

SOCIETY IN THE SHACKLES OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

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Abstract. The rapid development of information and communications technologies has changed the lives of both - society as a whole and individuals in it. The world is becoming a huge system for gathering, storing, and sharing information. Large amounts of data are collected, stored, analysed, and used for commercial purposes. Prominent American sociologist Shoshana Zuboff calls this process "surveillance capitalism." This paper aims to analyse the tools of surveillance capitalism and the influence of surveillance capitalism on public choices and behaviour. It is based on empirical information collected using several research methods - a survey (n = 204), semi-structured interviews (n = 5), and qualitative content analysis. The paper analyses three popular surveillance capitalists' online tools - Google search, Facebook, and Twitter and gives insights into society's preferences and behaviour patterns concerning ways of obtaining information and attitudes towards privacy and self-censorship. The research concludes that the tools created by surveillance capitalists have become an integral part of social life, and they dominate the process of interaction. They make life easier but their uncritical acceptance can be dangerous. Since surveillance capitalism has taken the stage, society members often uncritically, even ignorantly, treat current reality in which the everydayness data about user's life are the free raw material for surveillance capitalists, thus contributing to surveillance capitalism and its threats to defined privacy principles and democracy.

Keywords: surveillance capitalism, online tools, society's attitudes and behaviour, privacy.

JEL code: L82, P12, O31, O33.

Introduction

Only a few things in human history have had the potential to radically change society and its habits, affecting existing economic and social structures. Some believe that currently, we are witnessing such drastic change caused by information and communications technologies (ICT) and the consequent hyper-connectivity. Everything and everyone are connected, and this hyper-connectivity creates an unprecedented amount of data that is collected, stored, analysed, and used for commercial purposes beyond imaginable. Prominent American sociologist Shoshana Zuboff calls this process "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff S., 2019a). The concept of surveillance capitalism is new, and so far, there have not been many studies on how it influences societal choices and behaviour. Due to its omnipresence, somewhere beneath the layers of the algorithmic machines of surveillance capitalism may lie new forms of potential violations of human rights, new forms of exploitation, and large-scale manipulation mechanisms that affect billions of people every day.

The aim of the paper is to analyse how surveillance capitalism influences society's choices and behaviour through popular online tools and services. It is based on the empirical research conducted in 2020 and 2021 in Latvia and Germany. In order to obtain the maximum range of data, several research methods have been used. A qualitative content analysis of three online tools and services of surveillance capitalists, namely Google Search Tool, Facebook social network, and Twitter microblogging site, was performed. From the average user's perspective, possible factors were analysed for how and why each of these tools may influence user preferences or habits. Survey (n=204) was used to search for common trends in societal habits and behaviour patterns in the settings of surveillance capitalism. Furthermore, finally, to supplement information from the analysis of the survey data, semi-structured interviews (n=5) were conducted to get some additional information to the survey data to provide a more detailed understanding of the behaviour, attitudes, norms, and beliefs of the respondents. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse the

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obtained data. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data processing. Chi-Square test was performed to find relationships among variables, and Kruskal- Wallis Test to identify differences between different groups of respondents.

This study has its limitations due to the size of the sample and the limited resources. However, it gives a sneak peek into the problem. The information generated from this study can inform researchers about what has not yet been sufficiently explored and stakeholders about what may be important to consider when taking steps or interventions to limit specific aspects of surveillance capitalism.

Research results and discussion

1. Conceptualization of surveillance capitalism

By the 1990s, information technology had infiltrated virtually all industries and government sectors. Drucker's concept of the "knowledge economy" (Drucker P. 1969) was widely discussed among researchers. At the beginning of the next decade, when all kinds of social networks have been taken the World by the storm, Manuel Castells argued that information technology has led to a new 'network logic' of social organization. He called it "network society" (Castells M., 1996). Webster took another approach and called it "information society" (Webster F., 2006). All these newly created concepts portrayed the development of ICTs mostly with positive optimism. However, the far-reaching social, economic, and political changes caused by fast-growing ICT firms such as Facebook or Google started to raise some concerns. Several scholars started to refer to the process of commodification of information, audience data extraction, and surveillance as "information capitalism" (Parayil G., 2005; Rigi J., 2014). By the end of the second decade of the XXI century, information capitalism "*dominated the production and flow of information across the globe*" (Ellenwood D., 2019).

