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The Age of Surveillance Capitalism

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| Author | Shoshana Zuboff |
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The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a 2019 non-fiction book by Professor [Shoshana Zuboff](#) which looks at the development of digital companies like Google and Amazon, and suggests that their business models represent a new form of capitalist accumulation that she calls "[surveillance capitalism](#)".^{[1][2]}

Premise

Zuboff states that [Surveillance Capitalism](#) "unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data [which] are declared as a proprietary *behavioural surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as ‘machine intelligence’, and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later." She states that these new capitalist products "are traded in a new kind of marketplace that I call *behavioural futures markets*."^[3]

In a capitalist society, information, such as a users likes and dislikes, observed from accessing a platform like [Facebook](#) is information that can be freely used by that platform to better the experience of a user by feeding them information that data obtained from their previous activity would have shown them to be interested in. This in many ways can be done through the use of an [algorithm](#) that automatically filters out information. The danger of surveillance capitalism is that platforms and tech companies are entitled to this information because it is free for them to access. There is very little supervision by governments and users themselves. Because of this, there has been backlash on how these companies have used the information gathered. For example, [Google](#), which is said to be “the pioneer of [surveillance capitalism](#)”, Zuboff (2019)^[4] introduced a feature that used “commercial models...discovered by people in a time and place”, Zuboff (2019)^[4]. This means that not only are commercials being specifically targeted to you through your phone, but now work hand in hand with your environment and habits such as being shown an advertisement of a local bar when walking around downtown in the evening. Advertising attempts this technical and specific can easily have an impact on the one's decision-making process in the activities they choose and in political decisions. Thus the idea that these companies seemingly go unchecked whilst having the power to observe and control thinking is one of the many reasons tech companies such as Google themselves are under so much scrutiny.

Furthermore, the freedom allotted to tech companies comes from the idea that “surveillance capitalism does not abandon established capitalist ‘laws’ such as competitive production, [profit](#)

[maximization](#), productivity and growth”, Zuboff (2019)^[5], as they are principles any business in a capitalistic society should aim to excel in, in order to be competitive. Zuboff (2019)^[5] claims in an article that “new logic accumulation...introduces its own laws of motion”. In other words, this is a new phenomenon in capitalistic operations that should be treated as such and be instilled with its own specific restrictions and limitations. Lastly, as invasive as platforms have been in terms of accumulating information, they have also led to what is now called a “[sharing economy](#)”, Van Dijck (2018)^[6] in which digital information can be obtained by individuals carrying out their own surveillance capitalism through the aid of platforms themselves. Thus “individuals can greatly benefit from this transformation because it empowers them to set up business”, Van Dijck (2018)^[6]. Small businesses will also benefit in potentially growing faster than they would have without knowing consumer demands and wants. This leaves surveillance capitalism as an exceptionally useful tool for businesses, but also an invasion of privacy to users.

Reception

The New Yorker listed *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* as one of its top non-fiction books of 2019.^[7] Barack Obama also listed it as one of his favourite books of 2019, which journalism researcher Avi Asher-Schapiro noted as an interesting choice, given that the book heavily criticises the “revolving door of personnel who migrated between Google & the Obama admin”.^[8]

Sam DiBella, writing for the *LSE Blog*, criticised the book's approach which could “inspire paralysis rather than praxis when it comes to forging collective action to counter systematic corporate surveillance.”^[9]

The Financial Times called the book a “masterwork of original thinking and research”.^[10]

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