# Features Over Privacy: Our Surveillance Age

OSU CS391 Writing Assignment IV
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## DEFINITIONS

**Transcriptworld**: This is a theoretical world where the members of society are being pervasively tracked and are the sources of data collection in order to enhance the algorithms that support the functioning of society. Here, tech giants reign, and AI is used for almost every purpose (facial identification, action tracking ...). Your activity is logged, and your positive actions can be rewarded, while the negative ones are punished. [1].

**Pseudoworld**: This world is analogized to the "masquerade" - members of society live their lives protecting all personally identifiable information from the hands of the corporations eager to collect their data. From facemasks to VPN software (to attempt to obfuscate browsing history), and on, these people are dedicated to their privacy, and the correlated freedoms [1].

## FOREWORD

This paper is an opinion piece. I will defend my claim that the data economy is guiding society towards the Transcriptworld, but that that world is less desirable than Pseudoworld (Viewpoint 2'). To explain the title briefly, I boil the Pseudo/Transcript-world debate down to a question of features (i.e. services that some consider to 'enhance' life) versus the privacy and inherited freedom that opposes these features.

For the sake of keeping this paper as brief as possible, I will be, where applicable, examining the demographic of the college/high school (teenage) student. This is because I fit that demographic, so what I discuss and find will be directly applicable to my life.

## FEATURE-FULL DISMALITY

Society is in full swing of a digitization trend. More than ever before, we use the internet and computerized services to perform our daily routines. From smart fridges to social media platforms that monitor our every move [14, 15], to microphones in our homes that will answer questions, to shops designed to not require any formal checkout process [6], every aspect of life seems to be moving towards being computer driven. At first glance all these seem to be fitting with what members of my demographic want. Once you dig further into how these services are constructed, and why they have gained such widespread popularity, however, the dangerous ways that these corporations function is quite concerning.

This trend does not seem to be slowing down. Some estimates say that there are more than 500 new social media accounts per minute, while Google is queried for results over 40,000 times per second [7]. This societal trend, paired with the pervasiveness of IoT devices (an industry estimated to grow exponentially in the next couple years [8]) and technologies that can perform previously human-dominated professions [9, 10, 13] indicate that the attention and automation industries will keep growing over time. Given this and provided nothing changes, we are headed (fast) for a Transcriptworld scenario. One where there exists no concept of privacy. While at first this world may seem a pleasant one to live in, we must consider this in the light of ethics, specifically utilitarian ethics, to examine if this is actually morally right.

Utilitarian ethics relies on answering the fundamental question: what is the action that benefits or maximizes the utility functions of the largest number of people? [11]. While the eager government would quickly point out that there are benefits - the Chinese government,

for example, citing 'terrorism' reduction as one, others citing ease of life, there are serious downsides as well. If these were the only things affected, this would be considered perfectly ethical using utilitarianism (a majority of people derive a significant boost to their utility functions from the way these Transcriptworlds operate). This is not, however, the only side of the Transcriptworld. There are also downsides. First and foremost comes in terms of privacy. Transcriptworld functions on data that is collected about every aspect of a person, all of this data being by nature personally identifying (as in [14, 15]). This lack of privacy infringes on the utility of each person - though there may be some good derived from the Transcriptworld, there exists no privacy, no anonymity. Initially, there would be only a slight decrease in utility for the average person as a result of this lack of privacy. Over time, though, members of society would begin to feel the pressure of constant surveillance - the feeling of prey to a predator, like prisoners in the panopticon [2]. These feelings of being surveilled will eventually start to significantly threaten the positive utility derived from the benefits of a Transcriptworld. The cinching blow comes in the form of realization that some government or corporate actions, with stated purpose to form a safer or better society, are in fact not doing anything at all. The Chinese slaughter, reeducation and general xenophobia against Uighurs is a great example of something of that ilk [3, 4, 5]: the government assures it's population that this increases safety, but in reality, it is merely a justification to pursue government agendas. In fact, I would argue that this disingenuous process actually has a net negative impact on the utility functions of the inhabitants - not only are they supporting what are sometimes terrible atrocities, but the surveillance that everyone is prey to pressures its members not to speak out against the government.

