

# THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

*Disclaimer: This summary was published in Dutch and has been translated by Google. The result is mediocre. Improvements are always welcome and can be emailed to [rens@technofilosofie.com](mailto:rens@technofilosofie.com).*

*In October 2018, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism was published. Written by Harvard professor Shoshanna Zuboff. Important, full of new insights and essential for our future. A message to spread! Unfortunately, the book is also thick (523 pages), inaccessible, difficult and full of 6 and more syllable words. That is why we made an oversimplified, incomplete, simplified, self-colored, self-added but – I hope – very accessible summary. 4 pages! 12 minute read! Use it to your advantage!*

## Surveillance Capitalism. What is it?

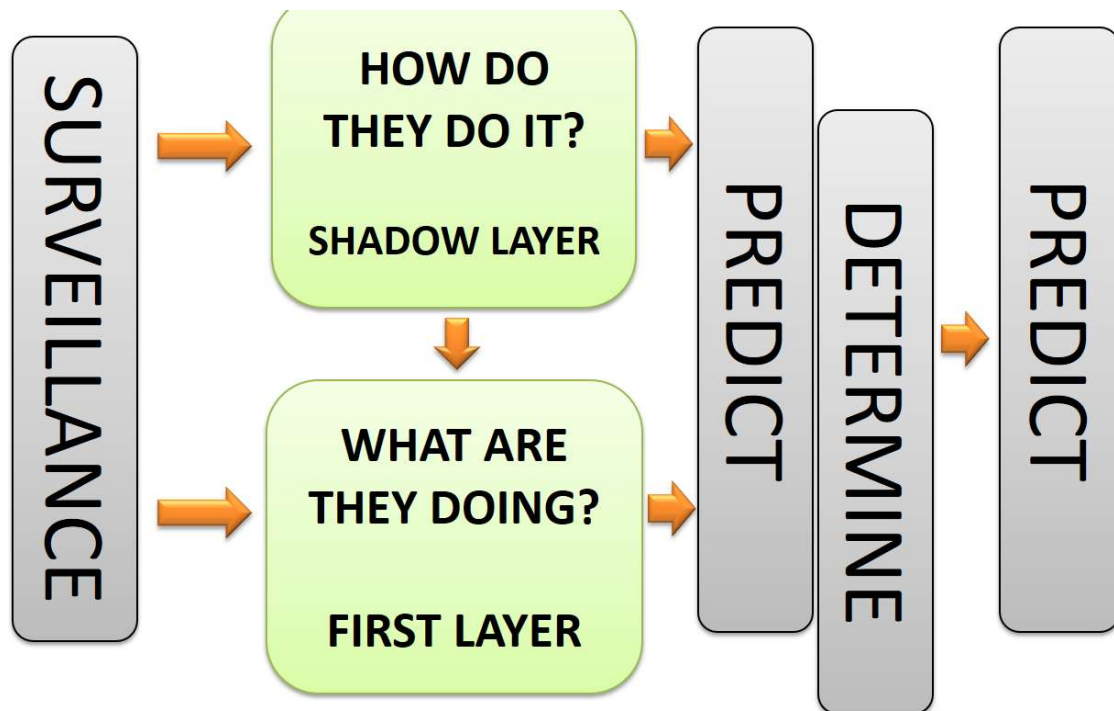
The core concept of the book is Surveillance Capitalism. Surveillance capitalism is a form of capitalism in which people are spied on often without their knowledge. This spying leads to a data collection. Data is collected about what people 'do' (posting, liking, watching, clicking, searching, etc..). **That's the first layer.** But data is also collected about how people do this (where, how often, with whom, in what tone, with a filter or without, for how long, when, etc...). **That's the shadow layer.**

And the shadow layer is is the layer that is really valuable.

With the data from the first layer and the shadow layer together you can **predict behavior** and the surveillance capitalist sells that prediction to its customers: companies or organizations that also want to sell something. Soap or an idea. The surveillance capitalist sells with that **certainty**. I'm certain these people are interested in your product. I'm certain these people don't vote.

That's where we are now. And that's just the beginning. After all, the best way to sell certainty is not to predict behavior, but to influence and determine behavior. Using data to manipulate people and sell that 'super power' to companies and organizations. That's the ultimate goal of surveillance capitalism. From predicting to determining. **From automating to our advantage to automating us.**

The book contains 'self-drawn pictures' here and there. So we thought, let's draw one too. Only we used PowerPoint.



And now the practice. Let's take an example from a well-known surveillance capitalist: Facebook. Facebook records everything you like, post, share, click and view. Via Facebook – pixels you are also spied on as

you visit other websites. And even your contacts are mapped. This means that data is also collected from people without a Facebook account. In short, Facebook strives to spy on everything and everyone. That is just the first layer. Facebook also registers how often you use Facebook, where, in what way, how long, from which device, and so on. The shadow layer. With all this data, Facebook predicts your behaviour. For example, whether you plan to buy jeans. That prediction is sold to companies that try to influence you with that data (look at those nice jeans!).

