

# Book Reviews

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Shoshana Zuboff

*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.*  
London: Profile Books, 2019. 691 pp. \$38. ISBN-13: 9781610395694

**Reviewed by:** Travis Loof, *University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, USA*

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With each passing day, more and more personal data are being created by people living more of their lives online. This has led some to speculate that data are most precious commodity on earth. Indeed, in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, readers are led through a comprehensive examination of this “new” form of capitalism and the impact these industries and technologies have on our daily lives. Through the nearly 700 pages of this book, the author conceptualizes surveillance capitalism and then articulates the unintended, and as the author argues, mostly intended effects of this new form of capitalism. Surveillance capitalism can loosely be defined as the collection of behavioral surplus (user-generated behavioral and psychographic data that are created beyond the given needs of a product or service) that is fed into machine intelligence (or other similar analytical tools) to fabricate and sell future predictions of human behavior at scale. If that sounds complicated, that is because it is. However, the working parts of this definition are logically deconstructed with pertinent examples throughout the book.

Shoshana Zuboff is the Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita at Harvard Business school and formally associate faculty at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. In addition, Dr. Zuboff has authored two other books examining and interrogating the influence of technology in the workplace (*In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*) and on the individual (*The Support Economy: Why Corporations Are Failing Individuals and the Next Episode of Capitalism*). As of 2020, she was also named to the Real Facebook Oversight Board, a group that is independent of Facebook composed of 25 experts from journalism, academia, civil rights, and politics.

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of around 150 pages, for a total of 18 chapters. Part one introduces the reader to an overview of the key terms and the meta concept of surveillance capitalism. In addition, this section explains the historical circumstances by which surveillance capitalism was able to form and eventually flourish. Part two explains how surveillance capitalism continues to evolve to new

challenges and stave off criticism, all while encompassing many more aspects of society and daily life. Part three examines how the consequences of surveillance capitalism have and will continue to shape lives unless action is taken.

Although the message of this book is sure to resonate with students, both the breadth and depth of the book may be a turn off to some. The text in its entirety would surely not fit well within a survey or principles course in either social or digital media. However, this book would be excellent addition as a supplemental or primary text in an upper level theory or literacy course. Zuboff pulls from a variety of social science paradigms and perspectives making for a ripe class discussion. Given all this, graduate courses in media ethics or social media would find the most use for this book. From the perspective of graduate education, this text could serve the dual function of an examination of digital media as well as an example of concept building and explication. If used only in part, the book could also provide an interesting supplement for discussions related to data ethics, big data, philosophy of science, and social media.

The complex nature of the subject material makes this book a challenging, but enlightening read. The author does a wonderful and painstaking job of explicating two of the main concepts: instrumentarianism and surveillance capitalism. The author argues that these concepts need to be outlined and named to address the new convergence of technology and corporate interests which form a new social dominance. Thus, instrumentarianism is discussed as being analogous, both in terms of formulation and scope, to totalitarianism. As someone who is reading this review, it may be difficult to understand how the author reaches those conclusions in my few sentences. However, the author constructs this argument in a logical and easily understandable, albeit lengthy, fashion. After finishing the book, readers may be left with a bleak outlook. It would seem Zuboff's goal is to name and outline the problem, and as such, the book offers little in the way of providing possible solutions. From the discussions of the "inner workings" of tech giants, to the analysis and problematizing of radical behaviorism, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is a figurative menagerie of social science theory that will surely challenge graduate students, and undergraduate students in very specific courses, in connecting and interrogating multiple perspectives in mass communication.

Karen Freberg

*Discovering Public Relations: An Introduction to Creative and Strategic Practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2021. 400 pp. \$100 pbk. \$60 ebk.

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*Discovering Public Relations: An Introduction to Creative and Strategic Practices* (Sage, 2021) written by Dr. Karen Freberg offers a refreshing, up-to-date, and engaging take on public relations in a text that is well-researched and broad-reaching, covering