

# O.K., Google: How Much Money Have I Made for You Today?

**By Jennifer Szalai**

**Book Review on** The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power

By Shoshana Zuboff

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A friend of mine says that whenever he walks into someone's home he's tempted to yell out, "Hey, Alexa," or "O.K., Google," and order 50 pizzas, just to see if there's a device [listening in](#) on whatever gossip he planned to dish out next.

Shoshana Zuboff would undoubtedly get the joke, but she probably wouldn't laugh. In "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism," she warns against mistaking the soothing voice of a personal digital assistant for "anything other than the exploitation of your needs." The cliché that "if you're not paying for it, you're the product" isn't alarming enough for her. She likens the big tech platforms to elephant poachers, and our personal data to ivory tusks. "You are not the product," she says. "You are the abandoned carcass."

O.K., Zuboff, tell me more. It's a testament to how extraordinarily intelligent her book is that by the time I was compared to an elephant carcass, I resisted the urge to toss it across the room. Zuboff, a professor emerita of Harvard Business School and the author of "In the Age of the Smart Machine" (1988), has a dramatic streak that could come off as simply grandiose if she didn't so painstakingly make her case. She says we're living through such "a bold and unprecedented shift in capitalist methods" that even as we encounter the occasional story about Facebook [allowing its corporate clients to read users' private messages](#) or the software in Google's Street View cars [scraping unencrypted information from people's homes](#), the American public doesn't yet grasp the new dispensation in its entirety.

So many people take care to calibrate their privacy settings just so, sharing certain things with friends and keeping other things hidden, while their data still gets collected and shared among apps for possible monetization now or later. Google and Facebook might not call to mind the belching smoke stacks and child laborers of the Industrial Revolution, but Zuboff argues that they're run by people who have turned out to be just as ruthless and profit-seeking as any Gilded Age tycoon. Instead of mining the natural landscape, surveillance capitalists extract their raw material from human experience.

This business model emerged almost by accident. Zuboff describes how Google, in its early days, happened to keep a cache of data byproducts — spelling, click patterns, location — that were produced with each search. It was only after the dot-com bubble burst in 2000 that the company was forced to figure out how to do more than simply provide a free service to its users. It settled on selling advertising, but the advertising would be “relevant” and “targeted,” using all the detailed behavioral information Google had collected from users.

“This new market form declares that serving the genuine needs of people is less lucrative, and therefore less important, than selling predictions of their behavior,” Zuboff writes. Whatever gauzy sentiments the new kinds of capitalists espouse (or even believe) about building community and democratizing knowledge get subordinated to the brute demands of economic survival — hence the [relentless accumulation of additional data sources](#), and the ardent lobbying against government regulation.

Surveillance capitalism has flourished precisely because it fulfills what Zuboff concedes are real needs and desires. Online platforms offer us ways to “ease the complexities of our harried lives.” In exchange for surveillance we get convenience, efficiency and social connection.

Google comes in for plenty of criticism from Zuboff, but she is equally scathing about Facebook. (She calls [Sheryl Sandberg](#), who worked at Google before becoming Facebook's chief operating officer, “the ‘Typhoid Mary’ of surveillance capitalism.”) Facebook has learned how to manipulate empathy and attachment in order to increase engagement and make billions. In a document sent to advertisers in Australia and New Zealand, Facebook bragged of its ability to discern exactly when a young person could use a “confidence boost.” And then there are the Facebook scandals involving [Cambridge Analytica](#) and [the](#)

[Kremlin](#) during the 2016 election, with their deployment of personality tests and viral memes; it's all fun and games until the host of "The Apprentice" becomes president.

Surveillance capitalists like to depict themselves as more socially enlightened than their industrial predecessors, but in Zuboff's reckoning they ask for a lot while giving relatively little back. Their companies operate at "hyperscale": Despite their enormous market capitalization, Google and Facebook each employ far fewer workers than General Motors once did, even during the depths of the Great Depression. Citing the economic historian Karl Polanyi, Zuboff shows how postwar corporations were expected to offer some sort of communal reciprocity — hiring workers and hiking wages, sharing prosperity rather than hoarding it. The ascendancy of neoliberalism in the 1970s, she says, laid the groundwork for Silicon Valley to promote an extreme form of entrepreneurial capitalism, unencumbered by any substantive responsibility to the communities it purports to serve.

Zuboff can get overheated with her metaphors; an extended passage with tech executives as Spanish conquistadors and the rest of us as indigenous peoples is frankly ridiculous, even if I can understand how Zuboff thought the phrase "rivers of blood" would get her urgency across. The system she minutely describes is scary enough (I now have a clearer picture of why the Pokémon Go app, a real data gobbler, was offered for free) without dialing the volume up to 11.

But then maybe my reflexive discomfort only indicates that I've become acclimated — or "habituated," as Zuboff likes to say — to the world that surveillance capitalists have created. Absorbing Zuboff's methodical determination, the way she pieces together sundry examples into this comprehensive work of scholarship and synthesis, requires patience, but the rewards are considerable — a heightened sense of awareness, and a deeper appreciation of what's at stake. A business model that seeks growth by cataloging our "every move, emotion, utterance and desire" is too radical to be taken for granted. As Zuboff repeatedly says near the end of the book, "It is not O.K."