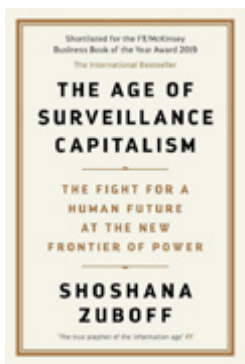


CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

Program on Surveillance Capitalism and Epistemic Agency

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At the dawn of the digital age, in the late 1940s, George Orwell published his harrowing novel *1984*, drawing attention to the wide-ranging possibilities of surveillance that technological developments were increasingly making possible. For Orwell imaginable surveillance was largely analog in nature, involving cameras and microphones. It took decades for digital technologies to develop far enough to be deployed systematically for surveillance purposes. But ever since Google developed an exceedingly successful business model collecting surplus data from internet searches (around 2002), such surveillance has become a defining feature of our age. In fact, data collection has become so central to capitalist economies that it was apt for Shoshana Zuboff to coin the term “surveillance capitalism” for this whole stage of capitalism, which has generated amounts and concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power that are unprecedented in human history and show no sign of dwindling. Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* appeared in 2019, and is no less harrowing than Orwell’s work in terms of what it re-



veals about the use technological advances had been put to. The book also makes clear that our age offers utterly novel ways of knowing and being known, and thus utterly novel ways of unfolding and constraining epistemic agency (agency in the domain of knowledge). These themes have also been developed in Mathias Risse’s 2023 book *Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us*.

For several years now, one of the Carr Center’s flagship programs has been the Human Rights and Technology Program. Under leadership from the center’s director, Mathias Risse, this program brought together between 9 and 12 virtual fellows each year who did work on technology from a human-rights (or also more broadly, from an ethics) standpoint, and has included the webinar series *Towards Life 3.0: Ethics and Technology* as well as a number of conferences and convenings. For the Academic Year 2024/25, we plan to move this program away from its rather general orientation towards a more specific focus on some of the essential challenges of our time, on which the Carr Center can muster exceptional expertise and for which it is therefore the ideal home. At its core, the Human Rights and Technology Program during that year would be transformed into the Program on Surveillance Capitalism and Epistemic Agency. This would mean that a substantial number of our fellows who come under the umbrella of Human Rights and Technology (though not necessarily all) should work on projects in that program, and that the communications and convening ac-

tivities of that program would focus on it. The projects would be oriented around Zuboff's and Risse's work but bring in researchers who develop these themes in their own ways.

Zuboff's work offers a comprehensive analysis of capitalist economies in the 21st century, whose key business model involves large-scale extraction of human data from day-to-day use of widely-used networked devices and platforms, from laptops and cell phones to social media interfaces, GPS systems and household aids. Such data collection amounts to a wholesale commodification of our daily lives. Communication, movement, domestic habits, sleep patterns, and physical conditions can all be tracked. Inferences can be drawn about both individual lives and social trends, with the goal being complete predictability for purposes of targeted commercial activities, including the across-the-board design of future economic and social patterns. The mechanisms of such data collection remain largely opaque to us and effectively occur as by-products of the ostensible use of the device or platform.

Zuboff's work is both conceptually rich and practically enormously significant. Her work offers characterizations of the nature of the current crisis, as well as plenty of ideas for conceptualizing the protections that individuals need from efforts to commercialize their lives and that democratic institutions need from becoming mere epiphenomena of corporate power. Her work opens our eyes to the limitations of human possibilities, individually and collectively, in light of these overbearing corporate interests—and challenges us to find ways out of this trap of commercial dependencies. Much is at stake when the design of our informational environment and thereby effectively the design of the human future is left to the highest bidder, and the subtitle of Zuboff's book captures it well: we are involved in a "fight for a human future at the new frontier of power." It is no exaggeration to say the Enlightenment ideal of personhood itself (and anything associated with it) is at stake. Democracy stands to lose out as a model of governance against newly sophisticated



versions of autocratic governance: such governance has enhanced its effectiveness through surveillance, whereas democracy is undermined thereby (think of the near-collapse of the information environment in the United States and other places and the possibilities of targeted advertisements to influence elections, an especially worrisome perspective vis-à-vis the American presidential election of 2024, but also much beyond). The rapidly developing possibilities of Artificial Intelligence are merely feeding into the underlying structure of surveillance capitalism and will likely only enhance this unprecedented concentration of wealth, knowledge, and power. And the more internet use increases across Asia, South America, and Africa, the more these issues become pertinent there as well. The

EU has already passed important regulation in this domain, but the EU is not likely to be the place where cutting-edge developments in the IT domain will be scaled.

Risse's *Political Theory of the Digital Age* establishes a foundation for the philosophy of technology, allowing us to investigate how the digital century might alter our most basic political practices and ideas (in ways that already establish important synergies with Zuboff's work). Risse engages major concepts in political philosophy and extends them to account for problems that arise in digital lifeworlds including AI and democracy, synthetic media and surveillance capitalism and how AI might alter our thinking about the meaning of life. *Political Theory of the Digital Age* offers a systemic way of evaluating the effect of AI, allowing us to anticipate and understand how technological developments impact our political lives. The book locates the digital age in the sweep of human history and explores how the arrival of AI engages with long-standing philosophical debates in domains ranging from democracy, distributive justice, human rights, and meaning of life. Risse devotes several chapters to an account of epistemic rights under the general umbrella of human rights. Surveillance capitalism is an important background theme in the book.

The Program on Surveillance Capitalism and Epistemic Agency would use these two works as their starting point, though inevitably Zuboff's work would command pride of place because of its substantially larger reception around the world. The program would do the following:

(1) We would bring in several fellows from various academic disciplines who work on themes around surveillance capitalism and epistemic agency. Most of them would be virtual, but some of them would be in residence. These would be the bulk of the fellows in the Human Rights and Technology Program, but not necessarily all. The fellows in the Program on Surveillance Capitalism and Epistemic Agency would work on both research projects and strategies and methods of educating the broader public about changes in this domain.

(2) We would develop a communications strategy around the work of these fellows that might include podcasts, webinars, papers, and other ways of reaching both researchers and the general public.

(3) There will be an accompanying student group drawing on the various Harvard schools (and beyond), thinking of these students as especially important fellow-travelers in these efforts who could be highly effective multipliers of these ideas in their future endeavors.

(4) In 2024, it will be five years since the publication of Zuboff's landmark work. We intend to mark this occasion with a two-day conference assessing both what we have learned about surveillance capitalism since then and what the practical possibilities are for opposing and overcoming it. (Tentative title: Surveillance Capitalism—Quo Vadis?). This two-day conference envisaged for September of 2024 will feature a keynote by Shoshana Zuboff and bring together politicians, activists, and academics to take stock of surveillance capitalism and the political possibilities of moving our democracies away from the dominance of commercial interests enabled by massive data collection. The location will be the Harvard Kennedy School. We aim for a highly visible event since the goal is to generate as much additional inquiry and political engagement around these matters as possible. The speakers will be chosen accordingly, and a careful and comprehensive communications strategy will also be developed around this event to make the material as broadly and effectively available as possible.

Principal Investigator for this program would be Mathias Risse, and Shoshana Zuboff will be involved throughout. Depending on how this work will unfold, it is possible to develop the Program on Surveillance Capitalism and Epistemic Agency into a multi-year activity.