



*The **Age of Surveillance Capitalism** was published in October 2018. Written by Professor at Harvard Business School: Shoshanna Zuboff..Important, full of new insights and essential for our future. A message to be spread! Unfortunately, the book is also thick (523 pages), inaccessible, difficult and packed with 6 and more syllables words. That is why I made a simplified, incomplete, self-colored, self-completed but - I hope - very accessible summary.*

**12 minutes reading time!**

## ABOUT SURVEILLANCE - CAPITALISM

**Surveillance capitalism** is a form of capitalism in which people are often spied on without being aware of it. This spying leads to a data collection. Data is collected about what people "do" (post, like, look, click, search, etc ..). That is the "**first layer**". But data is also collected on how people do this (where, how often, with whom, in which tone, with a filter or without, for how long, when, etc ..). That is the **shadow layer**. And the shadow layer is really valuable. With the data from the first layer and the shadow layer together you can predict behavior. This prediction is sold by the surveillance capitalist to his customers: companies or organizations that want to sell something. Sometimes soap. Sometimes an idea. The surveillance capitalist thus sells certainty. I am certain these people are interested in your product. I am certain these people are not going to vote.

This is just the beginning. The best way to sell certainty is not to predict behavior, but to influence and determine behavior. Use data to **manipulate people** and sell that "superpower" to companies and organizations. That is the ultimate purpose of surveillance capitalism. From predicting to determining. **Do not automate for us, but automate us.**

Let's take a look at an example from a well-known surveillance capitalist: Facebook. Facebook records everything you like, post, share, click and view. You are also spied on via Facebook pixels when you visit other websites. And even your contacts are mapped. That means that people without a Facebook account are also in the picture. In short, Facebook aims to spy on everything and everyone. **That's just the first layer**. Facebook also records how often you use Facebook, where, in what way, for how long, from which device, and so on. **The shadow layer**. With all this data, Facebook predicts your behavior. For example, if you plan to buy jeans. That prediction is then sold to companies, who try to influence you with that data (look at these beautiful jeans!). Facebook has already shown that it can do more than just predict. For example, they showed that they could make users more depressed by showing them certain messages. That fits in with their plans: do not predict **whether** you want to buy jeans, but determine **that** you want to buy jeans.

There is never enough data! A surveillance capitalist never has enough data. **The more data, the better behavior can be predicted.** The better behavior can be determined. The more certainty can be sold. Artificial



intelligence is trained with data. Quantity leads to "quality". And so it is the ambition of surveillance capitalist to spy on every kind of behavior and turn it into data. Surveillance capitalism aims to expand its activities.

**In width and depth.**

## THE NEXT PHASE

Let's start with the width. For example: the surveillance capitalist Google. It started as a search engine. That was and is a good way to spy on people. After all, if you have an itching in the pubic area, you probably tell Google rather than your partner. But of course that was not enough. So all kinds of new services followed. I will name a few. G-mail so they could see what you are emailing and how you are emailing. Google Drive, to see what documents you save. Then came the smartphone and Google quickly built its own - spying - operating system (Android). A smart thermostat followed, because what do you do at home? And you can of course control such a thermostat with those smart speakers (Google Home) that are now popping up everywhere. Cars increasingly contain (navigation) software from Google. Google recently launched plans to offer streaming games. The business model is undoubtedly not to make things cheaper for gamers but to gain insight into what gamers do. And how they do it. Maybe that is why self-driving cars will soon be free. And Google will be at the forefront of smart health bracelets. Smart clothing. Smart paint. Smart packaging. That is why it is also wise to replace "smart" (smart) in your head by espionage. Smart scale. Espionage scale. Something like that. That usually better describes what the product does.

A shocking example of the broadening of the activities of surveillance capitalism is Roomba. This smart vacuum cleaner does more than just vacuuming. The device recognizes furniture brands and makes floor plans of your living room. And that while you paid big for the device. The company has not yet decided what it will do with that data, but the fact that it is collected is bizarre enough. Suppose you catch your maid in your house while she is photographing your furniture, you will ask her to leave. Maybe in an unfriendly way. And then you call the police. You brag to your friends about your smart vacuum cleaner. After all, if your vacuum cleaner is smart, you should be too, right? Wrong!

