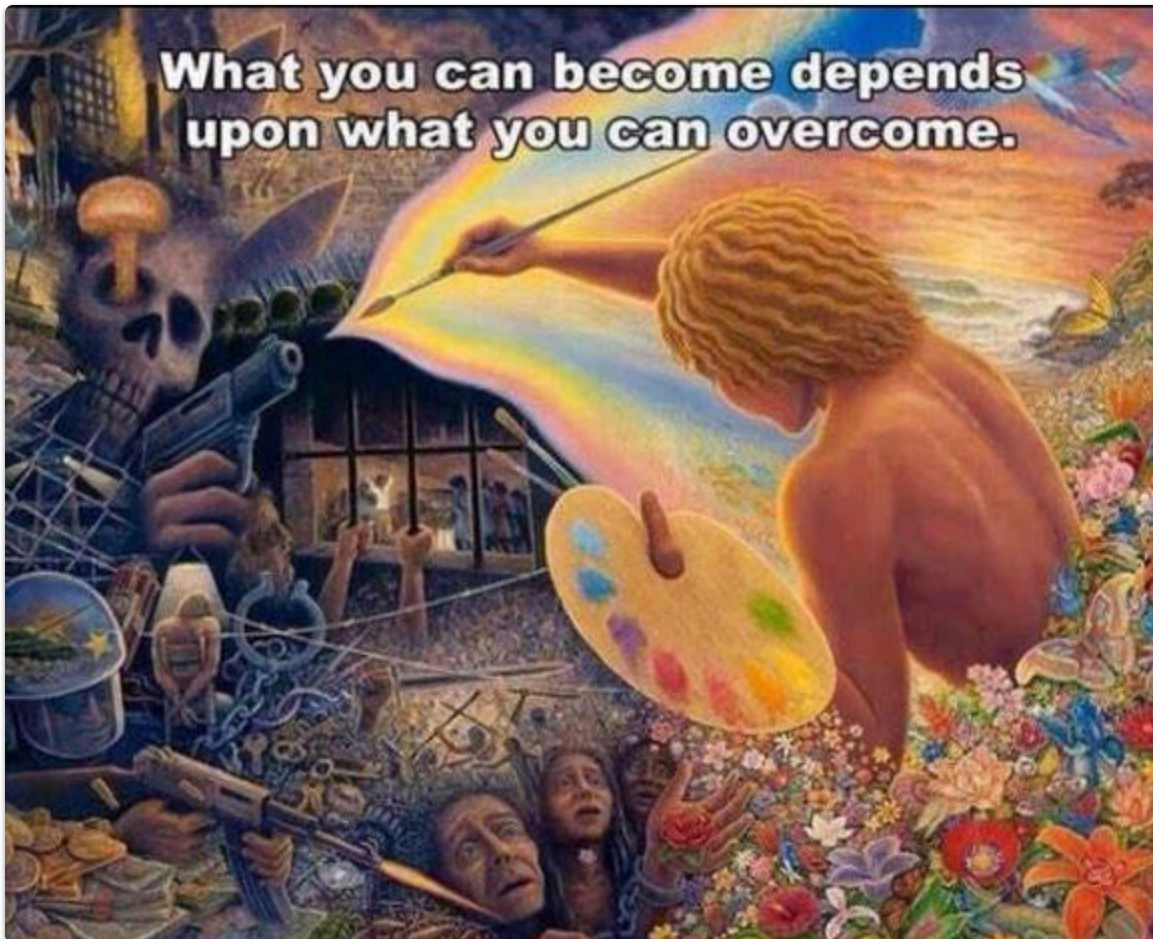


The Power of Awareness: Overcoming Surveillance Capitalism



Much of this presentation is about slightly altering our thinking. How we think can have a big impact on what we wish to see in the world.



It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism - an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything

— Hannah Arendt

Why did I include this quote?

I see divisiveness of not wanting to believe in anything.

Can we agree that the world needs healing right now?

Warning

In my attempt to make the argument that unrestricted surveillance capitalism can be used as a tool to usher in a movement of Authoritarianism, **some of this material might be psychologically disturbing.**

Under the right conditions, like the conditions we are seeing today, destructive concentration of power can happen in any political party, though it may take on different forms.

Who Am I

- I'm Scott Larson. I am a computer professional who has been serving Santa Rosa and the surrounding areas.
 - I started helping people with computer technology independently in 2007.
 - I write about the benefits and weaknesses of various forms of technology and its philosophical underpinnings.
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My Story

Hip Hop Is Read

TUESDAY, APRIL 24, 2012

"The Secret Meeting that Changed Rap Music and Destroyed a Generation"