Facebook has already shown that it can do more than just predict. They showed that they can make users feel more gloomy by showing them certain messages. That fits into their plans: **don't predict whether someone wants to buy jeans but determine that someone wants to buy jeans.**

## There is never enough data!

A surveillance capitalist never has enough data. The more data, the better behavior can be predicted and eventually behavior can be determined. The more data the more certainty can be sold. With data, the artificial intelligence can be trained. Quantity leads to 'quality'. And that is why it is the ambition of surveillance capitalism to spy on any behavior and convert it into data. Spy capitalism strives to expand its activities. **In width and depth.**

Let's start with the width. For example: the surveillance capitalist Google. It started as a search engine. That was and is a good way to spy on people. After all, if you are **itchy in the pubic area**, you're more likely to tell Google than your doctor or partner. But of course it wasn't enough. So all kinds of new services followed. I'll name a few.

- Gmail so they could see what you're emailing and how you email;
- Google Drive, to see what you save.
- The smartphone with its own – spying – operating system (Android).
- A smart thermostat to see what are you doing at home?
- And of course smart speakers.
- Next are cars that increasingly contain (navigation) software from Google.

Recently Google launched plans to offer streaming games. The revenue model is undoubtedly not to help gamers but to gain insight into what gamers do. And how they do that. Maybe self-driving cars will therefore soon be free (if they will ever work). And will Google lead the way in smart health bracelets. Smart clothing. Smart paint. Smart packaging. That is why it is also wise to replace 'smart' in your head with espionage. Smart scale. Spy scale. Smart toothbrush. Spy toothbrush. Something like that. **That usually describes better what the product does.**

A sobering example of the broadening of surveillance capitalism's activities is the **Roomba**. This smart vacuum cleaner does more than just vacuum. The device recognizes furniture brands and creates floor plans of your living room. And that while you paid a lot for the device. The company still has not decided what it will do with that data, but the mere fact that it is being collected is bizarre enough. Suppose you catch your maid in your house taking pictures, you will probably ask her to leave. Maybe in an unfriendly way. And then you call the police. The strange thing is that you brag about your smart vacuum cleaner to your friends. After all, if your vacuum cleaner is **smart, you must be too**, right? No!

In addition to broadening, surveillance capitalism also strives for a deepening. The surveillance capitalist wants to look inside. For example, by registering and analyzing minuscule facial expressions. Microexpressions. They often show what you really think of something while you are not even aware of it yourself. There are surveillance capitalists who invest heavily in the combination of information from your smart bracelet, with what you do on your smartphone, what you watch on YouTube, where you are and so on. This way the built your emotional profile. **Emotion-as-a-service.**

In short, if you once again hear a guru talk about a 'connected, smart society', you now know who really profits from that. Internet of Things, smart devices. 5G. Always online. They are all components that contribute to a huge espionage infrastructure. Translating behavior into data.

**You may have heard the expression: if the product is free, then you are the product.** That's not right. It is even worse. The product is the prediction (and later the manipulation) that is sold. The certainty. You are not the product, but just raw material. I recently heard someone say: if data is the new oil, why are we not the new sheikhs? Easy. Because we are just the earth.

## How do they get away with it?

Surveillance capitalism has little to do with laws and regulations. In fact, surveillance capitalists consciously ignore laws and regulations. It all started with a statement. There is never asked whether data could be collected, no, it was stated that data would be collected. Surveillance capitalists are a bit like the Spanish conquistadors who landed 500 years ago on the coast of South America and declared that the land belonged to the Spanish king. Why?

**Because they declared it.**

Surveillance capitalists collect data using the **same pattern** over and over. It starts with a raid. Take what you can get. As quickly as possible. As broad as possible. Until people realize what you are doing. Then you start stalling. Lawsuits. Create smoke screens. Ignore. Blame it on software bugs. Democracy stands little chance against a powerful surveillance capitalist. They just wait until habituation occurs. The public uses your services. They get used to it. They do not want to live without it anymore.

Then comes phase 3: adaptation. You adapt a little. Policy is being tightened. Improvements are promised. Some things really improved here and there. But never the things that are fundamental to the surveillance capitalist. And finally, the surveillance capitalist changes direction. There will be a new story told and new data collected.

For example, Google Street View. One day Google started a raid. Suddenly cars drove through our streets that not only photographed everything but guzzled a lot more data. All wireless networks were mapped, and - where possible - usernames and passwords were collected. Eventually we found out and so Google threw up smoke screens. They hid behind an engineer who had made a mistake. Later it turned out to be 'by design', but then we were already used to Streetview. It was very handy. After all, how are you supposed to teach geography as a teacher without it?

Then there were some adjustments. People were made anonymous. License plates stripped out. In some countries it was banned. In other countries, however, Google changed direction. Satellite photos were added. New plans presented to Streetview. A Pokémon in a Starbucks is just a taste of our future.

