

**BOOK REVIEW: THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE
CAPITALISM: THE FIGHT FOR A HUMAN FUTURE AT
THE NEW FRONTIER OF POWER**

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Ryan Shandler*

The University of Haifa, Israel

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* Ryanshandler@gmail.com

For thirty years, Shoshana Zuboff has written prolifically about the risks in the transition to an information civilization. In her new book - *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* – Zuboff perceptibly refrains from a purely academic analysis of the conceptual framework of information civilization that would legitimize its illicit expropriation of human experience. Instead, she issues a rousing call to arms to rediscover our sense of outrage and indignation at the commodification of human behavior. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* sets an almost impossibly ambitious challenge with the imposing mission Zuboff sets for herself, variously comparing its scope to Adam Smith, Max Weber and Karl Marx in its exploration of the ‘kind of civilization [surveillance capitalism] foretells’ (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 347). Yet deftly switching between a theoretical analysis of the underling concepts and its application in a rapidly changing technological environment, Zuboff offers a roadmap that will serve scholars and regulators alike in contending with this new economic and technological reality.

The opening chapters of the book develop a new vocabulary to describe and comprehend the nature of surveillance capitalism. Drawing on Arendt’s writings about totalitarianism, Zuboff stresses the importance of building accurate terminology to give language to the new economic imperatives ‘whose mechanisms and effects cannot be grasped with existing models and assumptions’ (338). Using a combination of theoretical analyses, interviews with industry professionals and historical research, Zuboff illuminates the logic through which seemingly innocuous products ranging from social networks and online search portals, to smart TVs and vacuum cleaners have removed the tangible product from the center of the commercial exchange. In its place, the new surveillance capital market, operating in the background of commercial interactions, expropriates excess personal data, which in turn constitutes the raw material for the fabrication of predictive models of future behavior for profit motives. Zuboff traces the earliest development of this new market force, observing how the business model of surveillance economics emerged almost incidentally. Google, the pioneer of surveillance capitalist techniques and the primary protagonist in the book, responded to the dot-com burst in 2000 by creatively using the primitive metadata it fortuitously stored on its servers to sell more precisely targeted advertising to advertisers. Quickly realizing the vast potential of this market to predict and manipulate human behaviour, it and other emerging technology powers declared human experiences to be part of their proprietary materials, taking advantage of an overlap with intelligence apparatuses to habituate the public to relinquishing their data.

A recurring theme in the book is the notion of a subliminal quid quo pro between consumer and surveillance enterprises. This quid quo pro regulates the exchange of personal data or ‘behavioral surplus’ for a combination of convenience, social connectedness and efficiency. Much of Zuboff’s writing is dedicated to shining a light on the terms of this ‘Faustian pact’ that has operated in the shadows, and which exploits ignorance of its operation as one of its central strategies. Zuboff concedes that this quid quo pro offers consumers very tangible benefits such as personalized service, and unparalleled convenience. But the true cost, she argues, is hidden, and because it does not ‘claim our bodies for some grotesque regime of pain and murder, we are prone to undervalue its effects’ (378). Zuboff asserts that what appears to be a minor sacrifice of personal information is actually the relinquishment of human freedom. Acquiescing to the insatiable demands for ever-deeper incursions into your purchases, habits, desires and emotions involves subjecting the entire trajectory of your life under the purview of market forces who can predict your future needs and manipulate your behaviour.

This leads to a second recurring motif – the question of free will in the age of surveillance capitalism. Drawing from key philosophers that have grappled with the question of determinism, Zuboff explains why uncertainty is an underlying assumption of human freedom. Considering the unprecedented concentration of resources in the hands of a handful of companies with the power to monopolize human knowledge, Zuboff argues that this assumption of uncertainty is called into question in the information age. The combination of sophisticated computing learning algorithms, inordinate computing power and an insatiable appetite for personal data, allows a small number of firms to predict individual behavior with a level of certainty never before known.

After painstakingly revealing the nature of surveillance capitalism and how its instrumentarian approach translates raw behavioural surplus into predictive products that are used to entrench a cycle of power accumulation, we are left with the question of how to respond. Zuboff's contribution is threefold. First, Zuboff offers the requisite terminology with which we can comprehend and combat the phenomenon of behaviour mining. Second, her book shines a light on the terms of the hitherto hidden quid quo pro through which we surrender our data. Finally, and most importantly, Zuboff fervently implores her readers to rekindle a 'sense of outrage and loss over what is being taken from us' (521). Yet at times this feels insufficient. After comprehensively analyzing the inevitability of the surveillance capitalist endeavor – its growing omniscience, its all encompassing reach, its concentration of knowledge and power – the act of reviving a sense of social outrage seems inadequate. So thoroughly does Zuboff persuade us of the inevitability of this new social reality that it leads us to ask whether ignorance was perhaps not a kinder state to leave us in lest her depiction of titans of technology wielding cyber-omniscience 'releases us from the illusion of freedom' (264).

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is an invaluable contribution to the debate about how pervasive technology is shaping our human behavior. Zuboff compellingly describes the commodification of human behavior that relies on consumers as both a source of raw material, and as a target for guaranteed outcomes. The book has a dramatic streak that could come off as cyber fear-mongering if it didn't so painstakingly make its case. As we approach that time, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism will be an indispensable guide to mitigating the social costs.