SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND YOUR EDUCATION: ARE YOU THE "CUSTOMER" OR THE PRODUCT?

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DO YOU CARE ABOUT YOUR DATA PRIVACY?

"Tellingly, it was inferred by some interviewees that students consider themselves to be living lives where surveillance and data extraction is ingrained (and sometimes actively accepted) as part of their engagement with social media and other networked activities. In this sense, students were able to tolerate – if not accept – the idea of being surveilled through their laptops – what has been referred to as 'digital resignation' (Draper and Turow, 2017), or perhaps 'surveillance realism' (Hintz et al., 2019)."

Selwyn, N., O'Neill, C., Smith, G., Andrejevic, M., & Gu, X. (2021). A necessary evil? The rise of online exam proctoring in Australian universities. Media International Australia. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X211005862

IS THIS JUST THE WAY IT IS?

IT CAN FEEL OVERWHELMING

- Sometimes, the sense of what has already been given away to these services can make any kind of resistance feel pointless.

- Your generation (those of you who are Gen Z) is *particularly* trapped in very unique ways, because – for many of you – your parents were giving your data away on the internet long before you could consent, or you were signed into service like the Google ecosystem in elementary or secondary school.

- People with power over you – your professors, employers, administrators – are regularly told that it's common knowledge that you don't care about your data or your privacy.

- I have about an hour to try and make you care if you don't already. Let's go.

- I'm responsible for supporting the use of educational technologies on campus.

- I'm also a faculty member, though I don't teach, and my research interests focus on public scholarship (making research meaningful to everyone) and ethics (making good choices, often on your behalf). I am particularly interested in how educational technologies do – or more often do not! – enact care.

- I care a lot about how the university handles your data and what we communicate to you through the choices we make. I care a lot about whether you have informed consent when you are asked to use services on campus.

- Before this, I was a scholar of comic books. You can decide whether that makes me more credible or less credible.

WHO AM I, ANYWAY?

WHAT IS SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM?

Term coined by Shoshana Zuboff; see *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019).

Analogous to industrial capitalism: the way the industrial revolution exploited the natural world for the benefit of profit, the surveillance revolution exploits the social world for the benefit of profit.

Consider how Google tracks your behaviour in order to sell you products from third parties (advertising); you pay for Gmail, searches, etc. with your data.

Google, Facebook, etc. use our data with very minimal regulation over how they make use of that information or where/how they resell it.

FROM *SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM*

"Futuristic as this may sound, the vision of individuals and groups as so many objects to be continuously tracked, wholly known, and shunted this way or that for some purpose of which they are unaware has a history. It was coaxed to life nearly sixty years ago under the warm equatorial sun of the Galapagos Islands, when a giant tortoise stirred from her torpor to swallow a succulent chunk of cactus into which a dedicated scientist had wedged a small machine.

"It was a time when scientists reckoned with the obstinacy of free-roaming animals and concluded that surveillance was the necessary price of knowledge. Locking these creatures in a zoo would only eliminate the very behavior that scientists wanted to study, but how were they to be surveilled? The solutions once concocted by scholars of elk herds, sea turtles, and geese have been refurbished by surveillance capitalists and presented as an inevitable feature of twenty-first-century life on Earth. All that has changed is that now we are the animals."

Data is valuable *because* it allows companies to predict your behaviour, profile you, and target ads and services.

But data can be the whole business plan, too.

HOW DOES THIS COMPANY MAKE MONEY IF I DON'T PAY FOR THE SERVICE?

ONE BUSINESS CASE IN EDUCATION: TURNITIN

- Turnitin is a plagiarism detection software. You submit your paper to Turnitin, and their AI service determines what percentage of the essay has been lifted from other sources; it also offers a "Revision Assistant" tool.

- (Thankfully, it is not a supported tool here at TRU.)

- When you submit your work to Turnitin, it becomes part of their database against which they compare essays and upon which they train their AI.

- You waive your right to your own intellectual property when you use this service, and your data – freely offered, and paid for by the university! – the entire business plan of this company.

- So what is your data worth, in this case, if Turnitin is worth $1.75B?

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

LinkedIn knows what industries you work in or want to work in. It owns that data.

Office365 knows how you do your school work and what your study behaviours are, which it reports as "habits." It owns that data.

