

Post-Pandemic Social Landscapes: Surveillance Capitalism, Behaviour Modification as the New Consensus Reality

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The ‘COVID Event’ handed the unreal world its great coup over the place of the real. This perception intervention gave the final stimulus necessary to tip the twenty-first century into an awaiting technologically manipulated reality. A new landscape is emerging where, for the first time, the human mind is finding itself out-of-place within its own territory. Emerging ‘post-pandemic’ landscapes are likely to be hazardous territory for our mental, emotional and physical states. The human condition is under modification.

New forms of power are rising, embedded within structures of health security, re-imagining our social lives, living and workspaces, and our physical and digital movements. Until now, the spider’s web of social control mainly operated below the waterline in a space where an almost intangible world existed beyond governance or accountability. Now the *Kraken* awakes and unashamedly rises to the surface. The beast of behaviour modification spreads its tentacles through our established social and cultural landscape without shame – all in the name of health security (the new *nom de plume* for social management). It is encroaching upon our media, city life, the office, and – perhaps most of all – the online digital world. The modification of these spaces is set to further desensitise, anaesthetise, and dehumanise us – the collective human mind is being groomed and prepared for a new consensus reality of “normalised dissonance.”

The post-pandemic landscape is merging physical world pandemics with its own viral digital epidemics that now infect the human psyche. The Italian philosopher Franco Berardi has noted that our “electronic mediascape” places “the sensitive organism in a state of permanent electrocution.”¹ The social body is deliberately targeted by strategies that cause anxiety, fragmentation, exhaustion, confusion, polarisation and fear. We can see this happening through national and local lockdowns; social distancing; anti-social interaction; social ostracisation; loss of economic independence, and more.

In early July, Prof Sir Venki Ramakrishnan, President of the Royal Society (the UK’s national academy of science) stated publicly that face masks should be worn in all public spaces (as they already are in many places in Europe and worldwide). Not wearing a face covering, he added, “should be regarded as ‘anti-social’ in the same way as drink driving or failing to

wear a seatbelt.”² This is nothing short of encouraging a regime of public shaming. The human condition subjected to a new rhythm of the modern power-machine that breaks down social alliances.

The established conditions that maintain a sense of social reality are being dissolved and replaced with a regime aimed at managing the masses through forms of separation and quantification. That is, techniques necessary to form a technologised humanity. These processes seek to reduce human life, and its environment, to something measurable and predictable – a life ordained by algorithms. These imposed changes are creating disequilibrium in the human psyche – a fragmentation of the human self. Furthermore, they are breaking down our trusted social relations.

Something insidious creeps into the global collective that is attempting to create a world of sleepwalkers, plied with fear-pills, updated with vaccines, programmed with nonsense, and dismissive of alternative thinking. As a conscious, biological organism, we are being prepared to mimic the automation of the machine. Humanity is mentally sleeping and slipping into the void where a new form of the ‘social collective’ awaits us.

Techniques are being devised and employed to produce normalised and standardised behaviour for a socially manageable populace. The collective human mind is being adapted and adopted into an infrastructure of control that operates largely through modes of digital connectivity. I refer to this rising mechanism of social engineering as the *modern power-machine* (MPM) that exerts control over human expression and autonomy of behaviour. To enact this, a consortium of institutions have been selected to structure contemporary societies toward specific functions that offer the promise of security and human well-being whilst developing increased social dependency. This is the post-pandemic landscape now rapidly arising and to which all future generations shall be born into.

Childhood’s End

Luciano Floridi, a professor of philosophy and the ethics of information, believes that human civilisation is shifting into a phase of “hyperhistory.” A hyperhistorical society that is dependent upon integrative technologies, says Floridi, could also become human-independent – that is, not needing us. Life on this planet is to be incorporated into an infrastructure that favours machinic intelligence and artificial organisms, thus de-territorialising the human experience. Our urban environments may soon be more conducive to artificial ‘life’ than biological life. No one is yet ready for the mutation at hand. Are we being programmed to take a new position in the world that erodes the possibility of human transcendence – a world where the ‘flesh robot’ eventually dominates the reality consensus?

We are witnessing an unprecedented migration of humanity from the physical space to the digital-sphere – an environment of surveillance and technocratic social management. Incoming generations will recognise no fundamental difference between the digital-sphere and the physical world as this merging will form the reality they are born into. To the new generations, the digital-physical-sphere will be their only reality for they will have been born without the offline-online distinction. In the words of Luciano Floridi, they are born *onlife*. This is their reality, and it is ‘onlife’. The world that many of us recognise as being human will never be the same again. With the ‘onlife’ mode, a new era of history begins. Childhood ends when you stop being a child and become a user. The user inhabits whole new realities – realities believed to be ‘user-generated’ when in fact the reverse is likely the case.

