

# **Media Studies**

**Industries, Texts and Audiences**

**Leighton Evans**





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To Vic



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# About the Author

**Leighton Evans** is an Associate Professor of Media Theory at Swansea University. He teaches across the undergraduate programmes in the department of Media and Communication, and his research focuses on the phenomenology of immersive media and the mediation of everyday life by digital media. He is the author of *Locative Social Media* (2015) and *The Re-emergence of Virtual Reality* (2018), and the co-author of *Location-based Social Media: Space, Time and Identity* (2017) and *Intergenerational Locative Play: Augmenting Family* (2021). In 2023, he was the recipient of the Dillwyn Medal in Social Sciences, Business and Education from the Learned Society of Wales in recognition of his research. In the same year, he was the recipient of a Swansea University Academy of Teaching and Learning (SALT) Excellence in Teaching Award, nominated by his students.



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# 3

## The Political Economy of Digital Media

### Datafication and Platformisation

This chapter, in contrast to the previous chapter, unpacks the digital political economy based on the mass production, extraction and analysis of data to package users as a commodity to be sold. The use of the audience as a commodity can be seen throughout the 20th century, as detailed in the previous chapter. However, in the digital era this dominant mode of commercial activity has changed the nature of the political economy of the media. Instead of ideological control, the key players in the digital economy look to establish behavioural and consumer control through continual, deep analysis of user labour on platforms (considering the work of Taina Bucher, Kylie Jarrett and Kate Crawford among others). Utilising and explaining concepts such as *surveillance capitalism* (Shoshana Zuboff), *platform economics* (Nick Srnicek) and *unending consumption*, this chapter provides a concise summation of the key issues regarding digital media and the contemporary economy.

#### Learning Objectives

- Understand the transformation of media consumers into data subjects and the implications of datafication and platformisation on personal agency and privacy.
- Analyse the role and impact of major digital platforms and social media companies in shaping behaviour and the contemporary digital economy through practices such as surveillance capitalism.
- Critique the economic models and ideologies that underpin digital media platforms.
- Examine the concepts of unending consumption and the attention economy as drivers of the digital economy.

#### Introduction

It hardly needs stating that we live in an advanced digital media environment where computational devices are our everyday companions and are entangled in our lives in many ways.

The result of this is a highly complex social milieu that reflects our wider society – a wider society that now that depends on information and data (Berry, 2011: 3). There has been in the past ten years increasing anxiety about how the economic model of this environment operates and modulates human affairs. This is only in public discourse though, as media scholars have been discussing these issues for far longer, arguably stretching back into the past century. Fundamentally, the **digital economy** that has emerged in this century, and which now plays a critical role in our everyday life, is one that has transformed from one that saw us as part of specifically homogenised audiences around a media text into a fine granular view of us as media users. When we consider audiences now, this grouping is on the basis of far more information than just a single programme, newspaper or radio show. Thousands of data points are collected, processed and used to profile us as single users based on our digital media usage. This is then used not just to push products at us, but also to shape our choices and behaviours in the digital world.

### Box 3.1 Critical Thinking Exercise

I often conduct a small thought experiment with students to illustrate how digital media shapes the parameters of our choices. Think about *why* you chose your degree and university, and list those reasons ...

Keep these reasons, and when you have read the following pages take a look at the box at the end of the chapter.

## Digital Oil: Data and the Weaponisation of the Web

In essence, this chapter is concerned with what the digital economy has re-created us as – data subjects. When the digital revolution in everyday life started in earnest in the 1990s, there was a very different idea of what we would become with digital media. In 1996, John Perry Barlow composed ‘A declaration of the independence of cyberspace’, which rebutted any governance of the internet by outside forces, including governments. The idea implicit in this was that ‘cyberspace’ would be a place of freedom; free from constraints on expression and the rampant commoditisation of everyday life. Barlow’s vision was **utopian**, but the vision proved to be hopelessly over-optimistic. However, the issue with the internet was not what Barlow feared; it is not governments and their control over the internet that has become a major issue for our activity online for many people in the world (although in many parts of the world this is a major issue and should not be underestimated). The colonisation and control of the internet by a number of corporations has led to a consolidation of the digital world that Barlow did not predict – but would have been horrified by if he would have seen it coming.

