

Surveillance capitalism and the right to privacy

Moyukh Mahtab
"Surveillance is the business model of the internet"—Bruce Schneier, security expert and privacy specialist

GOOGLE, the company now almost synonymous with looking up information on the internet, in 2007 launched Street View, a service which allows users to view panoramic images of streets around the world. These seemingly harmless images of streets and buildings, mapped by Google vans driving across streets, are an example of the privacy challenges the world faces today. In 2013, Google had to pay a fine of USD 7 million for violation of privacy during these mapping processes: the vans had been scooping up passwords, e-mails and other personal information from computers while driving by houses.

Street View was eventually restricted from operating in several countries. But as Shoshana Zuboff of the Harvard Business School—author of the recently published "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power"—argues, what people witnessed with Street View was not a one-off example, but is the very essence of the business model of the big data giants. As she writes in a related paper, the "modus operandi is that of incursion into undefended private territory until resistance is encountered." And without adequate and effective laws in place, tech companies have faced little resistance in encroaching ever more into the private domain. Pioneered by Google, surveillance capitalism is now the essence of how Facebook and Microsoft operate, and what other tech companies want to achieve in scale.

In 2013, after Snowden leaked classified government information about the global surveillance apparatus, it was not the fact that governments put citizens under surveillance that came as a shock; it was the range of information that these programmes collected and the "mass" nature of this collection that put focus on the debate about privacy. But

it is not only states that collect information en masse. The Brexit referendum and the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential Elections highlighted how the issue goes beyond the state to business models in the digital age. This is what Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism—a form of capitalism in which human behaviour is the raw material collected for the purposes of prediction and modification of future behaviour, and where the individual has little control over how their data is processed and used.

"Surveillance Capitalism" describes how Google, in its early years, trying to develop a brilliant search engine, came upon data that was being collected but was of no use. When the dot-com bubble burst and the founders of Google came under increasing pressure to deliver revenue, the company learned that this data that was collected but not used for improvement of services could be processed to create "prediction products". These could then be sold to advertisers; as time passed, the extent of information that was being collected and the sophistication of the analysis increased manifold. With time and increasing competition, she writes, it was realised by "surveillance capitalists that extracting human experience is not enough. The most-predictive raw-material supplies come from intervening in our experience to shape our behaviour in ways that favour ... commercial outcomes".

This new model was focussed on data extraction rather than production of new goods. Zuboff writes, Google went from re-investing excess data for betterment services to this new model, where the data collected was turned into products to be sold to third parties. And the extent of information collected by Google and Facebook has been widely documented, especially in recent years. What Google and Facebook know include, but is not limited to, one's locations and search history; based on these, Google has an ad profile on every user.

So why is this a problem, rather than just a novel—revolutionary even—business



A Google Street View car is driven in Sundsvall, northern Sweden, on September 13, 2011.

PHOTO: FABRIZIO BENSCH/REUTERS

model? Zuboff, and countless other privacy advocates, have argued how surveillance capitalism strikes at the core of democracy and individual sovereignty. Examples of use of personal data to predict and influence political outcomes have been rife in recent years: from President Obama's 2008 campaign (which used online behavioural data for predictive modelling) to Cambridge Analytica's harvesting data from Facebook profiles, without consent, which was used by Ted Cruz in 2015 and then by Donald Trump's campaign. As early as 2012, Facebook was openly celebrating its ability to influence voter turnouts during elections through manipulating what is produced in front of users on social media.

Whether it is for influencing our political decisions or for selling us more soap, the issue is about meaningful autonomy,

participation and violation of privacy. Of course, surveillance capitalists claim that user consent is taken before any data is collected (although, as the Street View example shows, that is not always the case). But even the "I Agree" clicks that are the norm for obtaining consent are no real consent at all, since it gives users little choice. A 2008 study titled "The cost of reading privacy policies" found that reading all privacy policies one comes across in a given year would need 76 full working days at a national opportunity cost of USD 781 billion. Central to exercising the right to privacy is to participate meaningfully in the process of what is shared and who it is shared with. It is the asymmetry of knowledge and power to decide that makes all of this problematic. It is not just about Facebook knowing my birthday in exchange for offering a free service, but its use of my data in ways

that I have no control over to be processed into "products" to be sold.

