



*Think With Google.*  
*Foucauldian Challenges to Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism*

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**Abstract:** Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* has done a great deal to conceptualise and raise awareness about the surveillance practices of Facebook, Google and other corporations. However, three of Zuboff's central claims, at closer inspection, provide only partly adequate groundwork for tackling surveillance capitalist power. The thesis that surveillance capitalists can have "perfect" knowledge of users, firstly, seems to miss the point that the power gained over users by *presenting* knowledge over them as being "true" is independent of accuracy. Secondly, the claim that surveillance capitalists "author" our futures through purely "behaviouralist" means of control is not supported by an empirical analysis of how the digital corporations seek to establish an emotional connection with users. Thirdly, Zuboff's suggestions that sanctuary from online social pressure is sufficient for individuals to gain autonomy from surveillance capitalism's power neglects the fact that dominant social and cultural rationalities influence the way we conceive of ourselves even without direct observation.

As a remedy to these shortcomings, this article posits two Foucauldian demands to build on Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism. Firstly, the discursive construction of surveillance capitalists' knowledge as such must be called into question. This allows us to critique the power-knowledge of surveillance capitalism without being lulled into a sense of security by the inaccuracies of surveillance capitalist knowledge. It notes that the production of "truth" induces effects of power, and, that these power effects can be challenged through questioning the discursive production of truth. Secondly, behaviouralist techniques and panopticon-like social pressure should not be regarded as the only means of power wielded by surveillance capitalists. A Foucauldian perspective highlights that inducing increasing swathes of humanity to "Think With Google" grants surveillance capitalists power over how we construe ourselves and our relations with others.

[**Keywords:** surveillance capitalism; Foucault; power-knowledge; governmentality; technologies of the self]



## 1. Introduction

Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* provides deep insight into the huge-scale, profit-driven, surveillance operations carried out by Silicon Valley firms such as Google and Facebook. The book and its author seem set to become central figures in contemporary understanding, within both academic and public spheres, of the surveillance activities of the world's most valuable corporations. Like Leonardo Marchettoni and other reviewers of *Surveillance Capitalism*, this article is critical of the lack of consideration Zuboff grants to other prominent conceptualisations of contemporary capitalist surveillance<sup>1</sup>. In particular, given that his work is considered "preeminent" in the field of surveillance studies, it is surprising that Michel Foucault is not mentioned once in Zuboff's tome<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, this article asks in which ways Foucauldian, post-structuralist analyses of power-relations are congruent, or are in tension, with Zuboff's analysis of "Surveillance Capitalism". Foucauldian concepts – such as power-knowledge, governmentality, and technologies of self –, as well as contemporary insight on capitalist surveillance, are employed in this article to challenge and build on Zuboff's problematisation and analysis of contemporary ICT-based power relations.

Section 2 of the article will briefly summarise Zuboff's conceptualisation of the economic logic and order of surveillance capitalism. The subsequent sections employ Foucauldian concepts to challenge and build on Zuboff's arguments about the ways in which surveillance capitalism poses a threat to society and humanity in general. Each section will focus on one of the three elements which Zuboff posits are particularly at

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<sup>1</sup> L. Marchettoni, "The Unfolding of Reality in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism", *Jura Gentium*, XVI (2019), 2, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> G. Elmer, "Panopticon-discipline-control", in K. Ball, D. Lyon, K. D. Haggerty (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, Oxford-New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 21.



stake under surveillance capitalism: the “division of learning” in society, the “right to the future tense”, and the “right to sanctuary”<sup>3</sup>.

Zuboff posits that the “division of learning” in contemporary society is dangerously dominated by surveillance capitalists. *They* know a great deal about us, whilst we know little about them. *They* decide what is learned and how knowledge is used. *They* have the authority to share or withhold knowledge<sup>4</sup>. A Foucauldian notion of power-knowledge, whilst also problematising the distribution of knowledge, demands greater depth of analysis in asking also how knowledge is constructed as “true” in the first instance.

The “right to the future tense” – whereby people determine their own futures through making promises – is characterised by Zuboff as threatened by surveillance capitalism. In contemporary neoliberal societies, however, surveillance capitalism’s services can be coherently understood, despite Zuboff’s claims, as favourable for self-determination and freedom. Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” is particularly useful to undermine arguments supporting surveillance capitalistic freedom. Governmentality allows us to examine how individual subjects are “made-up” through technologies of government, not least “translation”, such that they can bear “regulated freedom”<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, Zuboff argues that the increase in social pressure induced in young people through surveillance capitalist social media represents a threat to the human “right to sanctuary”. Whilst Foucault’s best-known concept, the “panopticon”, also emphasises how constant observation of the individual contravenes individual freedom, a Foucauldian perspective cannot accept Zuboff’s notion of “sanctuary” as sufficient for meaningful freedom. Rather, this article emphasises that, through “practices of self” and “inscription”, surveillance capitalists exert power over the individual even without the mechanism of direct social observation. These mechanisms of power must also be recognised and subverted in the struggle for liberation from surveillance capitalist power.

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<sup>3</sup> Sh. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York, Public Affairs, 2019, p. 521.

<sup>4</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> N. Rose, P. Miller, “Political power beyond the state: Problematics of government”, *British Journal of Sociology*, (1992), p. 174.



*Surveillance Capitalism* represents a compelling call for resistance to the power wielded by Google, Facebook, and an increasing number of other companies which operate the same business model. Nonetheless, a Foucauldian perspective should not be overlooked if the power of surveillance capitalism is to be effectively understood and challenged. In prompting the questions: how do surveillance capitalists come to be seen as possessors of true knowledge? and: how does surveillance capitalism influence the way we understand ourselves, others, and our roles in the world? a Foucauldian approach adds valuable insight into contemporary debates about the expansion of surveillant, technological capitalism.

## 2. Surveillance Capitalism – What Is It? What’s the Problem?

Few have done more than Zuboff to conceptualise and raise awareness about the surveillant practices of companies such as Facebook, Google, and others. More than a business model, Zuboff emphasises that “surveillance capitalism” is “a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales”<sup>6</sup>.