In that light, I propose an objectively better society - one more ethical by the standards of utilitarianism - than Transcriptworld. Now that we understand how the utility functions will end up in a Transcriptworld, it is easy to see how a Pseudoworld is a better alternative. This is because in Pseudoworld, privacy exists, and surveillance does not[1], therefore the utility functions of the individuals are higher. The utility that is experienced by the individuals is compounded by the freedoms afforded to these members of society as a result of there being no surveillance. No longer is society like a panopticon, rather individuals have freedom to think as they want and act the same (without fear of repercussions). Together, these freedoms and privacy create a society where the majority are benefited by their privacy and freedom, as opposed to the Transcriptworld society where individuals do not experience freedom, and are constantly under the threat of surveillance. Further adding to the utility of Pseudoworld members is the fact that the technologies that Transcriptworld have exist here too, in slightly changed format. This is especially true of those technologies that do not infringe on privacy: YouTube can still serve relevant content, it is simply unable to connect your browsing history to a physical being In this way, the difference in utility derived from technology is only slightly lower than in Transcriptworld[2]. This and the upside in utility provided by having left the surveillance state, as well as the upside in correlated freedoms yields a society which, by utilitarianism, is more ethical. This is because the utility functions of the majority of the individuals in the society are higher.

Other attributes that make Pseudoworld better than Transcriptworld include those of **happiness, fulfillment,** and **healthiness**. In terms of happiness, it is safe to say that without the panopticon-like surveillance state, the members of society would be happier. Further, rather than being fed the information that a plentifully informed algorithm (on a "super computer" [12]) thinks you want, a Pseudoworld allows the inhabitants to be free to seek genuine happiness. As far as living a fulfilled life, the same goes - a life where your decisions and consumed content are either scrutinized by or influenced by

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[1] It would not be efficient for anyone to invest in surveillance as this society is geared towards making this data useless. Over time, companies that rely on data would learn that these people will hide themselves until they are no longer being surveilled, and return to 'hiding in plain sight' when surveillance resumes. In this way, there would be no sense in surveillance in the Pseudoworld.
[2] Lacking presence of things like facial scanners to authenticate as you instead of a passport is an example of a technology drop from Pseudoworld to Transcriptworld.

algorithms will certainly not be fulfilling - especially in the context of the relatively "choose your own adventure" Pseudoworld life that opposes this surveillance state. This free, private life will be far more fulfilling, as the user chooses their path instead of having either a supercomputer or a surveillance program assist their decision. Lastly, there are multiple interpretations of "health" - emotional health and spiritual health are both higher in the Pseudoworld for the same reasons that fulfillment and happiness are. Physical health might be slightly worse in Pseudoworld as the entire society is not being tracked with a level of information that could be used to determine if that person is sick or not, and react accordingly. Instead, slightly less actionable data can be collected in Pseudoworld, anonymized, and with the consent of the individual, provide live monitoring of outbreaks and overall population health.

## CONCLUSION

By all the attributes considered here (health, happiness, fulfilment) as well as from an ethical standpoint, Pseudoworld is the preferable society. By emphasizing privacy and therefore freedom, Pseudoworld allows the inhabitants to be more human - it is inhumane to live under fear of surveillance, and under constant assault by "supercomputers pointed at your brain" [12] - this is not a natural state for humans. Sadly, though, our society seems to be headed towards the Transcriptworld, in search of the short-term utility gained by that world. Sadly, none of the proponents of Transcriptworld can see far enough ahead to anticipate the surveillance state. Therefore, we are headed towards a Transcriptworld, even though we should be aiming for Pseudoworld, the better world.

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