A Homegrown Recommender, living with a system of your own

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1 INTRODUCTION

We engage with the world in a way that generates a large amount of data, which corporations leverage through various types of machine learning systems to create digital personalities. These businesses generate income by creating and selling individualised digital profiles in a system we consider Surveillance Capitalism.

We propose a data recommender system that lives in our homes instead of in a company. You, the consumer or private citizen, own, train, and run your own machine learning system, a lifelong personal assistant. It will learn your preferences, help you find your way around the world, and make you aware of your privacy and take steps to protect it. It will ask before sending your data and will be transparent about where the data you receive come from.

Figure 1: A future pamphlet to inspire a resistance against Surveillance Capitalism. Pamphlet visual created using Midjourney AI.

1.1 The golden compass of e-commerce

If you use multiple music services (like Youtube, Spotify, or Apple Music), your Homegrown Recommender will be able to collect the data it requires to provide a personalised recommendation for you. All audio files that are available on these platforms would be included in the inventory lists. The lists are not free, but they are available for monthly rental. Mindful of your desire for privacy, the recommender algorithm will select songs from various streaming services. When you use

many providers, the providers are unable to create an accurate profile. They may piece together fragments of information, but they will never have the whole picture.

1.2 New products

How might the market change if everyone has access to a Homegrown Recommender trained by the owner to their personal preferences?
Perhaps a new kind of digital persona can be formed from little details that are now overlooked?
Would we change the way we consume and shop?
What if, instead of being struck by an ad when we're vulnerable, the system gives us a suggestion for a childhood comfort food that would help us get through the rest of a dreadful day?

1.3 The privilege of knowing

In the early days, the internet was a meeting place for risk-takers and creatives. Over the last 30 years it has become involved in all aspects of our lives. The same might be true for decentralised systems like our imaginary Homegrown Recommender. Private searching options, versions of which are currently only accessible to small groups of experts are difficult to use and obtain information from and as such they are primarily used by data scientists who do not want their online and offline activities tracked. Can we imagine, design and make systems that allow a re-claiming of our profiles for everyone? Can we claim the privilege of knowing?

1.4 Becoming a companion

What might happen to such a system as we used it? Would it adjust how it communicates with us when we're in a certain frame of mind? Would it remain an omniscient nonhuman or become a friend who acts in accordance with our shared ethics, habits, history and private language? Might it become a companion of some kind or a pet or a talisman?

Figure 2: Hypothesised future consequences of living with a recommender. Left visual created using Midjourney AI
Right visual is a screenshot of https://solar.lowtechmagazine.com/