[Theme music]

[Hayley] Hi everyone, I'm Hayley Wilhem and welcome to Quotable, where we question Brock University researchers on topics related to their research or creative work. In today's episode, we're talking to Dr. Aaron Mauro, an Assistant Professor of digital media here at Brock University in the Centre for Digital Humanities.

Dr. Mauro, would you like to introduce yourself and your topic of study?

[AM] Hi, yeah, thanks for inviting me to do this. This is really exciting. I am, my area of study increasingly has to do with cyber security, which is a topic we haven't really heard of a lot, it's not really a household kind of term. But we are hearing more and more about how our digital devices are watching us, they're listening to us, they're more involved in collecting data. Cyber security has a lot to do with that==the way that we manage our data, the way that we really just take care of our digital personas online. So that's something that I've been looking at. It's really been spurred by a really just fabulous book published by Shoshana Zuboff who is a professor of business at the Harvard business school and she wrote a book called "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" which is a great big book, it's sitting on my desk in front of us, we're looking at it [laughter] and in it she describes a new economic order where large companies are no longer really charging for what services they provide, they're now giving things away for free, we use our Google accounts quite happily, we log into our Facebook accoutns iwhtout really thinking about the exchange that goes on. I think implicitly we know that the exchange is our data and tahth our identities are the thing that we're trading for this service to connect or to be more productive or just have a really good smart phone. But in this, there's a distancing from an economic standpoint where Shoshana Zuboff says well, where's the reciprocity? In previous eras, in the twentieth century, large car makers would have a sense of reciprocity where they would make cars, they would have facotires, but people would also take home an income that would sustain them. And so now we see large companies that don't' really have much to do with society, they're simply just giving us services online, harvesting our data, but not giving back to society and culture in the way that previous industrial age would have. And so this, she described as surveillance capitalism. It's a new form of looking at really the human dimension, what it is to be human in a digital age. And I think that's changing for us as we go through. So it's something that's kind of tracked, like a lot of things, with Google in the early days as a Stanford start up, they would collect user data so that they could improve the produce, right, and I think that's largely how a lot of this surveillance work begins, that it's an honest attempt to just improve the quality of service. But as that time goes on, the data that

we collect about ourselves and who we are becomes commodified and becomes a piece of really extending who we are and our digital footprint. So these are the kinds of terms we're talking about. And large companies, they're springing up, like we haven't heard about, become data clearing houses, that manage our digital identities online without our say or our approval, so companies like Blue Kite, Data Logics, Canter, any of the listeners might not have heard of those but these are very large companies that h ave a lot to do with really how our digital identities are bougth and sold on a daily basis. So that's something that we're starting to think about more. And really my work and my book, Cybersecurity and the Humanities, which should be out in 2020, is looking at these issues really from a Humanities side, from the human dimension. So we see examples how like Facebook a few years ago got in some trouble where they did, you know, an unethical research study on 200 000 or so Facebook users to see if they could modify their mood. They showed them stories that were happy and lo and behold the users seemed happier, they started to post more happy content. The opposite was also true. They were able to swing users into sharing and spreading more negative content. So the ability for a social platform to shape our perceptions and the way that we think without really our without our conscious awareness is something that is becoming more and more of a problem. And whether we feel happy or sad on Facebook might not feel necessarily that important, but it's also been shown in other examples, where Facebook was able to actually increase the number of voters showing up to election polls on a given day by just telling other users that their friends had voted. So if your friend had voted, you would be more likely to go to the poll. And in the United States, where a lot of elections are decided by just a few percentage points, um, sharing you know democratic or republican voters more or less gives Facebook essentially the power to swing elections. So these are now real world issues that I think a lot of society and a lot of our laws and the people that we send to government might not be really aware of it. So this is some of the work we're doing.

[Hayley] Wow that was fabulous. Thank you. Thank you for joining us and for giving us an insight into online identity and surveillance capitalism. We look forward to seeing your book coming out.

[AM] Yes, yes Cybersecurity in the Humanities, 2020.

[Hayley] That's so exciting. Thank you for tuning into our segment and we hope that you come back and listen to more!

[Theme music]

[Credits]

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