Zuboff outlines two “imperatives” which drive the capitalist actors in this new economic order. The “extraction imperative” drives companies to seek more information about users, whilst the “prediction imperative” leads firms to use data accumulated through the extraction imperative such that what people might want, do, or be, can be predicted, and even modified, ever more accurately. The extractive and predictive capacities acquired by surveillance capitalist corporations have allowed them to generate immense revenues, such that Google and Facebook are amongst the most valuable corporations in the world based almost entirely on surveillance practices<sup>7</sup>. These revenues come primarily via targeted advertising, as well as other surveillance services like credit ratings, employee vetting, or inclusion of locations in platforms like Pokémon Go.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p.i.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.



The very profitability and wide spread of surveillance capitalism has been sufficient to draw significant public and academic concern. Nonetheless, prominent surveillance studies scholar David Lyon noted in 2018 that there does not yet exist an adequate ethical “vocabulary” to problematise and challenge surveillance capitalist practices<sup>8</sup>. To ethically tackle the intensification of the power of surveillance capitalism, Zuboff outlines three key battlegrounds which will be the focus of this article. Firstly, surveillance capitalism has resulted in a pathological “division of learning” in society which must be re-adjusted. Secondly, the “elemental right” to the future tense has been seized by surveillance capitalists, and must be seized back by individuals and society<sup>9</sup>. Thirdly, the “elemental right” to sanctuary is increasingly denied to young people in the interests of surveillance capitalists, and must be granted once more. The subsequent sections will outline Zuboff’s arguments on each of these three issues, before employing Foucauldian concepts to, firstly, highlight weaknesses in Zuboff’s concepts and, secondly, suggest a modified “vocabulary” for challenging surveillance capitalism.

### 3. “Division of Learning” and “Power-Knowledge”

#### *a) The Division of Learning*

The first concept which Zuboff proposes to capture the pathologies of surveillance capitalism is the “division of learning.” She introduces the reader to the “division of learning” with three questions. Asking “who knows?” means an examination of the distribution of knowledge and questioning who has the opportunity to learn. Asking “who decides?” makes us question which authority decides who learns, what can be learned, and how knowledge can be used. Finally, “Who decides who decides?” refers to the power which undergirds the “authority to share or withhold knowledge”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> B. Kaplan, “Queen’s Surveillance Studies Centre – David Lyon, David Murakami, Midori Ogasawara”, Audio Podcast Episode, in *Blind date with knowledge*, 2018-10-31, <https://podcast.cfr.ca/2018/10/queens-surveillance-studies-centre-david-lyon-david-murakami-midori-ogasawara/>, accessed 03 September 2020.

<sup>9</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 180.



Zuboff finds that the answers to these questions under surveillance capitalism indicate a “pathological” division of learning. Whilst surveillance capitalists *know* a great deal about “us” through the means of behavioural data extraction and analysis, “we” know very little about them as they keep their operations as secretive as possible. Surveillance capitalists *decide* what they learn – through the “dispossession cycle” surveillance capitalists bypass public debate and scrutiny of their data extraction<sup>11</sup>. They also decide that what they learn should be used for their own profits. Finally, the “competitive struggle among surveillance capitalists” decides that the most powerful surveillance capitalist companies can decide what data are extracted and how it is used<sup>12</sup>. Zuboff argues that surveillance capital’s domination of the contemporary division of learning has culminated in surveillance capitalists amassing an “unprecedented concentration” of knowledge. As this knowledge concentration forms the foundation for surveillance capitalists’ behavioural prediction and modification capabilities, Zuboff emphasises that the division of learning also “produces an equally unprecedented concentration of power”<sup>13</sup>.

Zuboff’s problematisation of the hijacking of the “division of learning” by surveillance capitalism is somewhat congruent with the Foucauldian notion of power-knowledge. Foucault outlines the interrelations between power and knowledge through what he terms the “rule of immanence”<sup>14</sup>. Hereby, power and knowledge exist in a relationship of mutual reinforcement and support. On the one hand, power tactics and ideological interests guide the direction of the “will to knowledge”. On the other hand, techniques of knowledge are necessary for power to be able to target, and exert control over, certain aspects of the world<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, Zuboff’s notion of the division of learning explains how authority and power determine what is learned, by whom, and in whose

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> M. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality* (1976), vol. 1, London, New York, Camberwell, Australia, Toronto, New Delhi, Auckland, New Zealand, Rosebank, South Africa, Penguin Group, 1998, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



interests, whilst she also emphasises that the unjust concentration of knowledge in the hands of surveillance capitalists is necessary for the unjust exertion of power over users.

*b) Perfect or Imperfect Knowledge*

Although Zuboff's emphasis of the interdependency between power and knowledge in surveillance capitalism converges with a Foucauldian approach, her understanding of power and knowledge nevertheless differs from a post-structuralist conception. This becomes particularly clear where she discusses the nature of surveillance capital's knowledge. For example, she argues that analysed behavioural data "says more about us than we can know about ourselves"<sup>16</sup>. She also fears that if surveillance capitalist trends continue then we will live in a world where "our freedom is forfeit to perfect knowledge"<sup>17</sup>.

Such usage of the concept of knowledge has left Zuboff open to critique. Indeed, John Thornhill emphasised on a radio show on which he appeared alongside Zuboff, that, because people are "gloriously unpredictable [...] it's quite hard for algorithms really to know what we're going to do"<sup>18</sup>. Ico Maly's review of *Surveillance Capitalism*, meanwhile, is critical of Zuboff's "reproduction" of the myth that surveillance capitalist algorithms produce neutral and accurate predictions about the world. Like Thornhill, and probably many others who experience irrelevant ads daily, he argues that, instead of producing "perfect knowledge", surveillance capitalism "produces rather linear and crippled behavioural scripts"<sup>19</sup>.

