

A systematic literature review of surveillance capitalism towards an empirical research agenda

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V-DATA project - The value of digital data: enhancing citizens' awareness and voice about surveillance capitalism
<https://vdataresearch.com/>
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The definition

Surveillance capitalism is an approach to business, largely performed by platforms, where customers' data is gathered and analyzed to predict behaviors for commercial purposes (Zuboff, 2019).

Some additional features:

- surveillance capitalism exploits asymmetries of power and information (Arvidsson, 2016; Beer, 2018; Hintz et al., 2017)
- surveillance capitalism relies on the unbalance between those who are exploited and those who manage the data (Crain, 2018)

A double aim

Providing an overview of
the literature that has
been produced so far



systematic
literature review

Suggesting key sub-topics to
further develop our knowledge
of surveillance capitalism



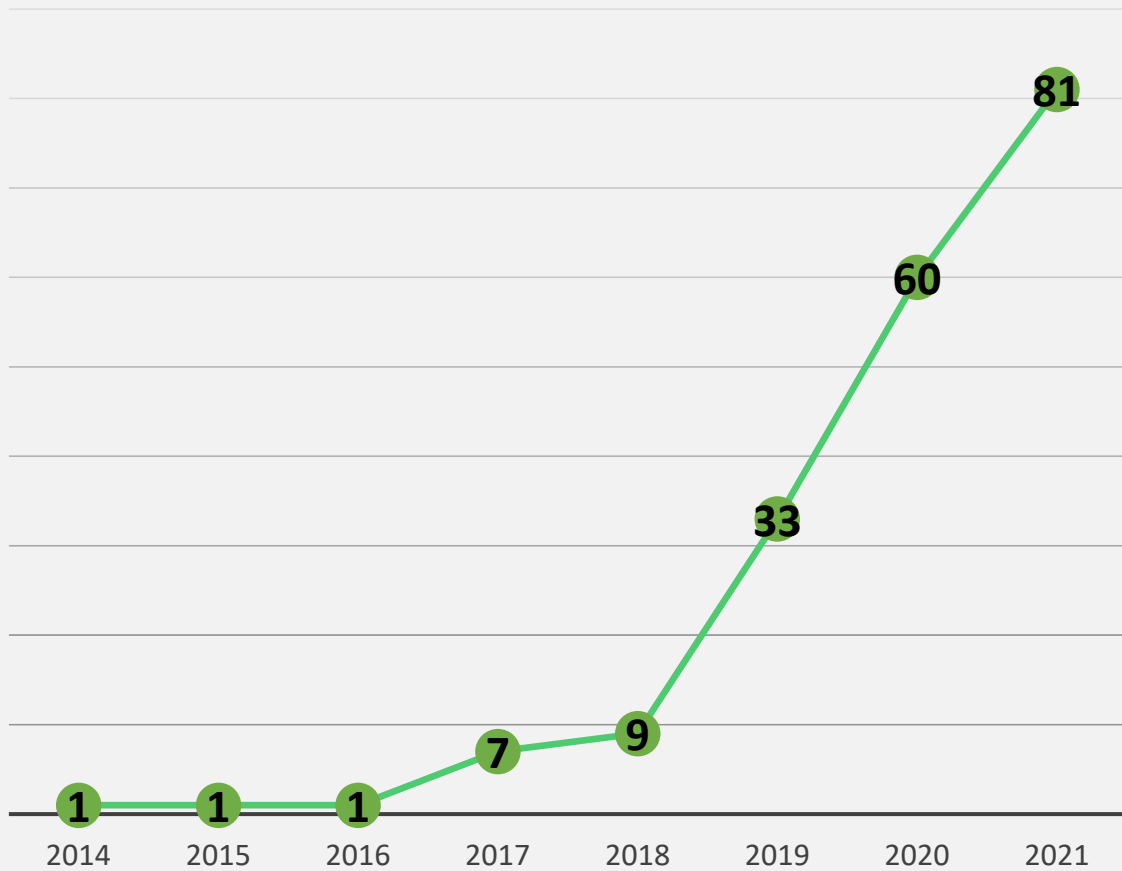
review of surveillance
capitalism contributions and
other domains' contributions

