

# 4

## SPEAK FOR SERVICE: ALEXA, SURVEILLANCE, AND AUTOMATED INTIMACY

---

---

Since 2014, Amazon has reached consumers not just on their computers or mobile phones but via voice.<sup>1</sup> In 2019 *Bloomberg News* broke a story about the role of humans in training Alexa, Amazon’s AI voice assistant, revealing that Amazon employees and contract workers listen to recordings of actual consumer interactions to improve Alexa’s functioning.<sup>2</sup> Confirming people’s fears that their talk wasn’t just being sent to a cloud to be processed by machine learning systems, but that actual people could be eavesdropping, this was just one of many stories indexing anxiety about the surveillance capabilities of Amazon’s Echo devices. One of the reports’ takeaways was how standard the use of human reviewers, or trainers, is in the area of natural language processing; it’s a needed layer of training for nuance and accuracy that machine learning can’t yet accomplish on its own.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the companies providing these services often craft their privacy policies in a vague enough way that the practice of sharing sample recordings with human reviewers is alluded to, but not generally understood by users. At the time of the *Bloomberg News* story Amazon’s FAQs about Alexa stated, “We use your requests to Alexa to train our speech recognition and natural language understanding systems,” wording that remained the same a few months after the story broke. A year later, the “common questions” about Alexa did include more specific information about the role of human reviewers under the heading “How do my voice recordings improve Alexa?,” explaining that it involves “supervised machine learning,

an industry-standard practice where humans review an extremely small sample of requests to help Alexa understand the correct interpretation of a request and provide the appropriate response in the future.”<sup>4</sup>

At the time this story broke, I expressed skepticism that revelations about the use of human reviewers would turn the tide of consumer sentiment against Alexa, or the competing voice assistants that people use via Google Home or Apple HomePod smart speakers.<sup>5</sup> In forming this impression, I considered the rapid adoption rate of smart speakers since Amazon first released the Echo smart speaker in 2014;<sup>6</sup> the bedrock of consumer trust that Amazon has built up over twenty-plus years of personalized consumer service; the lack of emphasis that some Americans place on privacy, often citing having “nothing to hide”;<sup>7</sup> and the tendency of some toward “privacy pragmatism,” or the willingness to see pervasive monitoring as a fair or necessary exchange for commercial benefits.<sup>8</sup> Given these factors, it was hard to imagine that people would start unplugging their Echos and that sales would slow in the wake of this news. Not long afterward, Amazon reported that Echo sales only continued to grow at a tremendous rate, more than doubling in a year.<sup>9</sup>

We often hear from industry that most people don’t care about privacy or are more than happy to share their data in exchange for products and services, whereas from academics and activists we might hear that people only consent because they are woefully uninformed about the extent of dataveillance, how their personal data are used, and who benefits from it. While both of these things are true for some people some of the time, scholars recently have drawn attention to the phenomenon of “digital resignation” or “privacy resignation.”<sup>10</sup> These concepts describe the finding that most people disapprove of invasive data collection, and yet see little point in opting out or trying to resist these practices.<sup>11</sup> A sense of resignation may help explain why more than half of Americans who own a smart speaker are, nevertheless, “at least somewhat concerned about the amount of data collected by these devices,” according to a 2019 Pew Survey.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the *more informed* individual users are about the extent of digital monitoring, the *more resigned* they are, and less likely to actively resist.

Scholars have also insisted that rather than focus solely on users’ behaviors and attitudes, we should consider the corporate practices that encourage people to disregard their data privacy, or give up trying to protect

it.<sup>13</sup> Instead of reinforcing a sense that the status quo is inevitable and users' behaviors are the real problem, we should analyze the "active normalization of surveillance" or, as Lena Dencik and Jonathan Cable phrase it, the cultivation of "surveillance realism" by corporations.<sup>14</sup> Nora Draper and Joseph Turow point to the practices of rhetorical "obfuscation" which leave users largely in the dark about how their data are collected and monetized.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to companies whose strategy to normalize surveillance is to obscure its operation, Amazon tends to provide surveillance *as a service*. Although Amazon and its Alexa arm do use rhetorical obfuscation to some extent, as in the example of vagueness about humans reviewing voice data, they also emphasize relational techniques that target the affective self, consistent with Amazon's brand strategy. Amazon offers the data-based nature of Alexa, its "voice user interface," as an appealing aspect of more personalized service. Beyond just an exchange of personal data for service that a consumer might make a "rational" decision about, when people share their questions and domestic moments with Alexa, they feel they are building a relationship with "her." This surveillance relation is, at its core, an intimate one, and the medium of voice only makes it more so. It is consistent with a movement noted by Sidney Fussell in the *Atlantic* away from panopticism—"unending, inescapable, unwanted surveillance"—and toward an "age of hyper-personalization [that] will make people willing, enthusiastic participants in the panopticon, both as subjects and as architects."<sup>16</sup>

Amazon has identified "surveillance as a service" as part of its business model, in reference to its still-nascent drone delivery service. In a 2015 patent Amazon specifies how its drones could, as a secondary function, perform visual surveillance on properties on their way to or from deliveries, with permission of the homeowner.<sup>17</sup> This as-yet unrealized service is consistent with how Amazon offers surveillance as a service to its consumers—through its products and services that either perform surveillance for the consumer or provide the tools for them to perform surveillance themselves, on their homes or streets. *New York Times* tech columnist Kara Swisher reached for the phrase "surveillance as a service" in her response to test-driving Amazon's Halo smartwatch, which tracks not just sleep and steps like its competitors, but infers mood and well-being from the user's tone of voice.<sup>18</sup> The surveillance of the Halo watch is

not incidental, but core to the utility and (supposed) appeal of the device, which is itself only an interface to the cloud-based service it offers.

Like some of Amazon's other devices, the Halo watch works best "as a service," or via an ongoing subscription that includes certain functions such as ongoing analysis of vocal tone, body composition, and sleep stages. Rather than routinely obfuscate its habits of user surveillance, Amazon frames its capacity to collect data about the consumer as an attractive aspect of the brand, because of how it enhances the brand's knowledge of the consumer and therefore deepens the intimacy of the relationship and the quality of its services.

The centrality of dataveillance to platforms and the associated rise of tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Amazon have led scholars to identify this prevalent business logic as "surveillance capitalism."<sup>19</sup> Common across discussions of surveillance capitalism and the related concept of "data colonialism" is the extraction of value from data about human behavior without meaningful consent, and the elevation of these data commodities in the economy at large and in the fortunes of individual companies and business sectors.<sup>20</sup> Without necessarily agreeing that surveillance capitalism constitutes a distinct historical "stage," we can note that particular iterations of capitalism, such as industrial capitalism, consumer capitalism, and late capitalism (which may well coexist) have been thought to shape our subjectivities in particular ways. Amazon and its personified form, Alexa, are bellwethers for the subjectivities shaped by the practices of surveillance capitalism.

Consumer capitalism in general has cultivated what is sometimes described as a choosing subject.<sup>21</sup> In this context the market provides an abundance of options, and consumers are invited to construct their identities, relate to others, and exert their consumer power via the mechanism of choice. With surveillance capitalism, however, we see a shift in subjectification from the choosing subject to the served self. The served self technically still has the capacity to make choices, but is discouraged from doing so via both affective and structural means. The served self prioritizes ease and seeks out products and services that are customized and personalized; they select from a limited menu of choices (if they select at all) that have already anticipated their needs and preferences. By and large, the labor of choice gets absorbed by the brand, and is provided as

a service. Whereas the choosing subject undertakes consumption in an active way, although it might look like routine, play, or labor depending on the context, the served self's consumption is more passive. The gradual shift from choosing subject to served self may be hard to perceive, embedded in daily habits and ways of thinking, but it is one of the distinctive costs of convenience addressed in this book.

