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"It's Merely Controlled": The Truman Show in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism

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Introduction

For seminal media theorist Marshall McLuhan, art and artists predict our media and societal futures. In *Understanding Media*, he writes that they can "anticipate future social and technological developments, [...] enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them" (16). Art reveals truths not yet clear to even the most discerning eye. Following this idea, what may *The Truman Show* (1998), awarded "universal acclaim" on critic review aggregator website *Metacritic* ("The Truman Show Metascore"), anticipate?[1]

The Truman Show centers on Truman Burbank, whose life has been appropriated for television. Unbeknownst to Truman but known to everyone else, he stars in a worldwide reality show—an unending dramatic irony that exists entirely for him. In the midst of thousands of hidden cameras, actors, and a massive set, his life is orchestrated by God-director figure

"Christof" for "24 hours a day, 7 days a week" (*The Truman Show* 1:01:44-1:01:46). The unsubtle allusion to Christ in "Christof" stands in opposition to "Truman"—true man. While the film has been subject to dozens of interpretations, ranging from "psychosis" (J. Gold and I. Gold) to a "culture of control" (Wise) to the "destabilization of identity" (Fitch), I argue that it is ultimately a film about media and technology; more specifically, *The Truman Show* serves as a pedagogical tool for navigating what Shoshanna Zuboff terms "surveillance capitalism." *The Truman Show* is both anticipatory and reflexive: the film serves as a means to predict aspects of our surveillance capitalist present, and its anticipatory quality simultaneously allows for reflection and learning.

In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff defines surveillance capitalism as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (v). Surveillance capitalism is not solely about predictive power—corporations also aim for "behavioral modification" (ibid.). Zuboff names such companies as Google and Facebook the largest culprits of surveillance capitalism. These two giant technology corporations, alongside a number of others, collect user data to not only predict our behavior but modify it, transforming users into ideal consumers that can be continually data-mined for profitable ends. With our new contemporary lens and the clarity of hindsight, *The Truman Show*, made two decades before Zuboff's book, maps onto our new surveillance landscape: we are Truman, and surveillance capitalists are Christof.

I will first discuss an online article that has drawn similar connections between the film and surveillance capitalism to establish a few guiding questions. Second, I explore American culture's relationship to television, especially during the release of *The Truman Show*, locating it within a move toward the digital era. From there, I place various aspects of the surveillance

capitalist digital landscape in relation to *The Truman Show*: behavioral modification, the drivers behind media technology and technologically deterministic thinking, hyperpersonalized advertising, and how surveillance capitalism gains control. Finally, I depart from *The Truman Show's* anticipatory function and reflect on the lessons to take from the film, ultimately suggesting individual actions that can be drawn from *The Truman Show*.

Profitable Behaviors and the "Opt Out"

Surface-level connections between *The Truman Show* and surveillance capitalism may draw reductive conclusions about the ramifications of the comparison. McLuhan observed that discoveries are only made when the "time is right," and thus many similar discoveries are made at once—"the effects come before [we find] the cause" (McLuhan, "Living in an Acoustic World"). Then, like most discoveries, I am not the first to have made this present connection between *The Truman Show* and surveillance capitalism. An idiosyncratic review website for amateur reviewers draws the same link in their review of Zuboff's book. As reviewer Austin Gohn explains, "Google […] began to construct its own world […] so that it could nudge our behaviors in profitable directions. […] We're all Truman, now" (Gohn). Gohn's review, that uses *The Truman Show* as a jumping-off point for a book review-turned-theological thinkpiece, glosses over two essential points of this connection.

First, Gohn does not elaborate on these "profitable directions." Zuboff is clear that surveillance capitalists do not merely predict behavior, but also modify it. Hence, how can behavioral modification be understood within *The Truman Show*? If we are all Truman, how exactly are we profitable? What makes Truman profitable to Christof?

