

Book Review

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism

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Shoshana Zuboff (2019), *"The Age of Surveillance Capitalism : The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power"*, London: Profile Books Ltd., Pages: 704, ISBN: 978-1781256848.

'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism' is a disenchanting text by Shoshana Zuboff which dethrones the Silicon Valley giants by questioning their methods of information dissemination. It lays bare the real motive behind digital surveillance and the role it plays in maintaining the status quo.

Published in 2019, this seminal book on digital surveillance begins with an introduction to the term 'Surveillance Capitalism'. In the book, Zuboff presents each definition as a warning by using words like 'parasite', 'threat', 'rogue mutation' and 'dominance'. A deep understanding of the term ensures better comprehension of the facts laid out in the book. According to Zuboff, Surveillance Capitalism is "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales (Zuboff, 2019)."

In simple terms, surveillance capitalism, the model on which most Silicon Valley unicorns like Facebook and Google thrive, is focused on the objectification of humans as the sum of their behaviours and interests. This behavioural data is profitable since it is used to predict digital activities. In the book, Zuboff assumes a Marxist perspective and highlights the detriments of allowing the

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commoditization of human nature in this new economy where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, and knowledge ownership is asserted to achieve power. This particular era, Zuboff says, is not only encouraging the most dangerous form of capitalism but is also exacerbating the social divisions prevailing in society. The tech monopoly situation today is focused on the success of a few, by collecting the user information of billions.

Free market capitalism, the absence of market laws, and governmental ignorance of digital malpractices have given an impetus to tech giants to freely collect information and sell it, hence waging information wars and also bringing about breaches in privacy. In the 21st century, tech users or the 'valley others' are losing all control over information. If you are a part of the digital space, your information is mandatorily being collected whether you allow it or not. This leaves the user with no option but to succumb to the demands of surveillance capitalism. Interestingly, surveillance capitalism is undertaken by invisible but perpetual data collection instead of the tangible, traditional tools of surveillance like cameras. Everything about users, from racial identity to expressions and feelings are collected. At any time of the day, the user's face is being recorded to see how they look or feel.

Conflicts and war today are supported by digital advancements in the world. The motive of each war is to gain more knowledge and amass power. Not just Silicon Valley, but the entire economic structure of the world is adopting the tenets of Surveillance Capitalism. This shift towards behavioural influence and modification appears dangerous as it threatens to transform the very basis of the way we behave.

Shoshana Zuboff even goes so far as to say that surveillance capitalism is a threat to the sovereignty of people owing to the fact that every bit of information generated on the internet has been recorded without informed consent under the garb of cookies and user experience optimization. Apart from the impending question about privacy, it is worth addressing that surveillance capitalism aims to attempt to 'predict the future', by analysing current behavioural actions.

Zuboff mentions that many have risen to the cry of safeguarding their privacy. However, it is not privacy that we must focus on, but surveillance. The promise of being able to predict behaviour accurately to gain profit is a perfect dream that each and every corporation is falling bait to. The result of this is far superior to a minuscule privacy breach - Zuboff envisions a world where our personalities and identities are contained within datasets and binary codes, where each move is orchestrated and predicted. What we stand to lose is the very essence of freedom and human nature followed closely by a transformation of humans into robots with predetermined actions.

It is established in the book that capitalism is also a threat to democracy because not only entertainment choices but also political choices can be affected by digital spaces. This raises a plethora of questions. What happens to free will? Do people make their own decisions, or are they influenced by datasets? Shoshana Zuboff answers these doubts by stating that Surveillance Capitalism functions on the underpinnings of behaviourism which believe that free will is merely a myth.

Many advertising companies aim to imprint their brands onto the human brain by creating experiences and perceptions that entice them. But why rely on a hit-and-miss model when companies can target an audience that is sure to love the brand and generate profits? It's easy for these Silicon Valley unicorns to track and know exactly how we are feeling on a certain day at a certain time.

Additionally, often we witness this phenomenon where we mention the name of a brand in a conversation with our phone in our vicinity and end up with advertisements of the same brand. Zuboff clearly states that this is not a coincidence and that technology is listening, it is tracking and it will eventually control everything ranging from what we consume to what we produce. Contrastingly, Zuboff also mentions that many would prefer to give away 'decision rights' if it ensures the incessant flow of personalised information. This leads the reader to think, 'If we can already define what we like, what interests us and what we will invest in, can we be ruled by bots if they own this information?' With the cornucopia of intelligence we have generated, Silicon Valley can track our whole life in real-time.

Zuboff attempts to unveil the magnitude of surveillance and control we are under with her book.

While it's true that Surveillance Capitalism is hard to fight, the argument that surveillance capitalism is inevitable is flawed. There are many tech models, including that of ubiquitous computing, which can be built while taking into consideration the privacy and freedom of the user. It has been proven that although the dream of predictive marketing sounds glorious, Facebook, Instagram and the hypnotising infinite scroll of many other tech spaces are only deteriorating the health and well-being of their users.

The unmitigated access to information leads to the concentration of massive power in a few hands at the top since many commercial functions can be enhanced with this behavioural information database- in sync with Foucault's theory of knowledge/power. The picture Zuboff paints is exceedingly dystopian and reminds one of George Orwell's Big Brother, but that does not mean that there is an absence of anti-forces which are fighting against surveillance capitalism. The argument she poses is that these 'good' companies are essentially being bullied by giant corporations. Behavioural datasets are highly profitable, and in a competition, these datasets provide a huge advantage to those that use them. Hence, companies which refuse to use predictive data lose out on business very soon and end up being usurped by surveillance capitalists.

By the end of the book, Zuboff focuses on the instrumental power of users that can compete with pre-existing monopolies. The book ends with a call to action, for us to use our knowledge to re-establish the glory of human achievements by rising up and regaining our bearings. "“No more!” We too can be the authors of many “great and beautiful” new facts that reclaim the digital future as humanity's home. No more! Let this be our declaration (Zuboff, 2019).”

References

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: In the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London: Profile Books Ltd.