If we agree, following Maly, that surveillance capitalism's current "knowledge" does not approach "perfection", Zuboff's problematisation of the division of learning in surveillance capitalism faces a significant obstacle. Zuboff's conception of the power of

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<sup>16</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>18</sup> A. Marr, "Who is watching you?", audio podcast episode, K. Hickman [producer], *Start The Week*, 04/02/2019, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002b81>, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>19</sup> I. Maly, "Review of the book *The age of surveillance capitalism*, S. Zuboff, 2019", *Diggit Magazine*, (2019), available at <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/book-reviews/age-surveillance>, accessed 15 August 2020.



surveillance capitalism depends on surveillance capitalists having accurate knowledge of the user, and subsequently using this accurate knowledge to influence and predict the users' future behaviour. Within Zuboff's theoretical framework, then, if we call the accuracy of the knowledge of surveillance capitalists into question, we also call into question the extent to which surveillance capitalists can exert real power. Zuboff's conceptualisation of the division of learning, thus, does not provide adequate tools to compellingly problematise surveillance capitalist power-knowledge

*c) The Production and Extension of Truth*

A Foucauldian conception of knowledge and truth can serve to problematise surveillance capitalism's concentration of power-knowledge whilst maintaining that surveillance capitalism need not yet approach "perfect knowledge" in order to be considered menacing. A Foucauldian understanding of power, truth and knowledge denies Zuboff's positivistic conception of truth, whereby surveillance capitalists can know more about users than users know about themselves. Within Foucault's conceptualisation, truth and knowledge are related to power more deeply than within Zuboff's framework. Foucault states, specifically, on the one hand, that "systems of power" "produce and sustain" truth, and, on the other hand, that "effects of power" are "induced by and extend" truth<sup>20</sup>.

In other words, if truth is produced by systems of power, and this truth also induces effects of power, then the "accuracy" of a certain "true" statement loses a degree of importance. Hereby, if an actor within a system of power relations successfully asserts that a particular statement is true, then it imbues itself with a certain power to influence the subject of that statement, regardless of whether the statement corresponds accurately to its subject or not. Furthermore, power also implies the capacity to extend truth, to make entities in the world comply with a particular conceptualisation of them. These Foucauldian insights into the "production of truth" and "inducement of power", and the

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<sup>20</sup> M. Foucault, "Truth and power", in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon, 1984, p. 74.





“extension of truth”, help to compellingly problematise surveillance capitalist power-knowledge.

i) Production of truth, inducement of power

Foucault’s assertion that truth – once “produced” as such “induces” effects of power, is as valid for contemporary surveillance societies as it was for the systems of truth and power he studied. Maria Los’ illustration of the notion of the “data double” provides a demonstration of the problem of constituting knowledge produced through data surveillance as “true”<sup>21</sup>. Los encountered her “data double” when she fell down a poorly covered manhole, sued the town authority for damages, and was forced to grant the town’s lawyers access to databased personal information about her from up to 10 years prior to the accident. The “data double” comprised medical records, files from employers, bank and insurance records and pharmacy print-outs, and was used to corroborate the legitimacy of her damage claim. Despite the quantity of information collected, Los was “startled” to find that the data double in several respects erroneously represented her real history. Most concerning of all, because of the “ramified nature” of the networks from which data are extracted, “it appears practically impossible to correct erroneous or twisted information”. Despite its inaccuracies and inflexibility, the “data double” remained crucial for the corroboration of Los’ damage claim<sup>22</sup>.

Los’ data double represents an extreme example of what Zuboff terms “surveillance as a service”, whereby surveillance capitalists compile and analyse data about individuals to help employers or landlords, for example, make judgements about who to employ or accept as a tenant<sup>23</sup>. In Los’ example it becomes clear that “surveillance as a service” does not rely on surveillance capitalists possessing a concentration of accurate knowledge, as Zuboff would suggest. Rather, the example indicates that surveillance capitalism relies on *constructing* its knowledge as true for the maintenance

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<sup>21</sup> M. Los, “Looking into the future: Surveillance, globalization and the totalitarian potential”, in D. Lyon (ed.), *Theorizing Surveillance: The panopticon and beyond*, New York-London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 69-94.

<sup>22</sup> M. Los, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>23</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 172.



of this part of its revenue stream. Accordingly, the *problem* of power-knowledge in the data double example is not, as Zuboff argues, that surveillance imbues certain actors with a concentration of accurate knowledge which they can use to influence other actors. Rather, the constitution of certain forms of knowledge – in this case data surveillance – as almost unquestionably true imbues the possessor of such knowledge with power over the subject of its knowledge (e.g. the power to grant, or not grant, damages) regardless of whether the “knowledge” is “accurate” or not.

Challenging the power-knowledge of surveillance capitalism, therefore, cannot rely simply on the demand that surveillance capitalists should know less, as Zuboff suggests, but necessarily involves disputing the discourses according to which surveillance capitalist knowledge is held to be unquestionably true. Los argues that heightened awareness in the post-modern era of the ethno-centrism and stereotypes which characterise subjective judgements has created a “cognitive vacuum” in which moral supports for conventional “shared meanings” and “intuition” have been removed<sup>24</sup>. In this environment, it is easy for authorities to construe a purportedly objective “data double” as “more real than the person behind it”<sup>25</sup>. Zuboff, meanwhile, cites Skinnerian, radical behaviouralism and the more recent discipline of “social physics” supported by MIT Professor, Alex Pentland, as important discourses supporting the philosophies of surveillance capitalists<sup>26</sup>. Disputing such discourses, and overcoming the “cognitive vacuum” cited by Los, represent important first steps in challenging the power-knowledge of surveillance capitalists.

## ii) Extension of truth

As well as the production of truth and inducement of power, Foucault’s explanation of the interdependencies of power-knowledge also refers to the capacity to “extend” truth – which refers to the power to make reality correspond with a particular conception of the world. Sections 4 and 5 will focus on how surveillance capitalists seek to bring people’s conceptions of corporations, other people, and themselves, into line with

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<sup>24</sup> M. Los, *op. cit.*, p. 86

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 353, p. 430.



an understanding which benefits surveillance capitalists. It will be shown how techniques of “translation” and “inscription” are vital for inducing individuals to conceive of the world in neoliberal or consumerist ways, which then causes them to act in ways conducive to capitalist profits, and brings a neoliberal conception of the world into reality. Here, it suffices to emphasise that, when problematising the “power-knowledge” of surveillance capitalism, its concentration of accurate knowledge should not be the only area of concern. The ways in which certain truths come to be “extended” must also be examined.

