

Reputation Management, Surveillance Capitalism and the Politics of Nudging

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Emily Rosamond

In their introduction to *Nudge* (2008), Robert Thaler and Cass Sunstein outline how choice architecture can help decision-fatigued subjects make better decisions, according to their *own* criteria as to what a good decision might be. Yet they also acknowledge a fundamental problem that might arise as nudging becomes more ubiquitous: what measures would actually guarantee that choice architecture served the best interests of users or citizens, rather than those of advertisers, financiers or other privatized interests?

Arguably, this problem has only been exacerbated by what Shoshana Zuboff has recently termed surveillance capitalism: a new regime of accumulation according to which Silicon Valley giants compete for dominance in surveillance assets, and broadly reimagine behavioural patterns as sites of direct intervention for profit. Corporations such as Google build advertising models that blend the “disinterested” language of searchability (of information, for the public good) with advertising keyword auctions based on surveillance of online users. As Safiya Noble points out, such blurring between conceptions of the “public good” and profitability can have serious ramifications for subjects’ self-perception.

To develop an analysis of the politics of nudging within surveillance capitalism, this paper examines nudging toward reputation management on networking sites such as academia.edu and LinkedIn. These sites continually send automated notification emails, with prompts such as “Someone just searched you on Google,” to encourage users to rehabilitate themselves as managers of their online reputations, who continually check their profiles. Such habits increase platforms’ profitability, by bulking out data streams used to generate advertising revenue, and increasing sites’ potential to gain subscription revenue for premium services. Yet they also promote a networked subjectivity amenable to – or even dependent on – reputation management, and create a “virtuous feedback loop” according to which the well-being of one’s networked self, via well-managed online reputation, is inextricably linked to the well-being of the for-profit platform.

In online reputation management on surveillance capitalist platforms, the politics of nudging are deeply intertwined with the politics of online self-presentation. This makes it difficult to claim that surveillance-capitalist nudging reflects users’ the best interests. Rather, it actively constructs reputation-addicted subjectivities that suit the economic needs of the platform.