



Is Big Data Destroying Democracy?

Leah Oldfield

“It’s no good fighting an election campaign on the facts because actually, it’s all about emotion”

Mark Turnbull,
former Managing Director at Cambridge Analytica
(Channel 4 News, March 2018)

This quotation, sadly, now depicts the foundations of our democracy. When global companies, like *Cambridge Analytica*, use the leverage of behavioural data to sell certainty instead of truthful facts the balance between democracy, whereby governmental power is held by all citizens (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 1998) and Tyranny, whereby power is held by a small number of rulers often using unfair and unjust practices (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), is toppled. Surveillance theory which conceptualises different strategies of surveillance that include dataveillance, access control, social sorting, peer-to-peer surveillance and resistance (Galič et al, 2017) is a growing phenomenon within an information society. This paper will seek to understand the developments of surveillance theory from Bentham’s structural panopticon to Michel Foucault’s metaphoric adaptations.

Furthermore, Gilles Deleuze’s (1990) theory, which brings surveillance theory forward into the digital age, and Zuboff’s (2019) surveillance capitalism will also be drawn upon. Surveillance capitalism is seen to thrive within four principal areas of a capitalized society: ‘consumer marketing, health care, urban policing, and anti-terrorism’ (Lyon, 2014: 2) and through this huge engulfment of societal life surveillance capitalism can pose a real challenge to

democracy. As whistleblowers from *Cambridge Analytica* revealed, the possibilities for big data to change, influence, and control sections within our society can be detrimental to freedoms (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harris, 2018; Lewis and Hilder, 2018). This paper will seek to determine what surveillance capitalism is and how it is expanding within our society. The international scandal of unethical practices by the company *Cambridge Analytica* will also be drawn upon with relation to the influence surveillance capitalism can have on our political systems and the overall success of democracy.



When created Bentham’s Panopticon architecturally solved the issue between ‘strategy and space’ and in doing so created the ultimate power over the mind. With a central tower observable from all occupants of the institution and the activities inside the tower hidden to them, those kept within the panopticon are unable to know if they are or are not being surveilled (Galič et al, 2017). Disillusioned with the ever-present fear of being watched the panopticon’s design created a self-disciplining environment. Interestingly, Bentham’s idea for the Panopticon was not to create all-seeing eyes everywhere, quite the opposite, in fact, his theory of discipline through internalized self-control was intended to reduce



the need for constant surveillance (Galič et al, 2017).

The best-known theorist exploring this metaphoric link between control and power was Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Through metaphorically instilling the architectural design of Bentham's Panopticon into the remit of a discipline society, more specifically within the West, Foucault sought to show how panoptic modeling has changed societal behaviours (Galič et al, 2017; Caluya, 2010). Foucault understood the internalised power of panoptic surveillance to lead to 'normation' or 'normalization', whereby new habits, ideologies and notions on the way things are done are forced upon the population and internalised as the norm (Galič et al, 2017). Furthermore, Foucault understood surveillance discourses that lead to people filtering their behaviour (Owen, 2017) to be discourses set by those in power to maintain social discipline easily and efficiently.

Deleuze's (1990) post-panoptic theories both bring this Foucauldian metaphor within the new technological age in search of new remits of analysis. Gilles Deleuze's 1990 essay *Postscript on the Societies of Control* shifts Foucault's theory of a discipline society into one of control (Galič et al, 2017; Caluya, 2010).

Under capitalism and especially neoliberalism, corporations have obtained huge amounts of control within the West, and surveillance techniques are increasingly harnessed by not only governmental powers but corporations too. Deleuze progresses Foucauldian theory and 'acknowledges the shift from just the "state" to other surveillance agencies, from "individuals" to "dividuals" and from discipline to control' (Lyon, 2014: 7). Of most importance here is that harnessing this data through 'consumer marketing,

health care, urban policing, and anti-terrorism' (Lyon, 2014: 2) has formed a society where data doubles of citizens are creating ideologies, experiences and behaviours for them (Galič et al, 2017).

Social networks are globalized communication platforms that freely give people the potential to challenge power. Simultaneously social networks provide those in power with surveillance technologies and large amounts of personal data



given at the user's will (Owen, 2017). Alongside social networks, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, online social platforms such as *Google*, *Apple* and *Microsoft* are just a few

technological conglomerates that harness the power of prediction through data analysis and data harvesting. Shoshana Zuboff, a Harvard Business School Emerita, has brought attention to this capitalization of personal data through what is coined 'surveillance capitalism' in her book; *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019).