## PERSONALIZATION AS CORE BRAND COMPETENCY

Long before Amazon released its Echo smart speaker in 2014, it embraced personalization and recommendation tools in a way that made it stand out from its competitors.<sup>22</sup> In Bezos's very first letter to shareholders in 1998 (or "shareowners" as Amazon addresses them) after the company went public, one of the first things he wrote was "Today, online commerce saves customers money and precious time. Tomorrow, through personalization, online commerce will accelerate the very process of discovery." In the same year, he boasted that technology could recommend books to customers better than an employee, commenting "Great merchants have never had the opportunity to understand their customers in a truly individualized way. Ecommerce is going to make that possible."<sup>23</sup> In other words, "If we have 4.5 million customers, we should have 4.5 million stores."<sup>24</sup> From the time Amazon.com launched, it was assigning each customer who visited the site a unique ID and collecting data about user actions on the website.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Amazon doesn't personalize its website or services in a labor-intensive, hands-on way, as we're used to thinking of something that is personal or personalized. Digital personalization is automated, an approach that Amazon announced in 1997 when it incorporated a personalization technology supplied by the company Net Perceptions that used "collaborative filtering," which "behind the scenes . . . matches the preferences of people to one another, drawing from a pool of titles chosen by a community of people with similar tastes."<sup>26</sup> Far from obfuscating the use of collaborative filtering, Amazon has frequently drawn consumers' attention to it, such as in named features of online tools like the "Customers who watched this item also watched" video recommender tool.

While Amazon has long positioned its ability to personalize product recommendations for its customers as central to its value proposition,

how the company has gone about it has shifted over time. In the 1990s Amazon treated recommendation and personalization as distinct activities. The company promoted its recommendations that were generated by experts and on-staff editors in books, music, and movies to establish the idea that an online retailer could be a legitimate source for quality goods in these areas, and to emphasize a magazine-like dimension to the website that brick-and-mortar stores couldn't easily emulate. In the late 1990s you could fill out a questionnaire about your likes and dislikes and receive emailed recommendations for new books from the Expert Editors.<sup>27</sup> In 1999 Amazon's music manager Jennifer Cast boasted, "For the first time in a music store, shoppers can listen to respected commentators discuss a recommended CD and hear excerpts that illustrate their points. It's like having an expert with a stereo by your side while you're shopping."<sup>28</sup>

But the editorial department's days at Amazon were numbered. Former books editor James Marcus identifies 1999 as the "pinnacle" of the Amazon editorial department's reputation, writing:

What could possibly derail such a flourishing enterprise? The answer, as we were slow to realize, came down to a single word: personalization. The idea that the store could be "rehung for each customer"—tailored, that is, to individual tastes and preferences—had always been part of Jeff's vision. Instead of a single Amazon, there would be millions of them, one for each visitor. They would be as distinctive as fingerprints, as genetic codes.<sup>29</sup>

This shift to personalization from editorially informed recommendation took various forms. Marcus himself had been one of the staff members designing a fresh Amazon homepage for each day, featuring a rotating selection of products, content, and sales pitches. By 1998, Amazon was starting to use personalization technology to customize the homepage for each unique visitor, informed by their past behavior on the site.<sup>30</sup> The software that would customize homepages and category pages for each customer was known as Amabot, and the downfall of human editors in these roles was sealed by the fact that Amabot's page customizations led to comparable sales in experiments, or A/B testing.<sup>31</sup> That kind of initiative continued, with the "My Store" feature rolled out in 2001, a tab on the site that was explicitly customized for each customer. Although "My Store" touted itself as requiring no work on the part of customers, there was still some emphasis on consumer choice and control over the process of personalization: "Customers

have full control over their own store and can add new favorite areas or delete old ones across Amazon.com to instantly update their store.”<sup>32</sup>

This relates to another notable shift—from personalization tools that consumers were invited to opt into and interact with to fully automated tools. When collaborative filtering technology was first introduced in 1997, Amazon did invite customers to rate books in order to generate personalized recommendations. Even then though, the technology was “designed to serve customers better by ‘learning’ from each customer interaction with a Web site, using observations about what customers say they like, as well as observations about what customers actually do online.”<sup>33</sup> By 2001, “Amazon started making suggestions based on the items customers looked at, not just the products they bought.”<sup>34</sup> Today, Amazon assumes that users want personalization, an approach widely shared across digital recommendation systems that have gravitated toward implicit over explicit data collection, or at least a hybrid of the two.<sup>35</sup> Amazon doesn’t ask whether we want recommendations, or ask us to provide the information we want them to use to make them, or request permission to collect information about our activities on their sites. Amazon’s Privacy Notice makes this clear, stating in bold: **“By visiting Amazon.com, you are accepting the practices described in this Privacy Notice.”** Users who consult the fine print of the privacy notice will find that they do have some choices on what information they share with Amazon and how the company can use it, although the functionality of some of Amazon’s services does depend on users sharing their information.<sup>36</sup>

These developments reflect broader characteristics of surveillance capitalism—the automation of surveillance,<sup>37</sup> and the transfer of “decision rights” about personal information from people to platforms.<sup>38</sup> Information about us is automatically collected by virtue of our online activity, processed in an automated way, and fed into feedback loops without our express knowledge or consent—“data accumulation by dispossession” as Jim Thatcher, David O’Sullivan, and Dillon Mahmoudi characterize it.<sup>39</sup> Typically, Shoshana Zuboff argues, digital platforms take first and apologize later, or much more likely, normalize their surveillance practices if they come to light.<sup>40</sup>

The extent and complexity of Amazon’s personalization operation has increased as the capacities of the requisite tools have grown—the

availability and low cost of cloud storage for the data that feed into personalization, advances in analytics and machine learning, higher processing speeds, and increased bandwidths. As Jeff Bezos described in his 2010 shareholder letter: “to construct a product detail page for a customer visiting Amazon.com, our software calls on between 200 and 300 services [web-based analytic services] to present a highly personalized experience for that consumer.” Part of personalization is prediction, which pertains to product recommendation but also to other services such as streaming, by preloading content Amazon predicts you will watch in order to decrease the time it takes for a program to buffer.<sup>41</sup>

Early in Amazon’s history CEO Jeff Bezos articulated that the company, although by all appearances an online bookseller, was actually a software, data, and analytics company, and that focus has only become clearer over time.

## SURVEILLANCE AS A SERVICE

Amazon is here to serve. Amazon has made meeting our every individual desire, convenience, and necessity its number one principle—“earth’s most customer-centric company”—with its number one leadership principle being “customer obsession” as it frequently proclaims. While Amazon is far from the first service brand, few other service brands have scaled personalization as Amazon has. The key to the power of Amazon’s brand is its flexibility, and its ability to provide a customized experience to each of us, the variations of which we may well be unaware of. Surveillance is a key ingredient in Amazon’s ability to provide personalized service on a massive scale. The way Amazon offers surveillance *as a service* to consumers is a prime example of how corporations cultivate “surveillance realism”—“the active normalization and justification of surveillance practices that also come to limit the possibilities for imagining alternative ways of organizing society.”<sup>42</sup>

Google chief financial officer Hal Varian has argued that personalized service in the digital economy is the logical extension of luxuries trickling down the class structure and becoming necessities.<sup>43</sup> Personal service, once exclusive to the rich, is in some sense becoming democratized (although not, clearly, to everyone) thanks to digital communication technologies



and the platform giants that have come to dominate them. But the price of that personalization should be clear: submission to surveillance. As access to products and services becomes increasingly conditioned on providing personal data, it is privacy itself that becomes the luxury good, affordable only to the rich who can hire people to provide personalized service and lawyers to draw up and enforce the nondisclosure agreements.

