Bruce Schneier (2015) *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World,* London & New York, W. W. Norton & Company

Book review

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Scepticism was the attitude governing my state of mind when I stared reading this book but it vanished as soon as I realized it challenged one of my deepest beliefs, namely: My life is so ordinary that no one, in their right minds, would bother monitor the routines. Out of my personal reflex as a psychiatrist I attributed paranoid tendencies to those concerned about being surveilled with the use of electronic devices. It might be that at an individual level, one's life is not of primary interest, unless one is a public figure or is prosecuted for some sort of crime, but at a global level, the individual becomes an inexhaustible source of useful information no matter how mediocre their lives are and this is what the author wants to highlight from the very beginning.

Everybody has heard about the existence of verbal and non-verbal communication and most of us agree that the latter is the form which bears the highest percentage of truth in an interaction. On the other hand, few of us know that there is an equivalent for them both in terms of data. Bruce Schneier defines metadata as a sort of non-verbal communication in this surveillance universe that provides accurate information of interest, for example the sender can codify a message, but facts about when/who/to whom/how often/from where the message was sent are less likely to be manipulated in an electronic communication.

The author states that Google has the capacity of "knowing" more about a person than the person itself only from their searches. This sounds more like an algorithm for building astrograms instead of a search engine, hence I wouldn't say Google per se "knows" things about people but a person who has access to Google's information can

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make high probability predictions about other people. As technical this surveillance process might seem, without a centralizing human, data will be just data, without being information. A lot of ethical questions and dilemmas arise at this point: what should be the probability threshold that gives the authorities the right to intervene in preventing a school shooting, for example, and how should this intervention look like? The interpretation of data that sits at the base of the prognosis received the name of data mining. As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I find this thrilling as the advantages of having more than the usual standardized information from a patient are obvious, but so are the disadvantages.

Bruce Schneier admits that this book is a picture of his experience as a security expert in the US and doesn't claim to cover all the distinctive features other countries might have. On the other hand, regardless of a country's particularity in the field of electronic communication, there are some common problems that require, or will require in the future, some clear regulation. He also presents a variety of intersections between the US and other countries in the field of electronic data tracking. Coming from a country where the degree of insecurity is perceived as very high, I constantly found myself falling into the trap of seeing only the advantages of the examples given in this book. I cannot stop from fantasizing about a regimen where deviations from the norms are punished but I guess this is just a personal frustration.

Mass surveillance is another concept defined by the author with many suggestive examples, one of them being that of tracking people with the help of high performing face recognition software. This type of invasion of our private space is so insidious that we are very tolerant towards it. There is even a predisposing psychological process that makes us vulnerable to trade our privacy for what we perceive as free Internet. Who would have thought that even the innocent and relaxing quizzes we take on the internet are a source of information or, better yet, that Angry Birds are a tool in the surveillance mechanism. As far as the gratuitousness of the Internet is concerned, the author makes a vexing and intriguing statement: "whenever something is free, you become the product".

A little bit too disquieting, the book raises the reader's anxiety level to such a high degree that a risk of thinking in a rigid and deterministic way emerges: "Maintaining Internet anonymity against a ubiquitous surveillor is nearly impossible". With this in mind, why bother to protect someone's anonymity, for example in a medical trial, when this endeavour is resource consuming and seems obsolete? Nevertheless, the feeling of freedom loss is due to the fact that there are too many times when the reading crosses the fine border towards something resembling a conspiracy theory.

It seems that great effort is invested by marketers in diminishing the feeling of "creepy" that is inherent to direct targeted advertisement but here comes the good news: as subtly personalized as they might be, commercials have down-regulated the interest of the individual to a point where access to certain basic information about a customer are counterproductive in terms of invested money per profit.

I don't know if, after reading this book, I will start reading the "Terms and conditions" instead of checking the box in order to move on to what I am interested in, but probably not. It has become such a routine process that it by-passes the cognitive

circuit resembling a sort of reflex. This reflex is the reason that stands at the basis of our generalized idleness when it comes to putting Bruce Schneider's solutions into practice. One thing is for sure, this whole data inference cannot be categorized as either good or bad, it is pretty clear that it depends on who uses it and with what intentions: "Technology is value neutral". Overall this was a bumpy read composed of a succession of examples not always connected by a fluent narrative discourse but written in an eloquent manner, accessible even to lay audiences. In the end, the sense of the title remains hidden for my reasoning, since David has not found such a simple solution to defeat the giant Goliath and the fight seems to be ongoing.