The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism Book Summary, by Shoshana Zuboff

by Allen Cheng


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1-Page Summary of The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism

Overview

After the events of September 11, 2001, efforts to establish online privacy laws were put aside. Nowadays, there are very few laws that protect your personal data from being collected and sold to advertisers. This information includes browsing history, phone numbers, email addresses, location history and even a psychological profile based on your social media accounts. This data is becoming more specific as advanced "smart" devices enter the market and diminish the amount of space not being monitored for behavioral data.

If you use the Internet, you are engaging with surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalists take your data and sell it to advertisers. They track everything from location to search history to contacts and more. The list goes on and on because they know how often you charge your phone or when you go to sleep. This information is then used for behavioral trends that help advertisers better target customers.

Many books that criticize surveillance capitalism are still helping to normalize it by suggesting that people should turn off their devices and spend less time on social media. Shoshana Zuboff, however, hopes we can find a way for better privacy laws in the digital sphere.

In this article, you'll learn about how many cookies your computer collects when visiting the most popular websites. You'll also find out how behaviorism is guiding business practices today and why it's controversial. Lastly, you'll read about how the 9/11 terrorist attacks led to surveillance capitalism in America.

Big Idea #1: In surveillance capitalism, all aspects of the human experience are being monetized.

Do you know to what extent businesses are monitoring and selling your movements, speech, actions, experiences and behaviors? Few of us do. These companies are trying to keep it that way.

In surveillance capitalism, everything we do is collected and sold to businesses.
Personal data collected can help businesses advertise better. For example, if you're close to a McDonald's, they'll show you an ad for a Big Mac.

AI can also help with predictive products. For example, Amazon's Alexa is a virtual assistant that helps people buy things online and collect data about their purchases.

Google was the first to recognize that people's personal data could be used for business purposes. Google was able to use this new information and turn its business around from losing money to making a lot of money in just four years.

Facebook is the second largest site in terms of data collection. A study found that 90% of websites leak personal information to an average of nine outside domains where this info is collected and used for commercial purposes. Of these sites, 78% send info to Google-owned domains and 34% send it to Facebook-owned domains.

Facebook is like Google in that it sells targeted ads to advertisers. In 2012, Facebook added a new tracking policy to its terms of service agreement that few people read because it was too long. Surveillance capitalism is the term for this kind of tactic.

Research shows that even when you're not using your phone, it's still tracking what you do. For example, many apps sold for Android phones contain trackers that leak personal information. Google Android phones themselves also provide a constant stream of location and behavior data.

How did we get to the point where using digital products means giving up our privacy? We'll examine this in more detail later, but first let's look at how surveillance capitalism came about.

**Big Idea #2: Capitalism has changed many times in the past, and each time it's been to loosen regulations and change attitudes for a new age.**

The story of surveillance capitalism is a modern one. But to understand it, we need to look back at the 1970s and 1980s when the rules of capitalism changed significantly.

The main idea is that changes to capitalism have helped loosen regulations and change attitudes so people could embrace the online age.

Before the 1970s, capitalism was a system of laws and policies that protected society from the dangers of capitalism.

As Karl Polanyi points out, the double movement was a way to ensure that capitalism didn't destroy itself. The double movement is what Adam Smith and other economists before him were trying to achieve. They wanted to make sure that greed and power-mongering weren't going too far—and they succeeded in doing so by creating institutions like labor unions, land preservation laws, and banking regulations.

Nevertheless, two influential voices rose in the 1970s and preached about a self-regulating free market economy. They were Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Both of them argued that we'd be better off
without laws or regulations because they limit our potential to create wealth.

Both Hayek and Friedman received Nobel Prizes, which validates their ideas. Those ideas were quickly implemented in the United States, as well as other countries around the world. In Europe, free-market capitalism was seen as an antidote to communism and totalitarianism.