Gohn second misconception lies in the end of his review:

> Digital natives […] are beginning to board boats of their own and sail toward the edge of the digital landscape, where surveillance can't follow. […] It's not long before, like Truman, they'll crash into the edge, climb the staircase, and opt out. The only question is: *Who will be there to welcome them?* (Gohn)

What Gohn—perhaps wistfully—fails to recognize is, for both Truman and us, the impossibility of individually returning to another reality. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan metaphorized electronic culture as an interconnected "global village," one that was "experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole" (131). Fragmented societies, with a "center-margin structure" (131), were—and still are—quickly becoming reconnected. In this global village, every individual is connected with, and watched by, one another. McLuhan understood electronic media to be one of "total involvement" (McLuhan et al. 61). There is thus no "opt out" for a single individual in an electronic culture.

The Truman Show was released as this truth became abundantly clear—Truman, like us, cannot really leave. Leaving the set only threw him into another world of being watched. Audiences who had watched Truman since birth had formed a parasocial relationship with him, in which they believed they truly knew him despite never actually having met him. Truman escapes into the world as its biggest celebrity, trapped forever in a world of surveillance. No longer watched wholly through the medium of television, paparazzi, stalkers, and the renewed surveillance of social institutions take its place—as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins understood: "we are all being watched; we watch one another as a mechanism of control and, in this way, mutually police one another" (137). Truman jumps out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Thus, in referencing Gohn, I establish two guiding questions: First, what are "profitable directions," and how exactly are we and Truman made profitable? Second, without a means to opt out, how can we understand a means to resist surveillance capitalism?

From Television to Internet

The Truman Show was made and released in the advent of the Internet, when physical television sets still reigned supreme. Specifically, it was made the same year Larry Page and Sergey Brin founded Google, the company that would ultimately become "the pioneer of surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 63). This coincidence (that is, if media are ever truly coincidental) marks the start of a new takeover in media ecology: the Internet's supremacy over television. 2011 marked "the first time in 20 years" that "the number of homes in the United States with television sets [...] dropped" (Stelter). In 2020, the Internet's sheer hegemony is even more apparent: American television's advertising revenue was projected to drop 15.2% in 2020, even while the Covid-19 pandemic kept many individuals at home, glued to a screen (Burch). This then places *The Truman Show* at a period of transition: from television to the Internet, connectedness to hyper-connectedness. The Internet has now thrust us from identifying with those watching Truman's show to being within it; we have gone from being active spectators to simply being active. We are not Truman's audience, we are Truman.

The Truman Show is littered with references to the act of consuming mass media. These would have been easily understood by a 1998 American audience immersed in the world of television. The film often cuts from the frame narrative to the story outside of it—there are shots of people watching a television, an interview segment with Christof, and a romantic plot-

line, all of which appear outside the scope of the frame narrative. The film was produced for and by a culture attuned to watching. Perhaps the most significant trope that speaks to *The Truman Show*'s awareness of mass media are the exaggerated product placements in Truman's show. Product placements were not unknown when *The Truman Show* was released. Indeed, they had been integrated into mass media in "as early as the 1920s" (Newell 575). The film, however, draws absurdity and humor from its parody of over-the-top, unnatural enthusiasm for products, poorly integrated into Truman's show:

> [Meryl:] It's a 'Chef's Pal.' It's a dicer, grater, peeler, all in one. Never needs sharpening. Dishwasher safe. (*The Truman Show* 9:16-9:23)
>
> [Marlon:] That... [referencing a branded beer in hand] is a beer. (*The Truman Show* 9:46-9:48)
>
> [Meryl:] Get one of those new 'Elk Rotaries.' (*The Truman Show* 18:33-18:35)
>
> [Meryl:] Why don't you let me fix you some of this new 'Mococoa' drink? All-natural cocoa beans from the upper slopes of Mt. Nicaragua, no artificial sweeteners!
>
> [Truman:] What the hell are you talking about? Who are you talking to? (*The Truman Show* 53:45-53:57)

The conflation of overzealous advertising and television is explained here: "since the show is on 24 hours a day without commercial interruption, all those staggering revenues are generated by product placement" (*The Truman Show* 1:05:45-1:05:51).

