

Biopolitics and Neoliberalism Nexus: Surveillance Capitalism in the 21st Century – A Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines surveillance capitalism as an evolution of Foucauldian biopolitics, where power shifts from state-centric population management to corporate-driven algorithmic control. It argues that digital surveillance transforms individuals from biological subjects into commodifiable "data-producing assets." By synthesising critical theory from Foucault, Deleuze, and Heidegger, the research explores "algorithmic governmentality" and neoliberal rationality. Through qualitative case studies on Big Tech health surveillance and COVID-era controls, the paper illustrates how digital platforms function as a modern panopticon. Ultimately, it highlights the erosion of autonomy and democracy in a world dominated by profit-driven behavioural modification.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, Surveillance Capitalism, Algorithmic Governmentality, Digital Panopticon, Data Commodification, Big Tech, Behavioural Surplus, Michel Foucault, Digital Sovereignty, Human Autonomy, 21st Century Power

1. Introduction

In the digital era, the boundaries between human experience and economic extraction are increasingly blurred. This study, "Biopolitics and Neoliberalism Nexus: Surveillance Capitalism in the 21st Century," explores digital surveillance as a profound evolution of power. It argues that the biopolitical management of populations—once a state function—is now driven by corporate algorithmic governance.

The central thesis posits that surveillance capitalism extends Foucauldian biopolitics, transforming individuals from biological subjects into "data-producing assets." Through "algorithmic governmentality," power operates invisibly, commodifying human behaviour into "behavioural surplus." Synthesising works by Foucault, Deleuze, and Heidegger, this research examines the nexus between neoliberal market logic and digital surveillance.

Using a qualitative case study methodology—focusing on Big Tech health surveillance and COVID-era controls—this analysis investigates how platforms function as a modern panopticon. It highlights the erosion of autonomy and the rise of "one-dimensional" subjects. Ultimately, this research provides a critical intervention for understanding 21st-century power dynamics, emphasising the urgent stakes for democracy and authentic freedom in an algorithmically managed world.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

The literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of power, control, and capitalism, focusing heavily on the shift from traditional surveillance to modern **surveillance capitalism** and **digital biopolitics**.

The arguments explored across the reviewed texts include:

From Needs to Desires: The Evolution of Manufactured Consumer Culture

The review traces the origins of modern consumer culture, noting the early 20th-century push to transform American society "from a needs-to a desire-culture." This shift prioritized training people "to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed". This foundational drive toward manufactured desire is analyzed alongside critiques of consumerism and commodification, examining their deeper implications and effects on attitudes toward fashion and superficiality.

Surveillance Capitalism and Algorithmic Power

A central argument is that contemporary power operates through **Surveillance Capitalism**, extending Foucauldian concepts of discipline and biopolitics into the digital realm.

a. **Data Extraction and Commodification:**

Modern surveillance is defined by the extraction of personal data (clicks, likes, biometrics) as "raw material for economic profit". This turns human experience into a "behavioural surplus" that is commodified for profit.

b. **Shift from Monitoring to Prediction:** Surveillance has moved beyond simply observing behavior to anticipating and shaping it. Algorithms predict user actions and actively **nudge and modify behaviour** through personalized content, ads, and algorithmic sorting, turning prediction itself into a commodity.

c. **Invisible and Continuous Control:** Digital power is described as continuous (24/7 tracking), decentralized (through corporations), invisible (data extraction behind the screen), and predictive (constructing future behavior). This creates a system of "automatic power" that works silently.

d. **Biopolitics Extended:** Corporate surveillance extends biopolitical logics—the management of life itself—into digital spaces. Just as states regulate life and populations, tech platforms monitor behavior, emotions, and choices, classifying individuals into "managed populations for profit". This shift involves the rise of the "**data-self**," where individuals are interpreted through algorithmic profiles rather than narrative meaning.

