A Post-Humanist Take on Surveillance Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

HCI researchers and designers, especially those who work on privacy, should consider approaching their work from a post-humanist perspective. As an example of what we stand to gain from this, I show how a post-humanist interpretation of surveillance capitalism opens privacy as one potential antidote to resist the normalization of surveillance. I conclude with a brief review of my research and interest in the workshop.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Corporate surveillance**; • **Human-centered computing** → *HCI theory, concepts and models.*

KEYWORDS

privacy, autonomy, post-humanism, design,

POST-HUMANIST HCI

Philosophical critiques have pushed the HCI field to interrogate the epistemologies that undergird its work [2]. In this short paper, I suggest that HCI researchers and designers, particularly those who focus on privacy, should consider adopting a post-humanist philosophy. Baumer & Brubaker [3] offer post-userism as a perspective that resists the flattening of humans into users. This is especially important as ubiquitous and pervasive computing march forward, operating without clear "users" and as sociotechnical systems profoundly affect people who aren't their "users," (e.g., an algorithm predicting someone's likelihood of committing a crime [1]. Post-humanism de-centers human beings and locates agency within interactions between human and non-human actants [6]. As an example of what we stand to gain from post-humanist perspectives, I contrast business scholar Shoshana Zuboff's articulation of surveillance capitalism, which focuses on a liberal-humanistic view of the individual with legal scholar Julie Cohen's explanation of modulated society, which adopts a post-human perspective of the self.

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND THE LIBERAL INDIVIDUAL

The companies at the center of the computing industry design goods and services to extract enormous amounts of data from or about people. They mine that data for patterns and use it to influence people's behavior. The CHI community must take heed and reckon with this. These companies sponsor our conferences, employ our members, and utilize our research. In her new book, business scholar Shoshana Zuboff forcefully unpacks surveillance capitalism – what it is, where it comes from, and why it is dangerous [7].

Belief in the power of data extraction has captivated industries such as retail, finance, transportation, insurance, health care, and education. Companies argue that data-driven products and services improve our lives through connection, convenience, and personalization. By digitizing all domains of life, these companies claim they will "solve all of humanity's problems while empowering each individual" [7, p. 404]. Unlike other modern utopianists, Zuboff explains, the leaders of these companies possess the technological and financial means to realize their vision of a "planned society, produced through total control of the means of behavioral modification" [7, p. 437].

Surveillance capitalism operates at the expense of privacy, yet its harm, according to Zuboff, transcends invasion of privacy. It threatens human nature by robbing us of the ability to control our destinies. Its harm is the death of individuality, the evaporation of free will, and the disappearance

of autonomy, leaving people with no refuge or escape from the surveillance apparatus. At stake are what Zuboff calls the "right to the future tense," as well as the right to sanctuary. She contends that privacy and data protection regulation are insufficient to curb the logic of surveillance capitalism, placing her faith in democratic institutions to develop alternatives. [7].

Zuboff's argument rests on a liberal-humanist foundation of the self as an autonomous individual. This tradition centers the individual subject and locates agency within it. But over several decades, scholars have called this into question. Post-humanist scholar Katherine Hayles labels "the idea that human agency is paramount" an "illusion," arguing that human agency cannot be isolated from the technological and social systems that constitute and interact with it [6].

MODULATED SOCIETY AND THE POST-HUMAN INDIVIDUAL

Most American legal and policy discourse rests on a liberal-humanist framing of the individual. Privacy discourse typically emphasizes freedom and control, centering an abstract individual that experiences benefits or harms. Within these frames, "privacy advocates...have difficulty explaining exactly why the information flows to which they object are so harmful. One answer often given is that the uncontrolled flows of personal information threaten individual autonomy and self-determination" [4, p. 6]. Yet, legal scholar Julie Cohen argues, "the liberal self who is the subject of privacy theory and privacy policymaking does not exist....[T]he self who is the real subject of privacy law and policy is socially constructed, emerging gradually from a preexisting cultural and relational substrate" [5, p. 1904].

Rather than protect autonomy, Cohen explains that privacy "shelters dynamic, emergent subjectivity from the efforts of commercial and government actors to render individuals and communities fixed, transparent, and predictable. It protects the situated practices of boundary management through which the capacity for self-determination develops" [5, p. 1904]. Privacy gives people 'breathing room" to dynamically manage these boundaries [5, p. 1906].

When technologies begin serving surveillance functions, that is, when they encroach on that breathing room, they start to shape how we make sense of the world and ourselves. When this surveillance is distributed across political and commercial actors, citizens lose the ability to pursue meaningful agendas toward human flourishing. Cohen calls this "modulation," a form of surveillance that derives power from its ordinariness. Modulation presents a threat because it is "dedicated to prediction but not necessarily to understanding or to advancing human material, intellectual, and political well-being" [5, p. 1927]. Here, we see clear parallels between Zuboff and Cohen. But where Zuboff bemoans surveillance capitalism's exploitation of human nature, Cohen warns that modulation alters people's subjectivity:

> "Modulation is a mode of privacy invasion, but it is also a mode of knowledge production designed to produce a particular way of knowing and a mode of governance designed

to produce a particular kind of subject. Its purpose is to produce tractable, predictable citizen-consumers whose preferred modes of self-determination play out along predictable and profit-generating trajectories" [5, p. 1917].

Why do these differences matter? Zuboff believes surveillance capitalism threatens human autonomy, and her reading leaves people powerless to fight its incursion. Cohen believes modulation constructs people differently, leaving room for people to push back and resist such framings. Indeed, Cohen's interpretation of privacy as breathing room seems to encompass Zuboff's right to the future tense and right to sanctuary without centering the liberal individual.

COUNTERING SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Zuboff and Cohen paint similar pictures of the way that dominant technology companies and the logic of big data threaten core values of our society. Zuboff argues that the harms extend beyond invasions of privacy, while Cohen positions privacy as the "opposite of modulation," [5, p. 1930]. For Zuboff, responses focused on privacy or data protection are insufficient to counter surveillance capitalism. But by writing off privacy, could we be overlooking tools that can help curtail those harms? Cohen's conceptualization of privacy as breathing room to manage boundaries may offer the key to harnessing privacy as a bulwark against surveillance imperatives.

What role can the HCI community play in this fight? Both scholars offer clues. Zuboff explains how companies driven by surveillance capitalism seek to eliminate friction, making thoughts and actions as seamless as possible. Cohen writes that democracy requires "discomfort – enough to motivate citizens to pursue improvements in a realization of political and social ideals" [5, p. 1918]. Many of our digital tools have been designed to prioritize integration and ease, but perhaps there are strong cases for designing friction and discomfort into them as well.

AUTHOR BIO AND CURRENT RESEARCH

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland, and my research broadly explores the intersection of families, technology use, and privacy. My dissertation examines the privacy and surveillance implications of parents posting information about their children online. I situate this practice within media history and parenting culture and consider how it contributes to surveillance capitalism. My writing on this topic has appeared in several academic and popular media outlets; more information about my work is available at www.priyakumar.org.

I am interested in approaching my dissertation from a post-humanist perspective. One way I envision doing so is by adopting Cohen's conceptualization of privacy; I would like to attend the workshop to learn how to engage more deeply with post-humanist and sociomaterial philosophies.

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