Below the surface, these nonsensical mockeries of advertising illustrate what was quickly becoming American society's fraught relationship with media advertising and capitalism. In this television culture, the public was quickly moving into private space. Television sets are different

from the world of the movie: cinemas are external, public spaces to which one goes, whereas the television brings those public spaces into the domestic. Meryl, at the beginning of *The Truman Show*, directly alludes to these melding spheres: "for [her], there is no difference between a public life and a private life" (*The Truman Show* 1:22-1:26). This could be placed in relation to Jürgen Habermas' public sphere, "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (176). Habermas' public sphere undertook the civic tasks of "a society engaged in public debate" (52). If television marked the start of an easily accessed public sphere, the Internet has only exacerbated it — Davy Janssen and Raphael Kies have considered how "online forums have approached the conditions of an idealized public sphere" (325). In this shift, the private and the public realm were, and still are, steadily becoming one.

To further emphasize this cultural moment, there are various scenes of people watching Truman in their most private spaces, e.g. a bedroom or a bathtub. As if challenging the idea of a utopic global village and idealized public sphere, *The Truman Show* presents an unideal facet of this new culture: not only does entertainment inevitably mix with advertising, but there is a further, fully invasive integration of advertising into our very homes. In this integration, all private space is enveloped by Habermas' public sphere and marred by profitable ends. *The Truman Show* anticipates a fundamental truth of surveillance capitalism: profit lies in what was once private space. To an unaware late-1990s audience, there was no way to know just how quickly this was becoming reality.

The Modification of Behavior

A key tenet of surveillance capitalism is the wrangling of behavioral data to make user behavior profitable. J. Macgregor Wise, in his analysis of *The Truman Show* as a culture of control, differentiates his insight from Michel Foucault's understanding of disciplinary societies. Unlike Foucault, who argued that "[d]isciplinary societies and technologies of surveillance" coerce individuals into "internaliz[ing] societal discipline, to become docile subjects" (qtd in Wise 30), Wise maps a culture of control on *The Truman Show*, in which "[t]he barriers between home, work, school, prison, and the hospital begin to break down and run together (31). As spheres meld, control becomes ubiquitous. I thus extend Wise's argument to surveillance capitalist logics, in which surveillance capitalists wield this culture of control, and use it for profitable ends.

Truman's profitability for Christof is entirely dependent on Truman staying within the confines of the utopia set Christof constructed for him—Seahaven Island. There is no set beyond this island and thus no profit to be made. Then, it is not enough for Christof to predict Truman's movements—he must modify them. Surveillance capitalism is much the same. It is not enough to be predicted; we must also be controlled and continuously mined for data. For audiences in the world of television, Christof is downright tyrannical. In our present day, we know him as Google.

How exactly is our behavior modified to be profitable? Zuboff, to illustrate her answer, references the craze that was *Pokémon GO*—an extreme case of behavioral modification and a prescient warning. In the summer of 2016, Niantic, a company working in collaboration with Google and the Pokémon Company, released *Pokémon GO* (Zuboff 310). Within its first week, the game became the highest-grossing app in the US and achieved "as many active Android users as Twitter" (Zuboff 314). The game itself is a game of augmented reality wherein users find

Pokémon creatures through their phone in their physical world reinterpreted through GPS coordinates, the phone camera, and their screens (Zuboff 309). There are no mapped borders within this new reality—just space completely reconstructed and mediated into data.

John Hanke, an executive involved with the creation of both *Pokémon GO* and Google's *Street View* (Zuboff 309), admitted that *Pokémon GO* had two means of profit: in-app game payments, and "*sponsored locations*" (Hanke qtd in Zuboff 315). Sponsored locations, in short, are businesses that pay Niantic to be located within *Pokémon GO* as a means to drive up a store's foot traffic (Zuboff 315). While sponsored locations began with mega chains such as Starbucks, McDonald's, and Sprint (Kumparak), Niantic has also exerted its influence on small businesses (Kumparak; Partleton), giving them a leg up within the sphere of capitalist logic. Under this scheme, small businesses now have an equal ability to enter an exclusive program that ultimately serves Niantic's profit ends. There is then an additional liability to appease Niantic, alongside other already existing online promotional venues like Yelp in order to bring in customers (Sperber 2014). As these businesses want to be promoted online through various means, they must first appear *promotable* to sites and corporations, or risk not being promoted at all. Thus, through this promotability imperative, small businesses' needs and public images are subject to that of other sites and corporations—often before their own. For these businesses, promoting Niantic is a promotional strategy in and of itself, and businesses had to be nominated to even have a chance at being selected (Partleton). In other words, they had to be nominated to a program that makes money for a larger corporation, in the hopes that they receive some spillover profit.