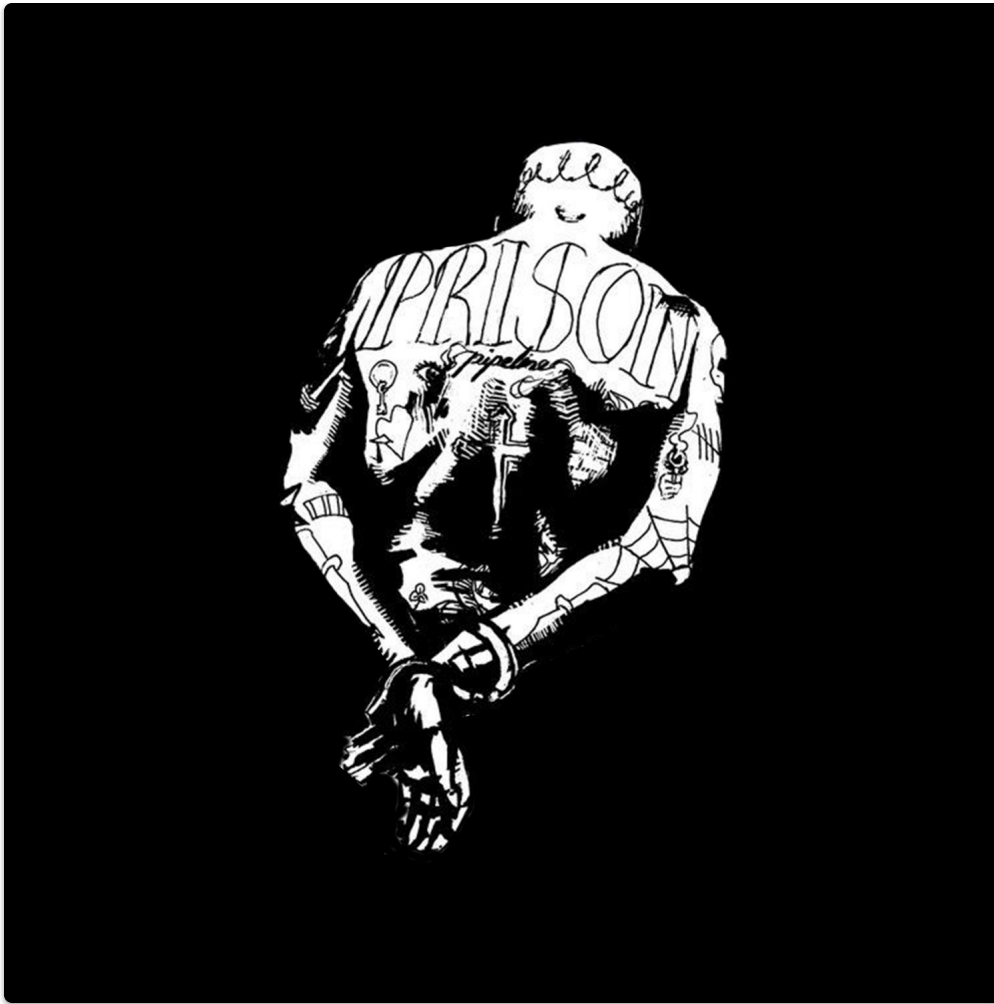
This anonymous letter landed in my inbox about a minute ago:

“ Hello,

After more than 20 years, I've finally decided to tell the world what I witnessed in 1991, which I believe was one of the biggest turning point in popular music, and ultimately American society. I have struggled for a long time weighing the pros and cons of making this story public as I was reluctant to implicate the individuals who were present that day. So I've simply decided to leave out names and all the details that may risk my personal well being and that of those who were, like me, dragged into something they weren't ready for.

The Secret Meeting that Changed Rap Music and Destroyed a Generation

About 20 years ago, I read an [article](#) from a Hip Hop blogger that received an anonymous letter about a clandestine meeting between music industry executives and promoters.



The author of the letter was thrown out of the meeting for expressing hostility to a plan of artificially elevating gangster rap over other hip-hop music with the goal of creating a prison pipeline that some of the top music execs we're invested in.

ALISHA LOLA JONES

“The Music Industry Funds Private Prisons”: Analyzing Hip-Hop Urban Legend

“Our people speak to the myth.”
—A. A. Rashid, griot

Article headline about record labels actively recruiting Black men with criminal records to record rap

Now, this story is mostly considered an urban myth. But if you look at the history of the private prison system, there are similarities to that timeline of events.



hurrakaingvc • 9y ago

I'm not a conspiracy guy but being a fan of rap since the 80's I recently had a conversation with a friend how around this time period diversity in rap on the mainstream level disappeared and it all became "gantsta rap". The era just before this there were party type rappers like Young MC or Tone Loc, Political type rappers like BDP or Public Enemy, story tellers like Slick Rick or Rakim, and several other examples of successful rappers that were more than just guns and drugs. I always found it weird that over the years those voices that were different and not talking about the same old topics had harder times breaking through and making it big. If it was just skill and musical quality rappers like Talib Kweli, MF Doom, and Brother Ali would be much bigger than they are.

👍 7 🗨 Reply ...

Reddit comment about the "Secret Meeting" story

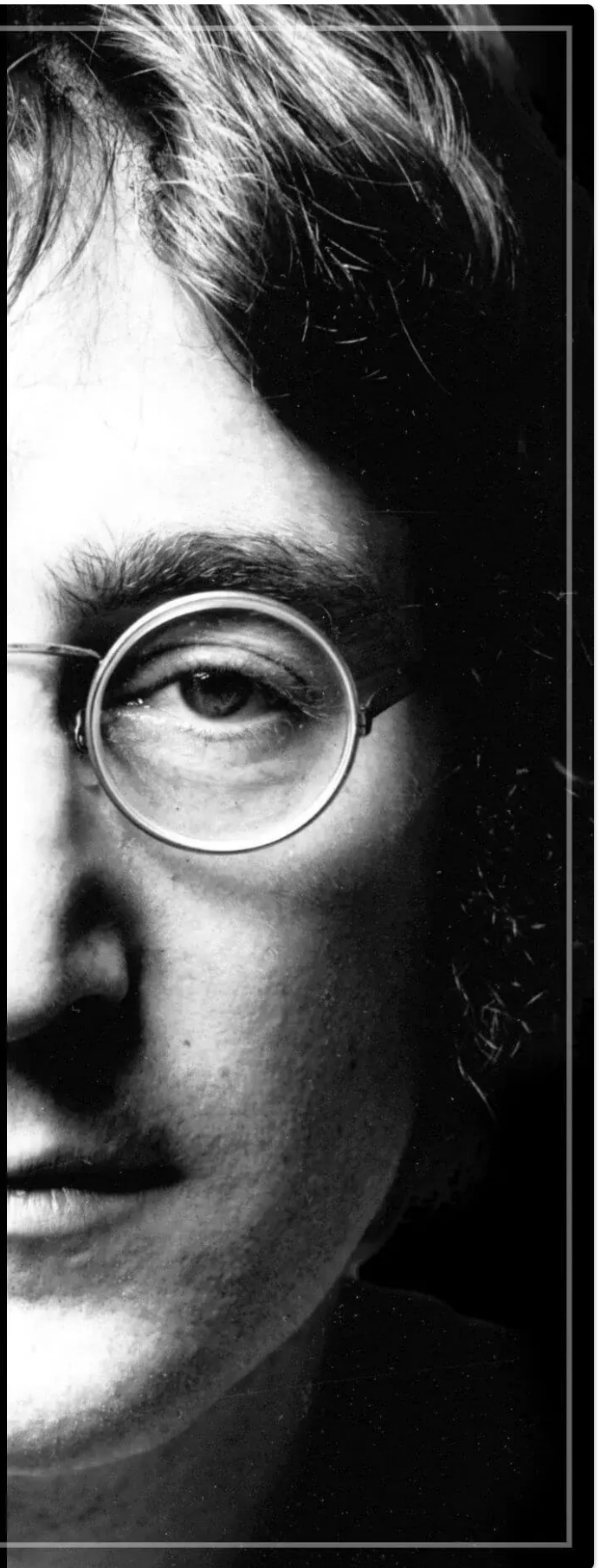
This Reddit commentor in 2019 agreed that something was off during that time period. Other commentors from that time tell a similar story.



