

SEBASTIAN SEVIGNANI, *PRIVACY AND CAPITALISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2016)

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### **The Rise of Informational Capitalism: How Our Online Lives Impact the Way We Think About Privacy**

*“In capitalist societies there is private property in the means of online communication and cooperation, which is a precondition for commodity production and the profit principle. On the Internet, and particularly in the case of social media, surveillance-based business models serve private property owners’ profit interests.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Privacy and Capitalism in the Age of Social Media* is a detailed study of the way that an informational capitalist society has influenced the way people think of privacy and surveillance. The book details author Sebastian Sevignani’s research of social media user’s feelings towards these two concepts that are often considered at odds with each other.<sup>2</sup> Through a thorough analysis of the history of information commodification, privacy theories and ideologies, and his own study of social media users, Sevignani seeks to prove two theses. First, that individual privacy is “structurally invaded in contemporary informational capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> And second, that in order to correct this problem, we must look beyond our current privacy framework.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SEBASTIAN SEVIGNANI, *PRIVACY AND CAPITALISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA* 190 (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2016)

<sup>2</sup> See Sevignani, *supra* note 1, at 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Sevignani, *supra* note 1, at 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Sevignani, *supra* note 1, at 1.

Author Sebastian Sevignani has studied communication, media and society for nine years. While this is first book on the topic, he has been involved in a number of social research projects.<sup>5</sup> Sevignani received a Bachelor's and Master's degree from the University of Salzburg for his study in communication and media.<sup>6</sup> He then went on to receive a Doctorate in the field of cultural and social sciences at the University of Salzburg, Austria.<sup>7</sup> Since 2014, Sevignani has worked as an associate professor at the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena's Institute of Sociology.<sup>8</sup> While focusing on the interplay between communications, politics and economics and through his use of empirical, social research, such as the study discussed in this book, Sevignani hopes to improve education in the field of communication, media and the Internet.

The book begins by giving an introduction to the terms that are used throughout the book. By defining terms such as “informational capitalism” and “commodification” the reader starts to understand what these terms mean in the context of Sevignani's research as well as in political economic theory. This lays the groundwork for the theories described later in the book to take hold and actually mean something to the reader. Sevignani then goes on to explain his research methods and outlining the particular study that is the main focus of this book. Rather than just establishing how he went about conducting his research, he also provides a detailed description on how his research plan was formulated and influenced by studies conducted by other political economists. This creates an image of his own research that provides details, not only about what he did but, about why he did it in that particular way.

Sevignani then analyzes how the concepts of privacy and surveillance operate in the context of informational capitalism. Sevignani suggests that due to the increase in collection of

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<sup>5</sup> See About, SEBASTIAN SEVIGNANI *archived at* <https://perma.cc/3MD2-6AL5>

<sup>6</sup> See Dr. Sebastian Sevignani, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena: Institute of Sociology, *archived at* <https://perma.cc/WDN3-N6CN>

<sup>7</sup> See *id.*

<sup>8</sup> See *id.*

consumer information, and its subsequent use in business models, our concept of what privacy means has changed.<sup>9</sup> He also suggests, that to a certain degree, we are willing to sacrifice a small portion of our privacy in exchange for conveniences such as social media and online shopping.<sup>10</sup> Seignani then gives an overview of different theories of privacy law and how these approaches are made more or less effective by the commodification of information. After giving solid background knowledge on existing theories of privacy, he discusses how personal ideologies have influenced concepts of privacy. Specifically, how thinking of privacy as a type of private property is particularly important to an analysis of privacy law in connection with information capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Seignani asserts that current approaches to privacy are ill-equipped to deal with the rise of information capitalism and provides some insight into potential alternatives to our current privacy framework.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the book, Seignani illustrates the tension between privacy and surveillance, and specifically how these concepts complicate what we do online. Our use of social media, he claims, is driven by the fact we are all looking for a convenient way to connect with friends, receive news, and provide information about our own lives. This need for convenience gives way to our implicit consent to the social network operators to perform surveillance on our online actions in order to collect information and data about us. When we find out that this information has been collected and shared with advertisers, we become offended and feel as if the social network operators have done something wrong by invading our privacy. In reality, we are the ones that have allowed this to happen by using social media platforms in the first place.

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<sup>9</sup> See Seignani, *supra* note 1 at 48.

<sup>10</sup> See Seignani, *supra* note 1 at 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> See Seignani, *supra* note 1 at 168.

<sup>12</sup> See Seignani, *supra* note 1 at 198.

Sevignani does an excellent job of setting up this dichotomy, and illustrating how it impacts privacy policy.

One thing that should be noted, is that the book assumes the reader has a basic understanding of capitalism and political economy, but those with a more intermediate level of understanding of these two topics will probably get the most enjoyment out of reading this book. Without at least a basic understanding, it is very easy to get lost in the different terms and theories, as Sevignani explains them very quickly. That being said, those without a background in political economy still have a lot to gain from this book, as Sevignani brings together many of the most prominent political economic theories. As such, he provides the reader with a detailed and expansive picture of the area in which his own research fits in, how it was influenced, and what it means for the future of other research in the field.

Finally, while this book goes into theories of privacy law and surveillance, both topics that are highly important to the legal community, this book is more heavily based in economic and social theory. The arguments put forth in this book are still both relevant and in fact, very important to a discussion on the current state of privacy law in this country and digital privacy more broadly. However, this is not the book to pick up if you want a detailed account of specific privacy laws. The political economy and social theory approach to the topic of privacy law is very interesting and gives a depth to the analysis that is not often found in books focused purely on the legal point of view. However, this is not the book to read are you looking for a solely legal perspective on the state of privacy law.

Ultimately, this book provides some eye-opening insight into the way that our society currently interacts with, and is dependent on, consumer use of social media. As our society becomes more and more digitalized, the theories set forth in this book will inevitably have an

even more profound effect on the way we deal with privacy and surveillance. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the relationship between privacy and our capitalist society, with the reservation that they should have some basic understanding of theories of capitalism and political economy before diving in.