Just to clarify, when we use the term ‘internet’ we are referring to the global system of interconnected computers that use internet protocols to communicate. A number of services and software applications use the internet as a carrier or platform. Applications you find on

your smartphone are not the internet, but they are on the internet. Similarly, the World Wide Web is not the internet – that is a software platform that runs on the internet. When Barlow was talking of the freedom of cyberspace, he was discussing the freedom that people had to communicate and create on the World Wide Web and other platforms. It is these platforms that have become intensely controlled by the digital giants of the contemporary age.

The inventor of the web, Tim Berners-Lee (2018), claimed that the Web itself is under threat from misinformation, questionable practices of political advertising, a loss of control over personal information and the weaponisation of the Web by major companies. By weaponisation, Berners-Lee is referring to the use of data harvested and analysed by Facebook and others and then deployed as tools for political gain, such as the Facebook data breach used by Cambridge Analytica to target and manipulate Facebook users. The algorithms at work on the Facebook platform trawl through the interactions and activities of users on the platform to gather sensitive personal information about sexual orientation, race, gender, intelligence and even childhood trauma – mining and refining the ‘**digital oil**’ (Humby, 2006 in Palmer, 2006) of the digital economy. Let’s be clear – the digital oil is our activities online, the ‘big data’ of our lives. These results can then be used to target users with tailored information to play on this psychological and personal profile in order to attempt to persuade users to take particular courses of action (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018).

At root, Berners-Lee’s concerns are around **polarisation** of the Web (Solon, 2018) and the dominance of a few companies in a medium that was designed for and bloomed through an environment of universal usage and access. As Jaron Lanier (2014: 348) argued, the digital world has become remarkably consolidated. While the World Wide Web was often portrayed “as a great wilderness of teeming, mysterious activities, it is actually mostly supervised by a small number of companies”. The dominance of these companies has afforded them the opportunity to become vast data aggregators with the potential to disrupt and be disrupted in the context of wider society. Without monopolistic positions in search and data organisation (Google), social networking (Facebook) or operating systems for PCs (Microsoft), there would not exist the affordances for the kinds of control and polarisation that cause these concerns. The Web and networked activity is dominated by a few companies.

The applications and the usage of the internet are not just about a technology, as these are examples of socio-technical systems. Like other mediums, our digital devices are made up of artefacts (phones, computers, tablets, etc.) that enable and constrain a social level of human activities. These activities that are defined in scope by the medium itself create knowledge that is produced, diffused and consumed with the help of the artefacts at the technological level (Fuchs, 2015: 39). Therefore, there is always a recursive dynamic relationship or a feedback loop between the technological and the social level of any media being used. According to Anthony Giddens (1984), media have the duality of structure and agency; media provide the structure of social systems and define the agency that individuals have in social systems through enabling and constraining actions. So, media are socio-technical systems that enable and constrain human activities and that create knowledge that is produced, distributed and consumed with the help of the same technologies in a dynamic and reflexive process that connects technological structures and human agency (Fuchs, 2015: 39).

The effect of media in this context is therefore to structure human agency within the logics of a particular technological system. With regard to the media that are produced, controlled and monopolised by the digital media giants (Facebook/Meta, Apple, Amazon, Google and others), Jaron Lanier (2014: 79) argues that the information economy that we are currently building does not embrace capitalism as an economic system of participation, but rather a new form of **feudalism** where users are farmed for data and their interactions with one another become the foundation of a new big data economy.



**Figure 3.1** A typical image of feudalism, with the farmer delivering taxes to the lord.  
Today, we deliver profits for free ...

