

CARISSA VÉLIZ

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**PRIVACY IS**

**POWER**

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**WHY AND HOW YOU SHOULD  
TAKE BACK CONTROL  
OF YOUR DATA**

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Privacy Is Power  
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## INTRODUCTION

They are watching us. They know I'm writing these words. They know you are reading them. Governments and hundreds of corporations are spying on you and me, and everyone we know. Every minute of every day. They track and record all they can: our location, our communications, our internet searches, our biometric information, our social relations, our purchases, and much more. They want to know who we are, what we think, where we hurt. They want to predict and influence our behaviour. They have too much power. Their power stems from us, from you, from your data. It's time to take back control. Reclaiming privacy is the only way we can regain control of our lives and our societies.

The internet is primarily funded by the collection, analysis, and trade of data – the data economy. Much of that data is personal data – data about you. The trading of personal data as a business model is increasingly being exported to all institutions in society – the surveillance society, or surveillance capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

To reach you, I had to go through surveillance capitalism – I’m sorry.<sup>2</sup> How did you become aware of this book? Can you remember how you first heard about it, or where you saw an ad for it? You might’ve been tagged by some platform or another as a ‘pioneer’, someone who is on the lookout for knowledge and new experiences. You like books that make you think. Or you might be an ‘advocate’, someone worried about social issues and politically engaged. Fit the bill? The main objective of this book is to empower you, but most similar uses of your data will disempower you.

If surveillance didn’t catch you before buying this book, it probably did afterwards. If you are reading these words on a Kindle, or Google Books, or a Nook, they are measuring how long it takes you to read each word, where you stop to take a break, and what you highlight. If you bought this book in a bookshop, the smartphone in your pocket was recording your journey there, and how long you stayed.<sup>3</sup> The music in the bookshop might have been sending ultrasound beacons to your phone to identify it as *your* phone and track your interests and purchases. If you used a debit or credit card to buy the book, they probably sold that information to data brokers who then sold it to insurance companies, possible employers, governments, businesses, and whoever else might have been interested in it. Or you may even have linked your payment card to a loyalty system, which tracks your purchasing history and uses that information to try to sell you more things the algorithm reckons you might buy.

The data economy, and the ubiquitous surveillance on which it feeds, took us by surprise. Tech companies did not inform users of how our data was being used, much less ask for our permission. They didn’t ask our governments either. There were no laws to regulate the data trail left behind by unsuspecting citizens as we went about our business in an increasingly digital world. By the

time we realized it was happening, the surveillance architecture was already in place. Much of our privacy was gone. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, privacy is facing new threats, as previously offline activities have moved online, and we have been asked to give up our personal data in the name of the public good. It is a time to think very carefully about what sort of world we want to inhabit when the pandemic becomes a distant memory. A world without privacy is a dangerous one.

Privacy is about being able to keep certain intimate things to yourself – your thoughts, your experiences, your conversations, your plans. Human beings need privacy to be able to unwind from the burden of being with other people. We need privacy to explore new ideas freely, to make up our own minds. Privacy protects us from unwanted pressures and abuses of power. We need it to be autonomous individuals, and for democracies to function well we need citizens to be autonomous.

Our lives, translated into data, are the raw material of the surveillance economy. Our hopes, our fears, what we read, what we write, our relationships, our diseases, our mistakes, our purchases, our weaknesses, our faces, our voices – everything is used as fodder for data vultures who collect it all, analyse it all, and sell it to the highest bidder. Too many of those acquiring our data want it for nefarious purposes: to betray our secrets to insurance companies, employers and governments; to sell us things it's not in our interest to buy; to pit us against each other in an effort to destroy our society from the inside; to disinform us and hijack our democracies. The surveillance society has transformed *citizens* into *users* and data *subjects*. Enough is enough. Those who have violated our right to privacy have abused our trust, and it's time to pull the plug on their source of power – our data.

It's too late to prevent the data economy from developing in the

first place – but it’s not too late to reclaim our privacy. Our civil liberties are at stake. The decisions we make about privacy today and in the coming years will shape the future of humanity for decades to come. Societal choices about privacy will influence how political campaigns are run, how corporations earn their keep, the power that governments and private businesses may wield, the advancement of medicine, the pursuit of public health goals, the risks we are exposed to, how we interact with each other, and, not least, whether our rights are respected as we go about our daily lives.

This book is about the state of privacy today, how the surveillance economy came about, why we should end the trade in personal data, and how to do it. Chapter One accompanies a person throughout a day in the surveillance society to illustrate how much privacy is being taken away from us. Chapter Two explains how the data economy developed, in the hope that understanding how we got into this mess will be helpful in getting us out of it. In Chapter Three I argue that privacy is a form of power, and that whoever has the most personal data will dominate society. If we give our data to companies, the wealthy will rule. If we give our data to governments, we will end up with some form of authoritarianism. Only if the people keep their data will society be free. Privacy matters because it gives power to the people.

The surveillance economy is not only bad because it creates and enhances undesirable power asymmetries. It is also dangerous because it trades in a toxic substance. Chapter Four examines why personal data is toxic and how it is poisoning our lives, our institutions, and our societies. We need to put a stop to the data economy like we put a stop to other kinds of economic exploitation in the past. Economic systems that depend on the violation of rights

are unacceptable. Chapter Five is about how societies can pull the plug on the surveillance economy. Chapter Six is about what you can do as an individual to take back control of your personal data and our democracies.

We are not witnessing the death of privacy. Even though privacy is in distress, we are in a better place now to defend it than we have been for the past decade. This is only the beginning of the fight to safeguard personal data in the digital age. Too much is at stake to let privacy wither – our very way of life is at risk. Surveillance threatens freedom, equality, democracy, autonomy, creativity, and intimacy. We have been lied to time and again, and our data is being stolen to be used against us. No more. Having too little privacy is at odds with having well-functioning societies. Surveillance capitalism needs to go. It will take some time and effort, but we can and will reclaim privacy. Here's how.