Theoretical Frameworks for Digital Control

The literature draws heavily on critical theory to conceptualize digital governance:

a. **Foucault, Deleuze, and Stiegler:** The digital environment is seen as an evolution of Foucauldian surveillance and Deleuze's "societies of control," leading to "**psychopolitics**" and systems of hyper-control. This results in the "digital panopticon," where surveillance is internalized and continuous.

b. **Heidegger and Technology:** Modern technology is viewed not merely as a tool, but as a "worldview" (**Enframing/Gestell**) that reduces nature and humans to mere resources or "standing-reserve". This mindset prioritizes efficiency over all other values and leads to risks like algorithmic control and the loss of authentic freedom.

c. **The Social Dilemma:** The Netflix documentary is widely recognized as a public illustration of these theories, showing how algorithms drive political polarization, mental health risks, and behavioral modification by maximizing engagement.

Societal and Existential Consequences

The literature review also touches upon the profound societal and psychological effects of these systems:

a. **Social Sorting:** Algorithmic profiling classifies individuals according to value, risk, or profitability, affecting the opportunities, information, or rights they receive.

b. **Disillusionment and Nihilism:** Pervasive surveillance capitalism and the emergent digital technocracy are linked to a sense of "Big Nihilism" among younger generations, where the commodification of data and the consolidation of power destabilize traditional values and engender feelings of alienation and meaninglessness.

c. **The Culture Industry:** Echoing earlier critiques, the culture industry (including mass media and digital platforms) gives the illusion of being informed while reducing the consumer to petty matters, spreading false values, and inducing an "imaginary happiness" that represses opposition.

The literature reviewed argues that digital technologies have operationalized a new, continuous, and highly personalized form of power—surveillance capitalism—that systematically observes, regulates, and profits from human life, thereby extending historical forms of control (consumerism, biopolitics) into the intimate spaces of existence.

The literature review, while providing a strong theoretical foundation, highlights several areas that remain under-explored or require further focused attention:

Lack of Empirical Depth in Digital Surveillance Critique: Several foundational critiques, such as Maryam Bashir's "Surveillance and Panopticism in the Digital Age," are described as "largely theoretical/conceptual" and "lacking detailed empirical case studies or concrete case analyses of digital surveillance practices". The field needs more grounded research to link theoretical claims about power and control to real-world, industry-specific examples.

Under-Exploration of Resistance and Agency: A significant gap is the limited discussion of how individuals and communities respond to and resist digital surveillance. The article on the "Digital Panopticon" notes that resistance strategies are "mentioned but not deeply explored", and the critique of Bashir's work states it "doesn't deeply explore how individuals or communities resist, negotiate, or subvert digital surveillance". Future research should focus on agency, counter-power, and successful strategies for subverting algorithmic control.

Differentiation of Surveillance Modalities: The literature sometimes treats "digital surveillance" as a uniform phenomenon. There is a need for more nuanced analysis that differentiates "between different kinds of digital surveillance (state vs corporate, moderate vs intensive, voluntary vs forced)," as noted in the critique of Bashir's work. This includes a deeper comparison of corporate-led models (e.g., Google, Meta) versus state-led models (e.g., China).

Legal Protection for Reproductive Privacy and Biopolitics: The introductory text to Studies in Biopolitics explicitly identifies a gap in existing legal attention: the "widespread tendency globally to regulate the most private sphere of individual lives: reproduction". It argues that while laws cover tangible aspects of privacy (data protection, correspondence), they grant "less legal respect... for privacy in the field of human reproduction," creating a gap in effective regulation for emerging technologies like pre-implantation diagnostics.

Addressing the Ethical and Legal Implications of "Inhuman Hermeneutics": The concept that Big Data creates an "inhuman hermeneutics"—interpreting individuals through data detached from human meaning—suggests a gap in understanding the ethical and legal frameworks necessary to address autonomous algorithmic systems ("digital organs without bodies") that operate outside direct human interpretation or traditional labour.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To examine how modern digital surveillance (like Facebook or government tracking) controls people's behaviour, and to understand the specific ways people try to fight back or resist this control.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for analysing the interplay between biopolitics, neoliberalism, and surveillance capitalism in the 21st century posits that contemporary digital control is a sophisticated evolution of historical power dynamics. This analysis begins with Foucauldian biopolitics, which examines how power regulates collective life through norms, statistics, and the management of populations. Under neoliberalism, this control intensifies as market logic transforms citizens into data commodities, shifting the biopolitical focus from state welfare to corporate profit. This results in Surveillance Capitalism (SC), which operates as the latest phase of biopolitical governance, where digital platforms act as decentralized, continuous mechanisms for extracting "behavioural surplus" to predict and shape human actions for economic gain. These digital environments function as modern Panopticons, where users self-regulate under constant, subtle monitoring, illustrating a form of algorithmic governmentality where power steers choices and habits rather than simply commanding them .