#### *d) Challenging Surveillance Capitalist Power-Knowledge*

This section discussed Zuboff’s problematisation of the concentration of division of learning in the hands of surveillance capitalists and argued that a Foucauldian perspective can provide a more thorough problematisation of the “power-knowledge” of surveillance capitalists. Unlike Zuboff’s conceptualisation, a post-structuralist critique of surveillance capitalist power-knowledge need not rely solely on the highly questionable assumption that surveillance capitalists can discover and use perfectly accurate knowledge about its users. Rather, from a Foucauldian understanding of power-knowledge, two additional strands of critique of surveillance capitalist knowledge emerge. Firstly, as illustrated by the data double, the production of certain knowledge as “true” induces effects of power even if that knowledge is “inaccurate” from the perspective of the subject of the knowledge. To challenge the power-knowledge of surveillance capitalists, therefore, we must question the discursive construction of surveillance capitalists’ (often inaccurate) “knowledge” as scientific and true. Secondly, the exertion of power involves the extension of truth: turning a certain understanding of the world into reality. Ways in which surveillance capitalists “extend truth” will be explored in sections 4 and 5.

## 4. Right to the Future Tense, Instrumentarian or Governmental Power, and Translation

### *a) The Right to the Future Tense*



In an attempt to capture the way in which surveillance capitalism denies freedom, Zuboff posits that surveillance capitalism has seized humans' "right to the future tense". The right to the future tense expresses that a central aspect of human freedom is the capacity for humans to determine their own futures. The act of making, and keeping, a promise is particularly illustrative of such self-determination for Zuboff. Indeed, the process of writing *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, having promised to do so, leads her to state: "I have no doubt that I am free. I can promise to create a future, and I can keep my promise"<sup>27</sup>. Whilst Zuboff emphasises that the right to the future tense does not imply "total authority over the future," as random events will inevitably interfere, she nonetheless claims the right to determine at least "my piece" of the future<sup>28</sup>.

If the right to determine one's own future is a "condition for a fully human life", then Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism presents an unparalleled threat to this right<sup>29</sup>. Zuboff asserts that their concentration of the means of behavioural prediction and modification bestows upon surveillance capitalists the power to "author" our futures to such a degree that they have "usurped" humans' right to the future tense<sup>30</sup>. She posits that surveillance capitalism's ever-increasing capacity to predict and modify what individuals and groups will do, allows them to ever-more precisely influence others' futures in accordance with their own interests.

Although Zuboff's emphasis of surveillance capitalism's ability to "author" users' futures arguably echoes Foucault's notion of biopower<sup>31</sup>, the differences between Zuboff's and a Foucauldian perspective are significant here. The mechanisms by which Zuboff interprets surveillance capitalism as depriving humans of the "right to the future tense" – according to the logic of "instrumentarian power" and "radical indifference" – are removed from Foucauldian conceptions of the functioning of power.

#### *b) Instrumentarian, Radically Indifferent Power*

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<sup>27</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 353, p. 329.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>31</sup> M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, cit., p. 138.



Zuboff emphasises throughout *Surveillance Capitalism* that the means according to which surveillance capitalism operates are distinct from methods of power pursued before. To capture this uniqueness, Zuboff proposes the concept of “instrumentarian power”. Instrumentarianism is defined as the “instrumentation and instrumentalization of behaviour for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetisation, and control”<sup>32</sup>.

Zuboff is particularly keen to differentiate the instrumentarian power of surveillance capitalists from totalitarian power and, in doing so, clarifies the logic of instrumentarianism. Whereas totalitarian power relied on the “engineering of souls” through “mass submission to social norms”, instrumentarian power relies on the “engineering of behaviour”, and therefore does not function through norms<sup>33</sup>. Rather, the engineering of behaviour conducted by surveillance capitalists is “radically indifferent”.

According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalists are “radically indifferent” in that instrumentarian power “reduces human experience to observable behaviour while remaining steadfastly indifferent to the meaning of that experience”<sup>34</sup>. This implies, firstly, that surveillance capitalists are indifferent to subjective meanings as an end – they are indifferent to what users value as long as they can continue to profit from predicting and modifying users’ behaviour. Radical indifference also implies, however, that surveillance capitalists’ wielding of power does not employ norms and intersubjective meanings in order to function, but requires only “indifferent” behaviouralist techniques such as reinforcement or nudging. Zuboff conceives of surveillance capitalists as the “indifferent authors” of our futures, then, because their possession of the means of behavioural analysis, prediction and modification allow them to continually modify what we do – in particular our consumption – through purely Skinnerian, behaviouralist methods, in accordance with their own, rather than our own, interests.

Reviewers often seem to uncritically accept Zuboff’s position that surveillance capitalists can control humans’ actions to an immense degree through purely behaviouralist techniques<sup>35</sup>. This article pushes back against this acceptance; the

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<sup>32</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376, p. 379.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>35</sup> For example, L. Marchettoni, *op. cit.*, p. 132.



subsequent paragraphs critique Zuboff's conception of radically indifferent, instrumentarian power, and indicate how a Foucauldian account may overcome the drawbacks of Zuboff's approach.

*c) Instrumentarian Power and Autonomy*

The central shortcoming of Zuboff's conceptualisation and problematisation of radically indifferent, instrumentarian power is her failure to make clear how surveillance capitalists' ability to modify behaviour precludes human agency. Zuboff seems to suppose that the very capacity of surveillance capitalists to modify behaviour per se implies that users are deprived of the capacity to make promises and to find ways of keeping them. Yet, this is a far from obvious supposition. Though techniques like nudging and herding surely do impinge on users' agency, individuals' ability to make and keep promises is to a great extent maintained despite the use of such techniques. It should be noted that free cloud services such as Google Drive offered by surveillance capitalists do much to minimise the influence of random "Acts of God" which can get in the way of individuals' ability to keep their promises. Indeed, Zuboff would have finished her book far sooner had she backed-up her work on the cloud, rather than losing the entirety of her notes when her house caught fire<sup>36</sup>.