Queensryche Operation Mindcrime Music Video

Looking at my troubled young adult years, this Rap Music story reminds me of the music that influenced me. I wonder if my understanding of the world was shaped by the music I listened to.

**IMAGINE
ALL THE
PEOPLE
LIVING
LIFE IN
PEACE
AND
SHARING
ALL THE
WORLD.**



Presentation Research: Music as a generational way to express the difficulties of our time. As an aside, are we lacking political music in our current era?



This story, true or not, reminds me of what is happening with the pervasive parts of technology. Always-online systems and services gather data, and this data is slowly used to shape society without our knowledge or consent.



The Watergate Scandal

March 1971: Daniel Ellsberg, released the Pentagon Papers. Nixon used his position to go after him and cover it up. Nixon resigned after public pressure.

**NEWS**

TRUMP WANTS GREENLAND 'ONE WAY OR ANOTHER!'

News Photo: Trump on Greenland

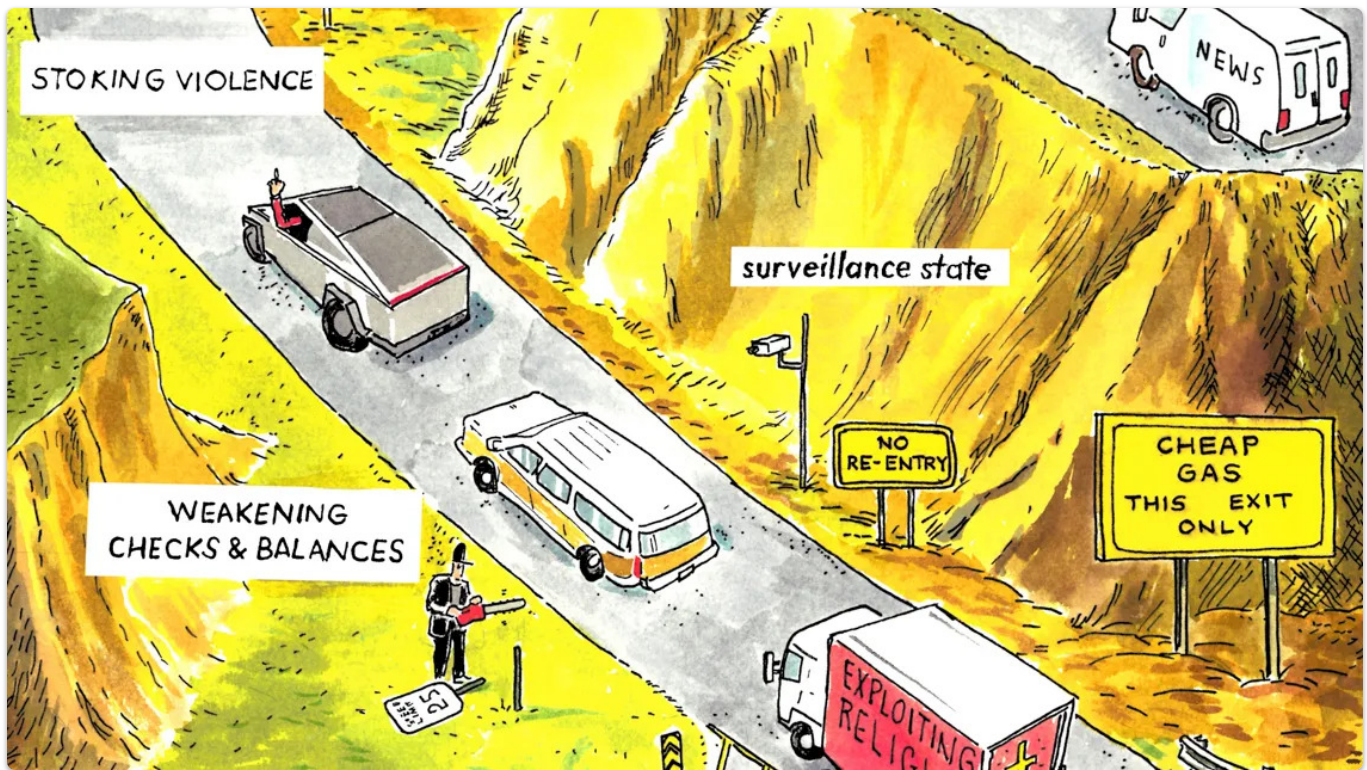
NOW: We have an administration that, as far as I can tell, is operating unlawfully with complete impunity. And neither party in congress is willing to stop it.



Think about where we're are right now
...to where we were fifty years ago.



Consumerism has slowly taken over our way of life. Now we are confronted with an Authoritarian political and financial system that works together to disenfranchise its own people.



Consumerism has been impacting society slowly over time for the last 50 years. With our limited understanding of how this data is used, we have been largely driving down this road unaware.

Ethics of technology



Ethics of technology relates to:

- **Hardware/Software Design Impact:** How our choices and behavior become effected by the design and implementation of technology (Is technology being designed to prevent

choice?).