The threat posed by advanced AI and predictive technology escalates this control, introducing an "inhuman hermeneutics" where individuals are reduced to measurable "data-selves" stripped of narrative agency. This shift from managing populations via statistical averages to governing singular individuals through hyper-personalised data profiles represents a qualitative transformation in how power operates. Critiques aligned with The Social Dilemma underscore how platform design weaponises this data, not merely observing behaviour but actively manufacturing outcomes, thereby eroding trust and manipulating social and political processes. Philosophically, this framework touches upon concerns reminiscent of Heidegger's critique of technology, as the pervasive reduction of human existence to calculable, predictable data aligns with a technological worldview that instrumentalises life as a "standing reserve" . Thus, the 21st-century digital landscape is defined by a form of economicized biopower that uses AI to exert continuous, predictive control, challenging fundamental notions of human autonomy and subjective meaning.

5. METHODOLOGY

Methodology: Case Study and Qualitative Analysis of 21st-Century Biopolitics

1. Research Design: Qualitative Case Study Approach

This research will employ a qualitative, theory-driven case study approach to examine the evolution of biopolitical control in the 21st century, specifically focusing on the intersection of Big Tech, digital health surveillance, and global health crises. The methodology is designed to provide rich, contextualized

insights into how power operates through the management of populations and individual "life" in the digital age.

2. Selection of Case Studies: 21st-Century Biopolitical Examples

The selection of cases is purposive, focusing on high-impact examples that illustrate the convergence of technology, life management, and commercial exploitation. The cases are divided into two primary groups:

Case Group Focus Rationale for Selection

I. Big Tech and Health Surveillance Examination of major technology companies (e.g., Google, Apple, Amazon) and their entry into personal health data, quantified self-tracking, and medical service provision.

To analyze how corporate actors extend biopolitical logics by monitoring, predicting, and commodifying intimate health and behavioural data.

II. COVID-ERA Biopolitical Control Analysis of global health crisis responses, focusing on the deployment of digital tools (e.g., contact-tracing apps, remote work monitoring, immunity passports/status checks).

To investigate how crisis contexts accelerate the normalization and internalization of digital surveillance as a form of governance. This serves as the primary Empirical Section.

3. Data Collection Strategy: Qualitative Analysis of Policy and Data Trends

Data will be collected primarily through documentary analysis, ensuring the systematic gathering of publicly available, relevant materials:

Data Type Specific Sources Analytical Purpose

Policy and Regulatory Documents: Public policy announcements, legislative texts (national/international), Big Tech company white papers, terms of service (ToS), and privacy agreements related to health/location data.

To identify the explicit rationalities (governmentality) and legal frameworks that permit or encourage data extraction and management.

Media and Scholarly Reports: Critical academic literature, reports from NGOs and privacy advocates, investigative journalism, and industry reports detailing data breaches, algorithmic biases, and health platform function. To assess the real-world social consequences, ethical challenges, and critiques of the biopolitical mechanisms in operation.

Behavioural Data Trends Aggregated data (where available, e.g., published reports on adoption rates of tracing apps, statistics on remote monitoring use) demonstrating the scale and scope of population-level tracking.

To map the macro-level effects of biopolitical technologies and the shift towards managing life processes at a distance.

4. Data Analysis: Thematic Coding and Interpretation

The analysis will proceed in three stages, guided by the theoretical framework:

Initial Coding (Descriptive): Data will be systematically coded for descriptive elements: Actors Involved (State, Corporate, Individual), Technology Deployed (e.g., AI, geolocation), and Area of Life Regulated (e.g., reproduction, health status, mobility).