This strategy marks how surveillance capitalism modifies bodily autonomy to be profitable. Surveillance capitalists employ gamification by creating profitable incentives under the guise of good intentions, ensuring users stay—i.e. through a reward system. On another level, they create profit-making systems out of user movement in both the digital and physical world. Through this process, social and cultural capital are converted into tangible, material capital. Niantic had created a total profitable environment. As Truman's best friend Marlon explains, in what could be directly applied to Niantic's antics: "it's all real. Nothing here is fake. […] It's merely controlled" (*The Truman Show* 1:58-2:05).

Pokémon GO, to create incentives for its users to go to their "sponsored locations," uses "forms of telestimulation" that "herd people […] to spend their real world money in [...] real-world commercial establishments" (Zuboff 318). Niantic did not just make a product, release it, and draw profit solely by predicting what users would click and how ads could be targeted. They watched what users did, fed that data into their algorithms, and used the information to not only optimize sales but further change their services, introducing incentives like "telestimulation" to modify user behavior for profit (Zuboff 70).

If Christof stands as our surveillance capitalist in *The Truman Show*, we come to realize that Truman's profitability entirely depends on the fact that, like *Pokémon GO* players, he stays within the confines of the world created for him. Christof did not just make a studio, then allow Truman to roam free. He watched Truman's behavior, disincentivized him from leaving Seahaven Island, and profited from his perpetually staying on air. Christof does this in implicit ways, such as fostering a fear of water and travel, and explicit ways, such as causing a bus break down (*The Truman Show* 44:30-44:40), hindering any chance of booking a flight ticket (*The Truman Show*

43:26-43:40), and physically placing obstructions on the road (*The Truman Show* 47:50-51:50). By the end of the film, profit imperatives have such a strong hold on Christof that he nearly kills Truman to stop him from leaving. Should *The Truman Show* be anticipatory, we must not only be wary of how we are incentivized to stay within the sphere of profitability, but how we are disincentivized from leaving.

Media Technology and its Drivers

The Truman Show predicts another crucial aspect of surveillance capitalism, particularly in understanding what incentivizes media technology. Audiences would have caught obvious product placement parodies, but it is somewhat off-putting when Christof explains that "everything on the show is for sale" (*The Truman Show* 1:05:52-1:05:55). Every single object is a product to be sold. Television culture was in the process of transition toward a complete unification between advertising and entertainment. This stands in contrast to an earlier age of television and radio that had, up until the 1980s, operated with an involved state (Hesmondhalgh 142). Telecommunications was viewed "as a *public utility,*" broadcasting as "a *limited, national resource*" that was "powerful and therefore in need of control" (Hesmondhalgh 142). With the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, these views were cast aside for privatization and marketization as "commercial companies in Europe and North America [...] were becoming increasingly aware of the potentially greater profits to be made in the cultural, communication and leisure industries" (Hesmondhalgh 145). Thus began the aforementioned transition from a television culture intertwined with public good to one working under neo-liberal market

principles and marked by a growing private sector presence that no longer was bound to notions of "public utility."