- **Human-technology relations Impact:** How technology impacts social relationships (Example: are there surveillance aspects of technology that cause a fear of speaking out?)
-

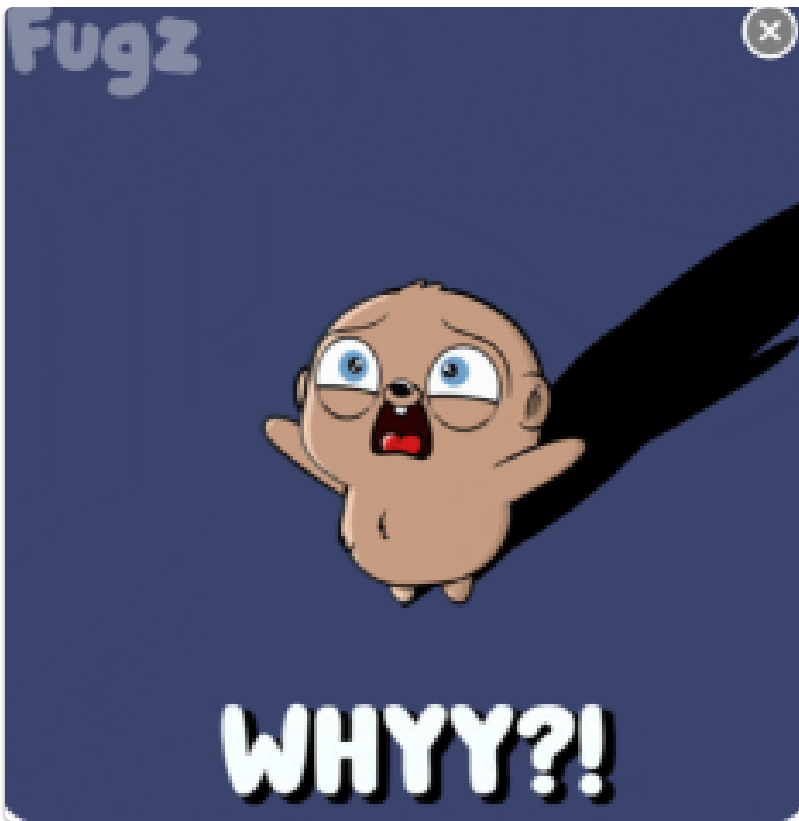
In my profession I:

- **Perform risk assessments of technology:** When I find harmful features I recommend competing alternatives, or provide a report to my customers on my concerns
 - **Observe how technology shapes human behavior:** I write about how harmful technology impacts culture and human agency
-



- **First-party** = companies like Google or Amazon that offer influence-related services to organizations that want to advertise to consumers (You)
 - **Second-party** = Advertisers, or any institution that pays a First-party to gather data for profit
 - **Third-party** = Consumers
-

Why am I doing this?



(good question, LoL JK)

-
- **Freedom:** I like being free to decide what I want to see on my computer; by extension, I want my customers to also have that choice (Currently that's not the case)
 - **Responsibility:** I want technology to be designed around principles that benefits humanity, not destroys it. I want society to have a say in how our technology progresses

-
- **I care about my daughter's future:** I want to do something about this for the future generation.
 - **Making my life harder:** It's more difficult to support my customers' objectives when technology is designed specifically to obscure choice to push people into harmful/unwelcome products and services later on when you are unaware

I have been noticing trends



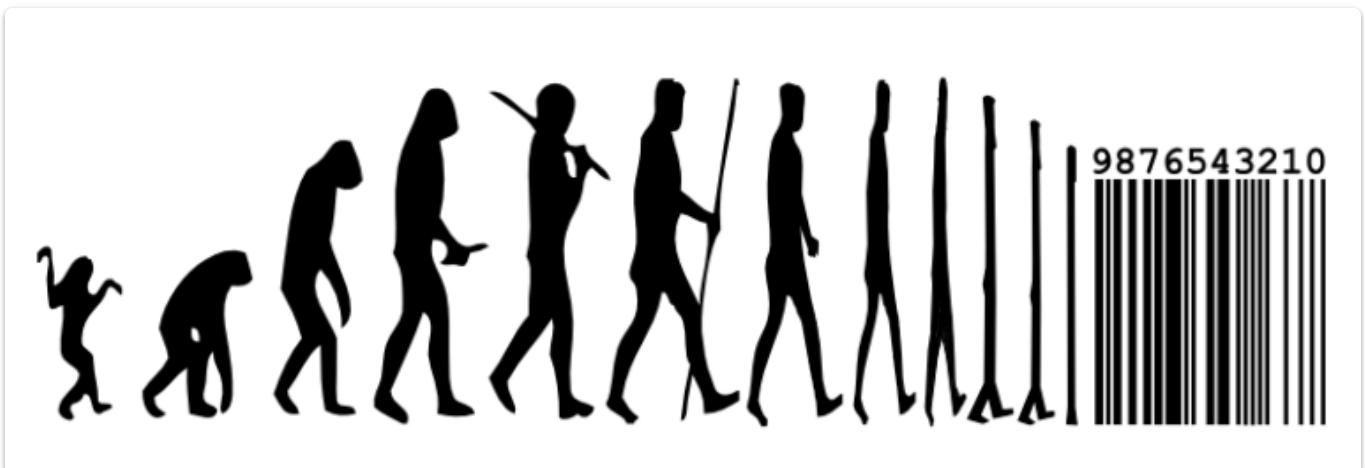
Enshitification happens when the customer becomes the product. When attention and information is sold as a product the user experience morphs from something useful to something exploitative.

Trend 1: You are no longer the customer (Even though by all appearances it looks that way)



Predatory pricing is an illegal antitrust business strategy where a firm deliberately sets its prices extremely low, often at a loss, to drive existing competitors out of the market or deter new entrants

Trend 2: Many modern devices are designed with data capture capabilities. This enables manufacturers to operate at a loss harming small businesses who develop safe competing technologies.



Trend 3: These data-capturing abilities can be used to elicit reactions causing divisiveness with the goal of commodifying our attention

Now unlocked: You're eligible for a free upgrade to Windows 11

Don't worry—you'll be able to use your PC while the download runs in the background (it's about 4 GB)

Get it

Schedule it

No thanks?