Source: Stefan Kuhn, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urbar.jpg>. Wien, Bildarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Eingescannt aus: Alois Niederstätter: Das Jahrhundert der Mitte. Österreichische Geschichte 1400-1522. Wien 1996

Companies like Meta organise data from users for the benefit of remote clients who want to manipulate what is presented to those people over those very networks (Lanier, 2014: 313). The result of this is that the process of capital accumulation itself in corporate digital media platforms is targeted advertising dictated by user activity. As we saw in the previous chapter on the political economy of the mass media, the role of the media in the past has been to control and harness that audience power to produce a commodity that can be produced, sold and consumed (Smythe, 1976). In the digital era, advertisers in effect buy attention as a product from platforms committed to the monopolisation of attention (Wu, 2017). This is sold by others, not by you, despite you doing the 'work'. The difference between 'old' media and digital media is that 'attention' can be quantified much more closely and specifically. The platforms of digital media allow for the storage and analysis of all interactions on those platforms; every search, every like, every message



and every click-through can be saved and added to the churn of data harvesting on the data subject created by the systems that view users through the lens of user interaction.

The effect of this commercial model is to capture extremely detailed personal information that is made valuable through use. Using this information, an advertiser might hypothetically be able to target all the members of a peer group just as they are forming their opinions about brands, habits, and so on (Lanier, 2010). Karppe and Crawford (2015: 73–74) identify that the processes used by social media are similar to others used in modern capitalism. Social media and financial algorithms are linked as they are part of the same overall eco-structure. In this sense, social media connects human communicative spaces to automated computational spaces.

### Box 3.2 Case Study

#### Facebook/Meta

In general, critiques of the major digital media companies have coalesced around the exploitation of users for data – but this is explicitly a focus of any critique of Meta, or Facebook as they were once known. It has become fashionable to argue that Facebook is in decline, but Meta is one of the ten biggest companies on the planet. As Taina Bucher (2021: 5) argues, Facebook is bigger than just one thing; it is akin to a global operating system and a serious political, economic and cultural power broker. While its use is in decline for some groups, it is still critically important. Sujon et al. (2018) identified that Facebook is far from meaningless to Gen Z and younger people. For these groups, the meaning of Facebook has changed. It is more akin to a personal service platform for coordinating events, archiving and relationship maintenance. Bille et al. (2015) argued that Facebook is more like an atmosphere, a force that attunes people to the world. The perceived presence of Facebook is always here in our world, even if we are not using it. As such, it is a part of how we understand and comprehend the world.

Online advertising has been seen as a mechanism by which Meta exploits users as users become a commodity. Web 2.0 (the term given to participatory use of the Web and other applications on the internet) in general has been seen as based on the exploitation of free labour (Terranova, 2004), but Meta has perfected this exploitation. Under the conditions of use of the platform, most users become part of a creative precarious underclass of labourers whose ‘work’ is dictated by and for the benefit of the platform that they use (Lovink, 2011). As Kylie Jarrett (2015 and 2022) argues, the immaterial labour that is used by social media is akin to a form of unpaid domestic labour – in effect we become ‘a digital housewife’. This economy is dominated by a few corporate media companies that use the notion of ‘sharing’ for mystifying the logic of profit, advertising and commerce that is at the heart of their operation (John, 2013) – with Meta being an ideal example.

The philosopher of technology Evgeny Morozov crystallises these criticisms. Optimism around social media is based on the techno-deterministic ideologies of cyber-utopianism (Morozov, 2011). This view only sees advantages for businesses and society through the lens

*(Continued)*

of that industry and the benefits to that industry without taking into account the realities of exploitation and the contradictions of capitalism. José van Dijck (2013: 11) argues that social media achieves this through an automation of the social and social behaviours by engineering and manipulating social connections. Douglas Rushkoff (2010: 158) argues that as a result of this, social media is involved in a process of “optimizing humans for machinery”. Christian Fuchs (2015: 15) summarises why this is so problematic. Meta is a company controlled by private shareholders who own Meta’s platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp). Meta’s users create data whenever they are online that refers to their profiles and online behaviour. This data is sold to Meta’s advertising clients who are enabled to present targeted advertisements on users’ profiles. Without Meta users, there would be no profit. So, users create the monetary value and profit of Meta but they do not own this profit, which is controlled by Meta’s shareholders. Meta users are exploited. Indeed, social media prosumers are double objects of commodification: they are commodities themselves, and through this commodification their consciousness (as embodied through their activity) becomes, while online, permanently exposed to commodity logic in the form of advertisements (Fuchs, 2015: 160).

