

## NEURAL IMPLANT SURVEILLANCE: EMOTIONS AS DATA IN THE YEAR 2065

RUBAB BATUL

*Setting: Year 2065; Every 16-year-old needs to be implanted with a neural chip, where every emotion and feeling is observed and transmitted in real-time across the digital world of Pulsefeed. “We Listen, Feel and Translate” is the new form of E-Capitalism of this age.*

We all love time-travel stories. I am no exception and that is why I somehow ended up in this chaotic world of 2065 where past, present and future cannot be distinguished anymore. If I remember anything from 2024, Elon Musk’s Neuralink was implanted in just a few paralysed people to help them more effectively interact with the world. The rest, the “able-bodied humanity”, was preoccupied with personal and collective endeavours for coming to terms with the constant loops of capitalist life.

Well, I think the narrator’s story is the least interesting part of the reading. Thanks to the post-structuralists for this. So without any more digressions, let me share with you the world of 2065. Gear up, dearest reader.



Figure 1. *Handmaid's Tale* Illustration by Daniel Zender, published in *New Yorker* (2019)

We are already familiar with the groupings and categories of the capitalist world, and age group still matters here. Everyone of age 16 and above is being implanted with these small devices across their ears that are constantly monitoring the electrical pulses of the brain and are able to convert their thoughts and emotions into real-time datasets. It is akin to the world of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, where all the Handmaids are given electrical markings across their ears to categorise and monitor them easily. Yes, if it is the "Handmaids", of course there is a "Gilead", you are always "under his eye". Well, Gilead has evolved now and has taken the form of NWeb. It is a tech giant plugging those neural devices in human bodies. NWeb has created a digital neural web where emotions, feelings and thoughts are broadcasted in real-time across the "Pulsefeed" digital platform. Sorry to give a plot spoiler this early, but there is no Instagram, Telegram or Facebook anymore. We only have *Pulsefeed* now; users do not

have to post or write anything. They broadcast their emotions on the platform and provoke an emotional ripple among the other users to become popular on the platform. Emotions are very central to this digital world now. The first question coming to our minds is: if there is no post writing and image sharing like before then how is the platform managing the monetization coming from advertisements based on the algorithmic data of user posts? Well, even if users are not posting images or writing posts, they are sharing their feeling in the moment and that momentary feeling is the commodity for the platform. Yes, you read it right; it is “how you feel” being a commodity. Sue Turnbull’s idea of “audience economics” (2020) is relevant for gauging the shift of economics from previous digital platforms, such as Instagram functioning, to the emotion-based functioning of *Pulsefeed*. For example, Turnbull describes the deep profit layering of interaction on digital platforms and explains how commodification is central part of this interaction. *Pulsefeed* is also monetizing of course but how? Apply Sue Turnbull's “audience economics” model here. First, *Pulsefeed* captures human emotions and their engagements on the platform into a data set, turning feelings into a digital commodity. It later sells this to advertising companies and other tech giants so they can reshape their products according to this data and vice versa. Does it ring a bell? Of course Instagram and Facebook were doing the same before but back then it was not our feelings that were being commodified entirely. Right now, the question of emotional sovereignty and privacy is really crucial. Are the future emotions of humans going to be controlled by digital algorithms? How will humans be able to comprehend emotions in real life when their feelings are so accustomed to these online digital platforms? Well, these questions still remain unanswered.



Figure 2. A speculative image of Pulsefeed data center

Furthermore, if we take a look at the “audiencing” part in more detail, we might be able to unfold how *Pulsefeed* platform is audiencing the users. For example, due to the live broadcasting of emotions on Pulsefeed, the platform knows if a user is feeling sad, and it will suggest to the user all products and content associated with the feeling of “happiness” and related emotions so that it not only controls the mood shifts of users but also sells products, indulging in an emotional manipulation of users on the platform. Don’t be too surprised. Even in 2024, such things existed. For example, the way Facebook and Instagram gave us all emoticon suggestions to certain posts was also part of this huge machine-learning related to emotions and feelings. All the NLP models (Natural Language Processing) used to train the AI models and algorithms on the digital platforms were doing something similar but in a more reductive manner. It all began with a lot of human labor involved. All big companies and tech giants like Google would hire a lot of people from different countries and their job was to go through

huge amounts of social media content related to company products and react to it with a certain emotion, such as happiness, sadness, excitement and so on. This whole rigorous process was done to help the machine categorise those emotions and later turn these sentiments into datasets. This categorisation was a bit tricky as the language use of emotions is very much controlled by lingual structures. Language is very much malleable yet has a limited fabric when it comes to human expression of emotions. Nevertheless, still these NLP models helped in making Apple Watch more efficient to predict human feelings based on its data categorisation of pulse, body temperature and sleep patterns. The world of *Pulsefeed* has taken this idea to another level and we now have real-time exchange of emotions across digital platforms. Now every “like” is not sent but felt across these platforms.

Well, at this point, if you are following the narrator, maybe a brief personal introduction is necessary before we unveil more about concepts of production and power in this new form of *E-Capitalism* world of neural implants. Well, me and a few of my fellows who were not as quick as others to submit to those digital implants have ended up in disciplinary cells so that our emotions can be monitored and regulated effectively. Michel Foucault would have never imagined that his idea of “disciplinary power” (1977) could be transformed into neural capitalism. I guess the human mind may have no limitations when it comes to control and surveillance models.

Well, initially they said we had a choice to either insert or not insert these implants. There was a promise, there always is; to get the job done. We are the Neural Handmaids now. Yes, some creative fancy terms for us but it is boring how word capitalism is still here even though it is 2065. Never mind, “creative freedom” is another controversial term now. Terms like “critical thinkers” and “creative writers” or “rebels” do not seem to make sense here. There are no protests anymore, there cannot be. Remember Gilead? “No rebels, only heretics”, because the state is always peaceful. Well now, the state has access to the neural data of citizens and it monitors the average emotion rate of every city. If the average rate of negative emotions like anger, sadness or distrust is more than 30% in a city, the state floods the *Pulsefeed* with all positive emotions broadcast and neutralizes the overall emotions of the city to suppress any kind of possible rebellion. Michel Foucault’s idea of “disciplinary power” is operational through these neural chips. The constant examination and disciplining of emotions of people to control their social behaviors is being practiced now. Every citizen is a Handmaid in this world; you live with an illusion of freedom and peace under the horror of constant surveillance and control.

To put it all in a nutshell, our capitalist world has a history of power and commodification, which are constantly repackaged. First, control was exerted over lands and material resources. Then our human labor was turned into a profiting commodity. Now, it is us, how we feel; this is being taken away. It is almost impossible to think of what can be next. At the end, we are always left with some questions. I too have some for you and myself. Is there an “authentic” human experience left now that neural implants are always there with you quietly listening and translating your emotions? Can the discourse around individuality exist in such an emotion-based totalitarianism? Can the audience of *Pulsefeed* ever evade the power structures of the platform?

X.

---

## REFERENCE LIST

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Turnbull, Sue. *Media Audiences: Is Anybody Watching?* London: Red Globe Press, 2020.