Trend 3 Example: We spend energy fighting unwanted features and processes, with those processes being used as data-gathering points of reference to decide how much a person will tolerate

What I don't like about modern technologies



- **Smart technologies:** Many are designed to steal attention, reduce our ability to understand relationships between our technology, each other, and the world

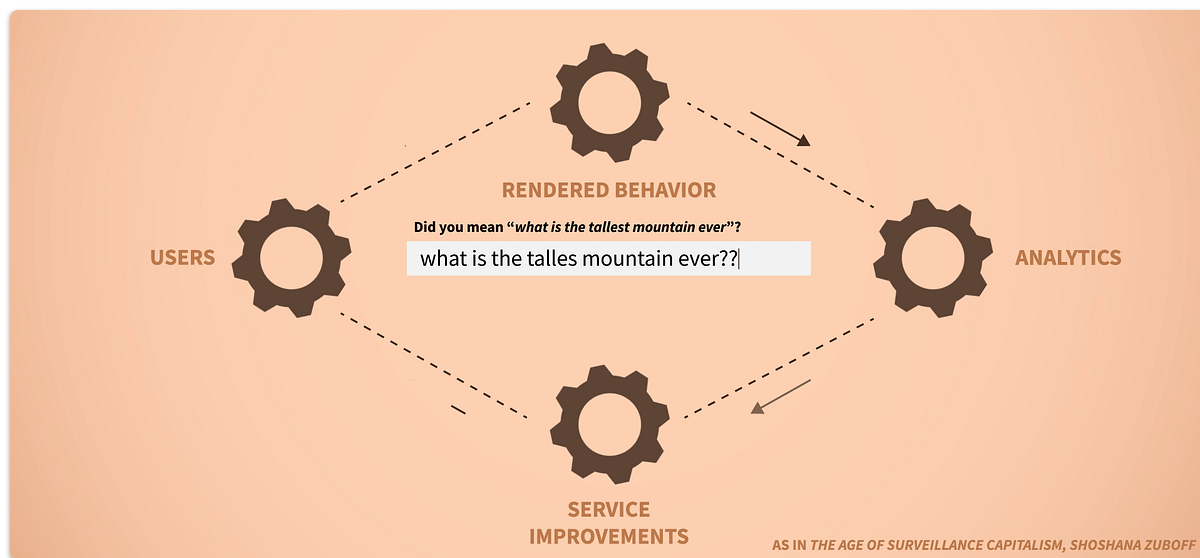
- Companies are **using adversarial incentives** in hardware design to mine data from private life knowing that it degrades society

- These attention stealing methods remain hidden behind End User License Agreements(*Consumer Impacting*) and Non-Disclosure Contracts(*Minimizes Whistle blowing*). Makes determining motives difficult.

What is Surveillance Capitalism?

A business model that mines behavioral data to be packaged into "prediction products". This data eventually ends up in the hands of commercial predators to influence society for commercial gain.

Key Aspects of Surveillance Capitalism



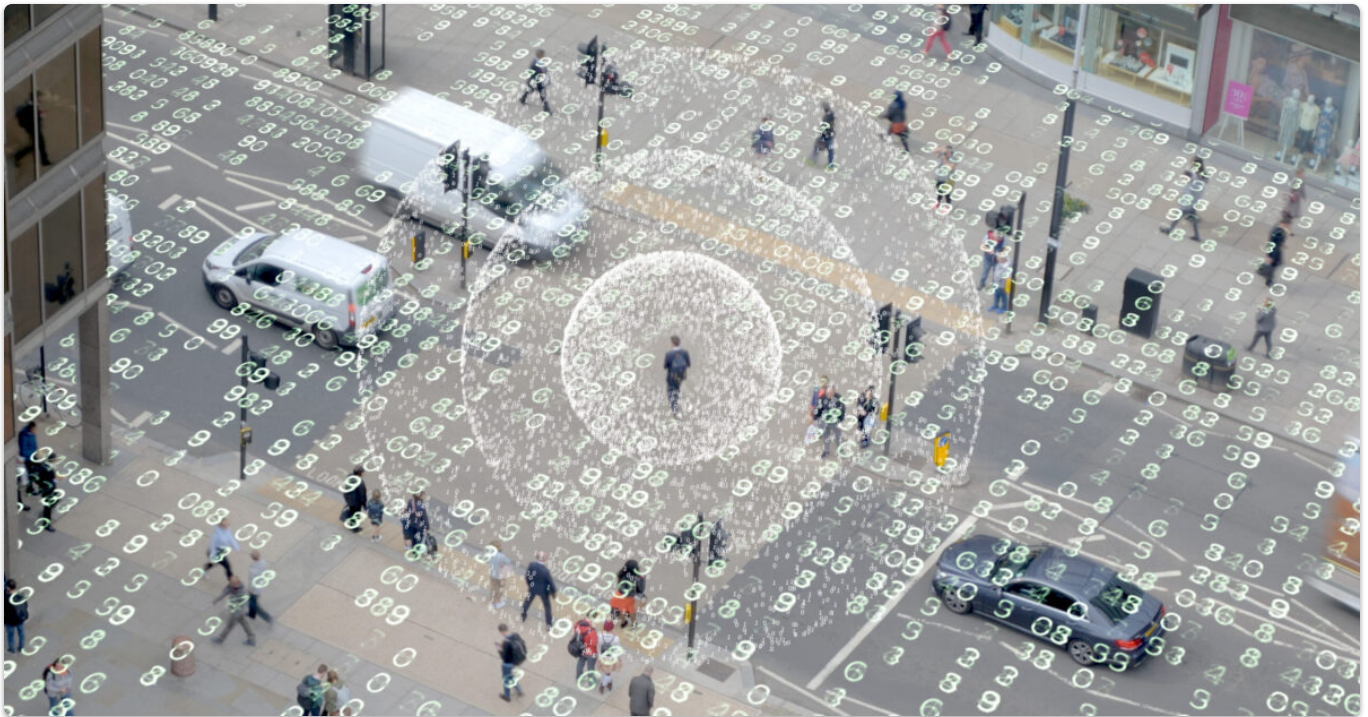
Behavioral Prediction: Companies like Google and Facebook collect behavioral metadata from activity online.



