Book Review

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power

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Under COVID–19 restrictions, the realm of education is changing faster than anyone could have expected. In less than a week, plans were rebuilt and implemented to move in–person teaching to the online environment. Many of the weaknesses in online delivery are standing out stark against the background of previous pitches of how great online delivery would be for students. From this quagmire of change an actual threat is poised to win big from the push to the online environment: corporations that subscribe to the surveillance capitalist methodology.

Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, recently came out with a substantive work: The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power, as provocative for its size as its argument. The book is a historic, qualitative analysis of the last 20 years of digital changes, a 690–page tome spanning 18 chapters divided into four parts, concluding with 129 pages of notes and references. Despite its length, the work is an easy read that defines, describes, and makes a compelling case against surveillance capitalism and the collection and use of spatial, personal, and digital data to influence behaviour and increase profits for corporate shareholders. Zuboff also provides warnings for educators throughout the work, with three key chapters focused intensively on educational issues: chapter 6 discusses changes in the division of learning, the representation of knowledge, power, and authority; chapter 15 focuses on research in educational institutions that is becoming increasingly profit–oriented and driven by corporate interests; and chapter 16 construes students as lab rats on whom these advances in technology are tested.

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Though initially categorized as a branch of information capitalism in which data were collected within any given company to improve its efficiencies (Matthan 2019), Zuboff shows how surveillance capitalism has since moved data collection into all areas of customer social existence. Collected data are used to make predictions not only about shopping but also daily habits, trends, and social conformity levels. Perhaps most Orwellian, these predictions are sold on what’s called a “behavioural futures market” (p. 8) where advertisers and marketing firms pay for the predictions extracted from the dispossessed private data and use the predictions to better target consumers and influence their purchasing behaviour (what Zuboff calls “behavioural influence”). Experimentation is also undertaken by those who make the predictions, such as Facebook’s manipulation of individuals’ news feeds to determine if the sentiment of the feed changes the sentiment of the posts. The results of these experiments are applied to improve accuracy, allowing companies to influence, define, and predict how to gain desired customers and increase sales more reliably. Zuboff suggests that in this world of data collection and behavioural influence, we are losing our “right to our future tense” which she defines as our ability to “imagine, intend, promise and construct a future” (p. 20). Such a loss means that the core tenant of Western democracy—an individual with free choice—is endangered. But even more troubling for education, it also means that acceptance of these methods within educational discourse and events places students at risk of no longer being the individuals they might otherwise become.

Part I of the book describes the rise and foundations of surveillance capitalism, set against Google’s emergence as the front runner. Part II tracks surveillance capitalism from the virtual to real world, as companies strive for more accurate predictions. Part III discusses a “novel and deeply antidemocratic vision of society and social relations” (p. 20) produced by the rise of “instrumentarian” power that is rooted in surveillance capitalism. Zuboff defines such power as “an unusual ‘way of knowing’ that combines the ‘formal indifference’ of the neoliberal worldview with the observational perspective of radical behaviourism” (p. 376). Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism represents a coup from above that removes an individuals’ right in a democratic society to choose for themselves because of the behavioural influence exerted through extensive collection of data during online activities. She ends with a rallying call that it is in a collective effort that we can reclaim the digital future.

Zuboff also warns about the acceptance and implications of surveillance capitalist foundations within education. In chapter 6, Zuboff suggests that the division of learning is changing, as knowledge, authority, and power are being reduced to summarily answer three questions: First, who is included (or excluded) in learning? Second, who decides who is included in that learning? And third, who decides how knowledge is distributed? Knowledge resides within “smart” machines and the few who are included (trained) to understand their operations. Zuboff suggests that such authority has been conferred to proponents of a neoliberal goal to maximize
profits and shareholder value—meaning that learning is geared to corporate profit rather than social improvement, and the power to distribute knowledge in such a data- and consumer-driven business model lies with the surveillance capitalist rather than adhering to the social contract of education. In short, Zuboff suggests that education started teaching for social participation, moved to teaching for employment, and now trains for the acceptance of this division of learning.