Acknowledging the drivers behind this media history helps prevent us from falling into the trap of technological determinism and reductionism. Technological determinism can be understood as giving the "causal role of technology" too much weight "at the expense of" other factors (Hesmondhalgh 110). These other factors may be cultural, economic, or anything else. A technologically determinist view sees technology as the sole catalyst behind all other relations, a single force that "determines" all others. Believing that any one factor decides all others necessarily precludes any agency to resist changes that are seen as inevitable. Understanding that technology is itself driven by other imperatives is essential to understanding that televisions, and television culture, are not entirely to blame for a commodified culture nor the close mix of advertising and entertainment. Rather, media technology here may be seen as a vehicle driven by individuals and groups with, as media policy changes show, a strong profit incentive. Technology is thus not the sole driver, but perhaps a tool that works in conjunction with other driving forces. Media in itself has strong effects on social relations and culture. Nevertheless, to think that these effects are inevitable is to fall into reductionist thinking, in that they lead to believing that surveillance capitalists are not creating a future but merely enacting it. It is often the other way around—media is a product of profit and cultural imperatives.

Similarly, for Truman, the television does not in itself manufacture his life. It merely acts as a tool for Christof. As every object on Truman's show is purchasable, not only does *The Truman Show* contain not-so-subtle product placement, it also contains totally invisible surveillance capitalist commodification. The premise of total commodification, in which anything

may be understood as an object to be sold, works in conjunction with the move of advertising to our most private spheres. The Internet provides us with the possibility to shop entirely from our homes, without having to interact with the public; now, our private lives are fully mixed with commodities and commodification. In this sense, *The Truman Show* could not be more prophetic.

Advertising and Hyperpersonalization

Like Truman, we eventually gain awareness of absurd, conspicuous marketing schemes—but it is the subtle ones that catch us off-guard. The surveillance capitalist advertising of today can be hard to miss; they are interspersed through Google searches, Facebook posts, Amazon products, etc. and are largely geared toward users—in other words, they are personalized. Furthermore, each of these companies have "suites" of products, and are thus able to track us both on and off their platforms. This may also be understood as a shift in mediums, or "the move from broadcasting to narrowcasting" in which all content is filtered through a form of "hyperpersonalization" (Metzger 798, 799) and "media audiences are increasingly likely to receive information that is customized to their personal tastes" (Metzger 798).

Narrowcasting and hyperpersonalization have facilitated the complete integration of advertising into our online tools, social networks, and professional web spaces. Everything is for sale. The inconspicuous advertising of today, however, was not always the case. Users were once outraged when they found ads targeted based on their "private correspondence" over *Gmail* (Zuboff 47), and Facebook's first advertising venture, 'Beacon,' was an invasive initiative that both tracked users online and disclosed their purchases to Facebook friends (Zuboff 48). Large-

scale public outcries against these programs transpired in 2004 and 2006 respectively, long before surveillance capitalists had found their footing.

Like Truman, as we became conscious of their methods, they improved their stratagems. Like a machine-learning algorithm, Christof changes the environment based on its user's movements. Surveillance capitalists quickly got smarter, and so did we—there is an infinite feedback loop; digital natives are quick to spot pop-up ads and have a kind of "sixth sense" about advertising online. This is, however, less resistance and more ambivalence. Instead of outcries, we simply accept our "digital dispossession" as inevitable (Zuboff 99). The digital dispossession here builds on David Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession," in which "[o]veraccumulated capital can seize hold of assets and immediately turn them to profitable use" (Harvey qtd in Zuboff 99). Jathan Sadowski explores digital dispossession, or "the idea of data-as-capital" explicitly in relation to Marx's understanding of capital (2). Sadowski, recalling Marx, first explains that the "cycle of capital" is motivated purely for profit, rather than simply circulated to consume commodities (3). That is, the primary function of wealth is to be used to create more wealth, rather than for consumption. Thus, if data is understood as "a form of capital that is distinct from, but has its roots in, economic capital," then "the cycle of data capital becomes an intrinsic motivation, a driving force, for firms" (4). Firms have an imperative to take data within the digital space, in which human experience and behavioral data becomes the next avenue for surplus value to be accumulated and for profit to be gleaned "with little regard for consent and compensation" (Ibid. 9). The accumulation of behavioral data creates an imperative for more accumulation.