To describe the new reality, Zuboff proposed a new concept - surveillance capitalism – "*a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction prediction, and sales; a parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioural modification; a rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; the origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy*" (Zuboff S., 2019a). Although the logics of surveillance capitalism was started by Google and Facebook, Zuboff stresses that "*just as surveillance capitalism can no longer be conflated with an individual corporation, neither should it be conflated with technology*" (Zuboff S., 2019b). Thus, a surveillance capitalist is any company whose business logic involves the secret or open collection and commodification of users' everydayness data.

The concept of influence can take many forms but in the context of this study, influence is understood as the ability to change or shape society's behaviour, attitudes, and accepted norms. Therefore, it was assumed as a fact that until the end of the 20th century, the social order in Western democracies was based on capitalism, where the raw materials of production were bought and sold, and the misappropriation of such raw materials was a crime. It was also assumed that in these societies, every individual had the right to personal autonomy and the right to decide for himself or herself whether or not to take certain actions to gain or share certain experiences. Finally, the premise was accepted that any form of censorship, including self-censorship, was not normal in Western democracies. Consequently, the change in attitudes towards the right to privacy, censorship, and the basic principle of capitalism illustrates the change in society's choices and habits.

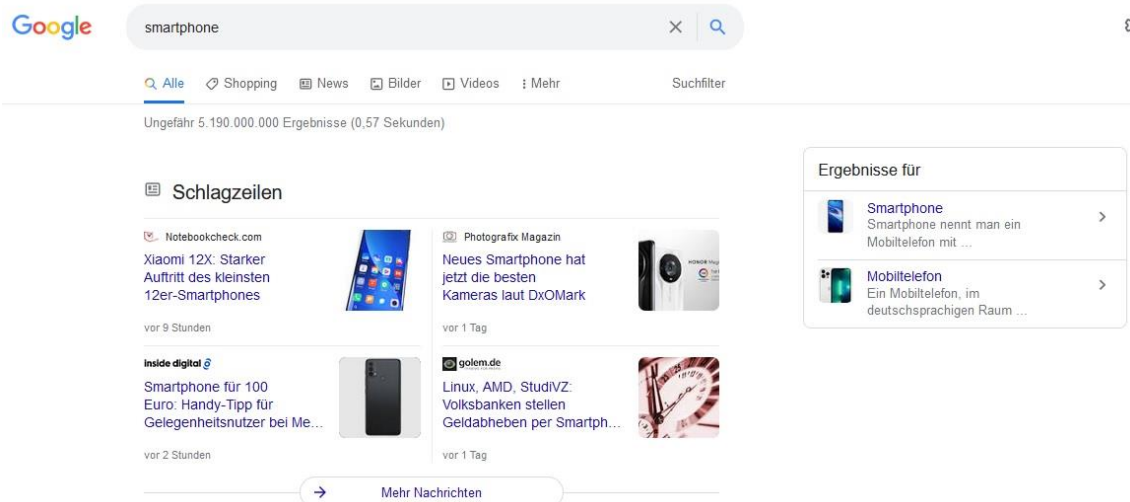
2. Analysis of online tools of surveillance capitalism

Computerized data collection is no longer special - it has become ubiquitous. Some areas of public life are already undergoing rapid change, while others are less visible but, in both cases, there is no going back. The Internet is combined with smart machines to create a sophisticated network. The world is becoming a huge system for gathering, storing, and sharing information. Google has done something similar to what Henry Ford did in the early 20th century: a new, dominant form of capitalism has been created that includes digital technology and ubiquitous data collection as an integral part (Zuboff S., 2019a). The competitive dynamics of surveillance capitalism require ever better and better behavioural prediction products, which can be obtained not only by accumulating huge amounts of data but also by modifying public behaviour. This long-term impact on public behaviour can not only have a significant impact on society's critical thinking abilities, choices, and habits but is also a threat to democracy. A situation has arisen where, due to a lack of knowledge, convenience, and the greed of some technologically advanced companies, society is moving rapidly towards "technological instrumentality".

Google search. Google's search is one of the most powerful tools of surveillance capitalism. It is believed that Google knows more about people's inner secrets, fears, and fantasies than their friends or partners because people's search queries can be very exploratory. Google's online search tool has fundamentally changed people's online habits and behaviours. Just as the invention of the calculator over time has reduced people's ability to perform arithmetic, Google's search tool:

- cuts down the need for the average person to keep in mind information they don't need daily. Consequently, in the long run, also erudition of members of society is reduced;
- decides what information a user gets, thus shaping how the user thinks. For example, when user start typing a search query, Google's search tool automatically suggests possible variations (Google suggestions);
- determines what a user sees first when they search. Given that an average user usually clicks only on the first 2 to 3 search results (Chitika Inc., 2013), it gives Google power to shape users' minds.