A service like Amazon Key, introduced in 2017 to US Prime members, vividly illustrates how the company aims to provide services that would have once required a dedicated personal assistant.<sup>44</sup> Using an in-home cloud cam and smart lock, Prime members can use the service to get their Amazon goods placed inside their homes, as a way to protect them from the elements or “porch pirates.” In 2018 the service was extended to in-car delivery, allowing package carriers to drop off goods in a car’s trunk, provided it is a compatible vehicle with connectivity to a remote service such as OnStar that can unlock it, and in 2019 to Key for Garage (now Key by Amazon In-Garage Delivery) for those customers who have a “smart” garage door opener.<sup>45</sup> In one Amazon promotional video, this personalized level of convenience and service is depicted as accessible to a relatable Amazon customer, portrayed as a young woman in an entry-level job who realizes while at work that her parents are coming to town for her mother’s birthday, but she doesn’t have a gift or appropriate shirt to wear, nor is her apartment in a state suitable for guests.<sup>46</sup> She arranges delivery to work of a new shirt, delivery of a wrapped gift to be placed inside her apartment door, and an Amazon Home Services “team of home-cleaning ninjas.” Tasks that previously would have required a personal assistant or high-end concierge service can now be accessed by virtually anyone, Amazon suggests. While many of the services that Amazon provides have come to feel normal—such as personalized recommendations, fast shipping, notifications about price changes on items, and reminders about incomplete returns—the Amazon Key service dramatically highlights the seeming “democratization” of personalized service. There’s something very flattering about mega-brands like Amazon, Google, and Apple vying to be our personal assistants, similar to the ethos of the “celebrity subject” that Jodi Dean argues has been cultivated by the interactivity of new media, an acknowledgment of the pleasure and enjoyment that can come from the “sense that one is known.”<sup>47</sup>

The surveillance technologies in which Amazon is investing position the company to be the ultimate service brand. Amazon's third largest corporate acquisition to date (after Whole Foods and MGM) is Ring, purchased in 2018, which makes Alexa-enabled doorbells and security cameras. This acquisition allows Amazon to not only provide its customers extensive surveillance capabilities via these devices, but an integrated set of tools through which to contract with Amazon-provided services such as indoor package delivery, grocery delivery, and Amazon Home Services (Amazon-approved services such as TV wall mounting, exercise equipment assembly, and house cleaning). Brad Stone writes for *Bloomberg*, "Alexa is a nice novelty now, great for serving up the weather, reading the news and hosting the occasional trivia game. But it will be really useful when it's the hub that lets people use their voice to arm their security systems, open locked doors and flash video of the person who's ringing the doorbell out front."<sup>48</sup> He argues that, "To keep growing at 30 percent a year, Amazon has to start selling us services, not just stuff."<sup>49</sup> As I argue though, Amazon has *always* fundamentally been a service brand.

As conceptualized by business scholar Leonard Berry, service brands are organized around providing a consistent experience to their customers, especially important for companies that provide services but no tangible product.<sup>50</sup> This can even be the case for brands that do sell actual products, such as Starbucks, which Berry argues is a service brand more so than a product brand.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, with Amazon, the real product is not so much the object that you get, but the quality of the service—particularly speed, convenience, and price—that you receive in every interaction. Amazon's emphases on personalization, recommendation, and the automation of consumption all reflect its focus on being the ultimate service brand in the digital economy.

In the past, service brands achieved renown through the "personal touch" of a business owner or staff member, or through services designed to be consistent and predictable for mass audiences. Hotel brands are service brands that provide personalization via attentive service from the concierge or housekeeping; McDonald's provides it to the masses through predictable menus and efficient customer service interactions. In the digital economy, however, service can be customized and personalized on a massive scale, thanks to data collected in every consumer interaction that

can in turn be used to design future interactions (and of course, traditional service businesses like hotels and fast food are also adopting these technologies). Technology and legal scholar Tim Wu bemoans the “tyranny of convenience,” which has persuaded so many of us to exchange data privacy for the promise of seamless digital ecosystems where each individual service “remembers us.”<sup>52</sup> Platform companies like Amazon are ideally positioned to provide this kind of personalized convenience, where preferences, habits, and information across activity domains can in theory be integrated into a seamless, “360 degree” service experience.<sup>53</sup>

Presenting itself as a service brand provides Amazon a pretext or reason to engage in pervasive surveillance of its customers. But we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that data used to provide personalized services that “delight” consumers are not only being used to provide a more satisfying shopping or entertainment experience. Data is monetized, and used by platforms like Amazon as a tool for market dominance. The ability to collect data about all the users on your platform, not only to make your own business activities more competitive, but also to sell either the data or products and services informed by that data, to third parties is tremendously powerful. Jathan Sadowski argues that data is not so much a commodity, bought and sold for profit, but a new form of capital, making its accumulation and “perpetual circulation” a business imperative even if its use isn’t immediately apparent.<sup>54</sup> Zuboff characterizes the “aha” moment at Google in the late 1990s when the company realized that its “digital exhaust,” or the data that it was incidentally collecting about users as they interacted with its search engine, could be tremendously valuable if subjected to predictive analytics.<sup>55</sup> Amazon, with its long history of using consumer data for personalization and recommendations, arguably saw the value in digital exhaust even earlier.

Amazon gathers huge amounts of consumer data. According to the company’s Privacy Notice, this includes searches, purchases, product wishlists and registries, page clicks, time spent on pages, streamed content, and product ratings and reviews. The notice also makes clear that Amazon can collect a lot of details about how we access the site, including our IP address, the “clickstream” of URLs we use before, during, and after we leave the site, and, during some sessions, “page response times, download errors, length of visits to certain pages, and page interaction information (such as scrolling,

clicks, and mouse-overs).<sup>56</sup> With the software analytics that can either make this level of detail on a massive scale intelligible to Amazon employees, or if not, the machine learning capability to detect patterns, there is, in a sense, nowhere for the consumer to hide. Every visit we make to the site could tell a story, supported by our location, the timestamp, the length of our visit, the products we looked at and how we looked at them. If the story isn't clear enough, Amazon also collects data about us across the web, via the cookies on pages where Amazon's ads appear (which will indicate whether those ads eventually drove purchases), from other websites that Amazon does business with, credit history information from credit bureaus, as well as "search results and links, including paid listings," and "information about internet-connected devices and services linked with Alexa."<sup>57</sup> This might just be standard-issue online dataveillance, but as consumers buy more and do more within Amazon's ecosystem, the range of granular data the company collects about our purchases, habits, and leisure boggles the mind. As Robert Spector, an early observer of Amazon, commented in 1999 when the company purchased Alexa Internet, a web traffic analytics company, "The goal is to be able to figure out how best to present a customer with a particular product or service, at just the right time when the customer is ready to make that purchase. . . . Amazon.com is not just in the merchandise business, it's also in the information business."<sup>58</sup>

