Monitored

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Business and Surveillance
in a Time of Big Data

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On 8 November 2016, millions of US citizens from across the nation went to vote in perhaps the most important election of their lifetimes. Little did they know the country had already been invaded. It was not by bombs or troops. It was not an economically crippling blockade or an apocalyptic chemical attack. Rather it was a new type of weapon, one whose historical roots combined the most insidious aspects of twentieth-century covert operations with the most dangerous viral techniques of the twenty-first-century information age. In the middle of the night and in broad daylight, a secretive force had infiltrated the last remaining global superpower and had turned its citizen's data against them.

The full facts of this attack are only now coming to light. The data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica digitally harvested over 50 million Facebook profiles in order to individually target US voters for political gain.[1] Specifically, the 'CEO' of Donald Trump's campaign used his prominent position at the company to 'wage a culture war on America using military strategies' employing according to a former employee 'the sorts of aggressive messaging tactics usually reserved for geopolitical conflicts to move the US electorate further to the right'.[2] Suddenly, what seemed like harmless clicks indicating what one 'liked' were weaponised and made into a 'lucrative political tool'.[3] Indeed, these 'smart' strategies were especially effective against a formidable political machine like the Clinton and the Democratic establishment. The Trump campaign

had bet the house on running a data-led campaign, figuring
that was their best chance against the formidable Clinton
machine. Cambridge were the data guys brought in to help
him do it. Their main job was to build what they called
'universes' of voters, grouping people into categories, like
American moms worried about childcare who hadn't voted
before.[4]

Of course, the danger of Cambridge Analytica and these types
of cyber-invasions goes far beyond one single election. They
threaten to undermine the very survival of modern democracy
itself. Already, similar methods by the same company have been
blamed for swaying the shocking Brexit vote by the UK to leave
the EU. 'There are three strands to this story. How the foun-
dations of an authoritarian surveillance state are being laid in
the US' quoting one popular UK commentator, 'How British
democracy was subverted through a covert, far-reaching plan
of coordination enabled by a US billionaire. And how we are
in the midst of a massive land grab for power by billionaires
via our data. Data which is being silently amassed, harvested
and stored. Whoever owns this data owns the future.'[5] This
new hi-tech battlefront was populated by nefarious computer-
ised secret agents like former 'Etonian-smoothie' and big time
adman Nigel Oakes, who was infamously hailed as Trump's
'weapon of mass persuasion' and the '007 of big data'.[6]
    However, digging beneath the hype is an even more worrying
truth. These attacks were only the tip of the iceberg as 'this type
of campaign could only be successful because established insti-
tutions – especially the mainstream media and political-party
organizations – had already lost most of their power, both in the
United States and around the world'.[7] More than simply a loss
of trust, they uncovered a brave new world where big data was
'hacking the citizenry' to shape popular beliefs and concretely
reinforce existing inequalities.[8] It represented a growing form of
'evil media' able to digitally mould how people think and act, a

social media virus engineered to 'manipulate the things or people with which they come into contact' for purposes of power and greed.[9] Not surprisingly, perhaps, this 'evil' was directly related to the growth of data-based academic research funded by state security agencies and the military.[10] Moreover, the reach of this surveillance was almost unprecedented – with the potential to monitor upwards of two billion people.[11]

This is a modern-day horror story where truth has become stranger and dramatically more troubling than fiction. It is full of scandal, outrage and liberal pieties about the need to protect our individual rights and sacred democratic institutions. And yet amid the noise, anger and inspiring protests, it is easy to miss the deeper reality of what is happening. Before Cambridge Analytica, before Trump and Brexit, big data was viewed as the hero not the villain. Those same voices disdaining these corrupting digital methods were once its greatest champions. As leading critical theorist William Davies recently declared:

> There is at least one certainty where Cambridge Analytica is concerned. If forty thousand people scattered across Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania had changed their minds about Donald Trump before 8 November 2016, and cast their votes instead for Hillary Clinton, this small London-based political consultancy would not now be the subject of breathless headlines and Downing Street statements. Cambridge Analytica could have harvested, breached, brain-washed and honey-trapped to their evil hearts' content, but if Clinton had won, it wouldn't be a story.[12]

It was the key to creating a sleek, efficient and bright 'smart' future. And it was by no means confined to mere elections or political campaigning. It was and is being used to reconfigure education policy – to data mine our children's personalities and emotions with the desire to predict 'national productivity in a global education race'.[13]

This reveals the ideological beating heart of big data. It is as much a promise, a technological 'myth', as it is a reality.[14] A vision is emerging of a different society where data rules our lives for better and worse. This vision can be found in the creation of 'data frontiers' for industries, portraying big data as a force for exploring and exploiting innovative ways of manufacturing not only goods but, quite literally and figuratively, the world.[15] Such changes are reflected in hopeful investments in smart technology and analytics to radically improve our lives and society. However, this promise is far from ideologically or politically neutral. Contained within its romanticised ideals revolving around speed, efficiency and innovation is an agenda that too often serves the few at the expense of the many.[16]