Connectivity and access will be part of the new power-machine regime. The rights of access are going to be a matter of consensus health security (as addressed in *New Dawn* #180/#181). Aligning with the power-machine will mean opting-in to its sanctioned and on-surveillance connections. Opting out will be an almost impossible alternative. Connecting into the power-machine will become the new cartography of 'human reality'. Living 'manually' – offline – will become one of the last ways of resistance as human life becomes regulated-by-automation.

The City as Machine Cradle

Modern living, especially within dense urban metropolises, as well as within poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, severely affects the human psychological condition and the nervous system. Journalist Naomi Klein has noted how a form of 'Pandemic Shock Doctrine' is emerging where city metropolises are forming suspicious partnerships with large tech conglomerates to re-design city living.

Klein has stated that the quarantine lockdowns were not so much to save lives "but as a living laboratory for a permanent – and highly profitable – no-touch future."³ One technology company CEO told Klein: "There has been a distinct warming up to human-less, contactless technology... Humans are biohazards, machines are not."⁴ Several local city governments are in negotiations with large private tech companies to create a "seamless integration" between city government, education, health and policing operations. Further, the individual home will become a smart-enclosed hub for the urban dweller. All this, and more, as a part of the "frontline pandemic response."

Online learning, the home office, telehealth, and online commerce/shopping are all now part of an emerging investment landscape to convert existing physical-digital infrastructures to 'cloud'-based run by now-under-construction 5G networks. All in the name of providing citizens with a securitised 'virus-free' landscape.

Eric Schmidt, ex-CEO of Google/Alphabet and now chair of the Defense Innovation Board that advises the US Department of Defense on military Artificial Intelligence (AI), recently stated: "The benefit of these corporations, which we love to malign, in terms of the ability to communicate, the ability to deal with health, the ability to get information, is profound. Think about what your life would be like in America without Amazon."⁵

Schmidt has been hired to head up the task force commissioned to reimagine New York's post-COVID reality. And he won't be alone. High-tech is now jumping to get into partnerships with local governments in order to bring a safer, more 'securitised' landscape into civil society – all for 'our' benefit.

Part of this process is modifying the behaviour of people working in business environments, with the office landscape set to be re-organised to regulate further and isolate the social interactions of working colleagues. Jeff Green and Michelle F. Davis in a recent Bloomberg business analysis suggested: "The pre-COVID workplace, with its shared desks and common areas designed for 'creative collisions', is getting a makeover for the social distancing era. So far, what employers have come up with is a mash-up of airport security style entrance protocols and surveillance combined with precautions already seen at grocery stores, like sneeze guards and partitions."⁶

The authors also foresee that the newly returned office worker will likely be encased in a makeshift cubicle of plexiglass sheets. A new mode of interaction-prevention is clearly in the works.

Hundreds of major companies have already announced they plan what they call “employee re-orientation programs” and are hiring “thermal scanners” to monitor employees for fevers, according to the article’s sources. The authors also noted that there had been a spike in job postings for “tracers” – who would track down the contacts of anyone testing positive for the virus. In short, companies are now looking for a range of solutions to keep people away from one another throughout the working day. IBM, for example, is looking to use existing sensors or find new technology to detect when people are too close or “trending” in that direction. Another report from the UK noted how companies may develop their own specialist employee smartphone apps that would operate elevators hands-free.⁷ Employers are discussing the creation of “safe bubbles” around employees with monitoring so bubbles do not overlap. How would they manage such monitoring?

Various companies, the UK report goes on to say, are looking to teach AI to monitor the video cameras that monitor employees. Dr Mahesh Saptharishi, Motorola Solutions’ chief technology officer, explained that AI algorithms can offer feedback about “pinch points” where people are too close together. Instead of employers (read ‘humans’) having to spend time (read ‘waste time’) monitoring video surveillance feeds, they can ‘ask’ AI if social distancing is being observed and any problem points.⁸ Issue solved! We’ll just rely on AI algorithms to tell us how to ‘social distance’ in our non-interacting bubbles, and we can modify our behaviour accordingly. Job done!

Importantly, this also signifies that to modify our behaviour, machine intelligence will need to gather ever greater datasets about us – all of us. ‘Smart cities’ and ‘secure offices’ means increased surveillance that translates into expanded datasets. The “Black Iron Prison” that science fiction writer Philip K. Dick saw coming is now hitting us squarely in the form of surveillance capitalism.

Surveillance Capitalism

Professor Shoshana Zuboff, author of the widely acclaimed *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, says that digital connection is now a means to others’ commercial ends. With the rapid rise of data collection for commercial gain, Zuboff explains, “the result is that both the world and our lives are pervasively rendered as information.”⁹ People are reduced to less than products because they are rendered into a mere ‘input’ for the creation of the real product which is the data. People are reduced to “prediction products” that are designed to “anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later.” Your life as a product, writes Zuboff, is then sold off in “behavioural futures markets.” Zuboff considers surveillance capitalism to be, at its core, parasitic and self-referential – a parasite that feeds on every aspect of every human’s experience.