## Digital Gods and Monsters

It would be wrong to suggest that Facebook is an outlier in this critique. Google’s model of operation can be argued to be constant real-time biopolitical exploitation. Hardt and Negri (2000: 24) have argued that the contemporary capitalism of which Google is a foundational part is based on a form of **biopower**. Biopower is a concept used by the French scholar Michel Foucault, referring to the techniques used by states to subjugate and control subjects. Google’s vision is one where the world is made completely knowable, controllable and predictable. Google are therefore proponents of an ideology that Evgeny Morozov (2013: 5) calls “technological solutionism”. Solutionism is a recasting of all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimised – if only the right algorithms are in place.

Morozov argues that solutionism is a typical ideology of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and intellectuals who glorify digital media as being the solution to societal problems. Morozov explicitly criticises the likes of Eric Schmidt (Google) and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) as technological solutionists that “impoverish and infantilize our public debate” (Morozov, 2013: 43). Technological solutionism reimagines the individual and the social as part of the algorithms or systems of digital media, and therefore any problems arising at an individual or social level can be solved by these digital media. This notion clearly has roots in cybernetic theory and imagination, as well as exerting a form of biopower where individuals are subjugated under these systems in order to create new data subjects. Google can be seen as a control machine that aims at controlling people’s perception of reality and at transforming these perceptions into profits (Fuchs, 2015: 162).

Scott Galloway (2017) uses an analogy of God to describe the kind of power relationship that Google has to the mere mortal users of its services. The power desired by Google is the knowledge of not only what we do, but also what we want to do. Google’s aim is to stockpile

information and use that information to build artificial models of mind that can be used to predict action. As Galloway (2017) pictures it, Google “knows that as we walk through the mall we lust for a pair of Tory Burch Jolie pumps or Bose QuietComfort headphones. He knows you have a thing for girls with tattoos”. The objective of the harvesting of personal information is not an individualised tracking of the whole population.

If Google insinuates itself into the intimate lives of each and every person, then massive databases that make numerical sense can be assembled (The Invisible Committee, 2015) to create a kind of cybernetic governmentality. While such a governmentality operates in terms of a completely new logic compared to the pre-digital world, its subjects continue to think of themselves according to the old paradigm in a ‘cultural lag’. We probably continue to believe that our ‘personal’ data belong to us and that we’re only exercising our ‘individual freedom’ by deciding to let Google and Meta or the police have access to them. The result of this accommodation is that the mass surveillance of individuals in this model is mass self-surveillance (Fuchs, 2011), a by-product of mass self-communication that requires users’ permanent input and activity to work. The specific characteristics of social media and the use of ubiquitous search engines, operating systems, email clients, the uploading of user-generated content and permanent communicative flows enable this form of surveillance.

The privacy of individuals using these platforms therefore is a root cause of much of the consternation about the wider influence of these digital giants. Helen Nissenbaum argues that the “right to privacy is neither a right to secrecy nor a right to control but a right to appropriate flow of personal information” (Nissenbaum, 2010: 127). However, it is these flows of information that remain opaque and hidden from circumspection. Surveillance on Facebook, for example, is surveillance of prosumers, who dynamically and permanently create and share user-generated content, browse profiles and data, interact with others, join, create and build communities, and co-create information (Fuchs, 2015). The usage of such platforms creates a trail of breadcrumbs that form a picture of a data subject that is sold to advertisers as an unavoidable consequence of engagement with the platform itself. Businesses that make money by collecting and selling detailed records of private lives were once plainly described as ‘surveillance companies’. Their rebranding as ‘social media’ recognises that people are willing to agree to a power relationship with these companies in return for the facilities that are offered by surveillance platforms. One can inform oneself about the issues with surveillance, but the reason no one reads the fine print is that even if one does take the time, there will soon be a new revision, and reading the fine print becomes a full-time job (Lanier, 2014: 314).

The prime ‘oil’ for the digital giants is the billions of identities they mine and get to know in ever-greater detail. The core of the business model is the easy access to that core material. If people make it clear, with their clicks, likes and postings, that they hate certain things and love others, those people are easy to sell to (Galloway, 2017). As Galloway (2017) argues, the companies will continue with more of the same. With global reach, near-limitless capital and its ever-smarter data-crunching AI machines, Facebook and Google will lay waste to any competition and dictate the development of media in this era.

