

BOOK REVIEW

*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism:
The Fight for a Human Future at the
New Frontier of Power. Shoshana
Zuboff. Public Affairs. 2019.*

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In the COVID 19 pandemic, economies are experiencing a severe downturn and thousands in the world over have lost their jobs. Big Tech, however is doing even better than before. While aviation, restaurants, many industries and local businesses struggle to stay afloat; Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook have together earned 240 billion USD in revenue in the last quarter (ending September 2020) and a total of 38 billion USD in profits. Undeterred by pandemic conditions, among its technology releases this September, Apple launched its Watch Series 6 that has the ability to monitor the wearer's blood oxygen levels. Since coronavirus often results in severe respiratory difficulty, this new feature seems to have come at the most opportune time. Apples' app allows users to measure their blood oxygen saturation and takes periodic readings of these levels. With this data in its possession, Apple claims that it will be in a position to help its users monitor their cardiac and respiratory health, asthma symptoms and potential heart problems. What is interesting is that to conduct this research, the company has chosen to partner with the Seattle Flu Study, the University of California at Irvine and Anthem, one of the largest for-profit health insurance companies in the US. What appear to be disparate snatches of tech news in 2020, achieve new levels of significance through the ideas introduced by Soshanna Zuboff in her book 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power'.

Soshanna Zuboff is a social psychologist and a retired Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, Harvard University. In the book she introduces the concept of Surveillance Capitalism. Surveillance Capitalism, as its name suggests, is the extension of capitalism's profit-making imperative through the collection and commodification of personal data. This includes location, phone contacts, heart-rate and blood oxygen levels etc., that tech companies track and monitor through our devices. Under the guise of personalization, this data is collected and put to use to predict and consequently modify human behaviour to meet the surveillance capitalists' economic imperatives. According to Zuboff, prediction and behaviour modification ultimately robs us of a future tense. In other words, surveillance capitalists learn and can therefore predict our behaviour. What they know and predict, they can consequently manipulate. The fact that our behaviour can be artificially modified and nudged in particular directions shows that our future can be pre-determined. A future in which we have little or no say; all with the aim of furthering capitalist intentions. Consumers of the services that big tech offers thus lose their right of privacy, knowledge and application, to market forces. Their personal human experience and knowledge is used as raw material to generate profit.

Surveillance Capitalism is unprecedented. Much like totalitarianism, it remains unrecognised while it is taking shape. It is different, and yet draws from the forms of capitalism that have come before it. If, she writes, "industrial capitalism depended upon the exploitation and control of nature," then surveillance capitalism "depends instead upon the exploitation and control of human nature." Zuboff's book thus delves into the dark side of the digital dream and is written with the aim of asking what that means for the future generations, for democracies and the possibility of a human future in the digital world.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a path-breaking work. In making the complex connections it does between the systematically planned, usually hidden-to-us workings of the technology industry, and the elephant in the room; its massive profits, we are made aware of how we- our beings and our minds, without our informed consent are being used to financially benefit a small number of people. I also consider the term Surveillance Capitalism a great contribution to discourse on society and technology. It is a powerful concept that can be used in the building

of more complex frameworks required to understand the relationship between tech and the social. While connections between seemingly unconnected events/ ideas (at one point, Spanish conquistadors and Surveillance Capitalism) can be refreshing, the same device sometimes lapses into tediousness when overdone. Similarly, while Zuboffs' flair for writing is what makes the book an engaging read, it is the overuse of these very same flourishes that make necessarily long sections, even longer.

To revisit my examples with the knowledge of the concept of Surveillance Capitalism, we begin to see Big Tech's COVID profits for what they are. The only reason that Big Tech can profit in a pandemic is because it uses the 'free' data we provide and deals in what Zuboff calls 'behavioural futures'. Apple's research deal on the other hand, puts what should be private health data from their customers into the hands of Anthem, a private health insurance company known for its unfair practices. Data of this kind can be used to further improve Anthems' prediction abilities (setting insurance premiums etc.) at the cost of their customers, ironically the very same people who provided them with the data.