The systematic approach

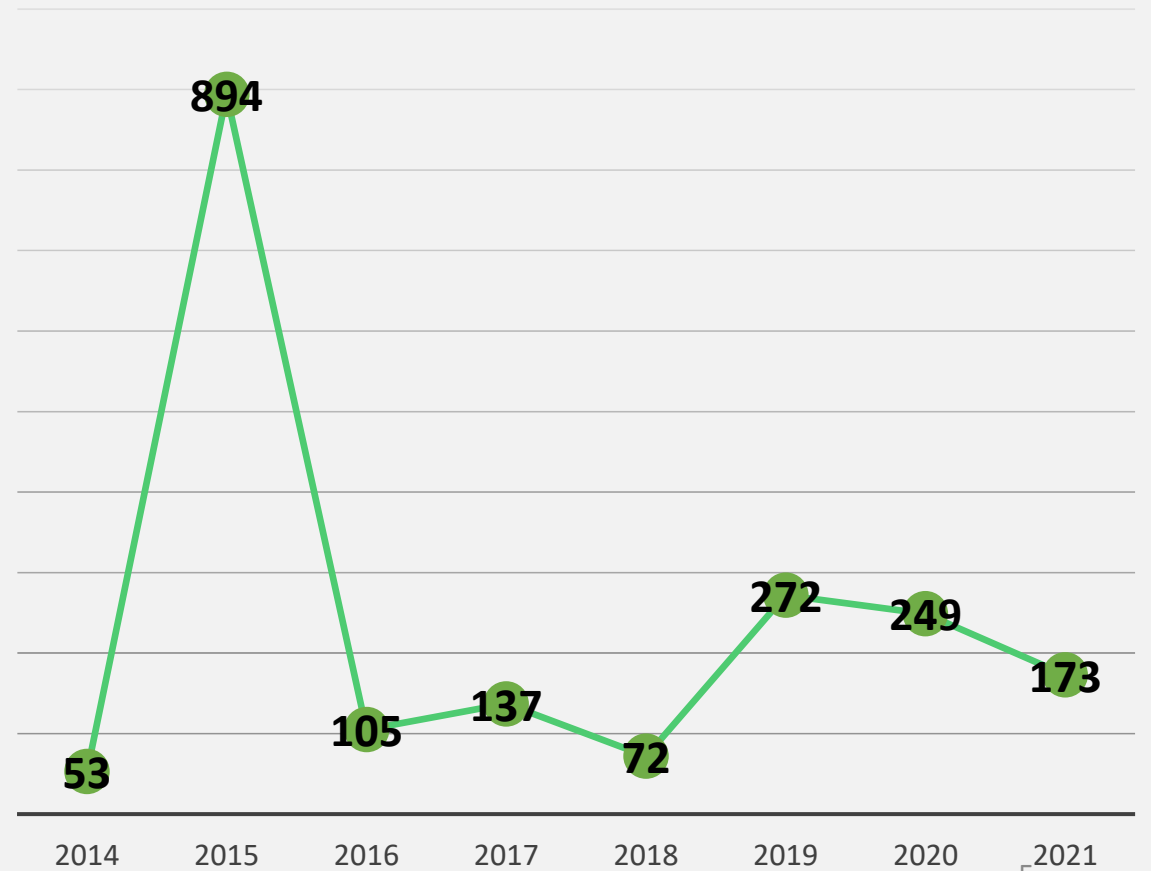
- Search on **Scopus** using keyword «**surveillance capitalism**»: result **219** papers
- **Manual sorting of abstracts** to categorize articles in five groups: “Theoretical”, “Methodological”, “Empirical”, “Literature review”, and “Other” (Flensburg & Lomborg, 2021)
- **Descriptive statistics on relevant variables**: number of citations, authors, year of publication
- **Co-occurrence analysis of the most recurring keywords** though VOSviewer (Flensburg & Lomborg, 2021)