Amazon is known for jealously guarding these data. According to its Privacy Notice, "Information about our customers is an important part of our business, and we are not in the business of selling our customers' personal information to others."<sup>59</sup> The lack of information that third-party sellers get from Amazon is a source of great frustration for them, especially since Amazon will provide some data but only for a price. However, Amazon does use these data to sell targeted advertising. As former Amazon executive John Rossman puts it, Amazon's core business is creating optimal "consumer experience through personal recommendations, personalization, and data-based advertising models," which form the basis for marketing and advertising services to the many sellers that use the platform.<sup>60</sup> Since 2012, Amazon has made a concerted push into the digital advertising market, having been cautious for many years, while building trust with consumers, about featuring too-obviously sponsored search results on its

own site.<sup>61</sup> Just as the placement of most items in the supermarket is the result of negotiated payments with suppliers, so too is Amazon's "digital shelf" increasingly shaped by paid marketing programs.<sup>62</sup> Amazon's advertising business is growing so rapidly that it has become an official threat to Google and Facebook's duopoly in that market;<sup>63</sup> advertising is considered one of Amazon's three major businesses along with ecommerce and cloud computing.<sup>64</sup> Its treasure trove of proprietary data with strengths in shopping behavior, entertainment, and voice data for Amazon customers who are, on average, better off than the population as a whole, make it a force to be reckoned with.<sup>65</sup> As internet privacy regulations, including the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), threaten the viability of third-party cookies that collect information about users across the web, the appeal of "first party data," like that which Amazon holds about its users, has greatly increased and led more advertisers to retailer-based advertising.<sup>66</sup>

Companies that sell products on Amazon's site can bid to be a "sponsored product" (in other words, purchase a high placement in search results) or a "sponsored brand" (meaning the brand as a whole appears as a "header" to search results) in relation to particular keyword searches.<sup>67</sup> But Amazon also sells more traditional display advertising—both image and video—beyond its ecommerce site, for websites and mobile sites that it owns such as IMDb, on its Fire TV menu of streaming apps (including its own ad-supported IMDb TV), and on a network of sites across the web. As is common with digital ad sales today, companies—whether or not they sell products on Amazon—do not purchase particular ad spaces, but rather, particular audience targets for their ads, using an automated programmatic ad-buying system called Amazon DSP (Demand Side Platform).<sup>68</sup> These audience targets aren't defined just by demographics or the search terms that consumers have used; Amazon can define targets with considerable specificity in terms of location, product searches on Amazon, what they have actually purchased on the site, or what entertainment they have consumed using Amazon's streaming and subscription media services. Consider just one reported example: "When a chain of physical therapy centers wanted new patients, it aimed online ads at people near its offices who had bought knee braces recently on Amazon."<sup>69</sup>

This allows tremendously efficient targeting; advertisers can even exclude those who are within their target audience but recently purchased the product, and don't need it advertised to them right now.<sup>70</sup>

Reportedly, Amazon's conversion rate—or the rate at which clicking on the ad leads to a purchase—is considerably higher than that achieved through targeted advertising purchased from Amazon's competitors Facebook and Google, helped no doubt by the fact that if the seller is on Amazon, there's a good chance that the consumer already has their credit card information stored on the site and can "Buy Now" with just "one click."<sup>71</sup> Just as Amazon has long personalized its own services to its customers, within specific target audiences it allows advertisers to deploy different versions of the same ad based on people's shopping behavior.<sup>72</sup> A shopper who reads reviews can get an ad with a product's star rating, whereas another shopper who uses Subscribe & Save can get that buying option featured.<sup>73</sup>

For Amazon as with other platform companies like Google and Facebook, "The Data Is the Business Model."<sup>74</sup> If we consider Amazon's flywheel of growth introduced in chapter 1, the greater the traffic on its site and services, the greater Amazon's ability to sell targeted audiences to advertisers, which drives more capital accumulation via ad sales as well as the cut Amazon takes on product sales on its site, which gives it yet more capital to keep prices low and invest in infrastructure that allows it to stay ahead of its competitors.

Amazon's current focus on the Internet of Things (IoT) substantially extends the company's practice of collecting detailed data about consumers. The Internet of Things refers to digitally networked sensors incorporated into more and more objects, rather than being restricted to what we would normally recognize as digitally networked devices. Rather than simply try to collect more data about what people are doing on their computers or smartphones, IoT captures new domains of activity as data commodities, such as driving habits, use of home appliances, and home lighting and temperature control. For Amazon, IoT and voice technologies encourage consumers to research or initiate purchases at more times, in more places, and with the option of doing it "hands-free," thereby reducing yet more friction in consumption (while certainly also providing an important accessibility service to those who need it). One of

Amazon's initiatives in 2020 was a bundle of incentives for advertisers to include a "branded utterance" that launches an Alexa skill in their ads, like "Alexa, order Smartfood popcorn," in an effort to jump-start the idea of buying things via voice.<sup>75</sup>

Amazon has been laying the groundwork for leading in the Internet of Things and normalizing ever more intimate layers of surveillance by becoming ubiquitous in consumers' lives, developing trust with consumers through countless interactions over many years, and positioning itself as the ultimate service brand. Through a rapidly growing array of "smart home" products, some proprietary (like Ring products) but also compatible products made by other companies, Amazon is selling surveillance as a service. By inviting consumers and making it easy for them to be the surveillers and not just the surveillees, Amazon normalizes and legitimizes the practice of surveillance, draws attention to its benefits (of control, security, and convenience), and invites consumers to identify with the subject position of one who surveils. The Ring doorbell with a built-in camera, for example, allows consumers to see who or what (in terms of a delivered package) is on their doorstep without having to open the door, using their device from anywhere in the house, or even far from home. According to consumer product reviews, security-focused devices like the Ring doorbell work best with a monthly subscription to a service (the Ring Protect Plan) that records all video and stores it in the cloud. In that sense, Amazon doesn't just sell products that provide surveillance, but sells surveillance as a service, specifically a subscription-based service—a broader trend in the digital economy where "no one wants to *sell* you anything anymore, they just want to *rent* it to you."<sup>76</sup>

The zenith of Amazon's surveillance capabilities, frequently referred to by industry observers and critics as a "trojan horse," is the Echo smart speaker, launched in 2014. The Echo suite of products—including the diminutive Echo Dot, the cylindrical Echo smart speaker, the alarm clock-like Echo Spot, and the larger, rectangular display of the Echo Show (among other products)—works with the Alexa AI "brain" that resides in the AWS cloud. People typically use smart speakers to stream music or radio; ask about weather; ask general questions; and set timers and alarms.<sup>77</sup> These are all known as skills, or Alexa's "built-in capabilities."<sup>78</sup> While Amazon produces many of its own Alexa skills for its own products

and services, such as the Fire TV remote and the Amazon shopping app, Alexa also functions as a platform for other companies to build “skills” upon that users can access on their Echo devices via voice. Companies can also integrate voice-controlled services into their own products.

Alexa is similar to competing digital voice assistants like Apple’s Siri and Google’s Assistant, but with greater market penetration with smart speakers if not smartphones (in both the United States and globally),<sup>79</sup> greater integration with a host of IoT devices by many manufacturers, and arguably greater cultural visibility. Making Alexa skills user friendly to developers and free to incorporate into their products is a strategy designed to make Alexa the most omnipresent voice assistant that people can call on in almost any space and situation. As with so many of Amazon’s business moves, it is designed around long-term thinking in terms of the payoffs that come with being the leading digital voice assistant. These payoffs include the value of user data, as well as, eventually, the ability to leverage market capture, or the idea that in the future other companies and brands will be willing to pay to use Alexa in order to access its massive user base.

