

## On Surveillance Capitalism

*“In the logic of surveillance capitalism there are no individuals, only the world-spanning organism and all the tiniest elements within it.” (Zuboff, 2015)*

In her research article, “Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization”, Shoshana Zuboff sheds a light on surveillance capitalism and the Big Other. This is the term she coined to refer to the imbalances in knowledge and power that she observed in the digital sphere. Surveillance capitalism refers to the analysis and treatment of user data with the objective of predicting, modifying, and targeting human behavior for revenue from corporations who want to know more about their markets. Where capitalism during the industrial age referred to the bourgeoisie exploiting and alienating the proletariat, those in power in the digital age benefit from the commodification of the online, human experiences and individualities of uninformed users. This model has, unfortunately, become the standard among Internet-based startups and companies.

Nowadays, one doesn't have to look very far to see surveillance capitalism at work. Simply looking something up will already give Facebook information about what a user is doing and what they might do next, and this information will be sold to advertisers on the website. Every small detail about a user is profiled, and there's no way to escape it. Websites Google and Facebook have become so institutionalized and essential to individuals that to be without them is akin to being separated from the rest of their social environments, and they accumulate information about users without their consent and without any way for them to say “no”. This has eventually become the norm, and people expect their data to be monitored because they are sold the idea that they will get better and more efficient services by doing so. And Internet-based corporations can get away with this because they are beyond the scope of public laws and it is difficult to define and predict exactly what they're doing and what else they're capable of. Zuboff mentioned that instead of false consciousness stemming from hidden classism, it now comes from the hidden facts of how exactly user data is turned into a commodity or modified. While they know everything about their users, everyone else knows nothing about them, and this is what makes them powerful.

The commercialization of individual identities can be damaging not only to people but to democracy as well. Big data turns the “everydayness” of social media into a revenue-generating strategy, and this essentially reduces the individual to a row of data. Users become, in a sense, alienated from their own online personal lives. The measures users have to take to avoid being turned into a commodity also take away the whole point of social media as something born out of the necessity for a new channel to express oneself, to obtain information, and to interact with others. Moreover, the model is against human autonomy because it needs its users to behave in a way that will allow them to predict what their next moves will be. This, according to Zuboff, can have detrimental effects on democracy. First of all, the imbalance in knowledge can bring about an imbalance in power, and these Internet-based companies have enough power to shape the minds of its users and eventually shape outcomes beyond the digital sphere. One example would be the Philippine Presidential elections where there were a lot of influences online which may have impacted the election turn-out.

As it stands right now, people have become desensitized to their data being used for commercial purposes, and it has become unsurprising or even a norm on social media. Of course, we can't just let users adapt to the surveillance capitalism because of its damaging effects on individuality and democracy, but at

the same time, we can't abandon social media entirely because of how important it has become as a platform for information sharing and connecting to others. Looking at it from a social conflict perspective, users need to achieve true consciousness and understand where they stand before social change can even begin to happen. While the knowledge gap between users and corporations remain the way it is, change cannot happen. The first step to solving this problem is to strive to be informed as a user, to propagate knowledge whenever it is obtained, and to demand information. Once more and more users are conscious of the systematic commodification of their personal lives, then they can eventually become a powerful enough force to influence change.