Total Surveillance Capitalist Control Through Dispossession

Zuboff argues that technology firms accumulate behavioral data through what she terms "the dispossession cycle" (137). While the earlier exploration of *Pokémon GO* was explicit in its behavioral modification, a more subtle, yet equally frightening example of normalized dispossession lies in Facebook's 'Like' button. In the first step of the dispossession cycle, "*incursion,*" technology companies take our "undefended" behavioral data (138). Facebook had taken this step when researcher Arnold Roosendaal found that Facebook's 'Like' button, unbeknownst to users, "install[ed] cookies in [their] computers" (158). Founder Mark Zuckerberg called this a "bug" (qtd in Zuboff 158). The next step, "*habituation,*" is simply to "wait them out" (Zuboff 144): Facebook denied every accusation, as bureaucratic methods took "a solid year and a half" before "*adaptation,*" and Facebook finally admitted to deceiving consumers (Zuboff 159). Now, despite concerns around its tracking capabilities, the 'Like' button had become a facet of life, and Facebook could begin "*redirection*"—the final step. With a fully integrated, data-tracking 'Like' button, Facebook announced a new terms-of-service agreement in 2014 that would allow "personalized ad pitches" based on "detailed profiles" from tracked data (Zuboff 160). With no way to opt out, Facebook's audacity was stunning.

Disillusioned to his dispossession, Truman finds the edge of Christof's film set and asks him if anything was "real." Christof's ominous voice speaks thus: "there's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. […] I know you better than you know yourself" (*The Truman Show* 1:32:53-1:33:16). Christof's eerie proclamation rings true and anachronistically echoes future arguments made by surveillance capitalists. Silicon Valley espouses propaganda-like rhetoric that professes the beauty of the digital surveillance capitalist ideal. Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, said that "Google needed no regulation because of

strong incentives to 'treat its users right'" (Schmidt qtd in Zuboff 104). Sergey Brin suggests that "people always have a natural aversion to innovation" (Brin qtd in Efrati). Zuckerberg, defending Facebook's complicity in harming the American election process, argued that "the very small percent of [Facebook's] business that's made up of political ads does not come anywhere close to justifying the kind of controversy [the company experienced]" (Zuckerberg qtd in Romm). The surveillance capitalist, like Christof, will do everything in their power to convince us of their goodheartedness. As products of the dispossession cycle, we may question: *what if they're right?*

Truman, in an act of defiance, spurns that Christof "knows" him: Christof "never had a camera in [Truman's] head" (*The Truman Show* 1:33:17-1:33:19). There was, of course, never a literal camera in his head. However, staunchly in the age of the Internet, we now come to realize that the amount of control Christof had over Truman completely obviates the need for one. Truman, from when he was young, is given messaging to keep him on the island. Not only is Seahaven Island portrayed to Truman as a utopia, but various objects, people, and events—including the loss of his father—further instill in him a fear of travel. Surveillance capitalism works in the same way; there is little explicit messaging, but minor incentives keep users around. One cannot deny the inherent compelling nature of being 'liked' on social media—the very act of seeing likes on a photo triggers a brain's "reward circuitry" ("Social Media 'Likes'"). Similarly compelling is the need to be 'in the loop,' an urge to be kept up to speed with current events and trends.

Further, surveillance capitalist logic works not on an individual, but on a network of users. For any given individual, the fact that close friends and family are online serves itself as (dis)incentive to stay. Thus, like Truman, attempting an individual opt out within the structure

imposed on us is difficult without first understanding the rules of this structure. McLuhan, in *The Medium is the Massage*, writes that "[a]ll media work over us completely" (26). In this case, digital media and surveillance capitalism work in tandem to enact behavioral change over individual users and society at large, especially for profit gains and commercial ends.