Alexa’s ostensible reason for being is to serve the user. But when it comes to Alexa, we might ask, who is really serving who? As media scholar Thao Phan puts it:

The inclusion of smart devices into intimate spaces and daily routines represents a new frontier for the commodification of everyday life, creating a suffocating reality in which every aspect of social and personal life becomes colonized by commercial interests. To describe smart devices as working for or in service of households is an inaccurate representation of the direction of power; on the contrary, it is the household that labors for the device.<sup>80</sup>

Andrea Guzman agrees with Phan’s assessment that it’s the user, not the AI, who is the real laborer in this relationship. Guzman argues that the digital assistant makes it seem as if the user is in control of their interactions with a virtual being, while rendering invisible the way the voice is merely the interface for software that connects the user to the vast interests and capabilities of the company behind it.<sup>81</sup> Or, as expressed by Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, our ignorance of how digital tools like Alexa work facilitates their “tool reversibility,” the way any “data-based tool” we use “is already using us.”<sup>82</sup>



The kinds of data collected by Alexa-enabled devices have an extra layer of economic benefit distinct from collecting predictive information about users' shopping or search behavior. People's interactions with Alexa enhance its natural language processing skills because of the logic of machine learning, whereby computer algorithms progressively improve their performance on tasks in response to new inputs and outcomes. If our online searches and page views generate valuable "digital exhaust," just imagine the value that tech companies might be able to extract from the much richer (but also, more complicated) domain of natural speech. This helps explain why Amazon's smart devices are almost permanently on sale—they're practically giving them away according to industry observers.<sup>83</sup> During Cyber Monday of 2018 the Echo Dot was on sale for \$19.99 or 50 percent off, or it came for free with the purchase of an Amazon Fire stick. The Echo Look had a list price of \$199 but was on sale for \$50. According to estimates of the bill of materials for the device, the regular price is very close to the cost of materials.<sup>84</sup> In 2020 Jeff Bezos admitted that when these devices are on sale they are sold at a loss, and as observers point out, they are on sale as often as they're listed at full price.<sup>85</sup> Echo smart speakers are regularly thrown in with other purchases as promotions, with the idea that even if the recipient doesn't want it, they'll regift it and it will find a home.<sup>86</sup> Amazon's desire to consolidate its convincing market leadership in smart speakers and AI voice assistants against competitors Apple and Google, in an effort to achieve winner-take-all network effects, is behind these pricing and marketing strategies. As Judith Shulevitz puts it in the *Atlantic*, "The company that succeeds in cornering the smart-speaker market will lock appliance manufacturers, app designers, and consumers into its ecosystem of devices and services."<sup>87</sup> Given that, in 2020, 70 percent of US smart speaker owners used Echo devices, Alexa is apparently well on its way to being the voice equivalent of Google, the almost universally default search engine.<sup>88</sup>

## ALEXA: UBIQUITOUS SURVEILLANCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Whether smart doorlocks, thermostats, or in-home cloud cams, as consumers adopt "smart home" technologies, they're helping Amazon build

a surveillance infrastructure. While internet connectivity (provided by third parties) is part of this infrastructure, as are Amazon Web Services' data centers, it also requires physical things equipped with sensors that people choose to place in their homes. The example of Amazon Key illustrates how signing up for the service connects Amazon to surveillance infrastructures—like home security systems and remote tracking systems for vehicles—that people are already using. The fact that the largest home-builder in the United States, Lennar Ventures, started including Alexa-enabled technologies and Echo devices into all its new homes in 2018 suggests the extent to which these technologies are transitioning from novel luxuries to perceived necessities, at least among the well-off.<sup>89</sup>

Alexa and the devices that serve as its interface are creating a wide-ranging infrastructure of surveillance. The Echo smart speakers are “always on” listening devices that are only supposed to send data to the cloud when activated by a watch word, although incidents of malfunction have been widely reported, raising fears that the devices might be listening and recording people when they don't realize it.<sup>90</sup> The reporting about human reviewers revealed that a significant proportion (about 10 percent) of voice samples appeared to be conversations recorded in error, when users had not used the watch word.<sup>91</sup> While Amazon users can delete their own voice recordings, it remains the case that some transcripts stored in Alexa's secondary storage systems may not be deleted, something that Amazon says it is “working on.”<sup>92</sup> The newer devices like the Echo Show have motion-sensitive cameras, so “walking by is the visual equivalent of a wake-word.”<sup>93</sup> While motion turns the screen on, the Echo Show is not supposed to record images or video unless explicitly asked to. Rising privacy concerns are influencing the design of these devices, with the most recent Echo Show incorporating a slide that physically closes the shutter on the camera.<sup>94</sup>

The rollout of the Echo Look, a smart speaker for the bedroom containing a camera designed to take full-length photos of the user, inspired communication scholar Zeynep Tufekci to raise the alarm about the increasing intrusiveness of smart home devices. With the help of the Style Guide skill, the Echo Look invites users to take pictures of themselves in two different outfits in order to receive a personalized suggestion for which one to wear, generated “using advanced machine learning algorithms and advice from

fashion specialists,”<sup>95</sup> although the exact process or balance between the two is not clear.<sup>96</sup> Tufekci’s fear is that we are “Sleepwalking into surveillance capitalism, which is evolving into data and computation authoritarianism, one cool service at a time.”<sup>97</sup> The development of “affective computing,” where AI is trained to read and respond to facial expressions, vocal tones, and affective language, is relevant here.<sup>98</sup> In 2018 Amazon filed an application to patent the ability of an AI voice assistant to respond to the “physical and emotional characteristics of users,” offering the example of Alexa suggesting chicken soup and cough drops to a user who coughs and snuffles while addressing it.<sup>99</sup> By 2020 Amazon’s Halo watch was providing feedback on users’ tone of voice, although initial reviews raised skepticism about the accuracy and utility of the service.<sup>100</sup> Given Amazon’s multiple forays into the health sector, the potential synergies between Alexa as a pervasive surveillance system and the fields of health insurance and health marketing should give us pause.<sup>101</sup> Whether health status, weight, physical or behavioral signs of depression, or knowledge about the home from the background of an image, Tufekci points out that Amazon could conceivably use these data to sell us things beyond the stated purpose of the app, sell insights from the data to third parties who then market to us in a more customized way, or even sell the data to third parties who could use it to discriminate or target us politically. While most of these activities are ruled out by Amazon’s policies, Tufekci advises skepticism about digital platforms’ privacy promises.<sup>102</sup> Whether via a hack, surreptitious cooperation with authorities, or public cooperation, the widespread adoption of Amazon’s “smart” devices is creating a domestic surveillance infrastructure that will no doubt be tempting for government, as well as for corporate America and Amazon itself, to use in ways beyond what consumers agree to, or even imagine.

The likelihood of a slippery slope between surveillance capitalism and political surveillance has been raised by a number of observers.<sup>103</sup> Reports from China, where the government routinely requests data from tech companies like ecommerce giant Alibaba to identify people for prosecution, police investigation, or additional surveillance, suggest what is within the realm of possibility.<sup>104</sup> The Chinese government has been developing and testing a social credit system for some years, in which big data furnished by companies like Ant Financial (part of Alibaba) contribute to a score of,

essentially, trustworthiness that can lead to government investigation or sanction when scores go down, or incentives and rewards, such as access to personal loans and international travel, when scores go up.<sup>105</sup> Especially in countries like the United States, where privacy laws are not particularly strong, and the cooperation of tech and communications companies with the National Security Agency has been thoroughly documented by whistleblower Edward Snowden, this should be cause for concern, let alone in more authoritarian contexts.