In addition to broadening, surveillance capitalism also strives to **deepen**. The surveillance capitalist wants to be able to look inside. For example, by recording and analyzing tiny facial expressions. Micro expressions. They often show what you really think of something while you are not even aware of it. There are surveillance capitalists who invest heavily in combining the information from your smart bracelet, what you do on your smartphone, what you watch on YouTube, where you are and so on. That's how they build your emotional profile. **Emotion-as-a-service.**



In short, if you hear a guru talk about a "connected, smart society", you now know in whose interest it really is. Internet of Things, smart devices. 5G. **Always online.** They are all components that contribute to a huge surveillance infrastructure. Translating behavior into data.

You may have heard the expression: if the product is free, then you are the product. That is incorrect. The product is the prediction (and soon the manipulation) that will be sold. The certainty. **You are only the raw material.** The raw material. I just heard someone say: if data is the new oil, why aren't we the new sheiks? Easy. Because we are just the ground that holds the oil.

## HOW DO THEY GET AWAY WITH IT?

Surveillance capitalism has little respect for laws and regulations. In fact, surveillance capitalists consciously employ a strategy that does not care about laws and regulations. It is fundamentally wrong. It was never **asked whether** data could be collected. no, it has been **stated that** data was going to be collected. Surveillance capitalists were something like the Spanish conquerors who landed on the coast of South America 500 years ago and declared that the country belonged to the Spanish king. Why? **Because they stated it.**

Surveillance capitalists collect data and always use the same pattern. **It starts with a raid.** Take what you can get! As quickly as possible. As broad as possible. Until people understand what you are doing. Then you try to win time. Lawsuits. Create smoke curtains. Ignore. Blame it on bugs. Democracy has little chance against a powerful surveillance capitalist. You wait until habituation occurs. The public uses your services. Gets used to it. Can't live without it. Then comes phase 3: adjustment. You adapt a little. Policies are being tightened. Here and there some things really improve. **But never the things that are fundamental to the surveillance capitalist.** And finally, the surveillance capitalist changes direction. A new story is told, built on. **New data collected.**

For example Google Streetview. One day, Google started a raid. Suddenly cars were driving through our streets that not only photographed everything but collected a lot more data. For example, all wireless networks were mapped, including - where possible - usernames and passwords. Finally we found out and so Google created smoke screens. They hid behind one engineer who made a mistake. Later it turned out to be "by design", but we were already used to that. Streetview was very handy. After all, how should you teach geography without it? Then some adjustments were made. People were made anonymous. Badges streaked out. It was banned in some countries. In other countries, however, Google changed direction and built on. Satellite photos were added. New plans presented to make Streetview a much more important part of our lives. **A Pokémon in a Starbucks is just a preview of our future in that regard.**

Raid! Time delay until habituation occurs. Adjust. Change direction. Repeat.



So if you have a smart speaker at home, assume that the device is listening all the time. Even if you don't talk to it. Even if Amazon or Google deny it. Even if the device is in the bedroom. And if we find out later, well, then we are already used to it. Stunned. A Google Home is so easy. We couldn't live without it. You should just type on your smartphone to play a song. So clumsy. In the past, spies had to go to great lengths to hide a microphone somewhere in the house. Nowadays we proudly bring our own spy microphone in our home.

In Europe we now understand that regulation is necessary. That is why the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is so important. It is mainly intended to curb surveillance capitalists, not to frustrate organizations internally with bureaucratic rules surrounding class lists. Surveillance capitalists oppose regulation. They do that subtly. Of course they say they fight privacy, online hatred, copyrights and improper influence. And they do that to some degree. Facebook hires companies that hire people who clean content (although those people are treated badly). Google makes it possible to download all your data (although in inaccessible formats). **But, please note, all discussion is only about the "first layer."** You don't get the really valuable data (the shadow layer) there. It is not even discussed. And that is no coincidence.