Nevertheless, there is a perhaps much more profound question that must be asked. What is not monitored and for what reason? It is all too common to lament that big data is just a symptom of a society where everyone is under surveillance all the time, where everything we do and think is being watched by the all-seeing eye of the digital corporate and government Big Brother. What these legitimate fears ignore though is how much of sociality remains hidden from view. From tax evasion to elite back-door deals to destroy our environment, big data has made the public little wiser about the actual people and methods used to rule our world and control our existences. Going even deeper, commonly missed among the white noise of social media, wearable technologies and the glamour of Silicon Valley is the massive amount of physical and digital labour that is being exploited to support these technologies and hi-tech cultures. It is easily forgotten, in this respect, that

> the wealth of Facebook's owners and the profits of the company are grounded in the exploitation of users' labour that is unpaid and part of a collective global ICT worker. Digital labour is alienated from itself, the instruments and objects of labour and the products of labour. It is exploited,

although exploitation does not tend to feel like exploitation because digital labour is play labour that hides the reality of exploitation behind the fun of connecting with and meeting other users.[17]

Arguably even more terrifyingly, most of us rarely even know which data has been taken from us and to what profitable ends.[18]

The question of who and what is monitored is perhaps the defining questions of our time. In his recent book, *Master or Slave? The Fight for the Soul of Our Information Civilisation*, scholar Shoshana Zuboff warns that we are at a critical juncture:

> we have a choice, the power to decide what kind of world we want to live in. We can choose whether to allow the power of technology to enrich the few and impoverish the many, or harness it for the wider distribution of capitalism's social and economic benefits. What we decide over the next decade will shape the rest of the twenty-first century.[19]

This is undoubtedly true. But there are equally important questions that must also be asked. Notably, how does the increasing ways in which the majority of the world's population is being monitored actually contribute to an unmonitored power elite? How does this constant surveillance of our thoughts, actions and preferences lead to a capitalist system which is by and large left unsurveilled? How is this culture of monitoring progressively colonising and exploiting not only current realities but our virtual ones as well? And finally, how have we been socially produced to become ultimately our own personal customisable twenty-first-century 'Big Brothers'?

Aim

This book aims to theoretically and empirically reimage capitalism by offering a novel perspective on the develop-

ment of modern power as it attempts to control a progressively data-based and virtual population. It critically investigates the paradoxical relationship between personal accountability and systematic unaccountability in contemporary neoliberalism. It reveals that ironically, as capitalism becomes less accountable in terms of its practices and values, individuals within this system become increasingly monitored and made accountable regarding their beliefs and practices. In this respect, sophisticated financial accounting techniques have made capitalist transactions more esoteric, and given elites greater opportunities to hide their profits through techniques such as tax avoidance and evasion. Significantly, this has played into a prevailing belief that despite its clear and present problems, capitalism cannot be altered and is therefore largely morally unaccountable for its destructive economic, social and political effects. Simultaneously, the rise of big data and social media have rendered the majority of individuals more accounted for in terms of how they spend their time as well as their daily behaviour. This has, in turn, forced them to be more accountable (both to themselves and those in authority).

At stake is the evolution of power and control for a digital world. Rather than being confined to the physical environment, market domination extends into our virtual realities. Capitalism is no longer satisfied with simply exploiting our labour – it now wants to shape and proscribe the limits of our multiple selves in cyberspace and beyond. It is coding and profiting from our diverse datafied identities and is pre-emptively colonising any computerised or simulative world we can conceive of. And ironically, it is relying on us more than ever to accomplish this total economic and social conquest. We are its data explorers – dispatched to discover new virtual markets and 'smart' data-driven profitable opportunities. And we are the ones who must constantly monitor ourselves and these multiple realities to ensure that they conform to these overriding fiscal prerogatives. In this new age of big data, you can increasingly imagine

anything you like and be anyone you want, just so long as it expands the bottom line.

Monitoring Society?

It seems clear that in the present era we are being watched and analysed more than ever. While previous periods certainly desired knowledge about the world and the people who inhabited it, for both cultural and technological reasons they paled in comparison to the contemporary drive to be 'totally informed'. At its most pure, it follows an Enlightenment tradition to clarify our given reality, to bring light to areas of understanding that remain dark. Moreover, it seeks to use data to reveal previously unseen aspects of our individual and human condition. Amid the numbers are clues and patterns that can alter how we see each other and our very existence. Yet it also raises the question of who is in control of this information, who is driving its collection, and for what reason. As even the famously technologically friendly former US President Barack Obama warned, 'The technological trajectory, however, is clear: more and more data will be generated about individuals and will persist under the control of others.'[20]