And all this is very relevant for Bangladesh today. In 2018, a well-known tech start-up in Bangladesh was found to be collecting private data, including SMS and contact lists of its users. When confronted with this, the company's response was that the data was being stored securely. The entire issue of consent is absent from legal and public discussion. An entire industry has developed in the country around selling of contact information (resulting in floods of unwarranted promotional texts that users cannot opt out of). A cursory survey of some of the immensely popular smartphone apps in the country shows that by default, they are allowed to access the location, storage, and even contact information of users.

In 2016, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was adopted with the aim of giving control to people over their personal data, recognising certain "digital" rights that individuals are entitled to regarding how their personal data is collected and used. The extent to which this can curtail mass collection of information by corporations may be debated, but we have a complete absence of this conversation about data privacy and consent. The laws which could have attempted to define and defend privacy rights, and set limits to collection and use, instead have been most famous for policing the internet.

Surveillance capitalists claim that all their incursions are innovative and beneficial, with examples such as live monitoring of speeds during driving, where if one goes over the speed limit, insurance companies can lower premiums. But as Zuboff argues in her book, this can be no utopia at all, but concentration of "instrumentarian power" (power to shape human behaviour), where the social contract, which rests on trust, is broken: "Deception-induced ignorance is no social contract, and freedom from uncertainty is no freedom".

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Reimagining 'Crazy Rich Asians' as social commentary on inequalities in Asia-Pacific

SRIINIVAS TATA and JACO CILLIERS

IT'S 1962, and in a modest Hong Kong neighbourhood, a poetic love story unfolds. Filmed almost twenty years ago, Wong Kar-wai's seminal movie "In the Mood for Love" captured the world's imagination about lifestyle in the region. A lower-middle class existence had never looked better.

Fast forward to 2018 and a new movie, set in today's Singapore, captures the world's attention, but for very different reasons.

"Crazy Rich Asians" mixes Asian family values, education and prosperity with a consumeristic facade of jewellery, clothes and luxury travel. The result is entertaining, yet thought-provoking: when did this seismic socio-economic shift take place? When did Asia become so prosperous, yet so unequal?

Research by the United Nations has shown that inequalities of both income and opportunities have been on the rise across the region over the past two decades. Our 2019 research with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) shows two-thirds of the world's "multi-dimensionally" poor now live in middle-income countries.

Increases in income inequality have coincided with a narrower concentration of wealth in the Asia-Pacific region, now home to the greatest number of billionaires in the world. Their combined net worth is seven times the combined GDP of the region's Least Developed Countries.

Governments have committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and aim to fulfil the promise of "leaving no one behind". Nonetheless, research reveals a worrying trend toward



A scene from the 2018 American film 'Crazy Rich Asians'.

greater inequality, not just in incomes, but also in access to basic services—educational attainment, health, clean energy and basic sanitation.

Gender is, perhaps, the most important lens through which these stark inequalities in access to health, basic services and rights can be understood. And they are most likely to be left behind. In addition, natural disasters, which have become more frequent and intense, disproportionately affect the poorest.

Due to their socio-economic plight, their capacity to recover is also seriously weakened.

Putting "Leave no one behind" into practice
Inequalities are not inevitable—they stem from policies, laws, cultural norms, corruption, and other issues that can be addressed. To be addressed, they require a range of well-coordinated policy interventions. If left unchecked, inequalities

ultimately threaten social cohesion, economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Several countries have prioritised investments in education, health and social protection to achieve more equitable development outcomes. Mongolia, for instance, now allocates 21 percent of public expenditure toward social protection with a specific focus on children. This has resulted in a significant reduction in stunting.