Zuboff’s work makes clear that surveillance capitalism not only has an impact on education but also happens within education, in the sense that university research increasingly is expected to embrace surveillance capitalism rather than serve as an independent voice. For example, chapter 15 describes the work of MIT professor and computer scientist Alex Pentland, who is dedicated to the study of behavioural influence and the adoption of technologies to better control behaviour. Zuboff shows that Pentland uses his position at a prestigious university to bring private money into his research, undermining academic independence from the start. His work is funded by promoters of surveillance capitalism, and the results are used to establish companies such as Sociometric Solutions Inc. (rebranded as Humanyze in 2015). Humanyze’s offerings include wearable technologies that provide real-time feedback to managers and employees to help monitor employees non-stop to flag potential social issues before they develop into any form of resistance. Pentland is an example of the corporate, neoliberal, and surveillance capitalist influence increasingly evident in educational research, and what can happen to the range of educational research when it is supported by corporations.

In chapter 16, Zuboff argues that children have become canaries in the coal mine of the new surveillance society. Recent studies that asked students to go without technology for a set time show an unhealthy reliance on connectivity. The anxieties and mental health issues that students exhibit while separated from their technologies suggest that the behavioural influence and new hive conditions are detrimental to student development—not only as students but also as social beings. Surveillance capitalism wants there to be no place to rest, no place to find refuge from the moment-to-moment surveillance. As older students realize that their every move is monitored and tracked, their only recourse is to attempt to hide from the surveillance. In such a context, children are constantly bombarded by advertising, which influences their behaviour to accept technology without understanding its true effects.

Beyond its thought-provoking and cautionary content, one of the book’s strengths is its approachable and readable style. Also, Zuboff makes good use of citations from the published works, speeches, and patents of those she is critiquing, which adds credibility to her statements. Her extensive collection of notes is supported by recent literature, bringing a reach and newness to the discussion. Although Zuboff’s writing style—the language she chooses and
the narrative she weaves (especially at the beginning of a chapter)—may have a conspiratorial
tone, her extensive use of primary sources soon assuages such concerns.

Still, as an expert in the computer business, and a college professor teaching computer
programming and related courses, I question Zuboff’s use of Apple Inc. to exemplify a company
that attempts to handle user data for more virtuous reasons. Just because Apple employs the
data “better” (i.e., it does not sell it to third-party users) does not mean the corporation is not
in the data collection and behavioural influence market. It simply means it does not sell its
collected data to third parties—but instead uses it for its own benefit.

Finally, Zuboff focuses on the Western notion of the individual as a rational economic agent.
Perhaps it was a limitation of the focus that she chose, but a view of people as more than
economic agents may have increased the sense of urgency in tackling surveillance capitalism.
Perhaps a deeper look at education in particular may have granted Zuboff another avenue to
help students and educators understand the surveillance capitalist threat, protect the individual,
and still allow for structured social interaction. That avenue of thought would have been
significant insight into the switch to mostly online learning as a result of COVID-19 restrictions
and the need to function under those restrictions.

This book is important to help us understand surveillance capitalism and its incursion into our
daily lives—especially when so many educational programs have gone online. For education, the
book presents warnings about changes in the division of learning, the funding for and
application of educational research where corporate or private monies are concerned, and the
developing realization that technologies contribute to students’ social disorders—and even
threaten the Western democratic way of life.

I found it easy to relate much of what Zuboff was discussing to my role as an educator. I now
ask new questions: Where will the data go? Who controls the data? How does the application
influence learning (are students learning or simply learning the application)? However, the work
applies beyond the classroom. For administrators, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* provides
insight into the goals of the companies that solicit adoption of their applications. IT specialists
such as education technologists and student support technicians will benefit from Zuboff’s
overall view of the goals of surveillance capitalism and hopefully question the uses, objectives,
and costs of technologies. More generally, educational technology supporters will benefit by
gaining an understanding that not even gamification is immune from behavioural influence.

While many of us have heard of the term and perhaps even been nudged into becoming more
“data driven,” the phrase is laden with ethical and privacy concerns that educators today must
confront. Overall, Zuboff reminds us that the use, storage, and control of data should be as
important a concern as whether the student will actually learn through a given technology. In
other words, we shouldn’t just be driven by practical concerns and concede to the new “reality” of prevalent online learning. Education decision-makers must be careful that any misunderstanding of the use, storage, and control of data does not place it into the hands of those with goals different from education—be it financial gain, behavioural control, or surveillance for social conformity. These questions are even more urgent and pressing than when she wrote the book only a year ago, as Big Tech seems poised to become a big winner from the near-panicked rush to move learning online due to COVID–19.

References

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