The results

Publications per year



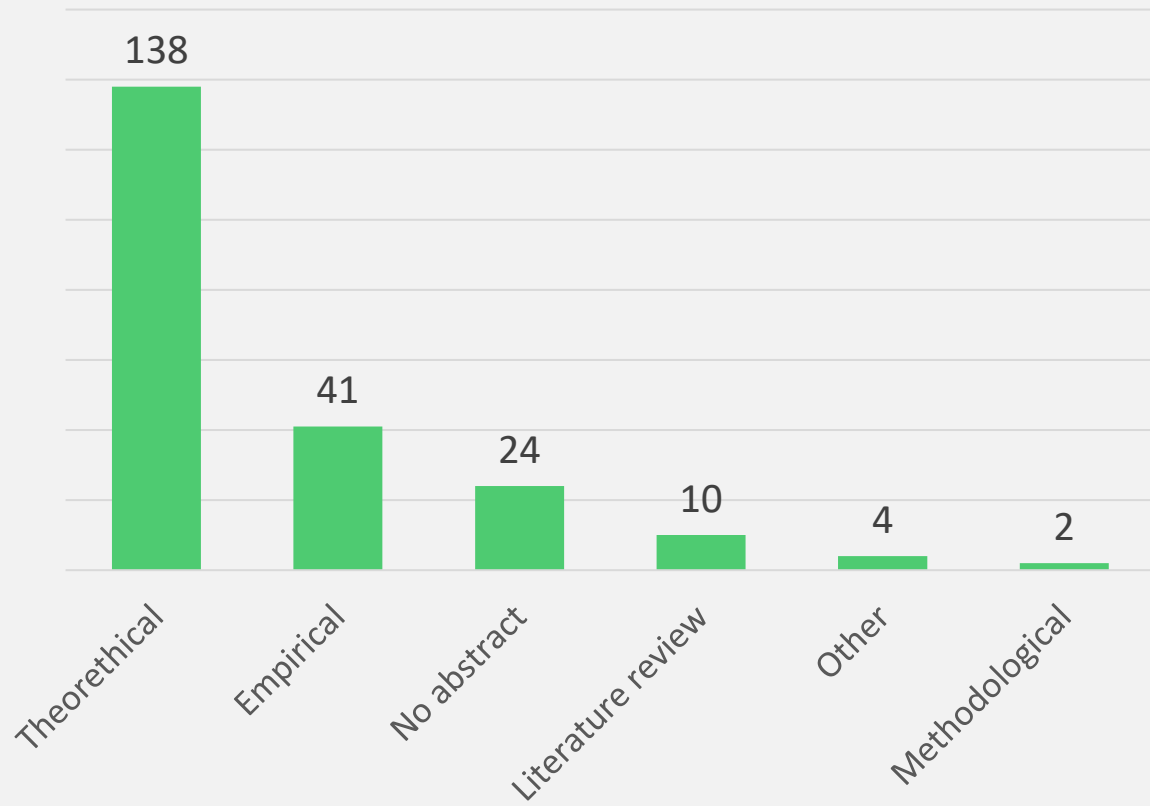
Citations per year



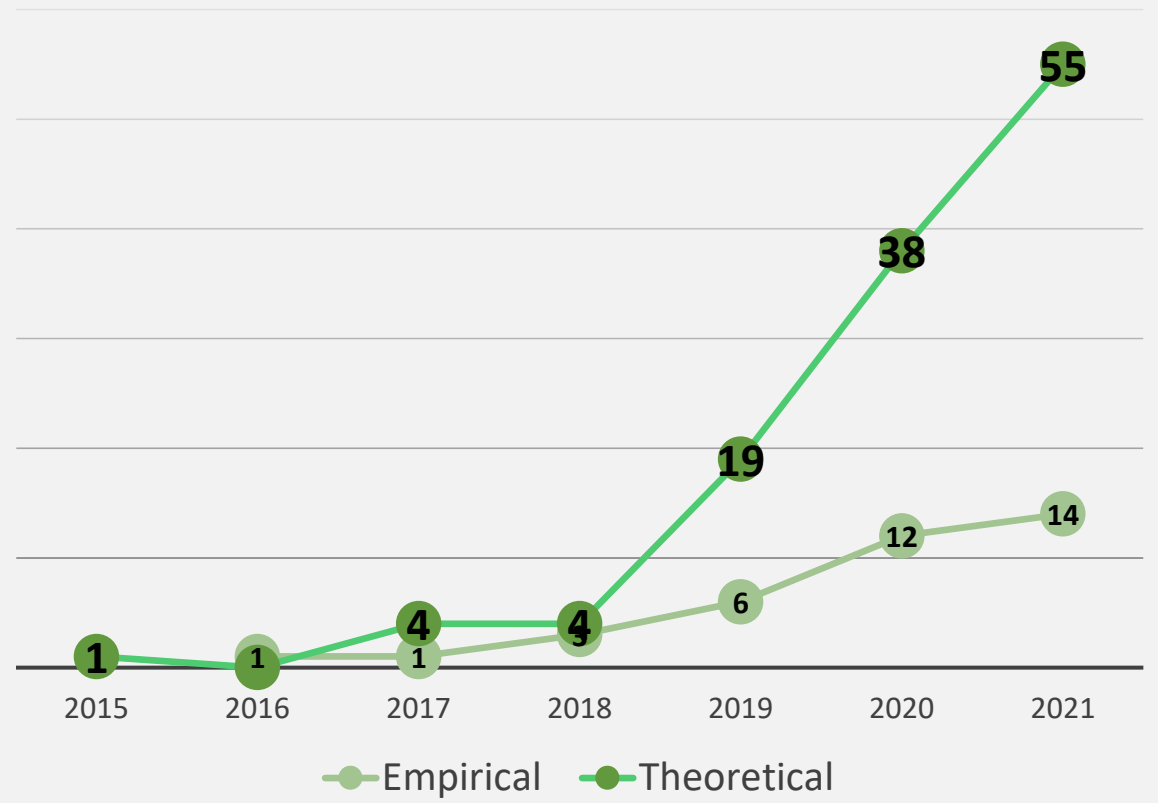
Top10 most cited authors and number of citations per year

