



## Shock and plunder

### Description

In her recent book on surveillance capitalism Shoshana Zuboff explains how digital corporations exploit our data, and us, just they claim that their products meet our needs and help us realise our dreams.

“our lives are plundered for behavioral data, and all for the sake of others’ gain. The result is a perverse amalgam of empowerment inextricably layered with diminishment” (53).

We are at once empowered and exploited. Surveillance drives “the dominant form of capitalism in our time” (53). She asks, “How did this happen?” Near the end of the book she catalogues some answers.

### The element of surprise

It’s well known amongst militarists (including gamers and *Game of Thrones* fans) that a surprise attack throws the enemy into disarray. It’s not just that the enemy don’t have their defences ready, but there’s confusion and they lose the ability to “think straight.” It takes a while to regroup and get organised, assuming they are not already decimated by the initial onslaught.

For Zuboff, that’s our condition in the face of the relentless speed of digital developments, implementations, systems, and rapid social change. We are under attack. Digital corporations that subscribe to the ethos of surveillance capitalise on this disorientating velocity of change.

We can’t keep up, neither can democratic processes and legislation: “velocity is consciously deployed to paralyze awareness and freeze resistance while distracting us with immediate gratifications” (343).

That’s the culmination of her litany of corporate tactics. On pages 340-343 of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff provides answers about time and place where hegemonic power gets unleashed. I think she leaves it open as to whether human agents are active in creating or exploiting these circumstances. It’s sufficient to think of *capitalism* itself as responsible, as the culpable agent.



Here I summarise the trajectory of her argument about this steady onslaught against privacy and individual autonomy. I adopt her numbering system and inflect her insights with my own understanding of what has (apparently) happened.

1. The technologies that have contributed to our loss of privacy are unprecedented. At no time in history, anywhere in the world, have corporations had the ability to deliver such beguiling tech features that drain and exploit our personal information. We didn't realise what was happening as **it was different to anything that happened before**. That's part of the shock narrative. We consumers and critics can analogize with the past (telephones, railways, industrial production, labour flows), but the Internet, ubiquitous communications, intelligent environments and their social implications are unique to the current age.
2. In some sense Google and other corporations have **made what they are doing fairly obvious**, either by declaring it or via the functions they provide. They also assert that they need to be ahead of the law (and even lawless) to deliver their life-enhancing innovations. They also declare that certain of their operations need to be kept secret. They have declared and claimed what is happening. (I think of the extreme case in politics of Trump and corporatists making their misbehaviour obvious, as if to immunise the population against the tendency to resist or protest.)
3. These innovations fit the current neoliberal zeitgeist. Current corporate practices fit within a historical context. Art historians would call that *historicism*, the view that circumstances are as they are due to **historical necessity**. The particular zeitgeist that appeals equates government regulation with tyranny: information wants to be free.
4. Surveillance capitalist organisations **forge alliances** and lobby governments. They have the cachet and the resources to bring others with power on board.
5. Such organisations know to advance their mission to exploit our behavioural surplus boldly until challenged by activists, [whistleblowers](#), the press, public opinion, the courts and politicians. Corporations may indeed win, but risk tarnishing their image in the process. Fortunately for them, they have the funds to invest in **public relations exercises**. Morals and ethics are relegated to the realms of PR, which also buys time: "buy time for gradual habituation to once-outrageous facts" (341).
6. Digital corporations provide services that induces consumers to **depend on the products**, services and modes of operation they offer. So consumers are caught in a bind. Whatever their suspicions, they can never be entirely opposed to digital corporations and their products.
7. Corporations develop a coterie of **other self-interested parties**, as businesses rely on and become complicit with the innovators: e.g. Google's parent company is Alphabet, which has subsidiaries Calico, DeepMind, GV, CapitalG, X, Google Fiber, Jigsaw, Makani, Sidewalk Labs, Verily, Waymo, Wing and Loon, and a coterie of partners and lesser players who depend on its services.