Michel Foucault argued that power is not only located in powerful bodies such as the state or companies. Power produces reality: “it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production”

(Foucault, 1977/1991: 250). The corporate platforms owned by Meta, Google and other large companies not only strongly mediate the cultural expressions of Internet users (Fuchs, 2015: 68) but are involved in the creation of our realities themselves. These companies are all in the same digital market space; looking for a competitive advantage to consolidate and improve market share in an economy where data and knowledge derived from data is a critical commodity.

## The New Capitalism: Platforms, Attention and Ideology

The major shift in the political economy of the media in the switch from analogue to digital has been the move to platforms. Meta, Google and others can create ‘walled gardens’ online, where activity of users can be measured in the minutest detail and used to create data profiles for sale. To keep users on these platforms, the companies have to innovate, offer new experiences and keep things fresh to harvest more data. This resonates with Nick Srnicek’s (2016) notion of **platform capitalism**, where capitalism itself is involved in a continual enrolment of new technologies to increase efficiencies and improve the processes of capital accumulation. These platforms have positioned themselves as user-centred platforms for improving the efficiency of everyday life and have been enrolled into the everyday lives of people accordingly. The word ‘social’ associated with media implies that platforms are user centred and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasises human collaboration. Social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of human networks (Van Dijck, 2013: 11). However, as a result of the interconnection of platforms, a new infrastructure has emerged: an ecosystem of connective media with a few large and many small players creating a ‘platformed’ sociality (Van Dijck, 2013: 4).

The disruption caused by such platforms (in terms of privacy, disruption to democratic processes and decision making) has often been conceptualised ideologically through Barbrook and Cameron’s (1995) concept of the Californian Ideology. This has been thought of as the ideology of the techno-elite in Silicon Valley, a radical mixture of libertarian and the radical politics of the sixties counterculture. Formulaically, the ideology can be expressed as a combination of ‘let me do what I want’ and ‘don’t tax me’ = Facebook, Amazon, Google, etc. In practice, this ideology manifests itself in the forms of new media and the ownership models of new media where vast profits are made from the exploitation of user-generated data with a business model that avoids corporate taxes and a social responsibility attitude that avoids accountability for the actions of actors on platforms.

This ideological position on the operations of companies goes some way to explaining the vast data-harvesting operations on the Facebook platform in light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal around the 2016 US election and 2016 Brexit referendum, where user profiles were extensively analysed and targeted with specific, psychologically affecting content in order to influence voting patterns. What the Californian Ideology does not emphasise though is the brutal instrumentalism of these platforms in conceptualising users – they are raw materials to be transformed into data (the commodity form) to be sold, and to hell with the consequences. These companies have particular politics and ideologies that seek market

domination, control of both information and data and an attitude of disruption which allows for circumvention of norms and societal values (without considering other problematic elements of the culture of Silicon Valley, such as Emily Chang's (2018) characterisation of a *Brotopia* where Silicon Valley is a modern utopia where anyone can change the rules or make their own rules, as long as they are a man). As Keen (2018) argues following his interview with Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook, these companies are undermining the 'American Dream' itself through a winner-takes-all mentality that squeezes both competition and innovation.

With that instrumentalisation in mind, the platformed use of human beings becomes clear. Andrew Keen (2017) notes that the problem with the digital community in general is that it is dominated by a few companies, but critically the medium of exchange between these companies is the attention economy. This economy is a product of the use of the products of these dominant companies. The priorities of these companies are currently clicks, numbers, time on site and retaining attention as a way of increasing the amount of data in a profile. As long ago as 1965, Gary Becker was arguing that time, not material goods, is the key scarcity in modern society. The attention economy is based on that fundamental principle. James Ash (2015: 99) rightly notes that attention is not just referent to the immediate and real time, but also to the past and the present. The key to the attention economy is to create an environment where the attention paid in the present can refer to a past and a future within a given experience or platform. The modulation of focus therefore requires a historical aspect and a future aspect. Within this, the dominance of the digital giants in the attention economy becomes clear; their ubiquity through utility transforms into a historical relationship and a perceived future relationship which modulates the attention of the given time.