Focusing on patterns that reveal information about a user's habits which is then used later to fingerprint individuals. The goal is to predict future choices and behaviors.



Behavioral Modification: Beyond predicting, this model often seeks to nudge or modify user behavior for commercial gain, such as driving consumers to specific locations or products.
(Minor Example)



Ubiquitous Surveillance: Data is harvested not just from online searches, but from smartphones, smart home devices, and wearables.



Deliberate Non-Transparency: Typically corporations will hide this illegal activity by not disclosing how their products gather data, leaving users in the dark. Once the damage is done it's next to impossible to obtain remedy.



Examples of damage range from bad actors using purchased data to scam victims, to steering election results by gaming social media.



Surveillance Capitalism is often described as an "knowledge coup" undermining personal privacy and potentially threatening democratic values by favoring financial interests over individual autonomy.

Digital Breadcrumbs/Metadata



-
- These systems **don't necessarily capture your personal information**, like name and phone number, to track you (which is how they get around most privacy laws).
 - **Instead**, they build profiles based on your behavior patterns and use that as a fingerprint to engage with you when you are interacting with any of these products or services.
-

Famous example: It was found that a teenager purchased pregnancy products around the beginning of her second trimester.

A prediction model was used to build a profile of her pregnancy. That system was used to mail maternity related advertisements before she told her family she was pregnant.

Current applications of this technology

Cost Subsidies: Marketing to powerful advertising companies is one of the ways costs are subsidized to the consumer. Many products are built and deployed by any company wishing to

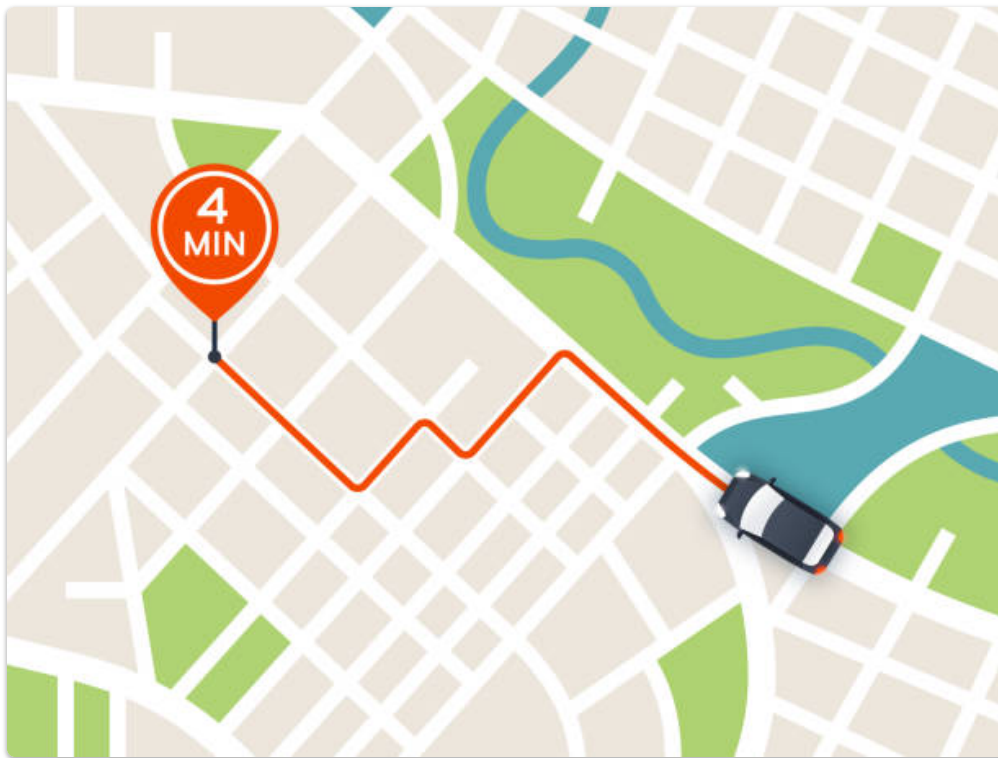
know more about their customers which is why the cost of many technologies over the years are increasingly sold at a loss.

Harmful: Creates artificial pricing decreases which has the opposite effect of making competing product prices higher, consolidating power amongst bad actors in the market.

The primary focus of designing harmful products is to increase the types and amounts of data collecting inputs

Harmful: Products are not designed specifically with your interests in mind. This increases the likelihood that products are designed against your wishes or needs, A feature might be taken away after the purchase, decreasing your freedom and control over the products and services you purchase.

