

Humanitech

The technology I have created is titled *Humanitech*, short for Humanitarian Technology. The aim and message of Humanitech can be summarized briefly in one sentence and represents the company's tagline – "Technology exists to support our humanity, not to degrade it." – Furthermore, "Humanitech puts the human first, addressing the disconnect between ever-evolving technologies and attention-driven revenue models against our vulnerable human brain".

Understanding the technology I have created begins with a collective understanding of the issue that it addresses and seeks to resolve. Without an understanding of the issue, the technology may seem unnecessary to the general public. It is assumed that a few people are aware of the pervasive issue (as is the case now), but these people do not know how to go about changing the ubiquitous business model it thrives on. The technology would then present itself as a call to action for the general public, enlightening those who are unaware of the issue, and attending to the concerns of those who are already aware.

So, what is this infamous issue that would evoke such a demand for global attention? Why have movements and organizations like *Wages for Facebook* or *The Center for Humane Technology* gained traction and support? The answer lies in the ever-evolving model of surveillance capitalism that permeates both our digital and physical existence. Coined by Harvard Business professor Shoshana Zuboff, surveillance capitalism poses a major threat to our democracy, our autonomy, developing minds, and the very foundations of our "free" society.

Going back to its origins, in order to continue providing a growing return to their venture capital funders, IT companies realized they must keep their services free of charge to increase the user base alongside advertisements as the source of revenue. However, the way in

which they implemented this model made it incredibly profitable at the expense of societal degradation. It wasn't merely a placing of random advertisements on sites and platforms, it was the creation of refined algorithms that held an insurmountable amount of user data to analyze through machine learning and statistical methods in order to derive predictions of the user's next actions, both off screen and on screen. "[T]he correlation of many of these detailed user profiles makes it possible to make statistical predictions about user behavior, and thereby make sophisticated assumptions that...the users themselves are conscious of... Because of this intra- and inter-personal connection, new data is more valuable the more it can be correlated with already-held data. As a consequence, a network effect occurs that amplifies the centralization of data." (Landwehr, Borning, Wulf, 2021.)

On the basis of this data, behavioral manipulation is able to occur in ways that the user is not even aware of. A vast amount of knowledge (data) of ideas that the user is most likely inclined to engage with (personalized through previous data, based on the beliefs they hold) increases the probability of being susceptible to a desired behavior (the fulfillment of an external party's desire), which leads to an entirely novel category of customers and markets (that trade exclusively in human futures).

Not only does the model hijack traditional product advertisement, companies can now offer political influence in general elections. "If the desired user reaction is no longer limited to buying a certain product, but also to nudge toward adopting a certain political opinion or voting in a certain way, the IT companies have deployed a tool to help wield power and control over society." (Landwehr, Borning, Wulf, 2021.) Which is exactly what happened in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, first reported in 2015, where the firm utilized Facebook data for Trump's 2016 campaign (as well as Ted Cruz') to create psychographic voter profiles, harvesting the data of up to 87 million people without their consent, worldwide. The problems of surveillance capitalism are not merely issues of surveillance and loss of privacy. It is an attempt at a radical

automated manipulation of behavior that is depleting democracy, human autonomy, human dignity, and much more.

Humanitech seeks to solve these societal risks through a two-step process. Primarily, the launch of the technology would create a political shift in perspective for those unaware of the issue. Similar to the way that the *Wages Against Housework* 1975 manifesto by Silvia Federici did not expect a tangible lump of money when demanding a wage, it rather offered a political perspective inconceivable in a society that views the very issue as natural. Notice how ‘housework’ and ‘women’ can easily be substituted with ‘surveillance capitalism’ and ‘human’-- “But the wage at least recognises that you are a worker... [E]xploited as you might be, *You are not that work*. Today you are a postman, tomorrow a cab driver... The difference lies in the fact that not only has housework been imposed on women, but *it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration*, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework had to be transformed into *a natural attribute* rather than be recognised as a *social contract* because from the beginning of capital's scheme for women this work was destined to be unwaged.” – this substitution of words is precisely what the *Wages for Facebook* movement did, and the message rings louder than ever. In this sense, the medium of Humanitech is the message; “Humanitech is our refuge from what was once inescapable.”.