If Zuboff does not make clear why individual self-determination is so gravely threatened by the instrumentarian power of surveillance capitalism, then there is little reason to assume that surveillance capitalism will be significantly reined in. This is especially the case in neoliberal societies whose notions of freedom highlight the benefits, and downplay the threats, of surveillance capitalism for self-determination. The autonomy-endowed, entrepreneurial individual, who pursues preferences with the aid of incessant calculations and lies at the centre of neoliberal ethical claims, is hardly threatened by the power of surveillance capitalism<sup>37</sup>. Whilst nudging is unlikely to distract the neoliberal individual from their preferences, the array of affordable, informed,

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<sup>36</sup> See A. Marr, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> See N. Rose, P. Miller, *op. cit.*



consumption options provided by surveillance capitalists represent a positive boon for neoliberal self-determination.

Although Zuboff is surely right that efforts to herd and nudge by Facebook and Google impinge on users' agency, her claim that herding and nudging allow surveillance capitalists to "author" human futures is overstated, and is especially unlikely to convince in neoliberal societies. The Foucauldian notion of subjectification, outlined below, provides an alternative approach for understanding and problematising surveillance capitalist power. From the perspective of subjectification, the extent to which surveillance capitalist power can be indiscriminately characterised as "radically indifferent" is called into question. Nonetheless, this Foucauldian approach bolsters Zuboff's claim that surveillance capitalists have the capacity to author our futures.

#### *d) Subjectification through Technologies of Government*

In response to Foucault's recognition that the "sovereign" model of power was no longer useful to understand contemporary power relations, Rose and Miller state that power "is not so much a matter of imposing restraints upon citizens as of "making up" citizens capable of bearing a kind of regulated freedom"<sup>38</sup>. In doing so they posit an unconventional answer to the question of how humans are turned in to "subjects" – placed in a relation of "control and dependence"<sup>39</sup>. The authors do not seek to establish that "the subject's" nearly every move can be controlled by those wielding power through behaviouralist mechanisms. Rather, Rose and Miller posit that "governmental power" seeks to "create [...] entities and persons able to operate a regulated autonomy"<sup>40</sup>. Rose and Miller argue that the formation of subjects – subjectification – implied by "governmentality" works through "technologies of government", of which "inscription" and "translation" are particularly noteworthy here. These technologies of government will now be summarised prior to an explanation of how surveillance capitalists deploy governmental, rather than purely instrumentarian, power.

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<sup>38</sup> N. Rose, P. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>39</sup> M. Foucault, "The subject and power", *Critical inquiry*, 8 (1982), 4, p. 781.

<sup>40</sup> N. Rose, P. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 173.



Borrowing conceptually from Latour, Rose and Miller explain that processes of “inscription” and “translation” are mechanisms which make government operable<sup>41</sup>. Translation is the process whereby one actor seeks to bring others’ understanding of a particular situation into line with its own understanding. Necessary for power to arise in an actor-network, translation is achieved through the construction of shared interests using “political discourses, persuasions, negotiations, and bargains”<sup>42</sup>. Rose and Miller cite “doctors and patients” as an example of successful translation. Hereby, the doctor can control what the patient does “at a distance” because the patient trusts that the doctor’s interests align with their own (improved health) and, thus, that following the doctor’s instructions will benefit them<sup>43</sup>.

Inscription, meanwhile, refers to means of producing “knowledge” about reality. Inscription – which makes reality “stable, mobile, comparable, combinable” – unavoidably reveals and constructs particular normative positions in relation to, and encourages particular “interventions” into, reality<sup>44</sup>. Rose and Miller emphasise, thus, that encouraging people to inscribe the world in certain ways is an important means of bringing people to understand their lives according to particular norms. The authors explain that “making people write things down and count them – register births, report incomes, fill in censuses” – incites individuals to calibrate and construe their lives according to particular ideals about “where they are” and “where they should be”<sup>45</sup>.

Rose and Miller emphasise that the technologies of translation and inscription are ingenious tools of governance because they allow authorities to exert power on individuals in pursuit of certain objectives, but without seeming to breach individuals’ freedom or self-determination. In fact, in reference to neoliberal government policies, Rose and Miller argue that translation and inscription often function “precisely by offering to maximise it [freedom] by turning blind habit into freedom to choose”<sup>46</sup>. This article will show that, like national governments, surveillance capitalists employ

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*





“technologies of government” to create subjects who are taught to embrace certain freedoms, such that they are “governed through their freedom to choose”<sup>47</sup>. Examples of ways in which surveillance capitalism employs translation, rather than solely Zuboffian instrumentarian power, will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, whilst inscription in surveillance capitalism will be discussed in section 5.

*e) Think With Google – Translating Capitalism*

Some ways in which corporations use translation to align people’s interests with their own through surveillance capitalist means are discussed in the “Think With Google Podcast” The podcast, produced by a branch of Google which researches how marketing can be improved using Google’s resources, aims to inform marketers how they can “think with Google” in order to improve their brands’ marketing<sup>48</sup>. The podcast is especially interesting as it gives insight into how Google markets itself to its “real customers” – corporations seeking to sell products and services<sup>49</sup>. The podcast leads us to question the usefulness of observing Google’s capacity to influence consumers only through the lens of “radical indifference”.

Rather than emphasising behaviouralist techniques of power, the podcast consistently emphasises the ways in which Google represents a powerful tool for marketers to ever more effectively engage potential customers through the “stories” or “meanings” of their brands. Far from being “radically indifferent”, then, to the subjective meanings of users’ experience, as Zuboff claims, Google is deeply concerned with users’ subjective meanings. Indeed, the podcast reveals that Google is tirelessly seeking to “translate” its and other corporations’ meanings onto other actors for the sake of sales. The podcast elaborates several ways in which Google can help corporations translate their narratives onto potential customers for their own financial benefit.