The Truman Show as a Pedagogical Tool

If *The Truman Show*, despite being a film made in the age of television, can anticipate the way we exist two decades after, what does it have to teach us about the way we can practice resistance? We must first come to realize that Truman's exit does not set him free. The television set, a physical object that brought the public into private homes, created a deeply involved viewer that felt as though they were participating in what they watched: "newscasters and actors alike report the frequency with which they are approached by people who feel they've met them before" (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 423). In *The Truman Show*, various reactions of audiences watching Truman are shown: Truman looks directly at a hidden camera, prompting a crew member to ask: "do you think he knows?" (*The Truman Show* 1:10:20-1:10:22). At other points in the film, someone physically caresses a blown-up image of Truman sleeping (*The Truman Show* 1:09:35-1:09:40) and audiences watch in suspense as Christof nearly orchestrates Truman's death (*The Truman Show* 1:27:15-1:27:16). Truman's audiences perceive themselves as viewer-participants of the television image, and form a parasocial connection with Truman in creating an imagined relationship with a media persona. They are hypnotized by television, something that can be understood deeply by cinema-goers, and even more so now, in the age of the Internet. Then, how could Truman be set free?

If Truman could not be free in the age of the television, there is no leaving the totally involved digital world of surveillance capitalism. This rings true now—leave social media and you would nonetheless be under its grip. Friends, family, acquaintances, the news, entertainment, and a myriad of other societal factors rely on it. Leave the Internet totally, and you cut yourself off from job opportunities, acquaintances and friends, connections, and the digital life. Start afresh off-the-grid—and you would still be under the surveillance of cameras, satellites, and information technology. Truman's exit was a false promise—we can rely on no such means to freedom.

This is not, however, to say that surveillance capitalism is the sole form of control. As Truman had left Seahaven Island into the real world to be under control of social structures and institutions, we too are under social structures. It is important, once again, not to further fall into reductionist thinking. Surveillance capitalist control is one facet of an interlocking system of power, and oftentimes works alongside colonialism, classism, sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression in suppressing marginalized groups and communities. Just as with people, not all digital users are equal. Here I gesture to a tradition of thinking that has dealt with control: from Foucault's understanding of power that "categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize" (780), to Collins' understanding of intersectionality as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (1).

This understanding of *The Truman Show* as anticipating surveillance capitalism may then be further understood in relation to a culture that discriminates and controls users, too, based on their class, race, gender, and sexuality. One may further ask questions about the way targeted advertising functions to perpetuate gender norms: a 2017 study demonstrated that "ads promoting certain high-paying jobs [were shown] more frequently to men than women" (Plane et al. 935). In this "culture of control" (Wise) driven by profit, how does the hunt for data perpetuate the status quo? How can intersectional frameworks and a continued struggle for power continue in the digital space? How did Truman work for his freedom?

Mirroring Truman: Toward Freedom

Learning to establish a surveillance capitalist resistance may be grounded in lessons from *The Truman Show*. Truman's first true act toward being free was the consciousness of his captivity. Not a consciousness of the mind, but rather one akin to Marxist class consciousness; "an awareness of one's position in the class structure that can be shared by members of the same class" (Borland 134). Truman, as the film progresses, becomes acutely aware of his exploitation, an awareness that began in suspicion and culminates in full understanding. Along the way, his acts of resistance—attempting to be unpredictable, questioning his friends, being generally cautious—were taken as feedback that Christof uses to manipulate the environment around him, keeping him in the set. This struggle between Christof and Truman reaches an extreme when Truman's resistance leads him to sail out at sea, despite his ingrained fears. Christof, manipulating the weather, nearly kills Truman in attempting to keep him on set (*The Truman Show* 1:24:00-1:28:50). There is no remorse, and for a while, it is unclear whether Truman dies.

Without regulation, to what extent will those in power struggle to keep a grip on the system that has served them well? I am not suggesting that Google will kill us — that would not be profitable.

We must take a page out of Truman's book, as "*unpredictable behavior is the equivalent of lost revenue*" (Zuboff 153). As we progress in the Internet age, we have grasped fully the value in what McLuhan described as "pattern recognition" (McLuhan et al. 63)—we have begun to see patterns and trends in surveillance capitalism that allow us to learn how to fight back against our manipulation. We must now not have just class consciousness, but user and consumer consciousness, or a consciousness of our digital exploitation. Like Truman, we only progress from gut feeling to full awareness by slowly understanding the ways that we are being deceived. We too must resist falling into consumerist traps set by surveillance capitalists.