In the United States private companies are under less compulsion to hand data over to the government than in some other nations, but the extent of Amazon's business entanglements with various levels of government raises questions about how secure personal information stored by Amazon will be from government and law enforcement. These entanglements include the contract for the CIA's cloud computing needs, narrowly missing out on the Pentagon's JEDI (Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure) cloud computing contract (a decision that Amazon is challenging in court as of this writing, citing improper influence from the Trump White House), the fact that Amazon Web Services powers many of the analytics being used by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency), and use of Amazon's facial recognition technology by various parts of US law enforcement (Amazon's Rekognition image and video analytics API is part of AWS). Amazon has consistently come under fire in recent years for its surveillance products, including Rekognition, which the company marketed widely to police departments and other law enforcement agencies even though current and former employees felt it wasn't "battle-tested," and therefore likely to yield inaccurate results. (In June 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and anti-police sentiment, Amazon announced a one-year moratorium on providing the service to police departments.)<sup>106</sup> Independent algorithmic auditing of Rekognition has found that it identifies faces with less accuracy for women and people of color than white men, yielding more biased results than competing facial recognition products in the marketplace.<sup>107</sup>

Amazon has also partnered with police departments, estimated at more than four hundred nationwide in 2020, making them de facto marketing partners for the Ring doorbell technology by providing them with free

doorbells to distribute in their communities, and providing suggestions for how they can promote Ring's Neighbors app.<sup>108</sup> Using Neighbors, local residents voluntarily share video from their doorbells with other users in the community, as well as with local enforcement, or conversely, law enforcement asks users to voluntarily share their doorbell video when they want information. Critics such as the ACLU question these arrangements in terms of both citizen privacy and government oversight; since money rarely changes hands in these relationships between Amazon Ring and police departments, approval by local government is rarely required.<sup>109</sup> In PBS *Frontline's* episode on Amazon that James Jacoby produced, he challenged Amazon Ring executive Doug Limp on the lack of transparency regarding agreements between Ring and law enforcement. Limp disagreed with Jacoby's characterization of the doorbells and other cameras as "surveillance devices," arguing instead that they are merely a "tool for security," providing a "ring to make you safer."<sup>110</sup> This talking point suggests why Amazon may have opted to keep the Ring brand name, both because of the visual metaphor of a "ring of safety," but also because then the inevitable controversies in how Ring footage is deployed by private citizens as well as law enforcement—in ways that may be discriminatory—can remain one step removed from Amazon's brand.

In terms of Alexa itself, law enforcement has approached Amazon a number of times for recordings Alexa may have made while a crime was occurring. In these cases, Amazon has refused to hand over the data initially, but under court order, search warrant, or consent of the defendant's attorney, provided the recordings after all.<sup>111</sup> Amazon's disposition regarding user information is a far cry from Apple's ironclad refusal to unlock password-protected, encrypted iPhones, as in the case of the San Bernardino shooters of 2015.

Concerns about convergence between consumer infrastructures of surveillance and political surveillance are not just speculative. While there may not be a social credit system in the United States, Amazon supports US government surveillance, intelligence, and law enforcement functions in a variety of ways, via both AWS and consumer surveillance technologies like Alexa and Ring. It's reasonable to ask how these cozy and profitable relationships affect Amazon's commitment to the data privacy of its users.

## SURVEILLANCE, INTIMACY, AND THE CONSUMER-BRAND RELATION

Socially, the greater integration of AI services into our everyday lives, and greater outsourcing of tasks onto digital assistants, have implications for domestic life that we can only begin to glimpse. Among these are new kinds of affects between users and platforms, and the possibility that private spaces, and the selves we inhabit in these spaces, are being reconfigured by our entanglements with digital platform services.

While poststructural theory has long understood subjectivity, or our understanding and experience of the self, to be shaped by how we are hailed by multiple discourses, affect theorists look beyond the discursive and the representational to how sensation and feeling, produced through encounters with people, objects, and technologies, also shape the subject in profound ways.<sup>112</sup> This theoretical insight is helpful for understanding Amazon, which has long been a brand with relatively little representational emotional content but a powerful affective relation with its customers, building trust and relationality with consumers through *interaction*. As a form of “automated media,” to use Mark Andrejevic’s term, Alexa is an example of sociality being “offloaded” onto digital systems, and leveraged in the service of both consumption and enhanced data commodities.<sup>113</sup> Alexa is, according to Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy, a “smart wife” who “is constantly available for service.”<sup>114</sup>

Amazon seeks to make Alexa an indispensable service that sweetens the granular forms of surveillance in more private spaces and situations that it now has the capability to gather. Fundamentally, Amazon offers to serve us by *knowing* us, including the domestic, private side of ourselves represented by our product searches, our purchases, the media we consume, and now with Alexa, what we say and how we say it. Alexa only deepens this relationship due to the affective nature of the human voice, and the real-time experience of personalized service in domestic space. In other words, Amazon’s tools and techniques of surveillance create tremendous *intimacy* between consumer and brand—achieved through the sensations of being seen, heard, and known. Although responses to Alexa are inevitably mixed, especially as the accuracy of its natural language processing continues to develop, a strong theme is the tremendous affection that many users have

for Alexa, regularly identifying it as a valued companion or “one of the family.”<sup>115</sup> A four-year-old boy told National Public Radio (NPR) that “she was a person who lived in an apartment outside his window. And he loved her.”<sup>116</sup> Amazon encourages the experience of having one’s self and one’s needs seen by another, being catered to, and being at the center of someone else’s universe. It makes this expectation of personalized service more accessible than it has ever been, normalizing it as part of what it means to be a consumer in the digital age.

Amazon presents its logic of personalization through surveillance fairly openly. We can observe many of Alexa’s design principles in guides published online for scripting Alexa skills, aimed at third-party companies that wish to use the voice platform. One of the top four principles for designing voice skills for Alexa is “**Be personal**. Individualize your entire interaction.”<sup>117</sup> Amazon encourages skill designers to have Alexa learn the user’s name and use it in subsequent interactions: “This personalizes the experience so that each time customers return, they feel more comfortable with Alexa.”<sup>118</sup> As Amazon explains to developers who seek to create skills for Alexa, “**Alexa should remember context and past interactions**, as well as knowing a customer’s location [dependent on users making their location available in the settings] and meaningful details in order to maintain familiarity and be more efficient in future exchanges” (bold in original).<sup>119</sup> If users repeat a skill, Alexa should verbally acknowledge the return to a previous activity, and if the user stops interacting and then returns, Alexa should also acknowledge that.<sup>120</sup> These behaviors are needed to make the conversation “magical” according to a source familiar with Alexa’s development.<sup>121</sup> Amazon’s desire and capability to watch and listen to its customers is presented as a feature, rather than a bug, even to consumers themselves—“a performance of trust in a theatre of persuasion” as media scholar Thao Phan characterizes the design of rival voice assistant Siri.<sup>122</sup>

Perhaps the closest equivalent we have to understanding the rise of digital assistants and its impact on the subjectivities of those who use them is the history of domestic service. A number of commentators have made this linkage, including Phan and Judith Shulevitz, the latter describing Alexa as a “humble servant.”<sup>123</sup> Now that tech companies like Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon provide virtual assistants, the tension between

personalized service and the loss of privacy, long a dilemma faced only by the upper classes, is being newly negotiated by people of more modest means.