For example, when user types "Smartphone" into Google's web browser, the first line of the results page, or "top spot," stores ads. The next line displays ads for Munich stores that sell smartphones and their location on the map because Google search engine has tracked that the query comes from the city of Munich.



Source: Authors' created based on Google Search

Fig. 1. Google search autosuggest (aka google autocomplete)

Next comes three unpaid links (not marked as paid advertising) to external resources that Google Search has identified as worthy of visualization. Then the section with the most current ("Top") news. This section contains three links to video stories about smartphones—finally, the next five unpaid links to external resources. Among them is the field "People also ask," with examples of various related questions. Another block closes the page with three links to Google's YouTube platform. Finally, one link at the bottom of the page is marked as paid content.

All of the elements listed in the results page's layout reduce the need to think and make an independent decision. Like aisles in a supermarket, page layout leads the user through columns designed by marketing gurus and human behaviour specialists, where everything is focused on uncritical but pleasant consumption. In reality, the user consumes only a small portion of all search results because it rarely sees more than those positioned on the first page of search results. Google's algorithm decides which pages its users will see.

Other Internet search tools may be built on similar principles but Google is more dangerous because of its dominance (with a market share between 80% and 90% depending on the territory) (statcounter, 2021). In such a privileged position, Google's online search tool can influence not only users' commercial choices but also democratic processes such as elections.

Facebook social network. Facebook is another online tool created by pioneers of surveillance capitalism. From a user's perspective, Facebook is a convenient platform to not only secretly see what your acquaintances or celebrities are doing and how they live but also a place to meet your distant friends and relatives. Facebook is still the world's most popular social network despite several reputational damages. Its number of active users has reached 2.90 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2021), so it is safe to say that every member of society will find a friend or acquaintance on this social network.

Facebook offers its users relatively convenient communication and interaction tools and the opportunity to share any information about themselves publicly. This includes information about their academic achievement, professional status, relationships, etc. There is also the option to post an image or video, and other users can show their emotions by selecting the tags "like", "love", "admire", "wow", "care", "angry", "smile", "sad", etc. Even in the postmodern society, members of society still like to understand and feel that they are valued both in action and as individuals.



Source: Authors' created based on Facebook

Fig. 2. Opportunities to show emotions on pictures on Facebook

Besides, people tend to pretend to be better (smarter, more sensitive, etc.) than they really are. Facebook offers this opportunity. With a single "like," "angry," or any other option, a user can show the world how he or she is fighting poverty or supporting black rights in the United States. It does not impose any obligations, not even physical effort. So, in the long run, Facebook reduces genuine worries and empathy among its users. Even friendship as a form of relationship no longer needs to be taken care of. A few clicks, and everyone can show their desire to make friends or accept or reject such an offer from others. Facebook takes care of other friendship aspects also. For example, no more straining your memory about when and who's having a birthday. Facebook will remind that.

At the same time, Facebook users can create their own public groups and communities or join other users' creations. These online communities bring together people with similar interests. Information from these groups and communities forms a personalized news feed. This allows users to create their own bubble with the messages they want to see. In the long run, this can narrow the user's horizons and create intolerance to those who think otherwise.

However, as Google mentioned above, Facebook is not just a passive tool controlled by users. In fact, this social network is owned by a mega-company that competes for dominance online and globally. Facebook's algorithms and artificial intelligence decide at any time which information will appear in the user's infosphere, how much and which of his friends will see from his posts, what content will become part of its reality and what will be censored or deleted. There have already been countless precedents that illustrate that Facebook has the power to change the boundaries of free speech (Stjernfelt F., Lauritzen A., 2020).

Facebook is not only one of the icons of surveillance capitalism but also one of the main reasons that stimulate the cancel culture. Cancel-culture is a modern form of stigma in which someone is excluded from social or professional circles, whether online, on social media, or in-person (Pilon J., 2020). If you don't like the other user's opinion - just block it. If you don't like a message on your news feed - block it as well.



