

# Abstract

Big Data permeates all aspects of modern life, and I ask the question: *What are the main ways in which Big Data threatens liberty?* In the examination of the threats I show that they are usually either a) lost in vagueness due to the concept of *liberty* being employed without a clear understanding of its content, or b) lost in definitions if we employ flawed traditional understandings of what liberty really is. My project is a conceptual analysis of Big Data and associated technologies and their effects on liberty. It is an analytical project, where I aim to prepare the ground for subsequent empirical examinations of the three threats I describe. Firstly, Big Data enables surveillance, which is a threat due to our right to privacy, and the fact that surveillance in itself constitutes a liberty reducing interference in our lives. Secondly, this surveillance is used to build highly detailed personality profiles, which are employed in order to influence us in various ways through the techniques of nudging. When employing Big Data nudges, we use algorithms both to determine what sort of nudge is most effective for each person, *and* how these nudges should be delivered to each person. I argue that we are not free when manipulated, or *coerced*, in this manner. Thirdly, Big Data is also used to determine what sort of information we receive from the world around us. When data about us, both as individuals and groups, are fed through algorithms, we run the risk of supercharging the human tendency for seeking confirmatory information, which can lead to the creation of filter bubbles. A similar tendency in social networks leads to the creation of echo chambers, and suddenly the ideological landscapes we traverse are characterised by conformity, and a concomitant tyranny of popular opinion becomes ever more coercive as this occurs. These are the main threats I aim to explain in more detail in my dissertation.

In concert, the three threats lead to societies in which we lose liberty through surveillance, lack of privacy, and a lack of alternative lifestyles. Through the exploitation of the information gathered by surveillance we are manipulated, coerced, and we lose the breadth of information required to develop into autonomous individuals.