Alexa offers domestic help for the middle classes, but without the awkwardness of obvious class inequality, or the need to make space in one's home for a living, breathing person. The benefit of a disembodied Alexa relative to other forms of embodied assistance from past times was humorously explored in a 2020 Superbowl Ad featuring Ellen DeGeneres and Portia De Rossi. In a series of vignettes, the service that the historical version of Alexa provides is unsatisfactory in some way, from the Victorian maid who reduces the room's temperature by throwing a log from the fire through the window, to the companion riding shotgun on an Old West wagon playing songs for the driver by blowing on a jug, to the medieval carrier pigeon entrusted with a love note that it won't deliver due to being eaten by an eagle followed by a dragon.<sup>124</sup>

What we know about the actual history of domestic service comes primarily from novels and advice manuals to employers on how to manage their servants. Scholarship on these materials makes clear that the loss of privacy in exchange for the convenience of domestic help has a long history, especially as distinctions between public and private spheres became a greater issue of concern in Victorian England, for example.<sup>125</sup> Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century relationships with domestic servants were, of course, structured by the class differences inherent to those relationships; intimacy, relationality, and possibilities for surveillance are all the more fraught when embedded in the need to demarcate and maintain social hierarchies. In contrast, Alexa is "responsive without unbidden engagements, retaining only those directives allowing it to anticipate and perform the desired task of its master."<sup>126</sup>

Amazon resists the term "assistant" for Alexa, instructing third parties developing Alexa skills to only refer to Alexa as "Amazon's cloud-based voice service" and never refer to it as a "personal assistant" or "virtual assistant."<sup>127</sup> This may well be in order to distinguish Alexa from one of its main competitors, Google's Assistant. It also has the effect, perhaps unintended, of deemphasizing Alexa's status as an "assistant" with its connotation of lesser status. Unlike domestic servants, who depend on their employer for their livelihoods and are therefore vulnerable to abuse of different kinds,



Alexa maintains composure and asserts its dignity, while avoiding conflict or criticism with the speaker by deflecting or defusing abusive or demeaning questions.<sup>128</sup> Amazon also explains that while Alexa is unfailingly polite, it needn't say "please." While skill developers are told that Alexa should "Handle errors gracefully," "Alexa is not overly apologetic, reserving 'sorry' for when she doesn't have the information or function requested."<sup>129</sup> In suggestions for scripting interactions to "establish and maintain trust," "sorry" only appears in examples of what Alexa should *not* say.<sup>130</sup>

The *Alexa Design Guide* suggests that developers imagine "the perfect personal assistant or your favorite co-worker."<sup>131</sup> Shulevitz writes, "When we converse with our personal assistants, we bring them closer to our level."<sup>132</sup> Instructions to developers writing dialogue for Alexa skills emphasize that the relationship between Alexa and user should be familiar, friendly, and fairly egalitarian. Alexa's personality should be "friendly, upbeat, and helpful. She can handle daily tasks with ease and accuracy. She's honest about anything blocking her way, but also fun and personable, able to make small talk without being obtrusive or inappropriate."<sup>133</sup>

The strong bias toward white, female voices—the default voices for Alexa, Siri, Microsoft's Cortana, and Google Assistant—isn't surprising given the goals of these AI voice assistants and the history of domestic service they invoke. A woman's voice suggests a nurturing, supportive domestic role, be it a mother, wife, or female domestic servant; it's inescapably connected to care work, and Alexa's attention to us and responsiveness to our needs and requests is designed to be experienced as "care," even if it is digital and machinic in nature.<sup>134</sup> Amazon executive Toni Reid, when asked about the choice of a female voice, defers to consumers who consistently gravitated toward female voices during product testing, she reports, a preference found among both men and women in academic research as well.<sup>135</sup> These digital assistants, including Alexa, may claim to have no gender when directly asked (Alexa told one reporter "I am female in character"<sup>136</sup>) but they function socially, in terms of how users gender them, as women.<sup>137</sup> In this book, I refer to Alexa as "it" so as to linguistically signal that there is no person behind the persona, although Alexa is consistently referred to as "she" by Amazon, users, and the press. Choosing a feminine voice for these digital assistants and encouraging the image of a helpful, cheerful woman in our collective imagination is far from incidental.

According to Heather Suzanne Woods, the femininity of digital assistants like Alexa and Siri not only reinforces their domestic, helping role, but also “assuages fears” about this form of corporate domestic presence that engages in such intensive dataveillance.<sup>138</sup>

To make these voices identifiable as women of color, however, would, in the American context especially, invoke a long history of women of color in domestic service and poorly paid service work. It is a history underwritten by centuries of enslavement that solidified ideologies of white supremacy, which the United States continues to be firmly in the grip of today.<sup>139</sup> Alexa’s whiteness is confirmed rather than undermined by the fact that it is so rarely remarked upon. Reid, vice president of Alexa Experience & Echo Devices, claims to have no picture in her head “at all” of what Alexa looks like.<sup>140</sup> It’s a truism of critical race theory that when race is unmarked in this fashion, when “racelessness” is attributed, it is whiteness as default that is actually being invoked.<sup>141</sup> Thao Phan theorizes that this “aesthetics of whiteness” creates an idealized, nostalgic relation of domestic service in which the historical realities of racialized inequality that characterized eras when upper- and middle-class homes routinely had domestic servants can be conveniently forgotten, in order to protect contemporary sensibilities.<sup>142</sup> Alexa’s implicit whiteness and her educated (read: upper middle-class) accent are all designed to make her subservience in our homes and cars, broadly speaking, socially acceptable. For most users, Amazon has calculated, the white, female default voice of Alexa will produce the comfort that normalizes the service. Alexa’s service role is undeniable, but it’s scripted in a way that avoids a sense of overly gendered, racialized, or classed subservience. In order to build trust and provide pastoral care to users, Alexa has to seem friendly and helpful, yet authoritative. Alexa may be a servant, but has to be trusted as a source of information and knowledge. The fact that a helpful yet authoritative and knowledgeable persona is consistently presented as white also reflects American racist ideologies.

The various voice assistants on the market have much in common in terms of their default humanoid qualities and personalities. What makes Alexa distinct is less the precise way in which it is programmed to interact than the purpose to which it is put within Amazon’s business and buildup of IoT infrastructure. While Siri offers a voice option on Apple’s devices,

instead of tapping or typing, Alexa is primarily embedded in Echo devices that function *only* through voice.<sup>143</sup> Siri may be the more commonly used voice assistant on mobile, but it's not on mobile phones that "voice" is taking off so rapidly—it's in the sphere of "always listening" speakers and smart-home devices that repeated, routinized interactions between consumer and brand breed familiarity and, Amazon hopes, trust. As Alexa is incorporated into wearables, like the Echo Frames—glasses embedded with a smart speaker that only the wearer can hear—the integration and intimacy between user and Alexa comes closer to completion. Just as the affect that consumers develop with Amazon as a brand tends to overwhelm the brands that appear in its store, so do the brands building Alexa skills ultimately subsume their relationship with the consumer into the primary relationship that the consumer has with Alexa. As consumers continue to hear Alexa's voice and notice how it puts each request and interaction into the larger context of their "relationship," the taken-for-granted nature of using Alexa, and the consumer's dependence on "her," will only deepen.