In recent years, the gap between rich and poor has become a major issue. Inequality is at its highest level in decades. The wealthiest people have accumulated more wealth than ever before. Therefore, it's no surprise that those who are less fortunate feel left behind or threatened by this growing inequality.

In a capitalist society, surveillance capitalism can thrive. Inventor Thomas Edison recognized that the principles of capitalism are adopted by other parts of society. If Google is successful, it must be right and good because of its success in business. Surveillance capitalism is also acceptable if it's thriving within the rules of free-market capitalism.

**Big Idea #3: Early concerns about privacy were dismissed in favor of loose laws.**

Surveillance capitalism has been met with some concern, but it hasn't gone away. People are worried about the implications of surveillance capitalism on society, but those concerns seem to fade quickly and turn into acceptance.

The main point of this article is that, in the past, people were concerned about online privacy. However, they eventually decided to favor loose surveillance laws over their concerns.

While cookies are delicious, the ones on our computers aren't. They track us as we surf the web and they're not very popular. In 1996, the Federal Trade Commission proposed a simple protocol that would give users control over their personal information by default.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) realized that self-regulation wasn't ideal for protecting online privacy. They were close to establishing legislation, but the events of September 11, 2001 interrupted them.

After the 9/11 attacks, the US government didn't tighten privacy laws in cyberspace; rather, it went the other way and loosened regulations around surveillance. The CIA and NSA quickly ramped up efforts to monitor internet activity. Naturally, they turned to Google for support.

In 2003, Google worked with the NSA and the CIA to provide more efficient search technologies. This allowed them to analyze mountains of metadata, identify behavioral patterns, and predict future behaviors.

Google has a lot of personal data, which is exactly what both advertisers and law enforcement agencies want. Google also worked with the NSA (National Security Agency) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Google wanted to keep the relationship going because it was good for business.

This brings us back to cookies. A study found that there are over 6,000 cookies on your computer after visiting the 100 most popular websites. 83% of those come from third parties and not the actual sites you
visit. How is this possible? Google's tracking infrastructure was active on 92 of the top 100 sites.

**Big Idea #4: Google's operations, such as Street View and Glass, are examples of how outrage can turn into acceptance.**

There were concerns about Internet cookies when they first came out, but we have clearly moved past that. And it's easy to see how this happened. There was initial outrage upon discovering the invasive practices of surveillance capitalists. But eventually people gave up and accepted them as a part of life.

This is a problem because companies like Google and Facebook want people to believe that they're the only ones who can do what they do.

Google's Street View and Glass operations are great examples of outrage turning to acceptance. Google cars have cameras that stick out like periscopes, but people may not realize that they're taking more than just pictures.

In 2010, German federal authorities discovered that Google was secretly collecting data from WiFi networks. After investigations in 12 countries, it was found that Google had broken laws in at least nine of them by doing this.

Prosecution of these cases is difficult because the practices are unprecedented. Therefore, there usually aren't any laws that specifically address privacy and boundary issues in the digital sphere. As you may already know, Google's Street View program has only continued to expand.

In 2012, there was a public outcry over Google Glass. This wearable technology allowed people to see into private spaces and led to the rebranding of this product in 2017 as the “Glass Enterprise Edition” with a target market of workers who may already have lowered privacy expectations at work.

Google has already found a way to get into people's private lives. They released Pokémon Go in 2016, which uses the camera and GPS of a user's device to locate virtual creatures that can be captured by users. These creatures can be located on people's property or inside businesses, places where Google Street View cameras may not have yet been able to capture them.

The game was a big deal. However, it's more about the information people are giving up than the gameplay itself. The reason that it needs access to your contacts and says "to find accounts on device" is because of surveillance capitalism.

**Big Idea #5: Data collection is getting more specific in their surveillance.**

At this point, you may be thinking that Google collects data on everyone. But if you have nothing to hide, why should it bother you?

