

Surveillance Capitalism

Surveillance capitalism is a modern economic logic where private human experience is claimed as free raw material for translation into behavioral data.

This data is used to create "prediction products" that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later, which are then sold in "behavioral futures markets" to businesses like advertisers and insurers.

The term was coined by Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff in 2014.

It represents a shift from traditional capitalism, which transformed nature into commodities, to a system that commodifies human behavior itself.

Key Features of Surveillance Capitalism

- **Data Extraction & Analysis:** Continuous monitoring of online and offline activity through search engines, social media, and the Internet of Things.
- **Behavioral Surplus:** Companies collect more data than is needed to improve a service; this "surplus" is repurposed to predict future actions.
- **Behavioral Modification:** Instead of just predicting behavior, systems are designed to subtly nudge or manipulate users toward specific commercial or political ends (e.g., the Cambridge Analytica scandal).
- **Knowledge Asymmetry:** Surveillance capitalists know everything about the users, while users remain largely ignorant of the extent and methods of the data collection.

Dominant Players and Mechanisms

- **Pioneers:** Google (specifically through AdWords in 2001) and Facebook (Meta) are credited with inventing and perfecting this model.
- **Tools:** Cookies, IP tracking, microphones on mobile devices, smart home assistants (like Amazon Alexa), and fitness trackers.
- **Customers:** The real customers are not the users, but the companies that buy these behavioral predictions—such as retail firms, insurance agencies, and political consulting groups.

Criticisms and Concerns

Critics, including Zuboff, argue that surveillance capitalism:

- **Undermines Autonomy:** By manipulating behavior, it reduces individual self-determination and free will.
- **Erodes Democracy:** It creates massive concentrations of power and knowledge that are free from democratic oversight.
- **Eliminates Privacy:** It normalizes the erasure of privacy, making users feel that surveillance is an "inevitable" part of digital life.

Sources

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