They are owned by the same entity (Microsoft).

Let's say an employer wants to pay for a packet of data that tells them what kind of employee they think you'll be, and they think what kind of a student you have been would be helpful in determining that.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

You see a therapist. With the pandemic, you've moved to meeting with her on Zoom.

Your Zoom account was provided to you by your employer. They have access to all your calls and any information shared through that system.

Your employer is curious about your mental health. They explore what your Zoom data shows, and they learn that you meet with a therapist every week.
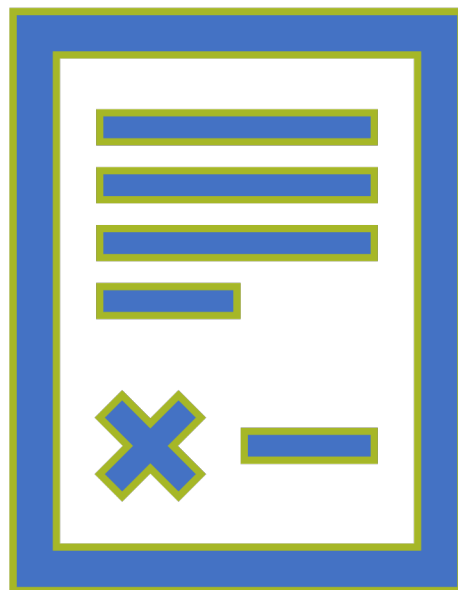
DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN?

It's been considered a human right in Europe since Google was successfully sued in 2014; recognized by various courts since 1995.

In the US, it's considered a contravention of the freedom of speech provision.

It was first upheld as a right in India in 2017.

We don't have a legal right to be forgotten in Canada.

DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO COMPLAIN?

… check your Terms of Service agreement, first.

AND WHAT ABOUT…

… facial recognition surveillance technology.

… vaccine passports.

… a fitness tracker that your employers encourages you to wear.

… dashboard cameras to lower your insurance rates.

WHAT IS DISASTER CAPITALISM?

Term coined by Naomi Klein; see *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007).

Refers to the practice in developed nations of exploiting moments of crisis to change policies, typically to reinforce a neoliberal approach to "free" markets and austerity spending, but also totalitarian social policy.

The idea is that massive and advantageous-to-the-ruling-classes changes can be made while citizens are too distracted by or absorbed with crisis to resist meaningfully.

Consider how September 11 and the so-called War on Terror were used to justify sweeping government surveillance efforts.

- We are seeing increased use of many tools in education, particularly those related to surveillance. *There is very little teaching and learning research in support of these practices*, like:

  - Requiring cameras to be on during videoconferencing.

  - Turnitin and other plagiarism checkers.

  - Behaviour tracking tools like Microsoft Teams, learning analytics in Moodle, etc.

  - Virtual proctoring services (ProctorU, Proctorio).

THE RISE OF EDTECH IN COVID-19

LEARNING ANALYTICS

- Learning analytics refers to the process of collecting and measuring data about how you learn. The stated goal is usually to "optimize learning."

- Even very simple analytics tools – like the ones in Moodle – allow faculty to see who clicks on what when within the course.

- More "sophisticated" tools, like the Microsoft for Education suite, don't just report data, but draw conclusions about your "habits." For example, they might let your instructor know that you always write your papers between 2 am and 6 am on the due date.

- Your instructor has no right to this information.

E-PROCTORING

- "Virtual proctoring" services allow you to take proctored exams at home, using your webcam. Either a real person or an AI service watches you take your exams.

- This process usually includes a "room scan," where you use your webcam to "prove" your room is a suitable place to write an exam.

- These videos are made available to your instructor to review afterwards to make judgements about your exam experience.

- What private information might a room scan include?

- Again, your instructor has no right to this information.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

- Good news: you actually happen to attend a university that has traditionally protected your data very carefully (and employs loud weirdos like me).

- Bad news: I don't win every fight.

- So what does that mean for you?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

+ Opt out of services you aren't using; delete apps from your phone.

🔒 Ask about how your data is being stored and ask about what the intention is for its use in the future, including after you leave the service.

🖊 Purge your data where you can, when you can.

✊ Band together: use your student union to build a larger resistance.

QUESTIONS?

Or follow up with me later:

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