8. People want to **feel included**. So digital corporations develop products that encourage that sense of community, and friendly competition (e.g. via [gamification](#)), or they amplify the threats of exclusion. So as well as benefiting from the potential camaraderie of online communities, people want to be on Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp to follow the trend, to be with the crowd, and not miss out.
9. Even though they are large organisations with boards, managers, and accounts, legal and HR departments, digital corporations cultivate the identity of the heroic entrepreneur (or intrapreneur) as if that is how they began and wish to continue – the myth of the humble garage inventor or [hacker](#) on the way to inventing the next big thing, or generating wealth, independent of standard and staid organisational structures. That kind of **genius success** contributes to a personalised narrative that many people relate to and admire.
10. For Zuboff, consumers might think that – because the companies are successful, they may also be right – (342). High tech companies project their CEOs as figures of authority even outside of their areas of expertise. That relates to the so-called **hallo effect**, e.g. [Mark Zuckerberg opining on a disease-free future](#).
11. All of this operates within a climate of social persuasion laced with – **beguiling rhetoric** – (342) about the benefits of digital innovation. Every problem has a solution and technology is so often projected as the solution.
12. **Alternatives** to the solutions offered by the corporations are eroded and diminished. In the case of surveillance it appears as if there are no avenues of escape other than going off grid, e.g. giving up your mobile phone.
13. It – s in corporations – interests to promote an – **inevitable rhetoric** – (342), as if these innovations are part of a progression to more and better. Any political, social or historical contingency to the claims and the products is subservient to the inevitable march of progress. See post: [What – s wrong with the future](#).
14. Behind much digital promotion is the idea that **humans are irrational and inadequate**. Hence our behaviours can be, and need to be, tuned, herded and conditioned. We see this in advertisements that try to convince us that we can – t manage our time, family life, finances, or relationships without the product on offer: the time management or relaxation app, dating app, etc. More significantly, we are easy prey to be coerced, nudged, seduced, triggered to various (competing) political, social and economic ends.
15. Tied to that inadequacy is the inevitable condition that no one knows all they need to know. **Ignorance is endemic in the world of technological consumption**. For Zuboff, – It is impossible to understand something that has been crafted in secrecy and designed as fundamentally illegible. These systems are intended to ensnare us, preying on our vulnerabilities bred by an asymmetrical division of learning and amplified by our scarcity of time, resources, and support – (343).
16. Finally, Zuboff writes about the tactics in war of **overwhelming the enemy with the unexpected** – shock and awe induced by speed. That – s the denouement to this narrative, from which she doesn – t really offer any hopeful means of recovery. See my posts on [vertigo](#).

## Pavement plunder

The idea of the – smart city – has a place in this putative exploitation. Zuboff cites a video interview in which Google – s CEO of Sidewalk Labs explains his vision for ubiquitous sensing technologies in the city. On pages 229-230 Zuboff explains, – He could not have been more direct in articulating

Sidewalk Labs's approach as a translation of Google's online world to the reality of city life:

In effect, what we're doing is replicating the digital experience in physical space. So ubiquitous connectivity; incredible computing power including artificial intelligence and machine learning; the ability to display data; sensing, including cameras and location data as well as other kinds of specialized sensors. We fund it all through a very novel advertising model. We can actually then target ads to people in proximity, and then obviously over time track them through things like beacons and location services as well as their browsing activity.

## References

- Doctoroff, Dan. 2016. Google City: How the Tech Juggernaut Is Reimagining Cities Faster Than You Realize. *The Information*. 17 October. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXN9QHHD8eA> (accessed 29 January 2020).
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

## Notes

- As it's current, the title of yet another Trump exposé, and a metaphor for where and when capitalism happens, I'll quote song writer Lin-Manuel Miranda in "The Room Where it Happens," (*Hamilton*).

No one really knows how the game is played  
The art of the trade  
How the sausage gets made  
We just assume that it happens  
But no one else is in  
The room where it happens.

- The image above is a missile on display at the site of The Secret Bunker in Fyfe, Scotland.

## Category

1. Economics

## Tags

1. capitalism
2. smart city
3. surveillance
4. urbanism

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