## Unending Consumption as the New Model

As Dave Beer (2015: 1) states, **big data** is central to the working of contemporary capitalism and a facilitator of neoliberalism. It forms the backdrop to market operations, and as such is an integrated part of everyday culture even if the calculative and computational form of its operations remain opaque. So, given all this, you might question why we continue to consume social and digital media in this exploitative model? Dave Arditi (2021) offers an innovative answer. Arditi identifies that the operations of digital media companies have resulted in a new form of capitalism altogether – unending consumption. Thanks to the never-ending streams of new content on TikTok, Instagram and the like, we can never exhaust the content we are offered. This also goes for subscription services like Netflix and Spotify – I can never finish Netflix; I can't listen to everything on Spotify.

Following Raymond Williams, Arditi notes that "culture is ordinary" and our streaming culture is now ordinary to us. The result of this is that we are in circuits of culture thanks to the constant relationship between cultural consumption, production, representation, identity and regulation. This happens without us thinking about it – this is how culture operates. We are always consuming culture, and in doing this we are in a constant feedback loop between consumption and commodification in our streaming culture. This is our new phase of capitalism in the streaming age – unending consumption (Arditi, 2021: 15).

The concept of unending consumption is straightforward to grasp. When we subscribe to media, we provide companies with constant and consistent consumption (Arditi, 2021: 17). In return, we receive ubiquitous, mobile access to individualised media based on our preferences, history and interests. The streaming economy has reduced the attractiveness of the previous on-demand economy. For example, in the 2010s I may have purchased a song on iTunes for 99c, or indeed downloaded it illegally via a service like the Pirate Bay. With my Spotify subscription I can get (just about) every song ever for £10 a month. When compared to iTunes, the Pirate Bay or buying CDs in the 1990s this is easy, cheaper and legal. Companies have used streaming technologies to change the way we consume culture. We can binge watch, binge listen, skip seamlessly between products and texts in a manner unthinkable a few generations ago. However, this also embeds us in a logic of capitalism that forces us to consume more. We only have a finite time to consume what is pushed to us (Arditi, 2021: 18) so we consume as much as we can. In addition, streaming platforms receive real-time data about the consumption of everything on their platforms, from the content of shows to the demographics of users. This then changes what is produced by producers. For example, music labels recognise what is going viral on TikTok and then create new content based on this. What emerge are cycles of viral production

In 2025, digital media is primarily a means to distribute content for profit. Profitability comes from disintermediation (Arditi, 2021: 34–36). Disintermediation refers to the removal of things that come between – having less friction. iTunes disintermediated music in the 2000s by eliminating CDs. Streaming both disintermediates and de-acquisitions us. We don't own anything; instead we subscribe – for ever. Streaming has created the experience of media as having limitless capacity because of the cloud, with higher fidelity and ubiquitous access anywhere. However, after spending £100-plus a year, what do I have to show for my Spotify use? Nothing tangible apart from a story I can share on Instagram about my annual listening habits.

You might think this is irrelevant if you don't subscribe to streaming media – but all of the media in this chapter use the logic of unending consumption. Indeed, anyone who creates content on platforms is now a quintessential part of the streaming culture. When thinking about a platform like TikTok, we are involved in an unending consumption of ourselves. The stream of content is endless, and functions at super-fast operating speeds. We watch, we consume, we repeat and we are consumed as we produce.

### **Box 3.3 Case Study**

#### **Pokémon GO as a Form of Surveillance Capitalism**

What harm could there be in Pokémon GO? People walking around, flicking PokeBalls at cute little creatures? Harmless. It's that walking around part that makes Pokémon GO a very interesting, insightful example of the true effects of the political economy of digital media. As an application running on a mobile device, Pokémon GO has several unsurprising features with regard to surveillance of users, data production and harvesting, data processing and using that data for advertising and profiling of users. The logic of mobile media applications in this

context has been a concern for many years as surveillant practices and technologies that produce, process, disseminate and utilise data from users. Bauman and Lyon (2013) use the term 'liquid surveillance' to describe how these technologies have altered the mode of contemporary surveillance. Liquid surveillance is 'the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection or direction' (Lyon, 2007: 14). The surveillance aspect of these technologies is married to the form of modernity 'that does not stand still', which Bauman defines as liquid (2007: 3). This notion of an underlying surveillant logic in digital media and the applications used through digital media underpins Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

Surveillance capitalism is not the same as digital technology. It is an economic logic that has hijacked the digital for its own purposes. The logic of surveillance capitalism begins with unilaterally claiming private human experience as free raw material for production and sales. It wants your walk in the park, online browsing and communications, hunt for a parking space, voice at the breakfast table ...

