



Big tech vs. 7.5 billion Earthlings

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

If you are an owner or director of Google, Facebook, Amazon or any other large tech company, this column is not for you. This column is for the 327 million Americans and 7.5 billion Earthlings who are having their personal data turned into mind-boggling wealth and power for a small group of people.

This column is for those of us who are seeing our political process being subverted, our privacy laws being violated, our local businesses failing because they can't compete on an unfair playing field, our desire to communicate with friends being used to manipulate us into buying unnecessary things and a more anxious and polarized community.

The tech companies have proven repeatedly, beyond a reasonable doubt, that they are not trustworthy, that they are ruthless, that they violate agreements and that they are greedy. Since past behavior is good indication of future behavior, we should protect ourselves.

But what can we do?

The tech companies provide many wonderful services and easy access to tons of information. No one is proposing getting rid of them. But how do we change the balance of power?

In medicine, there is a maxim that doctors cannot recognize something that they do not know. If they do not know about malaria or AIDS, they will not recognize the symptoms in their patients. The same is true for society. We cannot recognize what we do not understand. And much of how the tech companies have been changing both our society and ourselves has been happening without our knowledge, and often without our consent.

To rein in the tech companies, we first need to understand what they are doing. Like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which provided the intellectual framework to launch the environmental movement, Shoshana Zuboff's brilliant new book *The*

Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power provides a similar intellectual framework from which to launch a tech regulation movement.

In 525 pages of insight, Zuboff makes the case that what she calls surveillance capitalism as practiced by Google, Facebook and other big tech companies is radically different than previous forms of capitalism.

Why?

First, knowledge imbalance. The big tech companies know so much about us and we know so little about them. They know our fears, our friends, how long we sleep and when we ovulate, and they use that information for their benefit.

Second, unlike the industrial capitalism exemplified by companies such as General Motors, which tended to provide a higher standard of living for industrialized society, surveillance capitalism is having the opposite result. There is an obvious correlation between the ever-increasing income inequality in America and the fact that three recently created companies—Google, Facebook, and Amazon—have a combined net worth of more than \$2 trillion.

And finally, Zuboff reveals how these incredibly powerful, incredibly rich surveillance capitalists have a “radical indifference” to the impact their organizations are having. If it makes them money, they show no concern for the results: an increasingly polarized society, users who suffer from increased depression and anxiety, the decline of local businesses and news organizations.

Clearly something has to be done. We should start by understanding the problem. It is the 7.5 billion of us who will have to suffer the consequences. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.

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