



Review

Confronting a High-Tech Nightmare: A Review of Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*

Richard A. Slaughter^{1,*}

¹Foresight International, PO Box 793, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068, Australia. www.foresightinternational.com.au

During recent decades the 'myth of progress' lost credibility and it's not hard to see why. Many expectations of human improvement that were supposed to flow from new knowledge, advances in human organisation and successive waves of technical innovation have proved hollow or ambiguous. That's not to say that there have been no such improvements. But taking these as evidence of overall human improvement requires a kind of mental gymnastics undertaken only by the courageous or the hopelessly misguided. Politicians are prominent among those who seem wedded to this view. What cannot be overlooked for much longer is the way that humanity has manoeuvred itself into a fateful collision with the planetary systems upon which it depends entirely for sustenance and renewal. One need not dig very far into the current sense of frustration and malaise afflicting political systems to acknowledge that there can only be one 'winner' in humanity's self-chosen 'collision course' with the planet. It's not us (Higgs, 2014).

I take the view that the most vital responses to such circumstances are neither external nor technological. They include having the inner courage and conviction to think and feel clearly, regaining our bearings and understanding the broader reality of which we are part. Nothing less will help remove the scales from our eyes so that we can act in ways that truly make sense. Humanity has a planet to manage and if it fails to rise to the occasion the human outlook looks distinctly ominous (Slaughter, 2020). The focus of this review, however, is not that of the wider 'global problematique' but, rather, a work that deals with an issue that has crept upon us almost unawares. For this writer it provides tangible inspiration, hope and a rationale for action when they are in short supply.

To be clear at the outset, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is not a particularly easy read. This is not because it is poorly written or in any way obscure but because it takes the reader into new and unfamiliar territory. It takes a while to adjust, absorb the language and come to grips with what this lucid and courageous work is saying. In effect, the book re-frames the last two or three decades, the very time when Information Technology (IT) took on new forms and literally invaded human awareness, ways of life, long before anyone had grasped what was happening. And that's the point. Now that Zuboff has documented in compelling detail many of the details of that invasion - and the rampant dispossession that followed - it becomes possible to envision a *fundamental reorientation* both to the high-tech systems around us and to those in whose interests the present deceptions are maintained. This is clearly no small achievement. A revised understanding of the recent past leads to a re-consideration of the present from which may emerge rather different futures to those currently in prospect.

One question that is answered early on is: who was responsible for this invasion? There's a distinct cast of characters, prominent among which are those who created Google, Facebook and similar companies. Behind these organisations, however, are many others including neo-liberal ideologists, venture capitalists, several US presidents and powerful agencies closely associated with the US government. Yet even that's too simple. Bin Laden, as prime mover of 9/11, also had an influence since it was this event that led US security agencies to abandon earlier concerns about 'privacy' in favour of a particularly invasive and regressive form of 'security'. It's a bit like the 'rabbit hole' featured in the Matrix film trilogy: the further down you go, the more you find. Zuboff, however, is very far from

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rslaughter@ozemail.com.au (R.A. Slaughter).

getting lost. She locates dates, events, players and consequences in a highly disciplined and comprehensible way. As a result, we can finally know what happened, understand it and gain clarity about emerging threats to the human future. As mentioned above, to have any hope of dealing with the wider global predicament we above all need agency, clarity and understanding. It is simply unacceptable for any constellation of entities, some of whom are now driving some of the most powerful technologies ever seen on planet Earth, to acquire riches beyond measure by actively working in opposition to humanity's long-term interests.