Benefits of this Technology

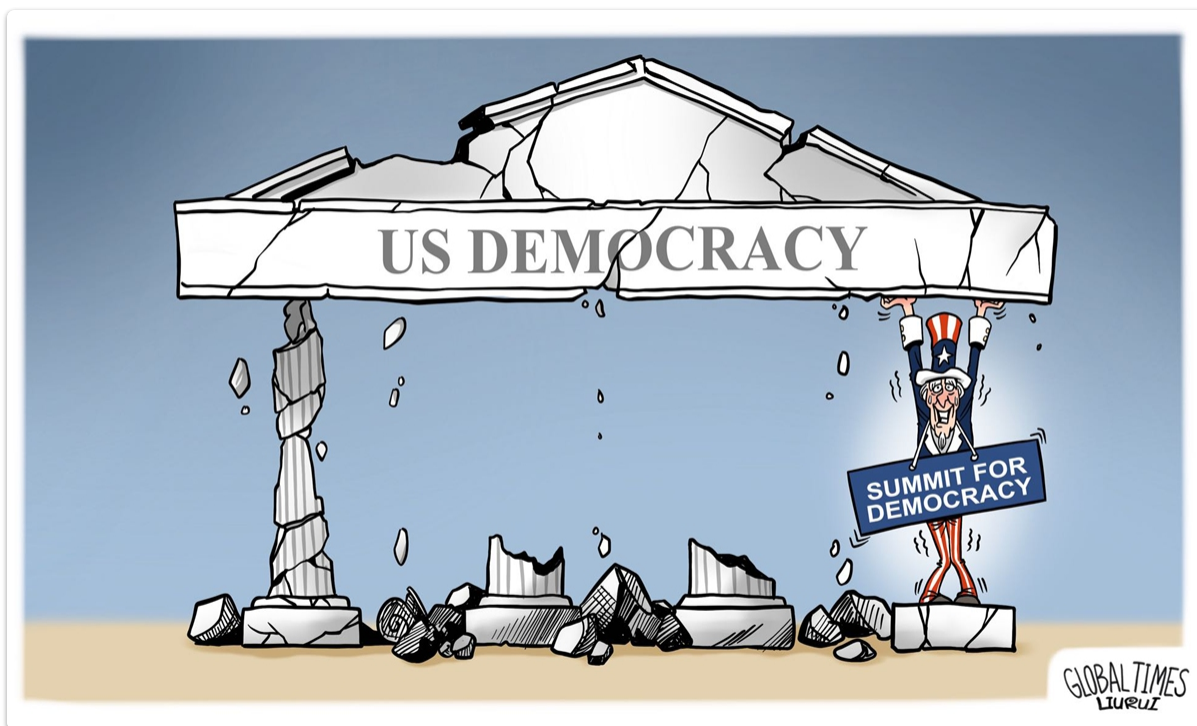


There are some good side effects of these practices: A good example of a possible trade off is driving directions. Mapping service use mobile phones to gauge traffic jams and providing alternative routes.

But many of these harmful practices involve **selling metadata to advertisers**, devaluing purchasing power and **negatively impacting agency**.

In the long run, when profiles of each customer are created to track future habits, those profiles can be used to take away the power of society. When the product focus is on improving the ability to extract information from society rather than developing new products that improve society, **we are all harmed**.

Closing Thoughts (Awareness and Empowerment)



Unless we have real representation in our government. Companies **don't** have vested interest in protecting privacy.

Your behavior becomes the resource for first-party companies to design democracy-harming products and keep efforts in the dark about how it shapes our society.



With the right information about behavior, first-party companies can sell their prediction products to governments and political candidates to destabilize online discourse and steer elections.



Because these companies don't share what they are doing with this data or how they are developing these products, it takes mistakes from these bad actors to learn how this technology progresses over time.



If you want to understand how democracy can be shaped in a harmful way over time, see the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal in the pamphlet for more information about this 2012 data breach.

What we can do

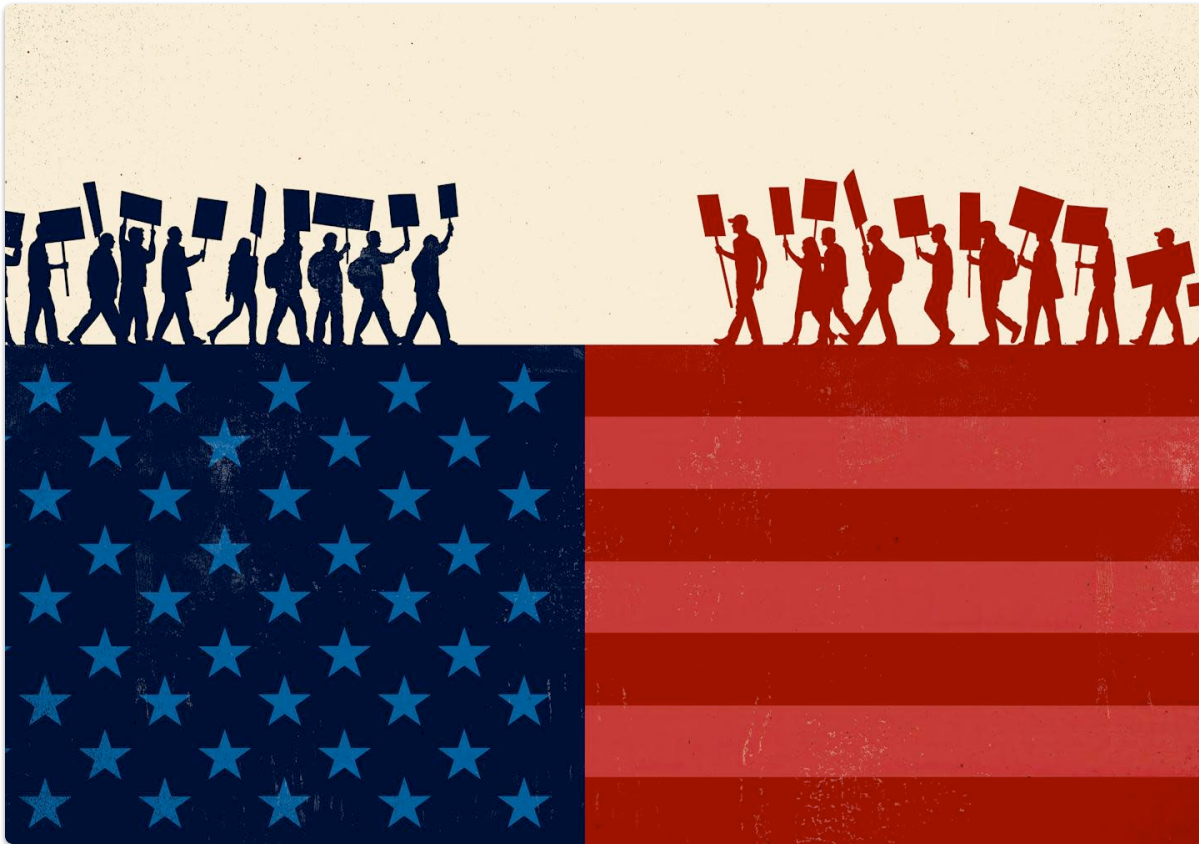
Behavioral Awareness

Ultimately, these harms are brought about by our cultural pathologies. Here are some psychological profiles that I think keep these problems going.

Note

Many of these profiles are cultural problems. They are not easy to resolve. But by changing our behavior, little by little, on an individual level, we can slowly shift the balance.

