

Commentary

The user as a data source: The advantage of surveillance capitalism

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DESCRIPTION

In the article it was pointed out that the negative aspects of digitization, such as the risks of users being misused, exploited, and the threats of privacy violations in the library literature had not received had not received an attention compared to its positive benefits. An example could be the use of advanced, digitized bibliometric methods applied by academic libraries to provide research management departments at universities with data on academic productivity and quality of individual researchers (Aastroem et al., 2013). It was noticed that a shift in the focus of academic libraries had apparently taken place from a situation where the primary focus was to deliver services directly to students and researchers to a different context where the needs of research administrative units were prioritized.

This observation led me to consider whether a quite new phase of digitization, linked with notions like surveillance society and surveillance capitalism, had influenced public and academic libraries. According to Zuboff, who in 2019 wrote the influential *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, a new, surveillance business model, based on the acquisition of large volumes of personal data, and its exploitation to targets advertisement, had been developed.

Important library-related questions raised by the advancement of surveillance capitalism

The first addresses the use of “extended library service”. Extended services here mean services, like the one mentioned above where academic libraries provide administrative units with data on research productivity. The activity of the libraries can be described as surveillance since the library watches over the researchers publishing activities. A related question addresses whether libraries should seek further inspiration by the practices of companies like Google and Facebook to obtain e.g., desired behavioral modification of the reading habits of their users, or should libraries rather oppose such developments? It could also be interesting to consider to what extent user-to-user mediation and social navigation in libraries

is related to threats associated with surveillance capitalism? Finally, it is interesting to discuss to what extent the library users themselves demand more pro-active technology-based services?

The use of extended library services through digitization

Although research management activities and parameters have been facilitated by academic libraries, such activities need not necessarily serve only narrow managerial and administrative purposes. Indeed, such services have also showed up to be beneficial to the researchers themselves by facilitating values like transparency, visibility, networking, partnership finding, research project funding, and the like. Furthermore, it is certainly a quite legitimate purpose of research administrative units at universities to ensure that research means are applied in accordance with laws and policies.

Should libraries find inspiration in the methods of surveillance capitalism

As to that question, it seems that very few if any library literature author recommends pure surveillance capitalistic-oriented business models to be introduced into academic or public libraries. However, it seems as if certain more innocent surveillance capitalistic traits have already been adopted by some libraries such as the feature applied e.g. by Amazon: Users who bought/lent title X also demanded title Y. Such services are provided by several libraries worldwide. On the other hand, pure commercial and marketing-oriented applications are not applied nor recommended.

User-to-user mediation and social navigation in libraries

User-to-user mediation seems to be more related to old library 2.0 dreams than to surveillance capitalistic practices. Indeed, the burgeoning exhibitionist technologies like blogs, photo sharing services and the like have influenced user behavior more than surveillance. In the library world, facilitation of non-commercial user-to-user communication seems to be a legitimate mostly public library activity. What distinguishes traditional surveillance from “reciprocal transparency” seems to be the type of interest and the underlying intentions behind them. Therefore, user-to-user mediation and social navigation are not particularly related to the threats of surveillance

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capitalism.

Library user attitudes and preferences towards the application of pro-active technologies: platform- and entertainment-oriented users

Evidence from a recent Danish national library user survey indicates that attitudes and preferences among Danish library users as to the application of pro-active technologies according to different library user segments vary. Here, a distinction between platform- and entertainment- oriented library users, corresponding to a distinction between a group of users who expressively wish to be challenged towards new cultural experience when visiting a library and another segment or group who prefers to do without further basic challenges (the entertainment-oriented library user segment). Indeed, the provision of challenges seems to be a complex issue whether the context is face-to-face or digital communication. The complexity not only derives from the difficulties related to determining whether a user belongs to the platform- or the entertainment related segment but also from the cultural-policy related issue about to what extent libraries should educate or develop its users.

It is difficult to precisely deduce from the conclusions just presented what strategies modern libraries should follow regarding digital surveillance. Maybe transparency could be a keyword and guide here.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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