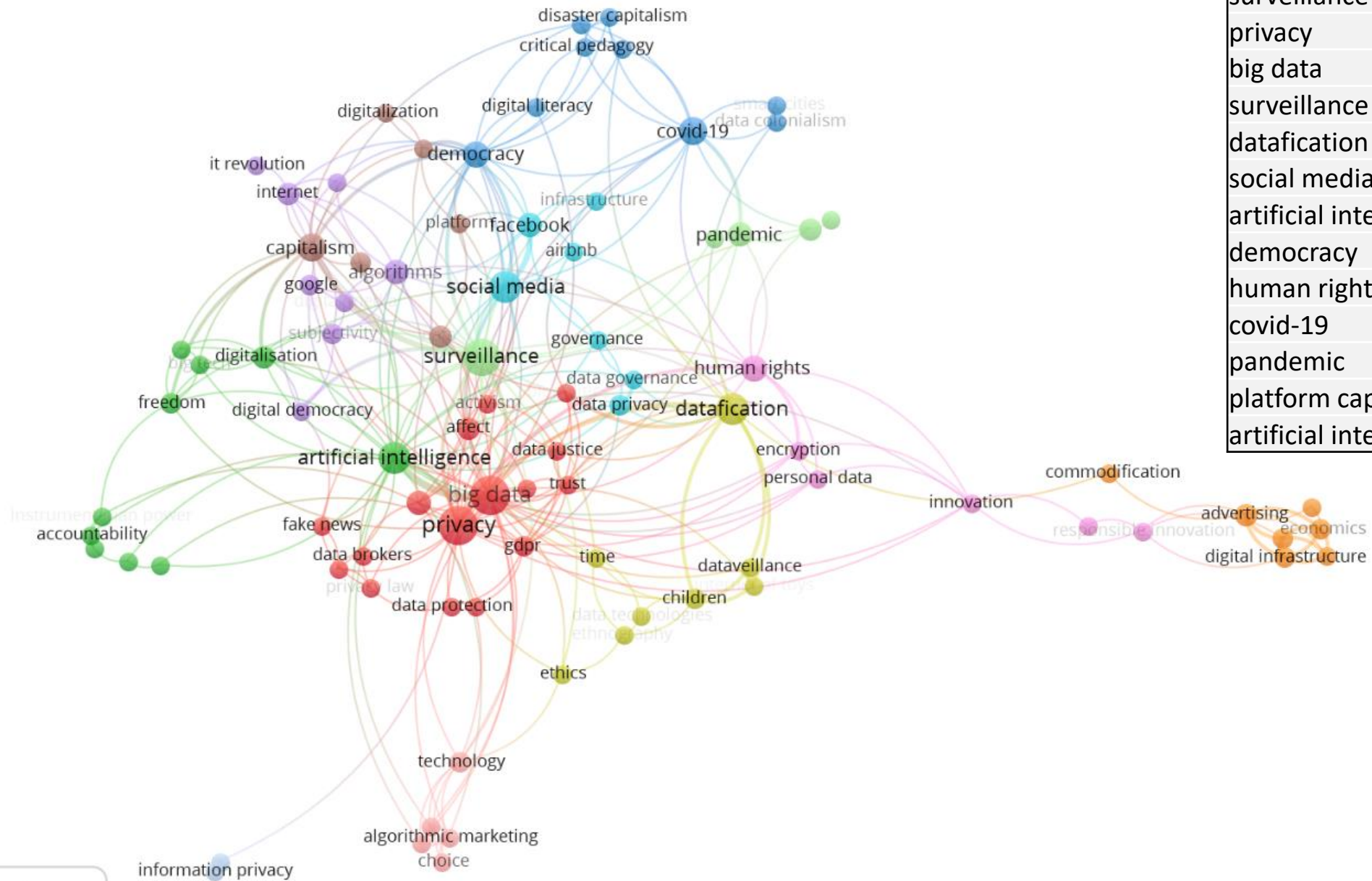
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Tot
Cinnamon J.				32					32
Dencik L., Hintz A., Cable J.			105						105
Foster J.B., McChesney R.W.	53								53
Galič M., Timan T., Koops B.-J.				71					71
Kitchin R.							52		52
Kwet M.						53			53
Saura J.R., Palacios-Marqués D., Iturricha-Fernández A.								31	31
Williamson B.								32	32
Woods H.S.					21				21
Zuboff S.		894				42			936
Tot	53	894	105	103	21	95	52	63	1386