Firstly, Google’s machine learning capacities allow it to help advertisers to tune their adverts (explaining which shots, music, etc. are most effective) such that viewers

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>48</sup> See <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/>, accessed 03 September 2020.

<sup>49</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 94.



are kept absorbed in the stories companies are trying to tell. Furthermore, Google's data about users can help advertisers appeal to particular individuals on the basis of their identities. Hereby, targeted advertising is no longer targeted only in the sense of showing users adverts which display products or services they are particularly likely to buy. Rather, targeting allows corporations to establish positive relations with a broader customer base by allowing marketers to target ethnically, sexually, or racially different campaigns for potentially very similar products towards different groups in a diverse society. Google also allows corporations to exploit users' passions – which are to some extent revealed by Google's data analytics. Marketing which gives the impression that the corporation/brand shares particular users' passion, it is argued, elicits a positive response and an increased likelihood that this passionate person becomes a loyal consumer<sup>50</sup>. Marketing campaigns using YouTube and other social media, which allow for highly effective enrolment of “genuine” brand promoters such as company employees or sports stars and other celebrities, represent a final means by which Google allows marketers to more effectively engage potential customers with brands' narratives<sup>51</sup>.

Google, then, offers marketers the opportunity to deeply engage with customers through providing more eye-catching ads, allowing the exploitation of users' passions and identities, and promoting use of social media platforms to establish more “genuine” interactions with brands. These techniques all centre on convincing customers that corporations share their interests and can be trusted. A patient's taking of prescribed medicine is reliant on the belief that doctors share their interests. Similarly, a customer's continued purchase of certain goods and services is reliant on marketers' ability to convince them that certain brands share the customer's interests, such that people feel that consuming certain brands of goods is in accordance with their own narratives and interests. The Think With Google Podcast, then, demonstrates that surveillance capitalism offers powerful new ways of ensuring that corporations can ever more convincingly situate its own interests in apparent accordance with ours. Far from being “radically

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<sup>50</sup> Think With Google, Gimlet Creative, *Think With Google Podcast*, audio podcast, 2020, available at [https://open.spotify.com/show/3WqnOQkFwDJyFf6ad1fB4?si=3U5-r6\\_SR2K1BBFxnmsy9Q](https://open.spotify.com/show/3WqnOQkFwDJyFf6ad1fB4?si=3U5-r6_SR2K1BBFxnmsy9Q), accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



indifferent” to users’ subjective meanings, surveillance capitalists are deeply interested in discovering our subjective meanings, and in helping corporations to compellingly translate their own purely financial interests into users’ terms.

*f) Friends, not Authors of our Futures*

In 1990 Deleuze observed that, whilst “marketing has become the soul of the corporation [...] we are taught that corporations have a soul”<sup>52</sup>. The Think With Google Podcast suggests that this observation is as true as ever. In fact, it seems corporations are no longer satisfied with convincing us that they have a soul. Google now helps to convince us that corporations are also our friends. They hold our attention, they respect our identities, they share our passions, they prove their authenticity by enrolling “genuine” representatives for their products. Given this, the most “terrifying”<sup>53</sup> threat posed by Google and other surveillance capitalist firms is not necessarily, as Zuboff asserts, the “authoring” of our lives using behaviourist techniques to predict and modify behaviours. Rather, whilst remaining wary of how our behaviours are “indifferently” nudged and herded towards corporations’ ends, we should fear capitalist surveillance in so far as it increases corporations’ ability to convince us that they are our friends. In order to resist surveillance capitalism’s power, we must first recognise how corporations turn us into subjects by translating their financial interests into our terms, for example, by exploiting our identities, passions and desire for genuine human enthusiasm. Having re-established that corporations are not our friends, we can more fundamentally question and dispute the assertion that the consumption offered by corporations represents legitimate means for us to achieve fulfilling lives. In doing so, we begin to deprive surveillance capitalism from being able to determine our futures for us.

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<sup>52</sup> G. Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October*, 59 (1992), pp. 3-7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



## 5. Right to Sanctuary, The Hand and Glove, and Technologies of Self and Inscription

### a) *The Hand and the Glove*

In Part Three of *Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff acknowledges that “radically indifferent” behavioural modification does not alone guarantee the power of surveillance capitalists. Placing particular emphasis on young people, she notes that social pressure (from peers in particular) is necessary to ensure that people continue to use surveillance capitalist platforms such that individuals’ data can be extracted and ads can be shown. Zuboff conceptualises how surveillance capitalism employs social pressure for its own benefit with the “Hand and Glove” model.

In this model, “the hand” represents psychological attributes which initially draw people to use social media. Zuboff highlights that, particularly in adolescence, individuals tend to think in terms like: “I am whatever others think of me, and how I feel is a function of how others treat me”. Young people, then, have an especially deep psychological need for recognition from others, whose approval represents “proof of life”. “The glove”, meanwhile, represents design practices on surveillance capitalist platforms which “ratchet” up the potency of these psychological attributes such that they transform from “tendencies” into an “unquenchable need”<sup>54</sup>.

Following this model, surveillance capitalist social media platforms, which fulfil individuals’ desire for social recognition and approval, also dramatically increase individuals’ need for social approval. Zuboff emphasises that Like buttons and other features on Facebook and Instagram reinforce the individual’s sense that social approval is vital for a legitimate existence and, simultaneously, encourage individuals to believe that they would be much better off if they did more to gain greater social approval<sup>55</sup>. The “glove tightening on the hand”, therefore, indicates the increasing degree of users’ reliance on approval through social media, which was itself encouraged by social media platforms.

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<sup>54</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, pp. 451-453.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.



Zuboff emphasises that the “hand and glove” model of control of individuals is rooted in surveillance capitalism’s profit motive. Encouraging people to feel an unquenchable need for quantified online social approval keeps users using surveillance capitalist platforms such that data can be extracted, and ads delivered. Furthermore, the more users feel inadequate about themselves because of a lack of social approval, the more likely it is that adverts on social media will result in spending –in the hope of gaining social approval, or simply feeling better<sup>56</sup>.

