

Chapter 4

Big Brothers Are Seducing You: Consumerism, Surveillance, and the Agency of Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Internet technologies have empowered consumers, giving them access to any information, allowing them to compare products against one another before they decide to buy. And when the product disappoints them, they can easily spread their disappointment. They have even the possibility to mobilize themselves to force businesses to comply to their demand. However, the corporations that provide the technologies are also the ones that continually surveil and create detailed profile of each individual consumer. It allows businesses that use these data to better seduce consumers to want and desire many things that they actually do not need. While there are concerns that consumers are vulnerable to informational manipulation, on the internet consumers are not passive audience. On the contrary, they can challenge businesses in many ways. Consumers can be surveilled by businesses, but the former can also put the latter under their collective social surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

Big brother is watching you. No, big brothers are watching you. It is not one, but can be many big brothers that are watching you. The number of big brothers depends on how many of them you invite to surveil you. Yes, it is you yourself that invite them. It is you who let them put yourself under their looking glass in exchange for comfort and pleasure. Indeed, these big brothers are not the Orwellian villain who is devoid of any goodness. They constantly monitor you to know you personally as a unique individual, so that they can maximize serving you.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8491-9.ch004

So, welcome to the era of surveillance capitalism, an era you cannot avoid if you cannot live without making continual digital connection. It is an inevitable world when most of the people you know are being digitally socialized. You will be left out by your social networks if you stubbornly remain analogue.

Don't worry. The surveillance capitalism will not put you in the Orwellian world. You will not be forced to obey anyone's command. On the contrary, you will get much more freedom than what you already have in your actual life. They will put all information in the world at your finger tips, they allow you to create your own world with friends you can freely select, or they will allow you to easily make any transaction, find you suitable friends, or lead you through unknown territory. So, there is nothing to worry?

Many people, most of them scholars, do really worry that you are not immune, or even are vulnerable, to informational manipulation. By allowing the providers of free services to constantly surveil you, you allow them to hack your inner self, to program you to want and desire many things that you actually do not need. They have a sophisticated form of power over you, because they are capable of "inducing compliance by influencing desires and beliefs" (Lukes, 2005, p. 136). By constantly monitoring you, they may know some aspects of you better than you know yourself, and manipulate you by providing information that suits your personal data. Being manipulated, you will not feel coerced, you may even see your new wants and desires as the characteristics of the identity you aspire to be. For the users of your personal data are mostly businesses, they will have greater capability to convince you to be their consumer. You may then develop the belief that your identity and lifestyle are supposed to be expressed in and your happiness also relies on the consumption of consumer goods they offer (Featherstone, 2007). Businesses always seek to make you their loyal, and even greedy, consumers.

This chapter will discuss how the current Internet technologies have empowered both consumers and businesses. These technologies have shifted the power toward consumers, and given them easy access to product choices and information. They can easily compare product offerings from different businesses, and can easily spread their disappointment when they are disappointed by the latter. These technologies have intensified competition among businesses. But, they have also the opportunity to continually surveil, and then manipulate and exploit consumers' consumption and desire to consume. The current technological development may not necessarily result in businesses exploiting consumers or the other way around. But, generally consumers can be more consumptive, and may consume much more than what they truly need.

Capitalist Pursuit of Endless Growth

Capitalism, being driven by profit motives and competition, pursues growth endlessly. The profit motives encourage businesses to grow, and to grow they have to win the competition, otherwise they will be wiped out by their competitors. The need to grow has forced businesses to continuously innovate, develop new technologies, supply new products or creating something new in different parts of value chain, which in turn will affect various aspects of social life. "Not only the modern mechanized plant and the volume of the output that pours forth from it, not only modern technology and economic organization, but all the features and achievements of modern civilization are, directly or indirectly, the products of the capitalist process" (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 125).

Capitalist system can only run properly if the production side of the system is balanced by its consumption side. Technological progress has incessantly increased production capacity. Rather than slowing technological progress and adapting production system to the existing consumption capacity of

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