If you're a fan of democracy or free will, you should be concerned about how much data is being collected on individuals. The key message here is that the surveillance capitalism industry collects information on people in order to predict their wants and needs better than they can themselves. In other
words, instead of asking Google a question, it would know what you want before you ask the question and tell you. At least this is how Hal Varian (Google's chief economist) described the company's intentions for collecting information on everyone.

This means being specific about what you want, as well as your emotional state. The field of emotional analytics has developed to the point where microexpressions on your face can be detected and recognized in an instant. Of course, this information is also useful for determining age, ethnicity, and gender.

Advertisers are using advanced technologies to collect behavioral data. One such company is Realeyes, which has collected over 5.5 million annotated frames of people from around the world and can identify a person's emotional state and body language. This technology could help advertisers sell their products by understanding how consumers feel about them, as well as make people more aware of advertisements.

Google is also working on digital fabrics that would allow it to track movements in clothing and accessories worn by real-world shoppers inside physical stores – giving it an edge in collecting consumer behavior data compared with other companies.

But if you're active on social media, your posts and news feed can be analyzed to determine how you feel about a certain topic. And when advertisers know what you're doing and feeling, they'll know the perfect time to nudge you in the desired direction.

However, how can surveillance capitalists actually change someone's behavior? We'll find out in the next point.

**Big Idea #6: Businesses want to identify the right moment to sell you something.**

Since a lot of companies in Silicon Valley analyze behavioral data, it makes sense that Google and Facebook would be interested in behaviorism.

Behaviorism is the belief that all behavior can be explained by specific stimuli. If you expose people to certain things, they will respond in a particular way.

The author wants us to understand that surveillance capitalists are looking for key moments of sensitivity so they can increase the chances of purchase and behavior modification.

Behaviorism is a school of thought that believes in the ability to predict and control behavior. B. F. Skinner was a Harvard professor who pioneered this field, as well as extreme behaviorism, which holds that there's no such thing as free will or freedom for an individual; if you think there is, it's just because you don't have enough data about how people behave.

B.F. Skinner passed away in 1990, so he didn't live to see the day when people were using smartphones and smart speakers that could be used for behavioral experiments. These devices are exactly what Skinner had imagined, and they've allowed companies like Google to conduct experiments on unsuspecting users by monitoring their actions without them knowing it. Facebook has admitted to changing some of its users' news feeds as part of an experiment, and we can look at Pokémon Go as a test run by Google to see how many people would follow directions from their phones if given a digital incentive (catching Pokémon).
Pokémon Go, a popular mobile game, allowed businesses to pay money so that their location would be a hotspot for the virtual creatures. This caused an increase in business of up to 70 percent.

**Big Idea #7: Surveillance capitalism is a future where people's every move and action are captured digitally. It seems like it's inevitable, but we can change that.**

In 1948, two books came out. One was B. F. Skinner's Walden Two, which presented a utopian world with extreme behaviorism and no concern for personal freedom; the other was George Orwell's 1984, which also presents a dystopian society without any personal freedom but clearly sees it as such rather than presenting it as utopian like Skinner did.

One of the books, Walden Two, was criticized by critics upon its release. The other book is still relevant and warning about what could happen if we give up too much control to those in power.

The author's point is that despite Orwell's warning, the future of surveillance capitalism won't be as bad because it will have conveniences. For example, if you miss a car payment, your car will stop working and no one has to get involved or check on you. It can all be automated. Never mind the glaring questions about how this could separate a parent from her child or prevent someone from leaving an unsafe situation; just think about all of the bureaucracy we'd be able to bypass!

Surveillance capitalists like to describe these automated contracts as inevitable. However, they're not.

Recently, we got a better understanding of what Facebook is doing. In 2018, it was revealed that they gave personal data to Cambridge Analytica, which used the information for microtargeting voters with misinformation campaigns.

This has raised some troubling questions about the state of democracy today and the dangers that arise when there is no regulation to protect our information.

**Big Idea #8: Surveillance capitalism isn't inevitable and people aren't ready to give up privacy for convenience.**

So what can we do about surveillance capitalism? First of all, people need to realize that there are other options. The message here is that it's not inevitable and people aren't ready to give up their privacy for convenience.