Source: Authors' created based on Facebook

Fig. 3. "Block" Option in Facebook

Facebook has already changed the way how at least part of society perceives and understands the concept of "friendship." In the long run, this surveillance capitalism tool promotes intolerance, a lack of empathy and encourages members of the public to share the finer details of their personal lives; By exploiting the need for social recognition, Facebook stimulates a culture of self-censorship and repeal.

Twitter microblogging site. Compared to the previously mentioned surveillance capitalism tools, Twitter is smaller but its user base is still pretty impressive. Twitter presents itself as a broadcasting platform similar to a real-time news site. In a way, it works as a Facebook news feed. The user can search for the content of his interest to follow. The specifics of this platform are that the length of a single text (tweet) on this platform cannot exceed 280 characters.



Source: Authors' created based on Twitter

Fig. 4. Twitter user's "home" window

On the one hand, it makes the news feed short and concise, just like reading the headlines of a newspaper. Such rules force users to express their thoughts appropriately and without redundancy. On the other hand, in the long run, such a way of doing things, like the newspeak in Orwell's novel *1984* (Orwell G., 1949), changes the way members of society think and communicate with each other. It also stimulates superficial knowledge of many things without a fundamental insight into the details. On Twitter, so-called information bubbles are forming even more than on Facebook. In this age of information overload, people tend to avoid information that contradicts their life view and are increasingly encapsulated in a kind of

bubble formed by exchanging information between like-minded people. Such a trend threatens democracy, as it does not encourage discussion with different-minded counterparts, leading to society's polarization.

3. Insight into society's preferences and behaviour patterns

Ways of obtaining information. Nowadays, information and communications technologies are widely available. The Internet has revolutionized communications to the extent that it is now the preferred medium of everyday communication for many. According to survey data, the majority of the respondents (82.4%) used at least two smart devices daily; 94.6% of the respondents use social networks daily, and the majority of them (95.1%) actively participate in the creation of online content (hence also data for surveillance capitalists). This participation mainly manifested as a pressing of the "Like" button (90.2% of respondents do it often or very often), entries on social networks (65.7%), and various comments online (46%). As informant Melanija (14) says: *"I post pictures and the like on Instagram but I watch videos on TikTok. For example, I post only pictures on Instagram, and they are of such high quality but I put everything without thinking much on TikTok. There I just say what I want..."*

Respondents mentioned WhatsApp - 85.8%, Facebook - 81.4% and Gmail - 71.6% as the most frequently used applications. All of them are tools created by surveillance capitalism. Google's Gmail service is a popular email but it is alarming that many people do not know any alternatives. *"I have Gmail. It seemed to me that email was just for Google. We were taught at school how to open Google email"* (Melanija, 14). Another informant also admits that he learned how to use Google tools at school: *"At school, we were taught how to open an email, use Google docs, and search for information for school work. I was not tough Facebook, I learned it myself when I was about 12 years old"* (Leon, 20).

71.1% of respondents mentioned WhatsApp and 51.9% Facebook applications as the most commonly used communication tools. Also, data obtained from interviews show a similar trend. For example, when asked, "What do you use most often to communicate with friends?" Sandra says: *"All the friends were there, the university course group was also on Facebook, so it went in. I'm currently trying to use the Signal application more but not everyone is using it"*.

There exist a few alternatives to privacy-oriented communication but their use among respondents is relatively small. For example, the communication application "Signal" was mentioned by 41.6% of respondents; however, only 19.8% of them indicated that it is used frequently or very often. Another communication application, also aimed at privacy, "Telegram," is mentioned by 39.7% of respondents but only 2.9% state that they use it frequently.

An absolute majority of respondents (96.57%) had only used Google's search tool to search for something online during the last five years. Interviews also show that informants know very little about other online searchers. For example, Melanija (14) states that Google is her primary and only online search tool. She describes the Google search tool as follows: *"Well, it just helps you find everything. You write and then you will be there."* As to whether there is another online search tool, she says, *"No! I can't imagine."*

Attitudes towards privacy. A large portion of ICT, including web search engines, email, social media, transportation information, and much more, is provided "free" to the end-users. Nonetheless, this business model usually involves customized advertising powered by unprecedented gathering and cross-correlation of personal information and everyday data. These practices conflict with principles of privacy. Although people often choose deliberately to use these "free" services and thereby give away their data, in most cases, they are almost pushed to do so because of a lack of comparable alternatives and little understanding of how this "free" works.