“Surveillance capitalism,” notes Zuboff, “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data.” It then becomes a product of value. Using this material, organisations can intervene in our lives to shape and modify our behaviour in order to favour outcomes most desirable for their commercial gain. Behaviour modification in the hands of private capital and undertaken with minimal external oversight.

At its most basic, humans have been reduced to ‘batteries’ that produce datasets for algorithms and machine learning. By and large, and somewhat of a worry, the general population is ignorant of what is going on quite literally beneath their fingertips. People are unknowingly funding their own manipulation says Zuboff.

Through its operations of technocratic ‘normalisation’ and the deliberate breaking up of social groupings, the power-machine age wants to manufacture a new standardisation of the human body and mind. With the encroachment of socially managed interventions, people are made vulnerable to the increased destabilising of the human self. The human sense of ‘self’ and identity has become a fragile thing; it is analysed, scrutinised, and criticised through social media; it is modified through surveillance capitalism; and it is increasingly being rendered by AI facial recognition systems such as Clearview (see *New Dawn* #180). As these post-pandemic landscapes roll out into our social environments, we are likely to see, as a consequence, an ever-greater fragmentation of the human self.

The Fragmented Self

It is no exaggeration that humanity is entering a period of existential crisis, perhaps not witnessed since the Middle Ages. But this time we don’t have the religious institutions to offer us salvation. The responsibility is upon our shoulders to find salvation by becoming fully human in the face of dehumanising forces. At present, we are being bombarded with such contradictory information leaving many people unable to find coherence or make a whole picture out of the shards. That is, the human mind is finding it increasingly difficult to see the patterns and connect the dots. Many people will also now be experiencing forms of cognitive dissonance: “Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviours to reduce the discomfort and restore balance.”¹⁰

The result is that the mind desperately wishes to reduce this discomfort and restore balance by seeking – or being provided with – a coherent picture, or closure. This ‘closure’ or ‘coherent picture’ may be provided by an institution or body (a structure of orthodox ‘authority’), and many people will accept it as a way of gaining closure, and thus comfort. In truth, we need to find this coherence and closure within ourselves – through our own resources.

With the increasing breakdown of social relations and a massively changing human environment, people’s consciousness is being further fragmented so that events are seen as random rather than interrelated and meaningful. Virtual attractions will be offered to compensate this lack of meaningfulness as the digital-sphere increasingly becomes the ‘safe and secure’ home for people. Critical thinking, perceptive observation and intuitive knowing will face the onslaught of nullifying behaviour modification.

As we are now seeing in the public space, self-identity (race, sexuality, etc.) is becoming a target of division, creating doubt, anxiety and social polarisation. Psychologically, people are being pushed to acquiesce, submit and accept measures implemented in the ‘new normal’ post-pandemic landscapes. And the more we submit, the more we become vulnerable to further submission and disempowerment.

Bureaucratic regimes and administrative structures will encroach deeper into our living, work and leisure until a form of what French philosopher Michel Foucault calls *disciplinary*

power will dominate over the human condition. New forms of social discipline and collective obedience fostering an artificial and engineered state of perception.

We are right in the middle of a time of intense “enforced socialisation,” or what Edward Snowden recently referred to as an “architecture of oppression.” For some, the only response to this overwhelming “architecture of oppression” will be to find their comfort zones – such as sitting at home with their ‘surrogates’ roaming the digital-physical landscape on their part.¹¹ Or, as the 2008 computer-animated sci-fi film *Wall-E* depicted, growing lazy and obese, indulging in infantile entertainments, while robots cater to every need. We can only hope this shall never be the case.

Humanity has entered unprecedented times. Such times demand an unprecedented response. It appears we are now being asked to ‘step up’ to accept our responsibility for our human becoming – to become fully human. By doing nothing, we allow our behaviour to be modified and our self-identities to be splintered.

In these post-pandemic landscapes, the choices we make will be choices that, like never before, determine our future as a human species. I suggest it is time to declare our unity as an empowered *fully human* species and not accept the push of the power-machine for distanced and disempowered individuals.

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Notes

1. Berardi, Franco. 2015. *AND: Phenomenology of the End*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 88
2. Coronavirus: Wear masks in crowded public spaces, says science body, www.bbc.com/news/uk-53316491
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6. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-01/the-office-you-left-is-not-going-to-be-the-office-you-return-to
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8. Ibid
9. theintercept.com/2019/03/01/surveillance-capitalism-book-shoshana-zuboff-naomi-klein/
10. From www.simplypsychology.org
11. See the sci-fi film *Surrogates* (2009) or read the book *Kiln People* (2002) by David Brin

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