Zuboff comes from a neo-Marxist perspective (Galič et al, 2017) that understands surveillance capitalism to be a forced byproduct of information capitalism which seeks 'to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control' (Zuboff, 2015: 75). Furthermore, it works. One example used by Zuboff to show this is Google's revenue, which increased from 86 million in 1996 to 3.2 billion in 2004 after being one of the first globalized companies to harness the power of behavioural analysis (The Intercept, 2019).



Within the expanding information society, we now find ourselves, the ability for technology to not only relay programmed instructions but to produce information (Zuboff, 2015: 76) has created a population, according to Zuboff, 'trapped in a world of no escape' (Channel 4 News, 2019: n.p.). This progression in surveillance theory conceptualises the progression within capitalism to bring the economic domain into the social (The Intercept, 2019) whereby the practices of surveillance are forced to be seen as inevitable in a digital future (Channel 4 News, 2019).

Data within an election process is now used within three main contexts, firstly as a political asset; data is collected and sold, secondly as political intelligence; data is collected and interpreted, and thirdly as a political influence; data is tailored at an individual level (Hankey et al, 2018). *Cambridge Analytica* is a branch of the SCL group, that is built on surveillance capitalism. The company has

previously been hired in election campaigns like the *Ted Cruz Campaign*, the *Trump campaign*, and the *EU Vote Leave* referendum to harness the power of prediction data to influence voters at the bail box (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harris, 2018). For the *Trump campaign* in particular *Cambridge Analytica* revamped their non-existent online presence by bringing in techniques that harnessed the data profiles of more than 200 million Americans and used this to analytically match campaign material with voters (Channel 4 News, March 2018).

While the ability to harness data to subjectively influence voters could be simply seen as innovative, the ability for this data to be used

unethically and manipulatively could destroy the foundations of democracy. Not only did *Cambridge Analytica* capture a pool of 87 million *Facebook* profiles largely without consent, but former employees like Brittany Kaiser, have come forward to reveal unethical practices such as fake news and opponent smear campaigns were seen within *Cambridge Analytica* to be their best products (Lewis and Hilder, 2018). Put exquisitely by Hankey et al (2018: 20): 'these private companies can

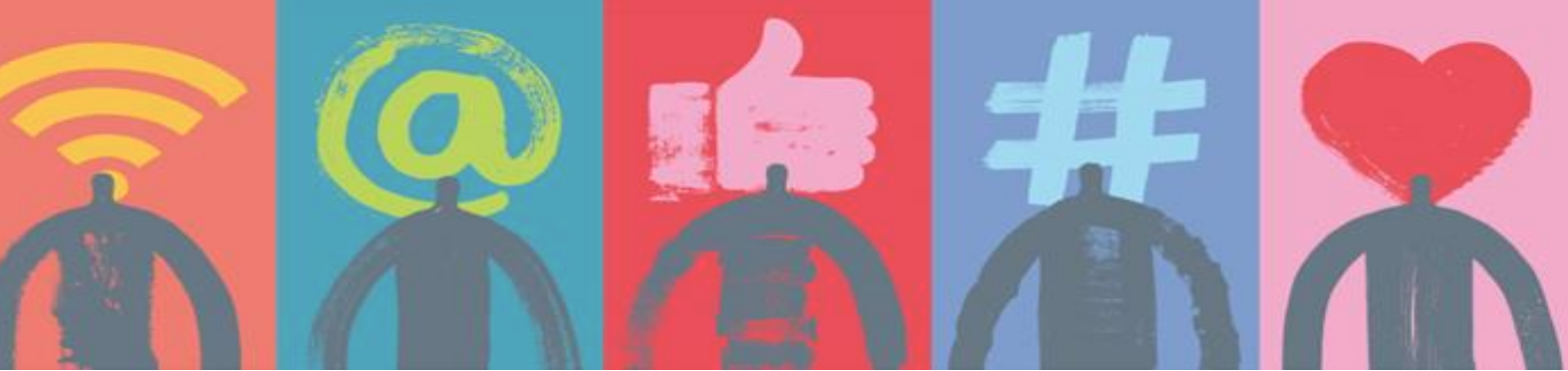
therefore have a significant influence on the political process. They have access to vast and deeply personal data, which gives them tremendous power'. The company was ultimately led into administration by CEO Alexander Nix and Managing Director Mark Turnbull who were caught by a Channel 4

undercover journalist permitting tactics such as honey trapping, extortion, and fraud (Channel 4 News, June 2018) however the damage to citizens trust in the democratic system is certainly greater.

