

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

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Context

- Surveillance capitalism, where personal data is collected, analyzed, and monetized by tech conglomerates to predict and influence human behavior, has concerns over privacy and autonomy, and its deep ties to state surveillance.

About the Surveillance Capitalism

- As individuals increasingly engage with digital platforms, **a new economic model – surveillance capitalism –** has emerged.
- It was coined by **Harvard scholar Shoshana Zuboff**, refers to the large-scale extraction, analyzing behavioral patterns, and predicting or even influencing human actions, and monetizing of personal data by tech giants and corporations like Google, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Apple.
- Unlike industrial capitalism, which profits from the production and sale of goods, surveillance capitalism generates revenue by **commodifying human experience itself**.

Power to Control Personal Data

- **Erosion of Privacy:** From GPS location tracking to browsing history, personal communications, and even biometric data, individuals have little control over their digital footprint.
 - ♦ It creates vulnerabilities, as seen in cases of data breaches, identity theft, and unauthorized government surveillance.
 - ♦ Governments and corporations often justify data collection under the pretext of improving user experience, security, or convenience.
- **Behavioral Manipulation and Consumer Control:** Targeted advertisements, personalized content recommendations, and algorithm-driven decision-making create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and influence choices. It can be seen in:
 - ♦ **Political advertising:** Social media algorithms influence voter opinions by amplifying certain narratives. The **Cambridge Analytica scandal (2018)** highlighted how Facebook data was misused to manipulate elections in the US and UK.
 - ♦ **Addictive technologies:** Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok use AI-driven content curation to keep users engaged, leading to digital addiction.
 - ♦ **Price discrimination:** Airlines, e-commerce websites, and financial institutions analyze user behavior to adjust pricing, often charging different consumers varying amounts for the same product or service.
- **Surveillance Capitalism and Big Tech Monopoly:** Google controls over 90% of the search engine market, while Facebook and Instagram dominate social networking.
 - ♦ It gives tech giants unchecked power to dictate terms of service, collect vast user data, and suppress competition.
- **Growth of State Surveillance:** Governments use data from tech firms for mass surveillance, curbing free speech and stifling dissent.

Key Differences: Surveillance Capitalism vs. Industrial Capitalism

Feature	Surveillance Capitalism	Industrial Capitalism
Core Resource	Data (user behavior, personal information)	Raw materials (coal, steel, textiles, etc.)
Main Mode of Profit	Monetization of personal data via targeted advertising, predictive analytics	Mass production and sale of physical goods

Workforce Role	Users generate value passively (unknowingly providing data)	Laborers actively produce goods in factories
Power Holders	Tech giants (Google, Facebook, Amazon, etc.)	Industrialists, factory owners (Ford, Carnegie, etc.)
Exploitation Model	Behavioral data extraction and manipulation	Exploitation of factory workers' physical labor
Surveillance & Control	Continuous monitoring through digital platforms, AI, and algorithms	Workplace discipline through supervisors and mechanization
Economic Impact	Rise of digital monopolies, inequality, loss of privacy	Rise of mass employment, urbanization, labor unions
Societal Effect	Erosion of personal privacy, manipulation of behavior (e.g., political influence, targeted ads)	Increased consumer goods availability, better living standards (but also labor struggles)

Legal and Ethical Responses to Surveillance Capitalism

- **EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR):** Enacted in 2018, the GDPR imposes strict rules on data collection and grants users the right to access and delete their data.
- **California's Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA):** Gives consumers greater transparency regarding how their data is collected and sold.
- **India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP) 2023:** Establishes guidelines for data collection, storage, and user rights. However, concerns remain about government overreach.

Way Forward: Restoring User Control Over Data

- **Strengthening Data Protection Laws:** Governments need to enact robust privacy laws with clear accountability mechanisms.
 - ◆ Regulations should mandate companies to obtain explicit user consent before collecting data and provide opt-out options.
- **Promoting Ethical AI and Transparent Algorithms:** Algorithms should be auditable and subject to external scrutiny to prevent bias and manipulation.
 - ◆ Ethical AI principles must guide the development of technology to prioritize user well-being over profit maximization.
- **Encouraging Decentralized and Privacy-First Technologies:** Alternatives to surveillance-based business models are emerging, including:
 - ◆ Decentralized web platforms like Web3, which aim to give users ownership of their data.
 - ◆ Privacy-focused search engines like DuckDuckGo that do not track user activity.
 - ◆ Encrypted communication tools like Signal that ensure data security.
- **Digital Literacy and Awareness:** Educating individuals about data rights, cybersecurity, and digital hygiene is crucial. Users should be aware of how to limit data tracking through privacy settings, VPNs, and ad blockers.

Conclusion

- Surveillance capitalism has fundamentally reshaped the digital landscape, giving corporations unprecedented power over personal data.
 - ◆ While technological advancements offer undeniable benefits, the unregulated commodification of human behavior poses a serious threat to privacy, democracy, and individual autonomy.
- To reclaim control over personal data, a collective effort is required—from policymakers enforcing strict data laws, to companies adopting ethical business models, and individuals making informed digital choices.

- ◆ The future of the internet must prioritize human rights over corporate profits, ensuring that digital advancements serve people rather than exploit them.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

[Q] Considering the pervasive nature of surveillance capitalism, and its impact on privacy and autonomy, what extent do you believe that the collection and monetization of personal data pose a threat to individual freedom and societal values?

