

DO WE HAVE FREEDOM?

IS AMAZON LISTENING TO US?

NO FREEDOM DUE TO COVID-19

FREEDOM, TECHNOLOGY + ARE WE BEING MANIPULATED?

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CONTEXTUAL STUDIES

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In this essay I will be critically discussing and exploring the relationship that exists between freedom, technology and the extent to which how people are manipulated in today's online social media culture. As this is an important issue within my degree programme, the aim is to continue the upcoming research idea onto my dissertation next year. It is made even more relevant given we are all currently being closed off from our freedom and this fact that I am in isolation from the COVID-19 crisis. It has made me think about some very fundamental questions - do we have freedom? Do we have freedom in general? What defines freedom? And what dangers do we have in allowing ourselves to become so dependent on technology.

This was made even more personal when I experienced with my own Amazon Alexa seemingly listening to me. I had a phone call with my friend where we discussed amongst other things, fake news, propaganda and what's going on around us. My Alexa without warning repeated exactly what I said, to myself in my own voice, I was stunned. But it made me realise, why then? Was fake news a trigger word? And what is Alexa really listening too? And do we really have freedom in a technology-based environment in our culture today? Personally, I think it is important to have freedom and privacy, but we always seem to have to fight for it. ***"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same" - Ronald Reagan.*** By getting information for my essay I also created surveys and watched documentaries about our freedom, surveillance capitalism and technology culture.

FREEDOM

For many thinkers and frankly non thinkers, Freedom is a fundamental aspect of our human rights. But ask yourself, do we really have it? By creating a study of my own I created a survey and results were interesting (hereafter called Davies 2020). Most people believe that they feel “relatively free” (Davies, 2020). The surveys also asked them to define what they meant when they thought of as freedom. Most answers were; freedom to voice their opinion, equal rights and to do things without limited restrictions (Davies, 2020). The UN definition with human rights within freedom are ***“Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination”*** (Nations, 2020) but by looking at the survey, I found that only 73.9% believed that they had a freedom of speech and only 52.2% believed that they could offend someone (Davies, 2020). People do believe that they can say what they want but they believe that there will be consequences from what they say regarding if its offensive.

In 2020 we find ourselves in a global pandemic with thousands of people around the world inside for isolation or in quarantine from the COVID-19 disease. From the 23rd of March 2020 the United Kingdom has been in lockdown (GOV.UK, PM Addresses to the Nation on Coronavirus : 23 March 2020, 2020). We find that our freedom has been restricted and that we are imprisoned in our own homes. There have been fines from the police if a person is out without reasoning. There are also restrictions within stores and social distancing rules. By creating a survey, I asked people if they thought that their freedom was under attack in this situation and if so, is it acceptable? Everyone in my survey said that they believe it is acceptable and that if it means to save lives while they are in isolation they are happy to have their freedom taken away for a short time (Davies, 2020). People also think that their freedom is being restricted at this time, not being able to do certain things that they want to do on a daily basis and It’s like a pause on reality (Davies, 2020).

As of the survey I asked 46 people what is the first thing that they are going to do when lockdown is over and 87% of the answers were warm and humane; answers such as seeing their loved ones again, *“See my Boyfriend”, “go to the beach with my friends”, “hug my grandson”* (Davies, 2020) This shows that people are not missing the commercial element of life, they are missing the freedom, the “little things” and the human connection (IQL, 2020).



(GOV.UK, COVID-19 essential travel guidance, 2020)

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM.