Overall, 70.1% of respondents agree or partially agree with the statement that their views on what constitutes private information and private data have changed in the last ten years. In-depth interviews also confirm this: *"I am 33 years old; my first computer was in 7th or 8th grade but without the Internet. I remember living without Google and social networks. So, I think yes - that attitude has changed a lot. For example, some 15-18 years ago, I couldn't imagine that I would show my trip to everyone online or tell everyone about my relationship. The first social network I registered on was draugiem.lv. As far back as I can remember, people were not so open at the time. I use draugiem.lv to communicate with my schoolmates during the summer holidays. There were a couple of pictures in the profile but that's all"* (Sabine, 33).

A large proportion of respondents were not worried that smart devices and various internet platforms collect information about them - 48.6% say that they do not care, they have nothing to hide, or sometimes think about it but they are generally not worried. 35.8% emphasize that they are concerned about that but that the benefits of surveillance capitalism outweigh the losses. Only 15.7% said they were worried and trying to curb the trend. Interviews show a similar trend that society today is not ready to abandon the tools offered by surveillance capitalism. *"I'm worried but not so much that I don't use, for example, social networks. Probably because Facebook can more or less clumsily post information about themselves and somehow not control it themselves. Let's say if it's possible to take a tick somewhere so I don't get personalized ads there, or follow me there or here, I'll take it out but I don't think it changes a lot"* (Sabine, 33). *"No one likes the feeling that you are being watched but I'm not really worried about it, because I'm aware that for Google or Facebook, I'm not interesting as an individual but only as part of a socio-demographic group known only to them"* (Sandra, 34). These data indicate the privacy paradox that modern society currently faces - people are becoming increasingly aware of the risks of sharing their data online but regardless they continue to do so for "better" or cheaper services. Hence, Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance of obtained data shows that there are some differences among the age groups in the respondents' attitude towards such personal data "giveaway". Statistically, significant differences are between age groups up to 25 years and 45+ years.

Table 1

Behaviour and attitude towards information collection by age (%)

Attitudes and behaviour	Age groups		
	>25 (n=78)	25-45 (n=49)	45+ (n=77)
Worried about the collection of information and trying to limit it	35.9	2.0	3.0
Worried but the benefits outweigh the disadvantages	35.9	4.8	3.5
Control regularly or sometimes what information is collected	69.3	38.8	13.0
Aware or sometimes aware of what information is shared online	70.5	36.7	5.2

Source: created based on the authors' calculations

A more detailed analysis of the answers by age groups shows that although the most common answer in all age groups is "Worried, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages," younger respondents are more likely than others to say that they are trying to limit it. There are also differences in the views on possibilities for controlling data collection. 32.1% of respondents in the age group under-25 indicate that they try to control regularly, and another 37.2% admitted that they sometimes control. These data contrast with other age groups. In the age group "25-45", 20.4% noted that they try to control regularly, and another 18.4% that they sometimes control. In contrast, in the age group 45+, only 9.1% of respondents have indicated

that they try to monitor regularly, and 3.9% that they sometimes control what information about them is collected by social networks and online applications.

The data analysis revealed that respondents were quite frivolous about sharing information online. About half do not think about it at all, only 9.8% answered that they always think. Again, age differences appear, as indicated by the Kruskal-Wallis test. There is a tendency for younger respondents to be more cautious about sharing information online. This is also confirmed by the youngest informant Melanija. To the question "Are you aware that what is posted on the Internet will stay there forever?" she replies, *"Yes, I am aware of that. It seems to me that everyone is already aware of this. That is why it is thought not only about the quality of the picture but also about the content. There are already some who make everything without thinking but mostly still think"* (Melanija, 14).

Only 1.5% of respondents say they read terms and conditions before agreeing to them when purchasing a new device. The majority - 58.3% - admit that they agree automatically without reading terms and conditions at all. Interviews show similar results. *"I agree automatically because I want to use this product"* (Leons, 20). *"I do not read the long sheet with the rules (because I am sorry for my time, as well, I do not always understand what is meant there)"* (Sabine, 33). The Chi-square (χ^2) test shows that there is a correlation between the answers to the questions "Do you read the terms of use before you agree to them" and "Are you worried that smart devices and various Internet platforms are collecting information about you?".