Resisting manipulation goes hand in hand with our second act toward freedom. Certainly, Truman did not end up free. But outside Truman's show, outside the frame narrative, it is implied that some are against Truman's captivity: a poster advertises a "FREE TRUMAN RALLY" (*The Truman Show* 1:07:14-1:07:15), and a number of characters attempt to give Truman an awareness, or consciousness, that he is being surveilled. We must then do the same. Truman could not be free because he escaped into a world that was nothing more than an extension of the television show. As a result, those outside of Truman's show did not choose to be conscious, or conscientious, of his captivity, and he was thus unable to be free. Truman was kept captive because of other people—as Sartre said, *L'enfer c'est les autres*. We must then collectively set each other conscious, conscientious, and free.

In 2018, the EU passed legislation "to protect the personal data and privacy of residents of EU countries" (Solon). As we speak, there are policies that can serve to systematically change

the rules of surveillance capitalism. We can advocate for control on technology company monopolies, a right to our data, or by simply asking if access to our data is necessary. These policies, however, are made swift with our collective consumer consciousness. Larry Page believes that "old institutions like the law […] aren't keeping up with the rate of change" (Page qtd in Zuboff 105). I concede this to be true; however, Page's sentiment should incentivize privacy law to be reformed, not abolished. As Zuboff points to "the critical role of public opinion" (520), we can only change our situation when we all are conscious and collectively advocate for systemic, meaningful structural changes to the surveillance capitalist system. Already, Zuboff's book, news articles on surveillance capitalism, and documentaries like *Manufacturing Consent* (both the book and the 1992 documentary), *The Great Hack* (2019), and *The Social Dilemma* (2020) are contributing toward this ideal; this essay, too, has hopefully been a step toward enacting it.[2]

That the film's last lines are not given to Truman, but to an apathetic television watcher, is a noteworthy choice. Truman's show ends, and they ask: "You want to see what else is on? […] Where's the TV guide?" (*The Truman Show* 1:35:57-1:36:00). This is the great tragedy of Truman, and us: apathy. We must begin to care about the systems and structures that aim to control us. We must be active participants not only within media itself, but in developing a consciousness and desire to change it. To allow technology—or rather, the drivers of technology, to treat a surveillance capitalist future as an inevitable one is to fall prey to deterministic thinking. In this future, we forgo human agency and data to powers that will endlessly hunt for more power and control in the name of profit. The fight against apathy is to envision a human-centred future, in which technology can be used as tools for social good, rather than the other way around:

technology using humans as tools for profit. This is a future in which technology can be used to benefit the marginalized, rather than to continuously exploit them for profit. The television culture was already beginning to see the effects profit-incentivized surveillance would have on our world; we owe it to our futures, and to the next generation of digital culture, to ensure that these lessons are received.

Ultimately, there is a certain amount of ambivalence that comes with our surveillance capitalist trap. It is outright impossible for many in hyper-digitized societies to live a regular life without access to technology. Yet, we must still somehow resist the system that we are under, in the hopes for a future that uses technology to serve the common good rather than firms or individuals. As we begin to make small, conscious choices of resistance, advocate for anti-surveillance capitalist policy, and bring the exploitation of our data to light, our small acts of individual resistance will create total reformation. These acts of resistance can be informed by *The Truman Show*: maintain skepticism and scrutiny at every turn, participate in social activism decrying data theft and behavioral control, and constantly question any and all relationships to power. While one cannot deny the culpability of Silicon Valley, neither can one deny the need for individual action that leads to collective change. As George Eliot understood: “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life” (785). Change must come from below—starting with us.

Notes

1. *Metacritic* judges their "METASCORE" based on "a weighted average of the published critic reviews contained in the chart on that page" ("How We Create the METASCORE Magic").

2. *The Social Dilemma* has faced criticism for its portrayal of surveillance capitalism. For example, reviewer Casey Newton quips that the film is "ridiculous", and that "the world is more complicated than filmmakers want to believe" (Newton).

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