



## *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, by Shoshana Zuboff

*New York, Public Affairs, 2018*

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## BOOK REVIEW

***The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power***, by Shoshana Zuboff, New York, Public Affairs, 2018

*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, by Shoshana Zuboff, analyzes the increasingly central role that certain types of digital technologies—those commonly referred to as *smart*—play in contemporary societies. This is a particularly relevant book for anyone whose professional practice or research interests are concerned with the future of the city, planning, or urban governance. Its message is vital in a period when concepts such as smart cities, smart mobility, urban analytics, and Big Data are being accepted by many urban policymakers and academic thinkers alike as part of an inevitable, yet desirable, future due to their alleged capacity to promote efficiency and ecological sustainability, social inclusion, and human well-being. This book presents a fundamental critique against the goodness of such claims.

*Surveillance capitalism* can be synthetically defined as a predatory form of computer-centric capitalism where human behavior is converted into data so that it can be used to predict, modify, and actively control how individuals behave. It is meant to serve the economic and political interests of an increasingly wealthy, highly informed, and powerful corporate digital elite against both private and public interests. Through surveillance capitalism, individuals are being gradually, but swiftly, expropriated of their privacy, agency, and humanity. Individuals are also being deprived of the right to *sanctuary*: time-places where one is not monitored, nudged, or controlled for someone else's benefit.

The soaring power of surveillance capitalists derives from the growing omnipresence of smart interconnected devices in contemporary life. Consider the dramatic proliferation of Wi-Fi networks and wireless devices; smart mobile phones and laptop computers; e-cars, e-bikes, and e-scooters; face recognition devices and GPS trackers; automated vacuum cleaners and digital kitchen appliances. Smart technologies are also a central part of professional practices. Consider, for example, how a remarkably small number of corporations (namely Google, Apple, and Microsoft) have managed to shape contemporary working environments with their computer-centric innovations. Consider also that their technologies are becoming increasingly proactive and coercive. The foundational technologies which initiated surveillance capitalism operated in the online world only and were aimed at extracting information from their users. Be alert. As Shoshana Zuboff convincingly argues, the forthcoming technologies will not just interfere with, but *determine*, our manifested behavior in the physical world.

Anyone who is following world news might wonder how this book covers surveillance issues in North Korea and China. Zuboff does not engage with North Korea, but she does explore in considerable detail the case of China. Surveillance problems may be linked to capitalism, but they are linked to other ideologically driven systems as well. In fact, the comparative analysis provided by Zuboff on the similarities and differences between totalitarianism and the emerging form of power brought by surveillance capitalism is a remarkable intellectual achievement (see p. 396 for a summary).

In the enthusiastic reviews that this book has received, namely by reporters from *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, and the *New York Times*, one can see comparisons between the analytical power of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and that of books by key authors such as Adam Smith, Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and even Karl Marx. After consideration, I am forced to agree with their assessment. The book is, however, not an easy read and enduring it until the end requires intellectual dedication and commitment. I am not inclined to believe that this can be considered a promising read for undergraduate education. Even at master level, this book might not find enough traction among students. However, the *message* of the book should be seen as foundational knowledge for both undergraduate

and graduate students in fields such as urban studies, city planning, human geography, urban economics, and related disciplines.

The book is composed of three major parts. I will not aim at providing a comprehensive description of the book's contents, as that is not feasible here due to space constraints. However, I will cover some key ideas and concepts as mere illustrations of the impressive richness of the book. Part I explores how surveillance capitalism has emerged. Zuboff primarily relies on the case of Google for this effect. This part includes a number of remarkable intellectual contributions, making it difficult to choose which ones to mention. I have chosen to mention the *dispossession cycle*: a complex set of governance procedures that has successfully enabled Google to achieve the monopolistic powers it enjoys today. The dispossession cycle is a "theory of change," as the author puts it (p. 138), and one with impressive results. It starts with *incursion*. At this stage, Google makes a bold move into a new domain. For example, it uses Gmail to obtain all sorts of personal information from its users; or sends without permission the Google Car to chart and take pictures of public streets while illegally hacking computers and wireless networks as it passes through the buildings where they are operating. When critically analyzing such practices, Zuboff offers insightful historical comparisons between surveillance capitalism and colonialism. The second stage of the dispossession cycle is *habituation*. While courts and democratic institutions slowly try to assess the controversial actions taken during the incursion stage, surveillance capitalists move forward at extreme speeds, improving and anchoring their new ideas and technologies in the mainstream practices while ignoring public outrage and threats of judicial action. Through this, what was hitherto unimaginable and unacceptable becomes the new norm. The third stage is *adaptation*. Here, surveillance capitalists make alterations as minor as possible to the implemented innovations so that they are no longer seen as completely unacceptable by their detractors and by the relevant judicial powers—and therefore are allowed to continue operating until the next state can be performed. The fourth and last stage is *redirection*. In this stage, surveillance capitalists strategically restructure their own narratives and products so that they can become minimally compliant with new cultural understandings, user preferences, and legal requirements and find a permanent root in society. After this, and as soon as possible, a new cycle of dispossession follows due to the *extraction imperative*: the need to remain competitive in the exceptionally fierce neoliberal environment that has summoned surveillance capitalism to existence.

Part II explores how surveillance capitalism moved from its original ecosystem (the online world) to the physical world. This was needed because of a major market imperative: that is, surveillance capital does not profit exclusively from commercial exchanges in Big Data markets and from conventional advertising. It primarily profits from selling *prediction products* that can only be as certain and accurate as new technologies manage to control human behavior in new ways—as an example among many of this control consider the political scandal around Cambridge Analytica. This sheds a disturbing light on smart technologies: they can, and perhaps should, be increasingly understood as a means for behavior modification employed by surveillance capitalists. This is perhaps the most striking irony the book presents to its readers: contemporary citizens are compelled to buy and use the means through which corporate powers watch and control them.

This takes the reader to Part III and what I consider to be the most exceptional intellectual achievement of this book: the notion of *instrumentarian power*. Using a range of historical and theoretical insights that include a fetching analysis of the work of seminal behaviorist B. F. Skinner, we are presented with instrumentarian power as an antidemocratic, corporate-led yet state-sponsored, computer-centric, certainty-oriented, and comprehensive dystopian vision for society. In this vision, there is little tolerance for uncertainty and human free will. The focus is instead on promoting predictable outcomes by forces that are neither interested, nor willing, to endure democratic scrutiny or legal control as they seek profit and power. This dystopian society is the unchallenged domain of the surveillance capitalist.

Unfortunately, and as Zuboff convincingly argues, this is the society we are rapidly heading toward—unless individuals and organizations prevent that from happening. But who would those people be when contemporary individuals increasingly understand reality through the

lenses of mobile phones, and through the screens of personal computers? Who would those organizations be, when contemporary companies and governments alike are becoming increasingly *smart*, which is to say under the control of instrumentarian powers? Urban professionals and scholars could—and perhaps should—play a key role in protecting societies in general, and cities in particular, from surveillance capitalism. Will they?

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