Bhutan and Thailand have successfully introduced universal health care schemes. Vietnam has decided to boost financing toward education and health sectors, in effect managing or reversing the trend toward greater inequality.

Fiscal measures are equally fundamental in addressing inequality. Tax to GDP ratios are low in a number of countries across the region, especially in South Asia. Progressive taxation remains a critical tool for wealth and income redistribution.

Some countries are taking steps to reform their tax systems while others are finding innovative and creative ways to boost venue and enforce tax collection. In 2016, for instance, Thailand introduced an inheritance tax and China is planning to do so in the coming years.

Labour market policies aimed at improving working conditions, raising the minimum wage, and offering unemployment benefits can act as a buffer to protect the poorer segments of society.

While some countries in the region, especially in Southeast Asia, have raised the minimum wage, more comprehensive measures need to be taken. With the emergence and adoption of new

technologies—automation, AI, and machine-learning—many low-skilled jobs and tasks are being eliminated.

Adopting and embracing new technologies would need to be viewed through the broader lens of achieving the SDGs and leaving no one behind.

Emerging trends, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and climate change, have wider cross-border ramifications. Countering the negative impact on inequalities will require collective and coordinated responses at the national, regional and global levels. It is apparent that a range of pro-active actions need to be taken by policymakers in the region to tackle inequality. Business as usual will just not do it this time.

The producers of the comedy blockbuster probably did not intend to stir debate on socio-economic inequalities. Nonetheless, by showing us "Crazy Rich Asians" enjoying their lavish lifestyles, they also managed to hold up a mirror and make us think about the striking contradictions lived everyday by millions.

If the region is to continue to be a growth engine for the world and a centre of global economic dynamism, it will have to show that it is not just a place where billionaires feel at home, but also a region that is charting a more secure and sustainable future for those left behind.

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QUOTABLE Quote

VIKRAM SETH
(b. 1952)
Indian novelist and poet
I think if something is worth doing, it's worth doing well. And worth thinking about it as well.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Needed a massage
6 Fierce fire
11 Freak
12 Sheet material
13 Sorts
14 Said further
15 Praline nuts
17 Put down
19 "It's a mouse!"
20 Mrs., in Madrid
23 Near future
25 Mix up
26 Crunch time
28 Clock sound
29 Visibly upset
30 Compass dir.
31 Pot brew

32 Stretch of years
33 Pough-keepsie college
35 Ruby or garnet
38 Rascal
41 Singly
42 Bring on
43 Breath fresheners
44 Run-down

DOWN
1 FBI worker: Abbr.
2 Demure
3 Smiley
4 Fencing sword
5 Fall
6 Entry form
7 Tops
8 What's more

9 Last letter
10 Last part
16 Sponsorships
17 Hay sites
18 Big dos
20 Belmont or Preakness
21 Kitchen gadget
22 Concert site
24 Pen fill
25 Workout locale
27 Car frame
31 Yarns
33 Let off steam
34 Skin woe
35 Toast spread
36 Bulldog backer
37 Took the title
39 Coffee, in slang
40 Be a snooper

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

THIS CHICKEN IS GOOD. HOW DID YOU MAKE THE SAUCE?
WITH BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS
I MEAN, WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS?
THOSE ARE THE INGREDIENTS

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

IS THAT YOUR DOGGY?
WHAT DOES THE DOGGY SAY?
MOO!
MOO!
MOO!
MOO!
YOU WERE JUST YANKING HER CHAIN, RIGHT?
WOOF!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	H	A	R	P	S	L	A	T
P	O	L	A	R	W	H	I	L
A	M	A	Z	E	R	A	M	O
D	A	M	E	K	I	M	O	N
R	E	G	O	L	E	T	S	E
R	E	D	W	I	N	E	S	
S	E	A	M	U	K	E	S	
C	A	D	R	E	S	C	A	P
O	R	I	G	I	N	P	O	L
M	E	D	I	C	R	A	D	A
I	N	I	N	K	A	G	E	N
C	A	N	S		N	E	S	T

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