When online, however, there are forms of restrictions towards your freedom. From looking at my survey I found that 52.2% of people believed that they had freedom online (Davies, 2020) Whereas 78.3% believed that they had more freedom online than other counties. But in our day in age, not many people understand what is really going on and what is happening to their personal online data. In my survey, I decided to ask the question *“Do you believe that service providers such as Facebook, Instagram, Google & Amazon know personal data/ personal information about you? If so why and how?”* the answers were mostly people saying that the information that these big provider companies knew about them was the information that they personally provided to them when they signed up to the provider such as; name, address, phone number and bank details. But what people don’t know is that these companies know much more than that. From a BBC Panorama documentary about

Amazon, an Amazon investor said *“People think I gave up a little personal data for a service I really like, and there was a time when that was what was really going on. But what’s going on now is much more invasive and much more manipulative” – Roger McNamee*_(Panorama, 2020)_From this statement from an employee of Amazon this shows that in reality, people don’t know what is going on with their personal data. Personal data is also now a part of your human rights. *In the digital age, personal data is intrinsically linked to people’s private life and other human rights. Everything a person does leave digital traces that can reveal intimate details of their thoughts, beliefs, movements, associates, and activities. The GDPR seeks to limit abusive intrusions into people’s private lives through their data, which in turn protects a range of other human rights* (Watch, 2018) Since the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica concern about digital data breaches back in 2016 (Watch, 2018) people have become more aware of where their data goes. But not everyone.



(GettyImages, 2018)

In 2016 there was a data breach with Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was a company that was a data analysis firm that worked on the Trump 2016 election campaign. But the deviousness that the company created was that; the company used data of 50 million people on Facebook without their permission (WIRED, 2016). But what they used that data for was much more manipulative and devious; they used data from 50 million people, and they roughly had 5,000 data points on every American voter and characterized the people into groups and called them “the persuadables” (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). *“the truth is, we didn’t target every American voter equally.*

The bulk of our resources went into targeting those whose minds we thought we could change. We called them the persuadables". They are everywhere in the country but the persuadables that mattered were the ones in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Now, each of these states were broken down by precinct. So, you can say there are 22,000 persuadable voters in this precinct, and if we target enough persuadable people in the right precincts, then those states would turn red instead of blue." - Brittany Kaiser (Former director of business developer for Cambridge Analytica) (Amer & Noujaim, 2019) by having an understanding of what happened in 2016 it makes you think. Is that still happening now? Am I being manipulated? and how am I free online? And is my opinion really my opinion? By seeing this information from what happened with Cambridge Analytica, makes you realise that people's opinions are most likely to be from what they have seen online. Not only was Cambridge Analytica a source of data consumption but it was a propaganda monster. *"It's incorrect to call Cambridge Analytica a purely sort of data science company or an algorithm, it is a full-service propaganda machine."* – Christopher Wylie (former Cambridge Analytica employee and whistle-blower) (Amer & Noujaim, 2019)

By changing people's perception on the world, people were bombarded with information to change their minds and then to vote for the candidate that Cambridge Analytica wanted to win and they succeeded. *"our team developed personalised content to trigger those individuals, and bombarded them with blogs, articles, websites, videos, ads. Every platform you can imagine. Until they saw the world the way we wanted them to. Until you vote for our candidate."*- Brittany Kaiser (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). But not only Cambridge Analytica has used personal data. Most of the powerful companies in the world are the ones with our personal information and data. This is what makes them wealthy in our day in age. *"The wealthiest companies are technology companies. Google, Facebook, Amazon, Tesla. And the reason why these companies are the most powerful companies in the world is because, last year, data surpassed oil in its value. Data is the most valuable asset on Earth. And these companies are valuable because they have been exploiting people's assets."* – Brittany Kaiser (Amer & Noujaim, 2019).

