

Surveillance capitalism in the information age

Written by Dr. Duncan Rozario on October 5, 2020 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca



Dr. Duncan Rozario

Monopolistic, ruthless businesses advance their interests unethically through the extensive use of collusion, coercion, lobbyists and political connections. A description of modern day Silicon Valley titans? No, actually this was the description of the practices of John D. Rockefeller's company Standard Oil in the late 1800s by one of the pioneers of investigative journalism, Ida Tarbell.

Tarbell's father was one of the victims of the Cleveland Massacre, the Standard Oil takeover of oil refineries in 1872 via a collusive scheme with the major railroads of the era. The robber barons of the Gilded Age — foremost including Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, Cornelius Vanderbilt and John Rockefeller — fell to Tarbell's rapacious onslaught, and eventually public support for the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. Standard Oil was broken into so-called baby Standards after a 1911 U.S. Supreme Court case.

The information age has ushered us into a similar gilded age, with many parallels of a century ago. The mass surveillance of our society, and the inexpensive cost of prediction, has led to companies harvesting human experience, correlating that with behaviour, and turning that into predictions. Unsurprisingly, this has led to the next step which is the manipulation of behaviour for economic gain. As Prof. Shoshana Zuboff has defined it in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, it's "a parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioural modification."

It's now come to the point that if we wish to participate in this new economic order, we must expose our underbelly to this new threat — the confluence of an unregulated market driven economy, with the post 9/11 continuous threat assessment of the surveillance state. We have become so dependent on the internet for modern life that we don't recognize the same conduit is being used to gather numerous unrelated data points, which when aggregated and analyzed by artificial intelligence, allow an unprecedented degree of predictability, and the next step of subliminal nudges to push us to profitable actions. But not profitable for us. Our democracy itself depends on our free will, conscience and critical judgement. The Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal of 2018 involved the nonconsensual harvesting the data of 50 million users to make psychographic profiles on U.S voters to allow the Trump presidential campaign of 2016 to target swing voters.

As hopeless as Ida Tarbell felt in the late 1800s, she used the power of civic journalism to inform and mobilize public opinion. Just as we have the power to allow surveillance, we can stop it. As Zuboff describes, "Surveillance capitalism's products and services are not the objects of a value exchange, they do not establish constructive producer-consumer reciprocities." The adage, "if it's free, you are being sold to" expresses that we must be willing and able to pay for services rendered. The use of encrypted email in our personal and business lives will deny others the right to data-mine and harvest our thoughts and lives. We must demand that companies we hire have clear terms of use and a clear description of their full data cycle- what do they collect, why, where is it stored, and when will it be disposed of. We need to engage with our legislators to strengthen the laws that protect our information.

In the province of Ontario, the Personal Health Information Protection Act of 2004 is currently being updated and we must be informed and advocate for better data laws. The Competition Act in Canada is the oldest antitrust law in the western hemisphere, even older than the U.S. Sherman Act of 1890. It does not have modern teeth to allow our government to do to the new class of robber barons what was done a century ago.

Above all we must be vigilant to the threats we face as a society. Revenue generated from Canadians must be taxed domestically to fund the services we receive. Domestic industries must be protected from non-level playing fields. And in the era of COVID-19, we need to understand the geopolitical challenges we face for our businesses and society to thrive. The benefits of the information age must be available for all, as Tiff Macklem said, "Uneven outcomes for some can lead to poorer outcomes for all." If this grand experiment of Canadian democracy is to survive, we must recognize both the challenges and opportunities that await us.