Rather than go into a detailed account of Zuboff's terminology it can simply be noted that she has provided a language and a framework that can be used to open out much of what's been hidden and to pursue the kind of projects and actions that are clearly needed. A couple of examples will suffice. One is a notion of the 'two texts;' while a second is about learning to distinguish between 'the puppet' and 'the puppet master.' In the former case she makes a strong distinction between what she calls the 'forward text' and the 'shadow text.' The forward text refers to that part of the on-line world that users of, say, Google and Facebook, can see, use and be generally be aware of. This embraces the whole gamut of design features intended to keep people in the system where their actions and responses can be constantly harvested and on-sold to others (data processors, advertising companies, political parties and the like). The simplest way to think of this 'text' is to view it as the 'bait' that keeps people returning. The shadow text refers to the vast hidden world owned by, controlled by, and singularly benefitting from what Zuboff calls the 'extraction imperative'. This is a highly secretive world that has thus-far experienced minimal regulatory oversight, especially in the US. Similarly, in the second case, a so-called 'smart phone' can be regarded as 'the puppet' whereas the hidden intelligences (including AI) that employ it for their own purposes are the invisible and currently unaccountable masters. Knowing how to use the former as a tool and enabler is one thing. Coming to grips with the hidden imperatives of the puppet masters is quite another.

Step by step the author explores how this system became established and how it morphed from being something useful that initially supported peoples' authentic needs (for connection, communication, identity, location etc.) into an all-out assault on each person's interior life. Even now, after the Cambridge Analytica and similar scandals, few people have yet grasped just how far this process of yielding their interiority to what Zuboff calls 'Big Other' has gone. For example, she documents how it exerts particularly savage consequences on young people at the very time when their identities, sense of self etc., are already unstable as they proceed through the upheavals of adolescence. She has strong words for what is involved. For example:

Young life now unfolds in the spaces of private capital, owned and operated by surveillance capitalists, mediated by their 'economic orientation' and operationalised in practices designed to maximise surveillance revenues... (Consequently) ...Adolescents and emerging young adults run naked through these digitally mediated social territories in search of proof of life... (Zuboff, 2019, p. 456, p. 463)

Immersion in social media is known to be associated with a range of unwelcome symptoms such as anxiety and depression but this particular rabbit hole goes far deeper. Viewed through the evidence presented here a combination of this form of 'rogue capitalism' with the far-reaching capabilities of digital technology are bearing down on the capacity of everyone to know and value their inner selves. In this connection Zuboff introduces a pivotal concept - the primacy of what she calls 'the latency of the self'. She writes:

What we are witnessing is a bet-the-farm commitment to the socialisation and the normalisation of instrumental power for the sake of surveillance revenues... In this process the inwardness that is the source of autonomous action and moral judgement suffers and suffocates. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 468)

So very far from being the fulfilment of humanity's aspirations and dreams, surveillance capitalism leads to 'the blankness of perpetual compliance.' But wait, the attentive reader might say, have we not seen this before? We have, both in some of the great Dystopian fiction and also in recent history. When whole populations are deprived of their inner lives, their deepest sense of self, they become depressed, diminished, disposable. Many accounts of this are available but one of the most powerful is arguably that by Masha Gessen whose book *The Future is History* provides a moving collective portrait of Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union (Gessen, 2017). What, therefore, needs to be done? Zuboff gives due credit to some of the early steps that have already been taken, many of them by European Union. But there's a long way to go before the myths promulgated by the Internet Oligarchs are recognised by entire

populations (and the politicians that represent them) and seen for what they are: a sustained assault by secretive but radically indifferent private entities on the very foundations of their humanity.

One of the main ideas that emerges is the need for new kinds of countervailing authority to re-constitute the digital realm along lines that are just, fair and democratic. Zuboff is clear that the present shape this high-tech nightmare has taken was never inevitable, never inherent in the technology itself. It was a consequence of values, choices and decisions taken by particular people at specific times and long before the implications were understood. There are, in particular, two claims of particular significance to Futurists and foresight practitioners which she refers to as: ‘the right to the future tense’ and ‘the right to sanctuary’. Here’s how she describes the relevance of the former. She frames her decision to spend seven years working on this book as an act of will that constitutes part of her own personal claim to the future. She then continues:

Will is the organ with which we summon our futures into existence...The freedom of the will is the bone structure that carries the moral flesh of every promise...These are necessary for the possibility of civilisation as a ‘moral milieu’...(They are) the basis of contracts...collective decisions to make our vision real. (Zuboff, p. 331-3)

The notion of ‘civilisation as a moral milieu’ is a powerful and compelling one. By contrast, the conditions and agreements demanded by Google, for example, require centuries of human legal practice to be set aside in favour of what she calls ‘Uncontracts’. These are forced ‘agreements’ created by the ‘positivist calculations of automated machine processes.’ In place of human qualities such as dialogue, problem solving and empathy, the ‘Uncontract’ again leads back to ‘the blankness of perpetual compliance’ referred to above (Zuboff, p. 334-6).

The right to sanctuary is also of primary significance. In Zuboff’s account it is among the most ancient of human rights and thus of vital and enduring value. But it is far from impregnable when ‘physical places, including our homes are increasingly saturated with informational violations as our lives are rendered as behaviour and expropriated as surplus.’ Moreover, the power of Big Other ‘outruns society and law in a self-authorized destruction of (this right) as it overwhelms considerations of justice with its tactical mastery of shock and awe’ So what is required, in this view, are ‘new forms of countervailing authority and power.’ In place of a swelling ‘social void’ her depth critique envisages both ‘direct challenges’ to the power of Surveillance Capitalism and a commitment to ‘new forms of creative action’ (Zuboff, p. 479-86).

Near the end of the book Zuboff advances a number of key suggestions about what, in her view, needs to be done to rein in Surveillance Capitalism (SC). In summary they include:

- The first step begins with naming, establishing our bearings, re-awakening our astonishment and sharing a sense of righteous dignity.
- Giving voice to our collective outrage and refusal of the diminished futures on offer.
- Becoming alert to the historical contingency of SC by calling attention to ordinary values and expectations that existed before it began its campaign of psychic numbing.
- The establishment of new centres of countervailing civic power equipped with laws that reject the fundamental legitimacy of SC’s declarations and interrupt its most basic operations

While researching this article I was reminded of a short piece by the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei from early 2019. In the opening paragraph it reinforces an underlying concern of Zuboff’s work to value and protect human dignity and autonomy. As such it provides a satisfying coda to this brief review of a remarkable work.

What does it mean to be human? That question sits at the core of human rights. To be human has specific implications: human self-awareness and the actions taken to uphold human dignity - these are what gives the concept of humanity a special meaning. Human self-awareness and human actions determine the interplay between individual thought and language and the wider society. It is our actions as humans that deliver economic security, the right to education, the right to free association and free expression; and which create the conditions for protecting expression and encouraging bold thinking. When we abandon efforts to uphold human dignity, we forfeit the essential meaning of being human, and when we waver in our commitment to the idea of human rights, we abandon our moral principles. What follows is duplicity and folly, corruption and tyranny, and the endless stream of humanitarian crises that we see in

the world today. (Weiwei, 2019)

A long line of techno-optimists has long asserted that technology should be seen as *the* key to the future. But there's plenty of evidence to suggest that is not the case. What Zuboff has demonstrated yet again is that when instrumental reason is linked to values such as power, money and greed its products become pathological. If, on the other hand, the systems and products of the IT revolution can be re-aligned with positive values and life-affirming purposes, then the human and global prospect would improve dramatically.

References

- Gessen, M. (2017). *The future is history: How totalitarianism reclaimed Russia*. London: Granta.
- Higgs, K. (2014). *Collision course: Endless growth on a finite planet*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Slaughter, R. (2020). Farewell alternative futures? In Press. *Futures*, Elsevier.
- Weiwei, A. (2019, January 21). Human dignity is in danger. In 2019 we must stand as one to survive. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/01/human-dignity-danger-ai-weiwei>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile Books.