After the shift in collective understanding, there’d be an influx in demand for value-oriented technology and a digital realm that supports our autonomy, democracy, and neuropsychology. The positive aspect is that we can see where surveillance capitalism took a turn for the worst, understand why it did, and create a solution based on the very reason it started. There are dark sides to surveillance capitalism, but at the same time, these services have incredible use for business, social engagement, political work, and so much more. As Humanitech seeks to address these problems, **it is imperative that we also retain the benefits**

as much as possible. By halting the current business model through political regulation, other technological paradigms are allowed to flourish.

A creation of policy through citizen voice is the first step in true democratic regulation of the issue, and Humanitech's message would amplify the voices of citizens through calls to action and an understanding that we all must fight this issue together. What policies? Predominantly, the concept of "minimum data" for the service to run, meaning no surplus data can be collected to make predictions, as well as accessible informed consent (no 30-page-long legal privacy statements), the ability to withdraw one's data at any time, and visible data pathways for both the user and public regulators. Suppose surveillance capitalism is outlawed. Humanitech would lend itself as the alternative, no strings attached. It would *not* be plausible to make users pay for the service solely to be free from surveillance and data collection.

So, how is revenue generated? Advertisements would still run, but data collection, at the extreme extent (for behavioral modification), would be outlawed, hence the "minimum data" requirement. It's just a fact that most of us do enjoy a personalized internet experience. Humanitech does not seek to erase that incredible, user-intuitive aspect of technology, but to erase the sinister side that interferes with our autonomy and future choice, solely to fulfill an external party's wishes. Users could choose to opt-in for personalized, context-based advertisements with the main difference being that prediction models are outlawed, as well as the markets that trade exclusively in human predictions. Users could also opt-out, meaning they'd view general advertisements instead of personalized ones.

The main source of funding would have to come from the developments of the novel Internet regulation policies. The current dominant loci of control for surveillance capitalism are the free services that social media platforms offer. A few ideas come to mind: 1) a governmental fund created specifically for the movement of anti-surveillance given the drastic

policy changes and demand for a democratized Internet, 2) fee-for-service or an anti-surveillance Internet tax, with the understanding that prior services were not “free”, 3) investors and supporters of Humanitech creating a fund and calling on politicians and policy-makers to amplify it and financially support it, as well as anyone else who wishes to donate, and 4) Humanitech itself being a For-Profit Corporation, continuing to offer these services, supported by advertising and context-specific advertising, only without personal profiling. For example, the DuckDuckGo search engine which operates on this model.

I am still thinking these through, with the fourth being my leading choice combined with one of the two public funding options. It is a difficult task as loopholes can arise and no one has truly come up with a solution yet. However, the technology itself would operate as follows: 1) Open source, meaning source code can be easily inspected, shared, and built upon by others, enhancing the shared information environment. 2) Encryption, to guard user privacy and reduce dependence on cloud computing providers, like Google Cloud. And finally, an idea made aware to me through the cited article, 3) Decentralized peer-to-peer systems, ensuring that “the service provider has no way of stopping peers from using the application to communicate directly” (Landwehr, Borning, Wulf, 2021.)

It is important that we view surveillance capitalism for what it is— a political issue. It is increasingly common that this political issue is recast as merely a willpower issue, which is evident when we’re encouraged to delete our social medias and become a luddite in the digital age, which is an unfair choice (go obsolete or violate your autonomy) that we should not have to make.

Humanitech would highlight all of the aforementioned issues caused by surveillance capitalism through a radical political perspective that demands regulatory assistance and funding, as well as offering the beneficial services that we’ve all come to enjoy without personal profiling predictions, made possible by opt-in/opt-out advertising (context-specific or

general). Humanitech's software would revolutionize the way our Internet operates and therefore cause a massive societal shift; not only in the values we expect our everyday technologies to uphold, but also in exercising our right to democracy and policy. The implications of Humanitech would likely spark many other movements and allow us to analyze other issues through the shared information environment with a newfound sense of confidence after coming together to reduce the world's most pervasive technological issue yet.

Is it wishful thinking? An idea that only the optimistic can entertain? It is my hope that we realize and harness our individual democratic power in resisting surveillance capitalism, and that one day we're able to exist outside of this business model. It starts with ideas like these.

Source Cited

Landwehr, Marvin, et al. "Problems with Surveillance Capitalism and Possible Alternatives for IT Infrastructure." *Taylor & Francis*, 19 Dec. 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2021.2014548?journalCode=rics20>.