See the Pamphlet for more information on these topics.



Externalizing Responsibility: Refuse to blame other people, parties or systems. Accept responsibility for our part in the problem through our actions or inactions.

Social Norms Acquiescence: Going along with cultural norms that put you in a divisive position of being right and others being wrong, to dominate a person or situation.



Sentimental Behavior Indulgence: Feeding off of outrage emotionally as a way to feel like something is being done, while outwardly doing nothing to decrease the level of harm.

Action might look different for each individual. We all come from different walks of life and have different skill sets.



Responding to National or Regional calls for safety: Calls to support initiatives, or bills to increase security at the expense of freedom, make us less safe. Trading security for freedom reduces our ability to act.

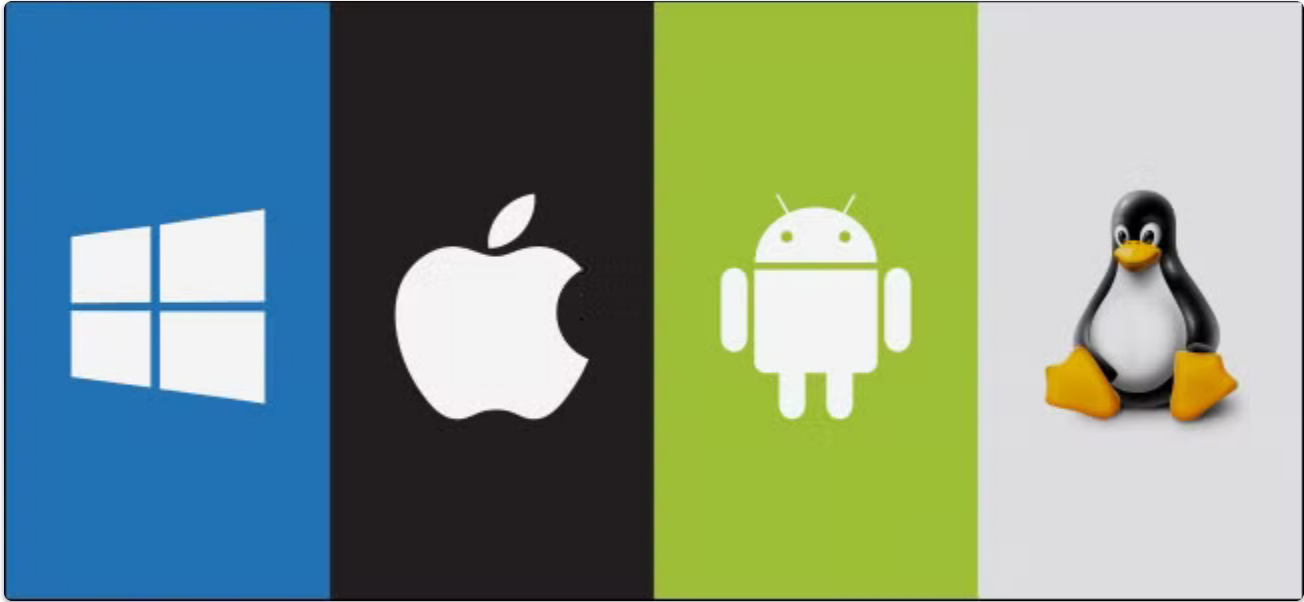
Giving away our power to act over to people or institutions that may have agendas that run contrary to our own might not be in the best interests of a free society

Exercise Choice



I'm a firm believer that the tools we use shape how we relate to the world.
We can decide to stick with tools that circumvent our will to act, or try something new and empowering.

One of those tools is the software that runs on your computer called the **Operating System**.



- Currently, the **Microsoft Windows Operating System** has a monopoly on the PC market, but that's changing. **Open Source**, Free software (as in Freedom-generating) like **Linux** has come a long way.
- The **Linux Operating System** works like Windows or MacOS, without all the junk. Its designed from user-centered and choice perspective.



- Recently, Microsoft and Apple have been designing new versions of Windows and MacOS with AI features.
- In my experience, the way these AI features are designed and forcibly deployed take away user control.

Certain technologies driven by AI improve many aspects of our lives, especially in the medical industry.

But without transparency, we don't have a say in how these technologies impact our lives.

Awareness





Our psychological blind spots can often prevent us from seeing a problem. We don't want to believe our lives are exploitable.

The organizations that engage in harvesting data usually have incentives to operate in the dark despite our inability to see what's right in front of us, to keep the money flowing.



Knowledge is power: Voicing our concerns with others is powerful. I encourage each of us not to buy into the politically correct belief that we **can't** talk about these important topics with one another.

The view that everything is a political ideology is pushed onto society to keep us divided and prevents our ability to organize.

At the same time, discourse should be respectful. Having beliefs doesn't make it right to assume we have all the answers and impose them on others. We need to listen to each other with curiosity, rather than wanting to change each other's viewpoints.

DEMOCRACY IS **NOT** FOR SALE

END CITIZENS UNITED

To properly hold these companies accountable and steer them in the right direction, we need a stronger focus on **ending Citizens United**, and we need active **enforcement of antitrust laws**.

See the pamphlet for more information on organizations you can support to help make these initiatives happen.



It's been my experience that persistence in supporting a better world, through action, will eventually yield results.

We can't rely on government initiatives to do that for us, especially now; we each need to invest time in making the world a better place if we want to see improvements.

Conclusion

- Data gathering is a complex problem because we receive many benefits from these technologies in society.
 - With the recent lawlessness in our political and corporate institutions, I'm starting to wonder if the benefits are worth the trade-offs.
-

If you are interested in learning more about gaining Freedom with the technology you use, please scan the QR code on the pamphlet, and I can keep you up to date on future events.

Reflections and Questions

- How does this make you feel?

If you can reflect on how you feel about this, we are already making progress.

- What are some things this tech might be able to predict about you?
- If we don't like it, what kinds of life changes need to happen?
- This is not an inevitable extension of Capitalism, but a specific mutation that requires our voice to shape it.