

Joseph Turow. The voice catchers: How marketers listen in to exploit your feelings, your privacy, and your wallet. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 344. ISBN 978-0-30024-803-6

Nils S. Borchers, Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen, Institute of Media Studies, Germany

nils.borchers@uni-tuebingen.de

“Voice profiling is a gateway drug to a new era of hyper-personalized targeting,” (p. 227) Joseph Turow concludes in his book *The Voice Catchers: How Marketers Listen in to Exploit Your Feelings, Your Privacy, and Your Wallet*. This crucial function of what Turow calls the “voice intelligence industry” explains the urgency of Turow’s most recent endeavor: a thorough examination of this industry which consists of different players, most centrally call center firms and the developers of voice assistants such as Amazon’s Alexa, the Google Assistant, Apple’s Siri, and Samsung’s Bixby. The industry is united by its interest in using voice as another source for collecting biometrical data. Such voiceprints, as Turow figuratively puts it, are the “gold in people’s speech” (p. 192). In contrast to the face as another source for biometrical data, voice has received comparatively little public attention. In *The Voice Catchers*, Turow sets out to change that. It is in voice, he argues, that the battle about our sovereignty from marketers is fought:

We’ve reached a point where a line must be drawn, beyond which marketers should not be allowed to go. If the use of voice profiling in the most private areas of a person’s life goes unchallenged, companies will follow the unending spiral of personalization to profile us based on our faces, hair, blood, and any other aspects of our anatomy and physiology that can send signals about us. (p. 261)

In six chapters plus an introduction, Turow takes us behind the scenes of the voice intelligence industry. The introduction explains why Turow directs our attention to this industry. To him, this industry is developing “a blueprint for marketers to

use your body’s signals for gain” (p. 4). He then continues:

If we look carefully at where voice firms today are building scale and where other marketers are pushing to piggyback on that scale, we can begin to understand future business uses of voice, as well as what political campaigns, police, and government agencies could do with these tools. (p. 10–11)

The introduction also presents the analytical toolkit that Turow uses to dissect the voice intelligence industry. Turow refers to four concepts that he frames as corporate strategies to secure supply routes for voice data: the spiral of personalization, seductive surveillance, habituation, and resignation. The *spiral of personalization* describes the guiding idea in current marketing that the increasing personalization of marketing messages offers a solution to decreasing advertising efficiency. Turow has already explored this spiral in previous books (e.g., Turow, 2011, 2017). *Seductive surveillance*, a concept coined by Troullinou (2017), captures marketers’ attempts to encourage the use of their voice-collecting devices by emphasizing the convenience, efficiency, and pleasure of their use. *Habituation* aims at establishing voice-collecting devices as vital components of consumers’ everyday lives. Finally, *resignation* is a concept that has appeared in Turow’s writings for some time, but which has only recently been developed conceptually (Draper & Turow, 2019). Resignation is directed at systematically discouraging consumers to fight back against data collection practices. This conceptual quadriga does a good job in guid-



ing the detailed analysis that is to come in the following chapters of the book.

Chapter One, “*Rise of the Seductive As-sisants*,” pictures the development of the voice intelligence industry. Here, Turow traces the industry’s roots back to the 1970s when the U. S. Defense Department began funding the development of machines that could understand human voice. A good portion of this chapter is devoted to the call center industry that Turow treats as a pioneer of the voice intelligence industry. Chapter Two, “*What Marketers See in Voice*,” outlines what the voice intelligence industry is able to do with voice data today and what industry representatives think they can achieve in the future. In my opinion, the first two chapters do a great job in grounding the analysis because it is here that Turow’s detective gene comes into play: To determine the industry’s state of knowledge, he persistently searches a wide variety of sources such as official statements of industry representatives, his own interviews with industry insiders, press coverage, patents, and manuals of voice gadgets. (Functionally similar chapters can also be found in Turow’s other works.) To me, it was particularly interesting to learn about the extent of the personal information that voiceprints might reveal such as weight, heights, heart rate, general health status, specific diseases, and emotional states.