(Zuboff, 2019)

Zuboff conceptualises surveillance capitalism as a drive to quantify or extract the phenomenal experience of being human, transform that experience into data and then sell that data as part of a constructed image of the user, a data subject made from the endless streams of data produced by digitally enabled everyday activity. This logic is not limited by company or by application but applies across the digital as a field of activity; anything that can produce data on the user can be enrolled into surveillance capitalism. The continual surveillance of the user is part of the new logic of capitalism itself, where value is extracted from not only the surplus labour of the user as audience, but also from all interactions with digital media, no matter how everyday or mundane.



**Figure 3.2** Pokémon GO

Source: <https://picryl.com/media/pokemon-pokemon-go-pocket-monster-transportation-traffic-52efd2> CC 1.0

(Continued)



Unsurprisingly, Zuboff uses the development and use of Pokémon GO as an example of the pervasiveness of surveillance capitalism. In this analysis, the game itself acts as a form of concealment of the logic of surveillance capitalism. The aim of Pokémon GO is not to capture Pokémon, but for the movement and activity of the user to be captured as data for processing to be sold. As befits a product of surveillance capitalism, Pokémon GO itself was born out of Google. John Hanke (Google Maps and Street View VC) launched Niantic Labs (Zuboff, 2019: 311). Following the formation of Alphabet as a parent company for Google in 2015, Niantic was established as a separate company with \$30 million in seed funding from Google. Pokémon GO represents a kind of 'living lab' for the testing and simulation at scale of not only real-time contextual data, but also the use of that data in nudging and controlling the movement of the user. Essentially, Zuboff argues that the game itself nudges players towards interactions with both other users and, most critically, specific places in a form of gamification as behavioural modification. Indeed, for Zuboff the critical aspect of Pokémon GO as an instance of surveillance capitalism is that while the game runs players through the real world as part of the game experience, this is not done for the sake of the game *that players think they are playing*.

The shaping of behaviour and our spatial experience that we see in Pokémon GO is part of a larger game of surveillance capitalism. This is exemplified through Pokémon GO promotions, how playing Pokémon GO drives footfall and how physical places are surfaced through the interface to draw the attention of the player (Zuboff, 2019: 314). Since 2017, Niantic has offered businesses the possibility of being 'sponsored locations' that pay for exposure (i.e. hosting a gym) on a cost-per-visit model. Organisations such as McDonald's have extensively used this system, sponsoring more than 3,000 locations in the game in Japan and in early 2020 entering a partnership with Niantic across Latin America and the Caribbean to promote their locations as locations within the game system (Dunham et al., 2024). The placement of key Pokémon and gyms in the game is co-ordinated with the business interests of advertisers, often without visibility to the gamer, and the playing of the game therefore becomes a series of controlled movements through a commercialised space. The game has two levels: the ludic experience and the commercial level that shapes that ludic experience.

Against this backdrop of surveillance capitalism, it is worth considering the kind of labour that Pokémon GO feeds from to sate the demand for data from this economic logic. Pokémon GO is a location-based game; to play the game is to move, to be mobile. Movement through space is the critical dynamic in the successful playing of the game for users (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017). Our work in moving is being used by the game to conduct fine analyses of mobilities and spaces for advertisers. Accordingly, players are never simply playing the game, but working within the confines of system that presents a gamic veneer. As Saker and Evans (2021) identify, the players of Pokémon GO either ignore this or do not understand how their movements are being controlled. The game being played is hidden by another game being played - but it is the player that is ultimately played.