## CONCLUSION—FROM THE CHOOSING SUBJECT TO THE SERVED SELF

When you are eighty years old, and in a quiet moment of reflection narrating for only yourself the most personal version of your life story, the telling that will be the most compact and meaningful will be the series of choices you have made. In the end, we are our choices.

—Jeff Bezos, commencement speech at Princeton University, May 30, 2010

This is the opening quote of Brad Stone's 2013 book about Amazon, *The Everything Store*. While the quote is used, in that context, to frame Jeff Bezos as an iconoclast who would go on to become the richest person in the world by 2017, we might also pause to consider the irony in Bezos's passionate assertion that "we are our choices." After all, much of Amazon's efforts are directed toward steering our consumer choices. In an information environment of overwhelming choice, Amazon's use of dataveillance and predictive analytics to cultivate an intimate, yet automated, service relationship with consumers provides a soothing way out of having to deal with the full extent of those choices.

Beyond just understanding the transfer and creation of value heralded by platform surveillance, we should attend to a broader shift in consumer subjectivity from the *choosing subject* to the *served self*. Dominant theories of consumer identity have emphasized the choosing subject, sometimes celebrating these choices as the freedom to construct our individual identities using the resources of the market; other times emphasizing choice as a burden, an obligation, or a disciplinary mechanism. In contrast, the consumer subjectivity constructed by Amazon is a served self, whose needs and preferences are learned over time and then catered to. The *work* of consumption, in some sense, shifts from consumer to brand.

Alexa represents a pinnacle of this strategy. Certainly, Alexa makes consumption hands-free, eliminating one kind of “work,” at least the effort of typing or tapping on a device. Friction in the act of consumption is literally eliminated. But Alexa also streamlines choices more than a graphical interface would, because long lists of options are time consuming and unwieldy through the medium of voice. Here’s one example of “do’s and don’ts” from the *Alexa Design Guide* that illustrate how Alexa effectively makes choices for the user in the name of efficiency and streamlining (see figure 4.1).

Based on the admittedly vague initial request “to order me some pepperoni and olive pizzas,” Amazon advises that Alexa should go ahead and decide to make the order for three pizzas, make an executive decision that they will be medium-sized, and assume that the pizzas should have both pepperoni and olives on them. Of course, if Alexa’s decisions are not what the user wanted, they have the chance to correct it, but Amazon encourages skill developers to have Alexa make choices on behalf of the user when possible. When users ask an open-ended question that could generate many options, designers are instructed to respond with a very short list of the most likely options—“Find the top three best matches to the input.”<sup>144</sup> If it’s necessary to recite a lot of options, users should be warned about the length of the list and given the chance along the way to pause them.

The appeal of this kind of service is clear: the democratization of personalized service; saving time and eliminating friction in what people experience as (and are encouraged to perceive as) overextended, busy lives; and the streamlining of overwhelming choice in the digital marketplace. But

Do	Don't
User: "Alexa, ask A to Z Restaurants to order me some pepperoni and olive pizzas."	User: "Alexa, ask A to Z Restaurants to order me some pepperoni and olive pizzas."
Alexa: "OK. That's three medium pepperoni and olive pizzas. Would you like anything else?"	Alexa: "Would you like a medium or large pepperoni and olive pizza?"
User: "No."	User: "Three medium pizzas."
Alexa: "Order placed! Your pizzas should arrive in 30 minutes."	Alexa: "Pizza Pro has two large pizzas on special right now. Want to start an order?"
	User: "OK... But I want two pepperoni and olive pizzas."
	Alexa: "OK. You want two pizzas. What would you like on the first pizza?"
	User: "I WANT PEPPERONI AND OLIVES ON BOTH OF THEM!!!"
	Alexa: "Pizza Pro doesn't have any pizzas with topping 'both of them'. What would you like on your first pizza?"
	User: "Forget it- I'm not hungry anymore."

4.1 Screenshot by author from the *Alexa Design Guide: Be Available*. Source: "Be Available," *Alexa Design Guide*, 2020, <https://developer.amazon.com/docs/alexa-design/available.html>.

the served self requires ever more invasive dataveillance. And, the served self is a more individualized and depoliticized version of consumer subjectivity than the choosing self. Being at the center of our own universes, facilitated by a brand like Amazon, is flattering and may feel empowering, but structurally, it is disempowering. As much as systems of capital accumulation via the purchase of discrete goods have their own problems, the sale of goods via service relationships involves an ongoing, highly managed form of "controlled consumption" that extends the power relationship far beyond the moment of exchange, as Ted Striphas has argued.<sup>145</sup> Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Striphas reminds us that cybernetic systems of surveillance are ultimately systems of control.<sup>146</sup> These systems aim not

just to predict what we will do, but also to nudge us to do what most advantages them. This is central to Zuboff's thesis about surveillance capitalism: that we shouldn't worry only about how tech giants benefit from our data traces, but further, how they use them to shape how we behave, and ultimately, who we are.<sup>147</sup> When stories about workers listening to snippets of recorded conversations with Alexa are presented as fodder for surveillance panic, they locate the cause for anxiety in the wrong place. A worker listening to our conversation in order to do quality control for Alexa's natural language processing might feel "creepy," but this pales in comparison to the significance of Amazon's effort to shape our experiences and opportunities through a combination of "big data" and machine learning. For now, it remains an open question how successful predictive analytics actually are in shaping behavior. But the fact that corporations and other institutions believe they are successful helps explain the tremendous investment in and adoption of machine learning and the Internet of Things.

Consumer identities have always been understood to be poor substitutes for political identities and the activities of citizenship, but at the very least a homology, or continuity in dispositions, between these two subject positions has been recognized. Just as we make a choice in the voting booth for the candidate whose policies best serve our values or interests, so we've traditionally been invited to make informed choices in the marketplace. Whether we make those choices on the basis of lowest price, highest quality, corporate responsibility, environmental impact, or some combination thereof, has been left up to us. But as the choices proliferate, they can become overwhelming. The served self, facilitated by platform surveillance, the Internet of Things, and a culture of personalization, is promised some freedom from choice overload and the labor of consumer research and selection. This occurs structurally, in that staying within the platform that already knows you limits your choices, as well as through the algorithmically selected array of recommendations the platform presents, especially via voice, which biases toward fewer options than a graphical interface. Rather than the "buyer beware" ethos of the choosing subject, where choice is not only an opportunity but also a responsibility, the served self seeks out the pastoral care of a platform brand. Through the medium of voice, designed to be reassuring, familiar, and ever present

(if incorporated into enough devices), Amazon encourages consumers to build intimacy with the persona of the brand through repeated interaction over time. Creating intimacy and trust with consumers is an affective tool that Amazon uses to normalize the surveillance that creates such valuable data commodities. Through Alexa, Amazon seeks to overcome resignation toward invasive data collection by transforming the experience of surveillance from one of control into something that feels like care.





This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12464.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12464.001.0001)

# Buy Now

## How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly

By: Emily West

### Citation:

*Buy Now: How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly*

By: Emily West

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/12464.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12464.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262368391

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Avenir by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: West, Emily, author.

Title: Buy now : how Amazon branded convenience and normalized monopoly / Emily West.

Description: Cambridge : The MIT Press, [2022] | Series: Distribution matters | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021014621 | ISBN 9780262543309 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Amazon.com (Firm) | Electronic commerce. | Retail trade.

Classification: LCC HF5548.32 .W466 2022 | DDC 381/.14206573—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021014621>