Chapter Three, “*An Operating System for Your Life*,” sheds light on how the voice intelligence industry disseminates its data collecting devices. A key battle ground are homes. Besides consumers’ individual purchases of voice assistants, Turow describes how construction companies in the United States started integrating smart assistant systems in the walls of newly-built apartments and houses. When considering that construction companies install such systems because this is what prospective buyers value – remember the strategy of seductive surveillance –, the disturbing vision of an omnipresent voice surveillance apparatus that Turow pictures suddenly appears much more realistic. In any case, it is a telltale sign that it might be overtly naïve to assume that consumers’

interest in protecting their privacy could prevent the voice intelligence industry from reaching its full surveillance potential. Other battlegrounds that Turow identifies are cars, hotels, schools, and shops. Chapter Four, “*Voice Tech Conquers the Press*,” looks at how the press covers voice assistants. More or less covertly, Turow accuses journalists of reporting too positively on smart speakers and thus of encouraging their diffusion at least indirectly. In parallel, this chapter also discusses sales strategies for voice assistants. In – what I feel is – a slight over-extension of the chapter’s theme, Turow here uses Black Friday press coverage to integrate the two discussions. Chapter Five, “*Advertisers Get Ready*,” discusses both the opportunities that advertisers see in using voiceprints for personalization and the challenges in becoming part of this new marketing environment. For one, there is a huge uncertainty in the advertising industry about the extent to which voice-leading corporations like Amazon and Google will be willing to share their data. For another, there is the “voice-first problem.” Voice assistants simply offer fewer slots for sponsored results to search queries because a voice response is strictly linear while a page with search results can present a number of organic and sponsored results at the same time. The tightening of advertising space motivates advertisers to perform evasive maneuvers:

In an environment where the voice titans have no interest in helping ad practitioners win customers in voice, marketers fear that the best they can do is to create content on their voice apps, phone apps, and websites that may lead Amazon and Google’s search engines to offer their product as an organic answer to a user’s search query. (p. 219)

The concluding Chapter Six, “*Voice Profiling and Freedom*,” outlines the threat scenarios posed by the voice intelligence industry. As in *The Daily You*, his 2011 landmark study on online behavioral targeting, Turow portrays price discrimination based on income, race, ethnicity, and education as one such threat. How-

ever, the list of threat scenarios has become more comprehensive since 2011 and now also includes misuse of voice data in political targeting, in criminal prosecution, and in asylum adjudication. After a brief discussion on how the US, China, and the European Union treat the collection of biometric data, Turow finally puts forward five proposals for regulating the voice intelligence industry. In a nutshell, and without doing justice to Turow's more nuanced discussion, these proposals ultimately amount to prohibiting the use of voice data.

I found *The Voice Catchers* to be both an informative and engaging read. Like in his previous works, Turow impresses with meticulous observations and in-depth knowledge about his subject. At the same time, he is unwavering in his mission to warn of the negative impacts of data collection and analysis practices by a nascent voice intelligence industry. This way, *The Voice Catcher* fits seamlessly into Turow's oeuvre. Admittedly, some of the scenarios that Turow presents to illustrate the urgency of his study appear somewhat far-fetched, at least to me. Moreover, some of the visions for the future capabilities of the voice intelligence industry seem rather speculative. However, I remember feeling the same in the early 2010s when reading Turow's *The Daily You* for the first time. Yet now, only a few years later, much of what Turow predicted has become reality. That said, I appreciate Turow's regulatory perspective in imagining ways to limit the power of the voice intelligence industry. In contrast to competing approaches that might promote literacy trainings, Turow's perspective takes note of the fact that the literacy approach amounts to an arms race between a billion-dollar industry and isolated consumers – a race that consumers are unlikely to win. Nevertheless, I would have liked to read more about possible

tactics to counter unwanted impacts of the voice intelligence industry that both consumers, activists, and regulators could adopt. I also noticed that Turow seems to avoid a more fundamental discussion of data ownership: how appropriate can and should it be to attain data, essentially through surveillance? In this respect, it seems to me that Shoshana Zuboff, whose book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) tills a somewhat similar field, advances her mission more resolutely. I would be curious to know how Turow feels about more radical approaches to curtailing the power of marketing, an industry he has followed for many years as a critical observer.

References

- Draper, N. A., & Turow, J. (2019). The corporate cultivation of digital resignation. *New Media & Society*, 21(8), 1824–1839. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819833331>
- Troullinou, P. (2017). *Exploring the subjective experience of everyday surveillance: The case of smartphone devices as means of facilitating "seductive" surveillance* (Doctoral dissertation). Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), The Open University, Milton Keynes. <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0000cd85>
- Turow, J. (2011). *The daily you: How the new advertising industry is defining your identity and your worth*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Turow, J. (2017). *The aisles have eyes: How retailers track your shopping, strip your privacy, and define your power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London, UK: Profile.