By looking at Amazon for example, originally, they opened in 1994 as an online digital bookstore and then expanded to greater things. Jeff Bezos the CEO originally an algorithmic trader, he believed deeply in his roots that from data, you can make money, and from 2001-2002 he decided that he could apply the same types of algorithmic optimisations to their consumer behaviour and to their operations at Amazon and that would be the future of Amazon. And he was not wrong (Panorama, 2020). By 1997 the Amazon website was a great hit and a retail revolution. At the time and still, now Jeff Bezos says that our data is being used for recommendations for us. ***“That is the data that allows us to predict, or try to predict what books and videos and music that you would like, that you would like that you haven’t discovered yet” – Jeff Bezos*** (Panorama, 2020). At one time maybe yes, our data was being used for that information but now our data is being used for a much greater influence in reality. For example, a Woman in Germany asked Amazon for her personal data from her and she was surprised it wasn’t just the data that she gave them nor the delivery history. But while Amazon’s terms and conditions set out the data it collects, she was surprised to see that 100 purchases had generated 15,000 pieces of information about her. Such as when she went on holiday, what locations, what restaurants she goes to and also Amazon could see other website information that she had been on, such as political articles and could base that information and that data on her she said: ***“Amazon knows more than our psychiatrist or doctor or best friend about our sex life, and if we can’t sleep at night.”*** (Panorama, 2020)

Amazon is a powerful company, so much that as of January 2019, over 100million Alexa devices have been sold worldwide, but more people are using the Alexa every day (Channel4, 2020). Dave Limp is in charge of the Alexa, and he aims to take this to a future where computers come fully conversant with humans (Panorama, 2020). When the Alexa light is on, Alexa is listening, recording, and transmitting what we are saying to her. But not only Alexa is hearing us, but humans are too, Amazon workers are listening to what you ask Alexa. Amazon says ***“staff listen to a tiny fraction of 1% of recordings which are anonymized to check Alexa understands what is being said. Customers can now up out if they want to.”*** (Panorama, 2020). But if you think of that 1% of the 100million Alexa devices

that is still a great number of people that are being monitored by Amazon. But where is that data going? And what is it being used for? ***“whoever owns, collects the data, right. If you have access to it and have writes to data, then you are king. It’s all about the data. Everything”***- Robert Fedrick (Senior technical product manager – Amazon web services – 1999 – 2005) (Panorama, 2020). Amazon says that our data is used to benefit us and Amazon, to give us the best service that they can provide for us and to predict what we are going to buy next. But in 2014 the company has a patent for targeted advertising using sniffer algorithms to identify trigger words. For example, if a person said they fancied to eat sushi on a particular evening that data would transfer into the Alexa and then they will get targeted advertising on their social media of where the nearest or best sushi place is in their location (Panorama, 2020). ***“it’s like a boomerang, you send your data out, it gets analysed and it comes back at you as targeted messaging to change your behaviour.”***- Brittany Kaiser (Amer & Noujaim, 2019).



(Staff, 2019)



(Amazon, 2020)

Amazon is also getting Data from our streets they spent \$840million two years ago buying the doorbell “ring” giving them a foothold into the home security industry, the benefit is that police can see crime 24/7 from the cameras on the doorbell (Panorama, 2020). But in reality, do we really want to be in an environment of constant surveillance? *“It’s more than simply community reassurance to a state of surveillance. And this lays a foundation for a network that quite rightly and properly causes concerns for people that, People don’t want to live in a society that is enmeshed in surveillance cameras. We could end up in a surveillance state and I don’t know anybody that wants to live in a surveillance state”* – TONY PORTER, (Surveillance Camera commissioner) (Panorama, 2020).

There are benefit’s but is this really humane? *“we are now contributing to systems that are fundamentally at odds with democracy and at odds with human freedom.”* - Professor Shoshana Zuboff (Panorama, 2020). In 2020 we find ourselves in more of a surveillance state every day but are we free? And do we feel free? From my survey, only 21.7% of people feel comfortable with big-name providers knowing personal information and 95% believe that data is being used for targeted advertising, but 78% feel that they are being watched or heard from when they see a targeted advertisement to them (Davies, 2020) Having a feeling of paranoia when being on the internet is not a form of freedom in my opinion. From this essay, I have learned that we cannot be free in a social media-controlled world. I also believe that if people were more aware of what is going on and the

innocence of people, People will be more aware of their surroundings. But knowing only 65% of people from my survey only sometimes read the terms and conditions when they use a new platform or service, do people really care where their personal data is going? And what it's being used for?

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