Finally, "How often do you keep track of which apps are active and running in the background on your smartphone?" - 20.6% of all respondents have answered that they do not understand the question, while 41.7% have admitted; they do not keep any track record at all. Only 2% of respondents say that they regularly follow which apps on their smartphone are active and running in the background. This is in line with security expert Dietrich's statement: *"Many users are unaware of how most" free "applications work, and even those who have heard something about data collection, are not aware of the scale of these operations."* This illustrates not only surveillance but also the two dimensions of information, or as Zuboff calls it "two texts". The first one consists of all public information online and is seen by anyone but the second, so-called "Shadow text" consists of our everyday data, falsely called "surplus data". The first-dimension acts as the data provider for the second. Zuboff admits that *"it becomes increasingly difficult, and perhaps impossible, to refrain from contributing to the shadow text. It automatically feeds on our experience as we engage in the normal and necessary routines of social participation"* (Zuboff S., 2019b).

Censorship and self-censorship. Content analysis already revealed the surveillance capitalist tools and services' potential for censorship. Multiple insiders' leaks have revealed Google's, Facebook's, and even Twitter's desire to be the sole custodians of any information (Hartwig R., Heckenlively K., 2021; Vaidhyanathan S., 2011; Vorhies Z., Heckenlively K., 2021; Stjernfelt F., Lauritzen A., 2019). The most visible forms of such gatekeeping actions are post bans in Facebook and Twitter and de-monetizing and de-ranking in Google search engine. This way, "acceptable information" is defined, narrowed down, and institutionalized. Institutionalization leads to self-censorship. Self-censorship is usually defined as the act of intentional and voluntary restriction of expression (Bar-Tal D., 2017) and it is probably the most harmful side-effect of surveillance capitalism. It destroys the debate and changes public opinion on many topics that are important to society. Self-censorship is a threat to democracy and diversity of opinion and adjusts the limits of freedom of expression in the long run. As Dietrich puts it: *"Since the beginnings of social networks in Germany, it has not been desirable to express one's thoughts on a sensitive political or social issue. Here, employers actively monitor the political correctness of their employees. For example, I follow with admiration the statements of various recognized American professors about gender or feminism. If I*

said publicly on Facebook that I do not agree with the assumption that gender is socially constructed, or that it justifies the existence of an objective pay gap between women and men, I would have been fired a long time ago and I do not know if I could find it in another reputable company. That's why I keep my views to myself" (Dietrich, 46). Sabine (33) thinks similarly: "I am aware that the day may come when the data collected may be used against me, for example, if there is a sudden change in the existing power and the laws are changed, and some expression of my opinion or location, for example, in a picket, will make me an undesirable individual for existing power".

Overall, the analysis of empirical data reveals that society uncritically, even ignorantly, treats the current reality in which the data about user's life, feelings, wishes, and experiences are turned into free raw material for surveillance capitalism operations. Despite the public's growing awareness about data commodification and its dangerous side effects, people still treat their privacy lightly and are willing to give it away for some immediate gains.

Conclusions

- 1) One of the significant development trends of modern capitalism is closely related to the ICT and data commodification – a huge amount of data is collected, stored, analysed, and used for commercial purposes.
- 2) The products and services of surveillance capitalism have become an integral part of social life, are perceived as almost irreplaceable, and it is very difficult to give up, as they really make life easier. At the same time, they have significant side effects. They influence the habits and behaviour that take various forms, including interaction patterns and complete reliance on surveillance capitalism tools as the only providers of "true" information.
- 3) Although some members of society are aware of the side effects of surveillance and data commodification, they continue to use its products and services because of convenience and lack of alternatives. The problem is not the use of these products but their uncritical acceptance, thus legitimizing the new order imposed by surveillance capitalists. The results of the study show differences in the behaviour and attitudes of different age groups towards the products offered by surveillance capitalists
- 4) Surveillance capitalism is a threat to privacy, fair competition, the market economy, and it is dangerous to democracy. Commercial organizations whose primary purpose is to make a profit cannot set up a neutral system. The tools produced by surveillance capitalists usually reduce the need to think and make decisions independently, narrow opinions, and stimulate self-censorship.
- 5) It is still not too late to limit dangers created by surveillance capitalism but to do so, society must be well informed and prepared for this standoff. The governments should enforce and fortify the laws about privacy and stimulate and support alternatives for tools and services created by surveillance capitalists. As Zuboff (2019b) puts it: "*Surveillance capitalism is an economic creation, and it is therefore subject to democratic contest, debate, revision, constraint, oversight, and may even be outlawed. Our societies have restricted the dangerous excesses of raw capitalism before, and we must do it again!*".

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