*b) The Right to Sanctuary*

In explaining the importance of the “right to sanctuary”, Zuboff provides a deeper problematisation of surveillance capitalism’s use of social pressure than in her description of the functioning of the “hand and glove” model. The social anxiety induced in users by “the glove” does not only result in users spending more time on social media. It also means that users, in seeking approval by posting and sharing on social media, spend more of their time with the feeling that they are being observed and evaluated by others. Zuboff employs Goffman’s notions of “onstage” and “offstage” to illustrate why this is problematic. “Onstage” refers to times and places where individuals are under observation and, therefore, are subject to the social norms with which observers evaluate an individual’s performance. “Offstage”, meanwhile, refers to times and places where one is not under observation, and can be, and discover, one’s “true self”<sup>57</sup>. Zuboff argues that it is only because humans usually have an offstage where they can be themselves, that humans tolerate being onstage and subject to social norms for much of the time. Because surveillance capitalism seeks to make its users remove as much of their “offstage” as possible, Zuboff asserts that surveillance capitalism produces conditions which are intolerable for human existence.

If surveillance capitalism removes the space where individuals can be themselves, collective efforts must be made to protect such a space for the wellbeing of humanity.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 472-474.



Zuboff proposes that sanctuary does not merely imply a space where the individual is free from social observation, but also implies “the place where a self can be birthed and nurtured”<sup>58</sup>. In this sense, the right to sanctuary does more than claim back an observation-free-space for individuals’ enjoyment. The right to sanctuary also implies making individuals aware and accepting of their true selves, and therefore less demanding of approval from their peers online and, thus, also less subject to surveillance capitalists. According to Zuboff, then, ensuring individuals the right to sanctuary from online social observation is needed for the immediate well-being of humans, and is also a crucial step in reducing surveillance capitalists’ capacity to control their users.

A Foucauldian approach surely agrees with Zuboff regarding the importance of an “offstage” for autonomy. Indeed, Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon emphasises the role of observation in making humans the subjects of power. He argued that the panopticon prison design, in which prisoners can always be observed, induces “in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assumes the automatic functioning of power”<sup>59</sup>. Constant observation and visibility effectively deny the subject of observation the ability to act differently from the norms imposed by the observer. Sanctuary from constant observation is, thus, evidently necessary for freedom from a Foucauldian perspective. Like Marchettoni, however, this article doubts whether the “right to sanctuary” is sufficient to ensure agency in the age of surveillance capitalism<sup>60</sup>.

*c) Against the “True Self”*

Although having an “offstage” favours freedom, a Foucauldian perspective disputes the core proposition of Zuboff’s “right to sanctuary” – that humans must have a space where, free from social pressure, they can discover their true selves. Indeed, Judith

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Pantheon, 1979, p. 201.

<sup>60</sup> L. Marchettoni, *op. cit.*, p. 130.



Butler emphasises, drawing on Foucault, that power “constrains and constitutes the very possibilities of volition” and, therefore, “cannot be withdrawn”<sup>61</sup>.

That power relations “cannot be withdrawn” is no less the case for the development of the self. Indeed, central to Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble* is the proposition that the notions of the self and identity are “normative ideals”<sup>62</sup>. According to this perspective, humans only come to construe their experience through notions of self and identity as a result of a system of power relations which situate the self and identity as norms. Relations of power not only situate the self and identity as normal, but also ensure compliance with norms of identity through the regulation of attributes along “culturally established lines of coherence”<sup>63</sup>. If the ways in which humans conceptualise their experience are understood as always imbued with power-relations, then assertions of the existence of “true selves” – internally discovered and independent of power - only distract from the functioning of power. The notion of a “true self”, in fact, often serves to reinforce a certain structure of power relations<sup>64</sup>.

#### *d) Inscription and Technologies of the Self*

A Foucauldian approach offers an alternative means for understanding and liberating the self in surveillance capitalism. Hereby, a post-structuralist perspective posits that we recognise the ways in which surveillance capitalists induce users to conceive of the world and themselves in accordance with capitalist interests. Furthermore, rather than seeking the withdrawal of power, post-structuralists ask how the ways in which surveillance capitalists seek to make users conceive of the world and themselves can be resisted and subverted.

The Foucauldian notions of “inscription” and “technologies of self” clarify that subjection to social norms does not function only through social observation, as Zuboff

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<sup>61</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.



suggests<sup>65</sup>. Indeed, these concepts have been deployed by scholars studying new media and information technology to help explain how surveillance capitalist platforms influence the ways users conceive of themselves and others.

As noted above, Rose & Miller explain that the process of “inscribing” reality invites people to conceive of reality and their proper place within it according to particular norms<sup>66</sup>. This is no less true for the way reality is recorded on and through surveillance capitalist platforms. Van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity* explains how the inscription of friendships through social media influences how users conceive of sociality:

from the technological inscription of online sociality we derive that connectivity is a quantifiable value, also known as the *popularity principle*: the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you.<sup>67</sup>

Van Dijck emphasises here, in contrast to Zuboff, that social media does not only subject users to particular social norms through inducing incessant observation. Rather, the quantitative inscription of sociality through social media helps to make users subject to quantitative norms of sociality. As Zuboff herself implies in the “hand and glove” discussion, such norms of sociality tend towards high usage of social media and also anxiety, both of which benefit the profits of surveillance capitalists<sup>68</sup>.

As well as inducing particular inscriptions of sociality, surveillance capitalist platforms are influential in governing how individuals conceive of and relate to themselves. Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” has been deployed in this regard. Foucault defines “technologies of the self” as ways for individuals to “affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being”<sup>69</sup>. Technologies of the self, however, are not “neutral”. Rather, Bakardjieva and Gaden emphasise that “technologies

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<sup>65</sup> See N. Rose, P. Miller, *op. cit.*; M. Foucault, *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

<sup>66</sup> N. Rose, P. Miller, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>67</sup> J. Van Dijck, *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> S. Zuboff, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

<sup>69</sup> M. Foucault, *Technologies of Self*, cit., p. 18.





of the self [...] have the potential to carry the dominant social and cultural rationality into the heart of self-constitution and thus ensure that the self is shaped in the image and interest of the dominant order”<sup>70</sup>.