**Collect all data you can find.**

**Stall until habituation occurs.**

**Adapt.**

**Change direction.**

**Repeat.**

So if you have a smart speaker at home, assume that the device is listening all the time. Also if you don't talk to it. Even if Amazon or Google says no. Even if the device is in the bedroom. And when we find out later, well, then we're already used to it. Anesthetized. A Google Home is so easy. We couldn't do without it. Imagine typing on your smartphone to play a song. That would be really annoying.

In the past, spies had to go to great lengths to hide a microphone somewhere in the house. Nowadays we proudly bring our own spy microphone into our home. In Europe we now understand that regulation is necessary. That is why the General Regulation Data protection (GDPR) so important. It is mainly intended to curb surveillance capitalists not to frustrate organizations internally with bureaucratic rules around student lists. Surveillance capitalists resist regulation. They do that subtly. Of course they say the protect privacy, fight online hate and protect copyright. And they do to some extent. Facebook hires companies that hire people to clean up content (even though those people are treated badly). Google allows you to download all your data (albeit in inaccessible formats). But, note, all discussion is only about the 'first layer.' The really valuable data (the shadow layer) is the one customers will never reach. That is not even discussed. And that is no coincidence.

In Christchurch, New Zealand, 50 people were killed. The killer broadcasted it through a Facebook Live stream. It caused a lot of controversy and Facebook was quick to announce countermeasures. Discontinuing the ability to set up Livestreams was not one of the possible measures. Facebook knows that users interact much more with Livestreams than with any other form of content. And all that interaction means data for the shadow layer and that's what it is about. Broaden. Collect. To predict. Determine. Surveillance capitalists seem involved at times, seem to care about privacy, influence and online hate. They seem to care about us. **But in reality they are radically disinterested.**

It's a scary thought. After all, surveillance capitalism is on the rise. Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Samsung, Twitter, IBM, AT&T, but also more traditional companies are changing their business models. Banks, clothing companies, electronics companies, supermarkets. And every time a company moves towards surveillance capitalisme, the share prices rise. You no longer earn money primarily by selling beautiful products or services, but by spying on people.

## What do we do about it?

Maybe you are still thinking: so what? If someone knows I want to buy a pair of jeans and they show me offer of a nice pair of jeans, that's great! It is not. Because it goes much further. There is a threat of a world full of radically disinterested companies that not only predict what we will do but determine what will happen next. Determine what we think and do.

**Companies who believe that free will is nothing more than behavior that is not yet explained.** Because there is not enough data yet. And who have the money, the knowledge and the power to fulfill their dreams and chase our nightmares.

Classical capitalists have destroyed nature, surveillance capitalists threaten human nature.

Surveillance capitalists sell certainty. The certainty that you will buy jeans. The certainty that you are going to vote. The certainty that your ideas will change. But soon also the certainty that a contract is honored. If you do not pay the installment on your car, it will no longer start. Are you driving too fast we increase your insurance premium in a microsecond. Did you not type enough words? Talk to your boss. In our current time contracts are based on trust, but surveillance capitalism relies on certainty.

Surveillance capitalists believe in a free market. They believe that a completely free market, in which people make their own choices, leads to the best organization of society. Of course they don't tell you that they are striving for a future in which people no longer have free will and in which surveillance capitalists are so powerful that there is actually no free market. **And, in a future where people no longer make their own choices, there is no longer a functioning democracy.**

The good news? There's still time. If you have ever booked a hotel via the Internet, you will often still receive commercials for hotel rooms. Even if you have already booked. So it doesn't work all that well yet. Every time 81-year-old Han van Doorn tells Google Home his place of residence (Uithoorn), the smart speaker thinks he says: YouPorn. There is still some time.

So a balance is needed. That starts with awareness. Surveillance capitalism is something completely new. Something that is so new that known ways of thinking and interpretation are not applicable. We don't contain it and we find the services convenient. We're numb. When we say 'bar' to a self-driving car and it drives us to a bar where our favorite drink is already waiting, without us knowing how or why, then we might find that useful too. But it is not! **We must wake up from our anesthesia.** We need to be human! The Berlin Wall fell because the people of East Berlin were done with it. That's our role. That is extremely important. Perhaps this summary will help with that.

But awareness is not enough. Surveillance capitalism hates laws and rules and that is why we need regulation. There is little to expect from America at the moment. Since 11 September 2001, they need the surveillance capitalists far too much to track down "terrorists". China is too busy spying on its own citizens. So, Europe it is. The AvG/GDPR is a start. But no more than that. Much more is needed. You sometimes hear people talk about rules around data – ownership. **Should people own their data?** That's the wrong question. A distracting question. The real question is more fundamental. Why is this data collected, analysed, processed and sold at all?

So regulation! A surveillance capitalist will say regulation thwarts innovation but the opposite is true. Good regulation leads to innovation. To new companies with other business models. Companies where you pay with your money instead of your data (or, as nowadays increasingly with your money and your data). Companies that offer services but do not sell forecasts. Companies that offer an alternative. Companies that will stop the advance of surveillance capitalism.

**Let's hope so.**