## Conclusions

While the political economy of the mass media was closely related to leveraging audiences for power based on ideological conformity, the political economy of digital media is



critically different. The digital media giants are creators and aggregators of big data systems that monitor and assess us continually to create a new kind of power. Big data systems greatly intensify the extent and frequency of how we are monitored in everyday life and at the societal level shift the governmental logic from surveillance and discipline to capture and control (Deleuze, 1992). That is, there is a shift from Foucault's (1975) notion of disciplinary technologies to Deleuze's (1992) concept of technologies of control. Foucault's notion of discipline as a mode of power had the idea of discipline as a 'machine' that works on a societal scale (Foucault, 1975). The four mechanisms of this 'machine' are: individuals being distributed in space; activity in space being regulated; the organisation of geneses – a series of techniques being used to organise the training of individuals; and the composition of forces where the organisation of each technique is to produce the product of an individual subject (Savat, 2012: 16). In this view, the bureaucracies and rules of everyday life have conditioned us to behave. In the big data world, there is nobody watching us – but that does not make us free. Instead, everything we do that intersects with digital media is measured and stored and used to nudge us towards outcomes decided by commercial relationships. The power of digital media comes from the ability to harvest, process and use us in this manner. From those processes, immense political, social and cultural power is in the hands of just a few companies – as well as wealth beyond the comprehension of most of us for the owners of these companies. The model has changed, and this change is important. The power of Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and others is of a different nature. The use of unpaid labour and the control of the media consumer is still there – and is far more problematic than ever before.

## Reasons for Taking Your Degree

You might have forgotten about this after all the reading you have just done, but dig out your list of reasons for taking your degree and choosing your university. You probably have listed things such as 'liked the course', 'liked the city', 'proximity to home', 'good reputation', maybe 'best nightlife'. What you have not put, I expect, is something like this:

'My history of media use was analysed and aggregated by a data broker, who then facilitated targeted advertising by my institution who targeted me, and others, specifically to have me enrol at the university.'

At the beginning of the chapter, I would not have expected you to suggest this. However, that does not make this incorrect. Your 'choice' was influenced by many factors, and an important one that we often do not consider is how digital 'nudges', based on profiling and the commercial relationships between platforms and customers (universities in this case), influence our choices. The order of search enquiries, posts seen on Instagram, tweets and all kinds of other digital information has been pushed to you, and this plays a role in the choices we make. This does not mean that we have no free will – but it does mean that we need to think about how the digital has a role in our actions.

## Glossary

**Big data** Refers to extremely large data sets that may be analysed computationally to reveal patterns, trends and associations, especially relating to human behaviour and interactions. It's characterised by its volume, velocity and variety.

**Biopower** A concept introduced by Michel Foucault that refers to the practice of modern states and their regulation of subjects through “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations”.

**Digital oil** A metaphor often used to describe data's value in the modern economy. Just like oil in the 20th century, data is seen as a crucial, highly valuable resource that drives innovation, economic growth and competitive advantage in the digital age.

**Digital economy** Refers to an economy that is based on digital computing technologies. It encompasses all business, economic, social and cultural activities that are supported by the web and other digital communication technologies.

**Feudalism** A historical economic and social system in medieval Europe, where society was structured around relationships derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labour. It was characterised by a hierarchy of lords, vassals and serfs.

**Platform capitalism** A term that describes a new economic and social system where digital platforms (e.g. social media, e-commerce sites) play a central role in mediating economic transactions and social interactions, often capitalising on data and network effects.

**Polarisation** The process by which opinions, perspectives or approaches in a society become divided into two significantly opposing sides, often leading to increased tension and conflict within social or political contexts.

**Utopia** A term used to describe an imagined community or society with highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens. The concept often explores ideals and ethical considerations in social, political and moral aspects.

## Further Reading

Christian Fuchs' *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (2021, 3rd edn, Sage) is the most comprehensive volume on the issues in this chapter, and is an invaluable text on the business of social media.

*Digital Labour* by Kylie Jarrett (2022, Polity) is an in-depth exploration of how the issues in this chapter affect people in everyday life, specifically in employment.

*Who Owns the Future?* by Jaron Lanier (2014, Penguin) is an accessible and lucid argument about the feudalism of everyday digital life. Despite its age, it is essential reading.