Surveys showed that in 2009 and 2015, the majority of people were against targeted advertising.

There is a huge imbalance in information right now. Companies collect lots of data about us, but we don't know what they're doing with it or how it's being used. When people find out this information, there will be an uproar.

It's also important to fight back. There are people who have never known a world without smartphones, and they're more likely to normalize the practices of surveillance capitalism. They're also especially vulnerable to the psychological effects of these practices.
In 2017, Facebook's former president Sean Parker admitted that social media sites use behaviorist tactics to keep people hooked on their feed and constantly checking for new updates.

Because of the constant access to social media, today's teens are in a near-constant state of boredom. This is similar to the symptoms experienced by people with addictions and those going through withdrawal. In addition, constantly being online has been shown to cause feelings of confusion, distress, isolation and depression among teens.

Research has shown that Facebook use does not promote well-being. The same can be said for the practices of surveillance capitalism in general. However, there are ways to avoid these pitfalls and still reap the benefits of using social media platforms like Facebook.

Researchers at Georgia Tech were developing the Aware Home. This was a vision of “ubiquitous computing” that isn’t far from the “smart home” that surveillance capitalists are bringing to reality. The big difference is that the Aware Home was designed with user privacy in mind and honored an age-old concept of a person's home being their sanctuary where they can be free from surveillance.

One year ago, I had a great idea for the future. Sadly, that dream was destroyed by September 11th. However, we shouldn't stop pursuing that dream because of what happened on 9/11.

**Full Summary of The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism**

“Surveillance capitalism” isn’t technology but a logic that drives technology, commanding its actions.

Technology has progressed and created new fields of danger. The digital world poses the question, "Can technology be our home?" People in computer science developed the idea of a "smart house" back in 2002 to study how computers could learn things about their environment. Today, Google's Nest thermostat can monitor and collect data from your fitness tracker or oven.

The devices we use today are connected to the internet, which makes them vulnerable to hacking. These devices store personal information that is valuable for advertisers and marketers. The people who control this information have a lot of power in our society. It's hard for consumers to understand all the terms of service agreements they're required to review when setting up these devices. Consumers have a choice between giving up their privacy or not using these products at all.

**Surveillance capitalism translates what people do into data.**

Surveillance capitalism is a new form of capitalism. It was created so quickly that it went under the radar and most people are not aware of its existence. It turns your behavior into behavioral information, which can then be used to predict what you'll do next (hence the name surveillance). The power in this system comes from companies using this information to make decisions about their products or services based on what they know about you.

Surveillance capitalism is a new kind of economy that uses data to create revenue. It converts those
revenues into capital, and it threatens human nature in the same way as industrial capitalism did in the 19th and 20th centuries. Surveillance capitalism creates distortions in market democracy and human rights.

The world has become a venue for corporations to make money. They do this by selling surveillance technology and other products to monitor people in their homes, bodies and cities. People are not aware of how much they're being monitored or exploited. Their privacy is being invaded because businesses want to profit off them, even when it's unnecessary.

Much of this commercial activity is done under the guise of "personalization"—which really means getting people to share their intimate details in order to make money off them.

Silicon Valley is the home of surveillance capitalism. Google was and is at its forefront, along with Facebook and Microsoft. Apple has stayed out of this regime, however, as it refrains from most of these activities.

**Surveillance capitalism developed rapidly since 2002, when Google noticed trends that allowed it to capitalize on user behavior.**

In 2002, Google learned that so many people were looking up the maiden name of Carol Brady from The Brady Bunch that they knew there was a demand for it. It turned out to be because people wanted to know this information in order to get on Who Wants To Be A Millionaire. This shows how important trends are identified by what we search for online before traditional media can recognize them.

