

Book Reviews

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Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books, 2019, 691 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-78-125685-5, £10.99 (pbk).

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In Internet governance, there is an overarching question that speaks to us all. If we thought the Internet was open and emancipating, then how and why can private companies and governments control and influence the Internet? This broader puzzle runs like a thread through Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. The author nicely ties together these seemingly dispersed instances of closure under the unified and comprehensive framework of surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism is a logic in action that 'unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data' (p. 8). Zuboff sets out the argument in three parts: the foundations, the advances, and the outlook.

In the first part (Chapters 2–6), the author sets the stage for surveillance capitalism. Zuboff starts by arguing that behavioral data by private companies are used beyond service improvement, to constitute a behavioral surplus (p. 75). Via the analysis of vast amounts of data that companies like Google own, private companies can produce predictions of future behavior. Due to this behavioral surplus, private companies can trade prediction products to customers on new markets in future behavior (p. 96). This is the extraction imperative: economies of scale in the extraction of behavioral surplus (p. 87).

This chain of components between behavioral surveillance, prediction products and markets in future behavior converges into surveillance capitalism: 'a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales' ('the definition'). Although this provides a helpful theoretical lens through which one can observe Internet markets, it frequently remains uncertain what (and where) surveillance capitalism actually is. Zuboff mainly conceptualizes surveillance capitalism as a new economic order or a logic in action. However, the author also argues that it is a new actor in history,¹ invented,² a new market form,³ and a logic of capital accumulation.⁴ Although not all of these conceptualizations might be mutually exclusive, quite ironically, identifying surveillance capitalism is – in real life and in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* – like nailing jelly to the wall.

In the second part (Chapters 7–11), Zuboff takes the argument further by stating that surveillance capitalism is not only a matter of new behavioral future markets but the certainty of those futures. Hence, the author moves from an extraction imperative to the prediction imperative, which engages in the question: 'what forms of surplus enable the fabrication of prediction products that

most reliably foretell the future?’ (p. 198). For this imperative, not only economies of scale are important, but in order to produce more powerful prediction products, surveillance capitalists required economies of scope (pp. 199–200): extending (across a range of activities) and deepening (personalization increases the predictive detail within activities) behavioral surplus flows (pp. 252–255).

After economies of scope, surveillance capitalists needed economies of action. Instead of predicting behavior, they shape and modify human behavior to provide guaranteed outcomes (p. 292): ‘(t)he aim of this undertaking is not to impose behavioral norms, (. . .), but rather to produce behavior that (. . .) leads to desired commercial results’ (p. 201). Hence, surveillance capitalism is ‘using its unilateral knowledge (scale and scope) to shape your behavior now (action) in order to more accurately predict your behavior later’ (p. 316). I want to push the argument further of seeing behavioral modification only as a commercial endeavor. Since political actors such as political parties can be customers of surveillance capitalists, I would argue that commercial results and the imposing of behavioral norms often overlap. Although the tool might be based on an economic logic, the application and the output might certainly be political. Furthermore, when surveillance capitalist actors are not private companies but public companies, this distinction between economic and political imperatives is increasingly blurring.

In the third part (Chapters 12–17), Zuboff looks forward by painting a dystopian picture of surveillance capitalist futures based on extracting, predicting, and modifying behavioral surplus. This type of society is not based in totalitarianism as we might expect, but embedded in what the author calls instrumentarianism. Whereas totalitarianism is operated through the means of violence, instrumentarianism operates through the means of behavioral modification: ‘a market project that converges with the digital to achieve its own unique brand of social domination’ (p. 360). However, Zuboff also recognizes that this process is not irreversible and that ‘only authority stands in the way: democratic institutions; laws; regulations; rights and obligations (. . .)’ (p. 404). The author argues that we need synthetic declarations (p. 480) – alternative frameworks that would change the game (p. 344) – that challenge the asymmetrical power relationships embedded in surveillance capitalism (p. 485).

Although Zuboff emphasizes the importance of democratic institutions, in these last chapters it remains unclear how we can actually fight surveillance capitalism. Although logics of collective action and regulation might be a solution for market capitalism, it is questionable how this could constrain surveillance capitalism when capitalist relationships have changed (i.e. humans are no longer workers or consumers). As the author argues, ‘regulatory interventions designed to constrain Google’s monopoly practices are likely to have little effect on the fundamental operations of this market form’ (p. 132). Instead, would it not be better to tackle the accumulation of behavioral surplus and the trading of such surplus on markets in future behavior? Why only address those private companies that produce and sell behavioral surplus (i.e. supply) and not also look at those economic and political actors buying behavioral futures (i.e. demand)?


To conclude, I come back to the puzzle presented in the introduction: How do an open and emancipating Internet, and control and influence of the Internet by private companies and governments converge? The paradox of personalization would answer that although private companies offer personalization, surveillance capitalism is based on imposed social relations that remain radically indifferent to our behavior (p. 513). The paradox of privatized publicness would answer that although we can make ourselves visible in networked public spaces, these spaces are privatized and designed to maximize surveillance revenues (pp. 455–456). At the basis of these answers lies the asymmetry of power and knowledge between netizens and surveillance capitalists (p. 191).

Hence, Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is an important contribution to the Internet governance literature. It is thought-provoking and will provide food for thought for generations to come, whether they are scholars, policy-makers, or users.

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Notes

1. '(...) surveillance capitalism is a new actor in history, both original and sui generis' (p. 14).
2. 'Key to our conversation is this fact: surveillance capitalism was invented by a specific group of human beings in a specific times and place' (p. 85).
3. '(...) a sweeping new logic that enshrined surveillance and the unilateral expropriation of behavioral data as the basis for a new market form' (p. 87).
4. 'The entire logic of this capital accumulation is most accurately understood as *surveillance capitalism*, which is the foundational framework for a surveillance-based economic order: a *surveillance economy*' (p. 94, emphasis in original).

Reference

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Author biography

Daniëlle Flonk is a PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School for Global and Transregional Studies and a research associate in the DFG-funded research project 'Evolving Internet Interfaces: Content Control and Privacy Protection' at the Hertie School. She has recently published her research in *Global Constitutionalism*. Her research interests include international relations with a focus on content control, internet governance, and norm development.

Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 209 pp.: ISBN 978-1-5179-0422-7, \$25.00 (pbk)

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In *The User Unconscious*, Patricia Ticineto Clough presents a collection of essays that examine 21st-century computational technologies through the fields of media studies, continental philosophy, and critical theory. Originally published between 2007 and 2016, these texts register how