50 people were killed in Christchurch, New Zealand. The killer broadcasted it via a Facebook Livestream. It sparked a lot of controversy and Facebook was quick to announce countermeasures. Stopping the possibility to set up live streams was not one of the possible measures. Facebook knows that users interact with these livestreams much more than with any other form of content. **And all that interaction means data for the shadow layer and that's what really matters.** Broaden. Collect. To predict. Determine. Surveillance capitalists sometimes seem involved, seem to care about privacy, influence and online hatred, but they are **radically disinterested.**

It is a scary thought. After all, surveillance capitalism is on the rise. Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Samsung, Twitter, IBM, AT&T, but also more traditional companies are transforming their business model. Banks, clothing companies, electronics groups, supermarkets. **And every time a company does that, stock prices go up.** You no longer earn money primarily by selling beautiful products or services, but by spying on people.

## WHAT DO WE ABOUT IT?

Maybe you still think: so what? If someone knows I want to buy jeans and I get an offer of a nice pair of jeans. That's great! Wrong!. Because it goes much further. A world full of radically disinterested companies is threatening that they will not only predict what we will do, but will soon be able to determine what we think and do. They believe that free will is nothing but behavior that cannot yet be explained. Because there is not enough data yet. And who has the money, the knowledge and the power to pursue their dreams and our nightmares? **Classical capitalists have devastated nature, surveillance capitalists threaten human nature.**



Surveillance capitalists sell certainty. The certainty that you are going to buy jeans. The certainty that you will vote. The certainty that your ideas change. But soon also the certainty that a contract will be honored. If you do not pay the installment on your car, it will no longer start. If you drive too fast, we will increase your insurance premium in a microsecond. Not typed enough? Talk to your boss. **Today, contracts are based on trust, but surveillance capitalism relies on certainty.**

Surveillance capitalists believe in a free market. They believe that a completely free market in which people make their own choices leads to the best organization in society. They do not, of course, add that they are striving for a future in which people no longer have free will and in which surveillance capitalists are so powerful that there is no free market. **And, in a future where people no longer make their own choices, there is no longer a functioning democracy.**

The good news? There is still time. If you have ever booked a hotel via the Internet, you will often see advertisements for hotel rooms for weeks afterwards. While you have already booked. So it doesn't work that well yet. Every time 81-year-old Han van Doorn tells his hometown (Uithoorn) to Google Home, the "smart" speaker understands: YouPorn.

We are on the eve and there is still time.

So counterweight is needed. That starts with awareness. Surveillance capitalism is something completely new. Something so new that familiar ways of thinking and interpretation do not apply. We don't really understand it. And we find the services useful. **We are numb.** If we say "café" to a self-driving car and it will drive us to a café where our favorite drink is already available, without knowing how or why, we may find that useful. But that's wrong! We need to wake up from our anesthetic. **Want to be human!** The Berlin Wall fell because the people of East Berlin were done with it. That is our role. That is extremely important. Maybe this summary will help a little bit with that.

But awareness is not enough. Surveillance capitalism hates laws and regulations, which is why we need regulation. Little can be expected from America at the moment. Since September 11, 2001, they have needed surveillance capitalists far too badly to track down "terrorists." China is too busy spying on its own citizens. Europe then. The GDPR is a start. But no more than that. Much more is needed. You sometimes hear people talking about data ownership rules. **Shouldn't people own their data? That is the wrong question. A question that distracts.** The real question is more fundamental. Why is that data collected, analyzed, processed and sold at all?

So regulation! A spy capitalist will say that regulation thwarts innovation, but the opposite is true. Good regulation leads to innovation. To new companies with different business models. Companies where you pay with your money instead of with your data (or, as now increasingly with your money and your data).



## IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ONLINE COURSE – COURSE TWO: HUMAN VALUES

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Companies that offer services but don't sell predictions. Companies that offer an alternative. Companies that halted the advance of surveillance capitalism.

Let's hope so.

*Rens van der Vorst wrote this summary in 2019 in Dutch and, ironically, the above tekst was translated by Google translate.*