This growing worry points to the complete colonisation of our lives by surveillance. The so-called big data revolution is constantly expanding, desiring to know ever more about who we are and what we will be. The inspiration for these questions is almost entirely market driven – associated with the overriding aim to maximise productivity, efficiency and profitability. To this end, 'there are now very few significant interludes of human existence (with the colossal exception of sleep) that have not been penetrated and taken over as work time, consumption time, or marketing time'.[21] These ultimately narrow objectives further reveal just how much is missed by an overreliance on big data. In the efforts to obtain limitless information the richer context is easily and often overlooked, as are alternative forms

of knowledge that could challenge these hegemonic market blinders.[22]

This mass infusion of data into traditional market ideas and practices has been presciently described as 'surveillance capitalism'. Personal information is now a prime resource to exploit and commodify. As such the rise of big data signifies 'a deeply intentional and highly consequential new logic of accumulation that I call surveillance capitalism. This new form of information capitalism aims to predict and modify human behaviour as a means to produce revenue and market control.'[23] Consequently, humans become the creator, product and consumer all at once. We produce our own data, we are produced as datafied goods and we ravenously buy back this information about ourselves. Thus the new capitalist behemoths like Facebook 'are part of a heavily personalised, data-intensive economy that exploits the digital labour of its user base'.[24]

Central to this digital exploitation is simply how enjoyable it can feel and ultimately addicting it can become. We are constantly clicking, refreshing and checking up on our datafied selves. The mobile phone is now so prevalent it is close to being a permanently visible appendage for people. There is always another clickbait article to read, more information to discover, steps to count, movie reviews to critique and restaurant locations to find. And with each digital encounter we are being technologically exploited more and more. These often hidden economic demands on ourselves certainly take their mental and physical toll. Internet addiction and overuse is now a certifiable condition that requires social prevention and medical treatment.[25]

Why then do so many of us continue to do it? What lies in our individual and collective compulsion to be ever more connected and updated? To understand this conundrum, it is essential to grasp the ironically empowering aspects of this domination. American writer Bruce Schneider speaks thus of a 'hidden battle to collect your data and control your world', and

'that in half a century people will look at the data practices of today the same way we now view archaic business practices like tenant farming, child labor, and company stores'.[26] Still, it is a 'bargain' we presently make based on widespread desires for the convenience it provides from corporations and the protection it offers from governments. The attractiveness of big data and its personal use therefore extends far beyond the horizon of a future digital utopia. Rather, its enjoyment is experienced in the here and now, as 'Self-tracking has to be understood in relation to behavior that is predominantly about getting things done in ways that are possible, suitable and meaningful for the individual.'[27]

What is absolutely key is that our surveillance is never complete. It is always both partial and perennially unfinished. There will never be a moment in which CEOs and politicians, and even radical hackers, stop and say 'we have collected enough data – our job here is done'. Instead it is ongoing and expo-nential. Each new dataset, each fresh piece of information, each novel algorithm is simply the means to collecting and analysing more. And there is a fundamental human element to this smart culture – namely, we are ultimately responsible for its continual and constant collection. While much of this data gathering is hidden and automatic, it relies on people to not only provide such raw material but find innovative ways for its expansion. This is reflected in an emerging form of 'surveillent individ-ualism', according to scholar Shiv Ganesh, 'which emphasizes the increasingly pivotal role that individuals play in surveillance and countersurveillance, [and] is central to understanding the ambiguities and contradictions of contemporary surveillance management'.[28] Consequently, we are increasingly becoming not so much 'quantified selves' but, more accurately, 'quantifying selves'.[29]

Appearing before us is a culture revolving around regular, systematic and ever larger monitoring. It is at once exploitive and empowering, ever-present and increasingly unintrusive. Yet

as we enter this monitored society, it is unclear whether elites or the system itself is becoming more accounted for or account-able. Further, this surveillance era, for all its information, seems to have made our everyday realities less rather than more clear. Ironically, as we fragment into increasingly small data-byte selves and identities, the oppressive system and power differentials driving this process are solidifying, unmonitored, behind the scenes.

Monitoring (Post)Modernity

Conventional understandings of domination focus almost exclusively on the shaping and controlling of a person's identity and actions. It presumes, even if only implicitly, a coherent self – as prevailing ideologies and status quos mould people into their powerful images. Yet the digital age challenges this traditional perspective. This is the era of intersectionality, of multiple selves, of pluralism in who one is and strives to be. We are expected to increasingly 'have it all', to resist being confined to any one identity. This reflects, in part, how post-modern ideas have gone mainstream. The twentieth-century notion of a 'unified' self is being rapidly replaced. The present age is witnessing

> the reformulation of the self as a site constituted and fragmented, at least partially, by the intersections of various categories of domination/oppression such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, far from being a unitary and static phenomenon untainted by experience, one's core identity is made up of the various discourses and structures that shape society and one's experience within it.[30]

While there are obviously many reasons for this shift, the intervention of technology is clearly prominent among them. In particular, the growing presence of data, virtuality, computers and robotics is evolving previously sacred natural assumptions