Thematic Coding (Theoretical): Codes will be grouped into emergent themes directly related to the theoretical framework:

Commodification of Life: Instances where intimate data is transformed into economic value or profit.

Algorithmic Subjectification: Mechanisms through which individuals are classified, predicted, and influenced by algorithms (creating the "data-self").

Crisis Normalization: How exceptional surveillance measures during the COVID era become normalized into everyday life.

Biopolitical Control vs. Care: The tension between using data systems for public health/care and their deployment for control/coercion.

Synthesis and Interpretation: The findings will be synthesized to articulate how contemporary digital practices constitute a new form of biopolitical governance, moving beyond mere disciplinary power to encompass continuous observation, data extraction, and predictive control .

5. Rigor and Limitations

Rigor: The qualitative rigor will be ensured through transparent documentation of source selection and constant comparison between theoretical constructs and empirical evidence (e.g., linking corporate data practices to concepts like biopower and governmentality).

Limitations: The methodology is conceptual rather than purely empirical, relying on secondary data and documented policy trends rather than original interviews or surveys. This means the study will effectively "draw the map" of digital biopolitics, necessitating further research to examine how individuals experience or resist these forms of control in everyday life.

6. NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITY

The rise of surveillance capitalism is fundamentally driven by **neoliberal rationality**, which has intensified biopolitical control by extending market logic into the most intimate spheres of life. This process transforms individuals into **data commodities**, where everyday actions and even biological existence become **data assets** continuously extracted for profit by corporations. This corporate governance, often described as a new form of digital biopower, aligns with the critique in Naomi Klein's No Logo by underscoring the unchecked, profit-driven dominance of global enterprises. The result is a profound threat to humanity, mirroring the concerns of Martin Heidegger, as human experience is reduced to a "data-self" and interpreted through an "inhuman hermeneutics" of data rather than meaning, treating life as a quantifiable resource for algorithmic exploitation. This digital hyper-control also leads to an erosion of democracy, echoing Herbert Marcuse's analysis of the "one-dimensional man": power operates subtly by continuously predicting, shaping, and **nudging behaviour** through algorithms, thereby neutralising critical agency and substituting invisible, algorithmic management for genuine autonomy and democratic self-governance.

7. Discussion

Scholarly literature consistently positions surveillance capitalism as a modern evolution of the power structures described by Michel Foucault, specifically biopolitics and disciplinary power. While Foucault's original concept of biopolitics focused on how the state managed populations through institutions and statistics to maintain health and security, surveillance capitalism represents a significant mutation where power is decentralised and driven by commercial profit. This new form of control utilises the Foucauldian principle of governmentality (shaping conduct) by applying it through digital platforms, resulting in continuous data extraction, algorithmic prediction, and behavioural manipulation. The digital environment functions as a pervasive panopticon, compelling users to self-regulate because they are aware of constant monitoring. A key distinction is the transformation of the individual: traditional biopolitics viewed the human as a biological subject, whereas surveillance capitalism views the human as a data-producing asset or "data commodity", subject to an "inhuman hermeneutics" where identity is reduced to measurable data profiles. This corporate-led control, which includes the classification and "social sorting" of users for commercial and political exploitation, is seen as the latest, most invisible phase of biopolitical governance, expanding power into the most intimate aspects of life.

8. CONCLUSION

Scholars widely agree that surveillance capitalism is an extension of **Foucauldian biopolitics** into the digital age.

Traditional biopolitics focused on state control over populations and life processes; surveillance capitalism involves corporate power governing behaviour through data extraction and algorithmic prediction. Digital platforms act as a new **panopticon**, enabling continuous monitoring, "social sorting," and behavioural nudging.

This new form of power transforms individuals from biological subjects into "data commodities". Surveillance capitalism weaponises biopower for profit, making the management of everyday life, behaviour, and attention the core mechanism of the economy and a pervasive form of digital governance.

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