Google was startled when it realized its search engine could predict what you wanted to buy before you even knew. The company then used that knowledge to build AdWords and target ads based on your interests, which is called surveillance capitalism. That's where Google collects data from your online behavior to create a user profile that advertisers can use.

Google's surveillance methods collect more information about users than they need. They don't really need all that information, but they have it anyway because of the way Google works. This is a "free asset" for them, even though people may not realize that Google can access their data and use it to serve ads on Gmail and other services.

Facebook soon came up with a similar approach to mining information. Its 2007 service, Beacon, allowed advertisers to monitor user behavior. It had the ability to disclose an individual’s purchases to the people in his or her personal network without the user’s permission. This created some controversy because it could reveal something about a person before they were ready for other people to know about it. Facebook ended that program but Zuckerberg said later privacy was no longer a social norm.

Google's revolutionary data extraction led to the economic imperative of surveillance capitalism. The tech giant had to procure information in ever-larger amounts, and it used its search functionality as the first step toward that goal.

When Sheryl Sandberg moved from Google to Facebook, she became an advertising tycoon. She helped
Facebook grow into a surveillance capitalist company that took control of user data and monetized it for profit. The practice of surveillance capitalism has become normalized as apps have been tracking people's behavior without any kind of checks or balances in place.

**Data creates “prediction products” that anticipate human behavior.**

Companies that offer prediction products are trying to create tools that can predict the future. This came about in two waves: The first wave was for online advertising, while the second wave made these companies more prominent.

The economy has changed. There are new ways of making money, and they're not all about labor. The Internet of Things is a system that tracks people's behavior to make predictions for businesses. It can tell if you're going to miss your car payments or start charging more for insurance if you drive unsafely.

Gamification is a process of applying game-like elements to non-game contexts. This can help people accomplish tasks or achieve goals by offering rewards and incentives for their performance. For example, an insurance company might offer lower prices if you agree to have your driving monitored through telematics devices such as GPS and accelerometers in your car. In this case, the consumer would value the discount more than his privacy concerns about having his driving monitored.

Surveillance capitalism is a process that turns your life into data, which can then be sold to advertisers. The author believes surveillance capitalists are trying to convert everything into raw material for datafication.

A Sleep Number bed collects biometric information from its users and shares it with third parties. The owners of the beds agree to this by signing a contract. The company uses that data for targeted ads and messages.

**Surveillance capitalists use “instrumentarian” power to shape consumers’ behavior without consumers’ awareness.**

Technology is changing the way we live and work. It's disrupting our society in ways that are similar to how totalitarianism did. Both technology and totalitarianism want to control people for their own purposes.

Surveillance capitalism is a puppet master that controls people through their digital devices. It erases the concept of secrets by manipulating ideas and thoughts.

Surveillance capitalists try to hide their intentions. They want people to behave in a certain way without knowing it. Google wants consumers to be objects of searches, and Facebook wants users not to realize that they're gathering totalistic knowledge about them.

In the book 1984, Orwell used the metaphor of Big Brother to represent totalitarianism. It gained power through fear and controlled violence by using re-education techniques. In contrast, Big Other is a different way of exerting control over people's actions in instrumentarianism. It uses behavioral modification
techniques to change people from inside out rather than outside in.

Individuals must stand up to surveillance capitalism and instrumentarianism’s “coercive confluence.”

Surveillance capitalism has three alarming departures from historical norms of market capitalism:

1. People are willing to give up their privacy for convenience and information.

2. Instead of relying on consumers, companies can anticipate the behavior of individuals or groups and populations. This is done by using products as hosts for surveillance capitalism. It's a new way to do business that differs from how it used to be, because it requires only a small workforce with specialized skills instead of thousands of employees like General Motors did in 1965 when its market capitalization was $222 billion.

3. The new collectivism is characterized by radical indifference. The state no longer concentrates freedom and knowledge, but the market does. Surveillance capitalists have become the self-designated masters of society. They have extreme disregard for rights and outcomes because they don't view information corruption as a problem unless it threatens their data gathering or profits.