Published contributions for each category



Empirical and Theoretical contributions through years





Keyword	Count
surveillance capitalism	105
privacy	20
big data	19
surveillance	18
datafication	10
social media	10
artificial intelligence	7
democracy	6
human rights	6
covid-19	5
pandemic	5
platform capitalism	5
artificial intelligence	4

Two takeaways

**Privacy is a highly
discussed topic**



**Focus also on
other elements**

**Surveillance capitalism is mainly
tackled from the theoretical point of
view**



**Increase empirical
contributions**

The four sub-topics

1. People's awareness of surveillance capitalism
2. Big data use and big data economic value
3. Culture of surveillance capitalism
4. Platformization of consumer culture



Relevant literature on the sub-topic with respect to surveillance capitalism and data extraction



Interesting literature from other domains that could help extend the existing one



Possible empirical research strategies

1. People's awareness of surveillance capitalism



- The largest part of contributions **focuses on privacy** (Helm & Seubert, 2020; Huey, 2012; Hulse & Reeves, 2014; Liu, 2011; Luther & Radovic, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2018).
- Literature has **neglected**, to a considerable extent, the **exploration of people's awareness about the processes of value creation from data** (Airoldi, 2020; Hintz et al., 2017).



- The **literature on algorithmic perception and the one on algorithmic resistance** offer interesting guidelines to study the relationship between users and surveillance systems (Bucher, 2017; Lee, 2018; Velkova & Kaun, 2021).



- Conducting empirical studies via **surveys, interviews, and digital methods projects** on the relationship between users and human and non-human actors of the surveillance capitalism landscape.

2. Big data use and big data economic value



- Scholars have been considering **how users' data become exchange value for products or services** (Alaimo et al., 2020; Hulseley & Reeves, 2014).
- **Datafication is well-known** and studied in the **online environments** (McStay, 2020; van der Vlist, 2017). **It recently reached many offline fields too**, largely due to the pressure of firms (Kendell, 2020); e.g.: **home personal assistants** (Burdon & Cohen, 2021; Pridmore et al., 2019; Pridmore & Mols, 2020; West, 2019).



- Many suggestions come from the **platform capitalism literature**. Digital platforms, that nowadays work as intermediaries for digital activities, have the aim to collect, produce and accumulate data and develop new narratives (Helm & Seubert, 2020; Spiekermann, 2019; van Dijck et al., 2019; West, 2019).



- A reasonable empirical path to analyze the value that data have for platforms is to analyze **how big data analysis and big data value is framed** on official documents, media interviews and posts, **through document analysis**.

3. Culture of surveillance capitalism



- A less developed sub-topic in present literature compared to the previous two
- David Lyon says that this issue could be related to **how people experience surveillance in everyday life** or also to the **changing attitudes towards surveillance** based on different life situation or environments (Lyon, 2018).



- Lyon (2017) argues that the idea of an agent of surveillance, often pictured in the past as the surveillance state, is not adequate for the present time. **We should focus on surveillance imaginaries and practices, to study how surveillance is accepted, negotiated, or rejected.**
- Some empirical studies already started to do so (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Hinchliffe, 2021).



- At the **macro level, digital methods project** seems promising for mapping macro-discourses on surveillance capitalism within digital environments.
- At the **micro level, qualitative and ethnographic studies** on surveillance artifacts in everyday life, such as smart speakers or wearable devices, could be successful research strategies.

4. Platformization of consumer culture



- A less developed sub-topic in present literature as well
- Zuboff showed how **the goal of surveillance capitalists** is not just monitoring and exploiting users and consumers behaviors, but **also trying to manipulate them and orienting them towards standardization.** With standardization consumers' behaviors would be easier to foresee and anticipate (Zuboff, 2019).



- Some very recent contributions precisely showed that **consumer culture**, especially on platforms and due to platforms affordances, **is oriented towards an increased standardization** (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020).



- **Digital methods** contributions seem a valuable path to study platformization of consumer culture

Thank you

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