Several scholars have argued that surveillance capitalist technologies have become important “technologies of the self”<sup>71</sup>. Lupton, for example, emphasises that digital self-tracking tends to encourage individuals to think with and through information about themselves according to neoliberal and entrepreneurial norms<sup>72</sup>. Consumer research, meanwhile, has shown that, when individuals believe that an advert is targeted specifically to them, the content of the advert leads them to adjust their perception of themselves<sup>73</sup>. Such examples of surveillance capitalist technologies presenting information to users in ways which reveal particular, perhaps entirely illusory, truths about the self surely merit further study. They also demonstrate that – even without the method of panopticon-like social observation – surveillance capitalist technologies influence the way we conceive of ourselves.

Given that, from a Foucauldian perspective, relations of power cannot be escaped, resistance to how users are encouraged to conceive of themselves by surveillance capitalists cannot centre solely on seeking refuge from influence by surveillance capitalists. As such, Foucauldian scholarship, rather than demanding, like Zuboff, that strategies of power influencing self-constitution are withdrawn, should highlight the ways such strategies can be effectively subverted and resisted. The “Queer Surveillance” issue in *Surveillance and Society* was noteworthy and enlightening in this regard, and there is

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<sup>70</sup> M. Bakardjieva, G. Georgia, “Web 2.0 technologies of the self”, *Philosophy & Technology*, 25 (2012), 3, p. 402.

<sup>71</sup> See M. Bakardjieva, G. Georgia, *op. cit.*; A. Lasén, “Digital Inscriptions and Loss of Embarrassment: some thoughts about the technological mediations of affectivity”, *intervalla* 1 (2013), pp. 85-100 ; D. Lupton, “Self-Tracking Modes: Reflexive Self-Monitoring and Data Practices”, 19 August 2014, available <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2483549> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2483549>, A. Evans, S. Riley, M. Robson, “Postfeminist Healthism: Pregnant with anxiety in the time of contradiction”, *Jura Gentium*, XVII (2020), 1, *Homo medicus e commodification. Una prospettiva bioetica*, pp. 95-118.

<sup>72</sup> D. Lupton, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> C.A. Summers, R.W. Smith, R.W. Reczek, “An Audience of One: Behaviorally targeted ads as implied social labels”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43 (2016), 1, pp. 156-178.



need for further analyses of how surveillance capitalist inscriptions and technologies of the self can be resisted and subverted<sup>74</sup>.

#### *e) Rethink With Google*

The concepts of “inscription” and “technologies of the self” touched on in this section invite an alternative interpretation of the phrase “Think with Google”. Hereby, “think with Google” does not only refer to how Google provides new tools for marketers to think about how to persuade potential consumers to spend. “Think with Google” also implies the ways in which we think about ourselves and others with, and through, information provided to us by Google, or other surveillance capitalists. In order to gain a greater degree of liberation from the power of surveillance capitalists it is surely insufficient, then, to demand only sanctuary from constant observation on social media. A Foucauldian conception of freedom also requires recognition of the ways in which we are induced to conceive of ourselves and the world according to certain norms when we “think with Google”. Whilst the work of Lupton and others provides useful beginnings, more research is surely required to better understand the role “thinking with Google” plays in shaping how we relate to ourselves and others.

## 6. Conclusion

This article aimed to build Foucauldian challenges to Zuboff’s influential “masterwork” (shoshanazuboff.com 2020)<sup>75</sup>. It has focused on the political values which Zuboff argues are at stake in the “age of surveillance capitalism”. The main sections of this paper employed Foucauldian concepts to highlight weaknesses in Zuboff’s arguments and provide additional directions for critique of surveillance capitalism.

Three questionable claims central to Zuboff’s “stakes” of surveillance capitalism have been emphasised. Firstly, that surveillance capitalism has, or could have, near

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<sup>74</sup> In particular, see B. Schram, “Accidental Orientations: Rethinking queerness in archival times”, *Surveillance & Society*, 17 (2019), 5, pp. 602-617.

<sup>75</sup> See <https://shoshanazuboff.com/book/shoshana/>, accessed 03 September 2020.



“perfect” knowledge of users. Secondly, that surveillance capitalists can author our futures through purely behaviouralist means of control. Thirdly, that sanctuary from social pressure would be sufficient for individuals to resist surveillance capitalism’s power. In making these claims, Zuboff provides inadequate groundwork for efforts to challenge surveillance capitalism.

Two demands have been distinguished to build on Zuboff’s critique of surveillance capitalism and remedy her failings. Firstly, the discursive construction of surveillance capitalists’ knowledge as such must be called into question. This approach, unlike Zuboff’s, allows us to critique the power-knowledge of surveillance capitalism without being lulled into a sense of security by the inaccuracies of surveillance capitalist knowledge. It notes that the production of “truth” induces effects of power, and, that these power effects can be challenged through questioning the discursive production of truth.

Secondly, behaviouralist techniques and panopticon-like social pressure should not be regarded as the only forms of power wielded by surveillance capitalists. A Foucauldian perspective highlights that the exertion of power by surveillance capitalists to influence how we construe ourselves, and our relations with other actors, must be understood and challenged. Further research should examine the deployment of techniques of power such as inscription, translation, and technologies of the self, and the possibilities of subversion and resistance, when marketers and individuals in society “think with Google”.

In analysing surveillance capitalism using Foucauldian conceptualisations of power, the threat presented by this new feature of society looks different to the dystopian picture presented by Zuboff. By emphasising the importance of surveillance capitalist’s capacity to influence people’s ways of thinking about the world – not least in regard to knowledge and one’s relations with oneself and others – a Foucauldian perspective is crucial to help societies come to terms and deal with this new capitalist, surveillant force<sup>76</sup>.

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