal experience that were implicit and private suddenly became explicit and public, were exposed to scrutiny and made the basis for evaluation, criticism and punishment. Now it is the interiors of all our lives that are exposed to invisible overseers, who do not merely profit from our actions, but increasingly control their every expression.

Players think they are playing one game – collecting Pokémon – while they are in fact pawns in an entirely different one

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Consider the apparently benign game [Pokémon Go](#), both a ridiculous and a transparent example of the link between behavioural surplus and physical control. While its initial players lauded the game for its incitement to head outside into the “real world”, they in fact stumbled straight into an entirely fabricated reality, one based on years of conditioning human motivation through reward systems, and designed to herd its users towards commercial opportunities. Within days of the game's launch in 2016, its creators revealed that attractive virtual locations were for sale to the highest bidder, inking profitable deals with [McDonald's](#), [Starbucks](#) and others to direct Pokémon hunters to their front doors. The players think they are playing one game – collecting Pokémon – while they are in fact playing an entirely different one, in which the board is invisible but they are the pawns. And

Pokémon Go is but one tiny probe extending out from Google and others' vast capabilities to tune and manipulate human action at scale: a global means of behaviour modification entirely owned and operated by private enterprise.

The efficacy of Pokémon Go in impelling and directing human behaviour recalls nothing so strongly as the psychologist BF Skinner's development of operant conditioning, and Skinner is one of many figures Zuboff evokes, implicates and critiques in her narrative. Skinner developed and perfected a technology of behaviour modification in living organisms, and extrapolated from it a politics rooted in total social control. Published in 1971, his incendiary treatise *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* prescribed a future of behavioural modification and redirection which rejected the very idea of freedom, replacing it with guaranteed outcomes and individual conformity. But while the targets of operant conditioning in the 20th century were always construed as "them" – enemies, prisoners and social misfits – and its implications were the subject of revulsion and rejection by a public fearful of "mind control", the targets of the same logic today are all of us, and its possibilities have been embraced at the highest level, from the boardrooms of the most powerful corporations to governments seeking to both "nudge" their populations towards "better" decisions, and to surveil their inner moods and desires for any signs of deviance, dissent or radical intent.

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For Zuboff, this dread force is not merely a higher expression of capitalism, but a perversion of it, and while some might regard that as special pleading, she is at pains to clarify where it differs from more equitable and mutually beneficial forms. As a consequence of placing her analysis within economic theory and a wider history of both capitalism and totalitarianism, she introduces a number of useful terms into the discussion which do much to move it forward. Much of the debate around Google, Facebook and their ilk, for example, has been framed in terms of privacy – as mere control over information about the self – and while many of these arguments are venerable and well-articulated, they've also been mostly lost. It seems people are very willing to give up their private information in return for perceived benefits such as ease of use, navigation and access to friends and information. Zuboff recasts the conversation around privacy as one over "decision rights": the agency we can actively assert over our own futures, which is fundamentally usurped by predictive, data-driven systems. Engaging with the systems of surveillance capitalism, and acquiescing to its demands for ever deeper incursions into everyday life, involves much more than the surrender of information: it is to place the entire track of one's life, the determination of one's path, under the purview and control of the market, just as Pokémon Go players are walked, lit by their glowing screens, straight through the doors of shops they didn't even know they wanted to visit.

When this logic of invisible coercion is applied to the social sphere, its implications become even more disturbing. The belief that human behaviour can be perfectly modelled, predicted and controlled entrains as a consequence the collapse of equitable relations between individuals and trust in institutions, and the substitution of algorithmic certainty for any semblance of participatory, democratic society. There is no appeal to collective, contestable decision-making or to responsible business practices under this purported perfection of human behaviour. Surveillance capitalism, run as the code for everyday life, erases both free will and free markets – an outcome as horrifying to confirmed believers in "good old" capitalism, such as Zuboff, as to those of us who weren't so sure about the original in the first place.

What is hinted at throughout the text, and made explicit in Zuboff's closing insistence that subsequent generations must face up to this epochal challenge to the future, is that such utopian schemes are destined to fail. As experience has shown, the world – life itself – is cloudy, contingent and defined by change. As horrifying as the surveillance capitalists' view of a totally controlled,

perfectly articulated and error-free future might be, the inevitable failure of its vision, and the resultant violence – already evident in our fractured worldviews, competing fundamentalisms, weakening of social bonds, and distrust of one another – is perhaps more so. The work begins in demolishing the framework of this world order, but it continues in the establishment and enactment of new and better futures.