

AI, Surveillance & Human Agency

How algorithms shape behavior — and how to keep your autonomy

A practical-literacy track on recommendation systems, persuasion loops, surveillance models, and algorithmic governance. It explains influence mechanisms in concrete terms and provides digital self-defense habits — so AI is used as a tool, not obeyed as an authority.

Focus areas: How recommendation systems shape behavior; Persuasion loops and behavioral conditioning; Mass data extraction and surveillance models; Algorithmic governance and digital dependency; Practical digital self-defense and healthy tech habits

How the Feed Shapes You

Recommendation systems, persuasion loops, and the attention economy (Foundational · 40 min)

A concrete walk through how engagement-optimized systems learn your weaknesses and shape your behavior — and why that is a design choice, not a bug.

Optimizing the Wrong Thing [scholarly]

Feeds maximize engagement, a proxy that rewards outrage and novelty over truth or wellbeing. The objective function explains the symptoms.

The Persuasion Loop [scholarly]

Your behavior trains the model; the model shapes your behavior. Naming the loop makes it visible and interruptible.

From Bubble to Dependency [speculative]

Personalization can narrow your world and deepen dependency. The long-term social effects are genuinely uncertain — we label this forecast as speculative.

Practical Digital Self-Defense

Concrete habits to reclaim attention and privacy (Foundational · 35 min)

An actionable checklist for preserving autonomy: reducing tracking, breaking persuasion loops, and using AI as a verified tool rather than an oracle.

Shrink the Surveillance Surface [wellness]

Audit app permissions, prefer privacy-respecting tools, and minimize accounts. You cannot leak what you never share.

Break the Loop [wellness]

Turn off non-essential notifications, remove infinite-scroll triggers, and schedule intentional use. Friction is freedom.

Verify, Don't Obey [wellness]

Treat AI output as a draft. Demand sources, keep a human in the loop on big decisions, and notice convenience hardening into dependence.

Reclaiming Your Attention

How compulsion is engineered — and how to disarm it (Foundational · 40 min)

Connects the attention-economy design playbook (variable rewards, infinite scroll, notifications) to concrete habits that restore deliberate focus.

The Design of Compulsion [scholarly]

Variable rewards, infinite scroll, autoplay, and timed notifications are A/B-tested against your self-control. The pull is engineered, not a moral failing.

From Distraction to Depth [scholarly]

Carr and Postman argued the medium retrains the mind toward fragmentation. Protecting deep attention is protecting the capacity to think.

Disarming the Triggers [wellness]

Kill non-essential notifications, disable autoplay and infinite scroll, schedule intentional use, and add friction (grayscale, timers).

The Surveillance Stack

From data harvest to behavioral control — the documented machine (Advanced · 55 min)

Assembles the documented layers of modern surveillance — collection (Snowden), exploitation (Cambridge Analytica), identification (facial recognition), and scoring (social credit) — and connects them to the business model underneath.

Collection [historical]

Snowden's 2013 disclosures confirmed dragnet collection built to capture 'everyone it possibly could.' Infrastructure, once built, gets used to its limits.

Exploitation & Identification [historical]

Cambridge Analytica weaponized harvested profiles; Clearview turned public photos into a face-search engine. Capability proven; decisive impact debated.

The Engine Underneath [scholarly]

Zuboff's surveillance capitalism and 'data colonialism' name the incentive: your behavior is the raw material refined into prediction products. The right question isn't 'what do I hide?' but 'who profits from knowing me?'

Key Topics

How the Recommendation Feed Shapes You [scholarly]

Engagement-optimized feeds personalize reality, reward outrage, and quietly narrow what you see.

The Surveillance Business Model [scholarly]

Why 'free' platforms extract behavioral data — and how prediction products are sold.

Using AI as a Tool, Not an Authority [speculative]

Principles for keeping judgment human while still using AI productively.

The Attention Economy and Your Dopamine [scholarly]

How products engineer compulsion — variable rewards, infinite scroll, and the war for your focus.

When the Algorithm Is the Authority [scholarly]

How opaque models make consequential decisions — and why 'the math' is not neutral.

Deepfakes and the Crisis of Evidence [speculative]

When any image, voice, or video can be faked, how do we know what's real?

Practical Data Privacy Without Paranoia [wellness]

Realistic habits that meaningfully shrink your data exposure — ranked by effort and payoff.

Cambridge Analytica: Data as a Weapon [historical]

How harvested social data became psychographic targeting — the documented scandal that made surveillance capitalism concrete.

Snowden, PRISM & Bulk Collection [historical]

The 2013 disclosures that confirmed mass, suspicionless surveillance — and what they did and didn't reveal.

Facial Recognition & the Biometric Net [scholarly]

How face, gait, and voice became trackable identifiers — Clearview AI, error rates, and the stakes of a body you can't change.

Predictive Policing & Algorithmic Justice [scholarly]

When models forecast crime and risk, whose past becomes whose future — and the feedback loops that bake in bias.

Social Credit & Behavioral Scoring [scholarly]

Scoring citizens by behavior — what China's systems actually are, and the quieter Western equivalents.

The Alignment Problem & the Paperclip Maximizer [speculative]

Why making powerful AI do what we actually mean is genuinely hard — the control problem, stated honestly as open.

The 'Dead Internet' Hypothesis [speculative]

The claim that much of the web is now bots and AI content — separating the documented kernel from the overstated whole.

Data Colonialism: You Are the Resource [scholarly]

Reframing the data economy as extraction — your life as the raw material refined into prediction products.

Sources & Citations (Chicago)

Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018).

Edward Snowden, *Permanent Record* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

Christopher Wylie, *Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America* (New York: Random House, 2019).

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