The internet for use within a political campaign is not new and has been used since its development as a tool for political communication and broadcasting. In recent years, however 'the collection, analysis and use of personal data is now an inevitable part of the democratic process' (Hankey et al, 2018: 10). But is this subjective targeting of citizens and framing of campaigns to individual polarised realities democratic at all? According to influential theorists on data surveillance like Zuboff and Gould (1988), the answer is no.

The information society we are creating through mass surveillance and the commodification of human behaviour is one that 'creates a society of intense inequality' (Channel 4 News, 2019). As the information society develops, control comes from





knowledge and knowledge comes from information. We are now, according to scholars like these living in a society where those in power know everything about us but we know little about them (Channel 4 News, 2019). As predictions on behaviours sell and win election campaigns, 'the more certainty for them means less freedom for us' (Channel 4 News, 2019).

Scholars like Zuboff and Gould are rightly concerned with the implications of surveillance capitalism on our homogeneity and our desires for self-development and self-transition. 'The ability for surveillance capitalism to manipulate our preferences, distort our democracies, and hold us to ransom' (Sangiovanni, 2019: 214) is creating a polarised society that is not progressing. To move out of this and relinquish control of our own experiences the installation of better democratic control is suggested by some scholars. Both Gould and Zuboff agree that surveillance capitalism to be a systemic issue that must be addressed through legislative structural changes (Sangiovanni, 2019).

Article 8 of the Human rights act already gives citizens the right to a private life without governmental interference, the right to form your own identity, and the right to privacy on the internet (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2021). So why are these freedoms being destroyed on a massive scale? Because power is being harnessed through the commodification of human experience and citizens are being manipulated, again, by capitalistic control. The power of narcissistic governments which prioritise populist ideologies must not continue to hold the ultimate power of knowledge by means that erode our fundamental human rights. To progress with democracy and not become the tyrannical beings Plato predicted, the human right to privacy must be addressed, the negative reinforcement of surveillance in power struggles must also be addressed and we must look beyond a world of panoptic discipline and control and understand the beauty in a society where freedom of choice and expression is crucial.

Bibliography:

Cadwalladr, C. and Graham-Harris, E. (2018) Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach. *The Guardian*, 17th Mar. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

Caluya, G. (2010) The post-panoptic society? Reassessing Foucault in surveillance studies. *Social Identities*, 16(5): 621-633. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13504630.2010.509565?needAccess=true>

Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) Tyranny <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tyranny>

Channel 4 News (June 2018) *Former Cambridge Analytica CEO Alexander Nix faces MPs (full version)* 6th June. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weQ9E6e3aJQ>

Channel 4 News (March 2018) *Cambridge Analytica Uncovered: Secret filming reveals election tricks* Mar 19th. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpbeOCKZFfQ>

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021) *Article 8: Respect for your private and family life* 24th June. <
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights-act/article-8-respect-your-private-and-family-life>>

Galič, M., Timan, T. and Koops, B. (2017) Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation. *Philosophy and Technology*, 30(1):9-37. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s13347-016-0219-1.pdf>

Hankey, S., Naik, R. and Morrison, J. (2018) Data and Democracy in the Digital Age. *The Constitution Society* pp.1-56.



<https://consoc.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/07/Stephanie-Hankey-Julianne-Kerr-Morrison-Ravi-Naik-Data-and-Democracy-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>

Lewis, P. and Hilder, P. (2018) Leaked: Cambridge Analytica's blueprint for Trump victory. *The Guardian* 23rd Mar. San Francisco: Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/23/leaked-cambridge-analytica-blueprint-for-trump-victory>

Lyon, D. (2014) Surveillance, Snowden, and Big Data: Capacities, consequences, critique. *Big Data & Society* pp.1-13. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951714541861>

Owen, s. (2017) Monitoring social media and protest movements: ensuring political order through surveillance and surveillance discourse. *Social Identities*, 23(6): 688-700. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504630.2017.1291092?journalCode=csid20>

Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1998) 2nd edition. New York: Oxford, p.147.

Sangiovanni, A. (2019) Democratic Control of Information in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 36(2): 212-216. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/japp.12363?samlreferrer>

The Intercept (2019) *The Rise of Surveillance Capitalism* 1st Mar. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s4Y-uZG5zk>

Zuboff, S. (2015) Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30: 75-89. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/jit.2015.5.pdf>

Pictures:

<https://bernardmarr.com/what-is-big-data/democracy.jpg> (1200×761) thebluediamondgallery.com

<https://www.presenza.com/es/2018/03/latentacion-argentina-por-el-metodo-facebook-cambridge-analytica/>