Surveillance Media: Power, Control, and Global Inequality

Laila Hassan*

Department of Communication & Digital Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya

*Corresponding author:
Laila Hassan

✉ laila.hassan@uonbi.ac.ke

Department of Communication & Digital Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Introduction

In an age of ubiquitous connectivity and data-driven technologies, media is no longer just a conduit for information and entertainment—it has become a powerful surveillance apparatus. From social media platforms to streaming services and mobile apps, the media we engage with daily collects detailed information about who we are, what we do, and how we think. While these technologies promise personalization, convenience, and innovation, they also enable unprecedented forms of monitoring and influence that reshape power dynamics at both individual and structural levels.

This article examines how surveillance is embedded in media systems, who benefits from these practices, how they reinforce patterns of control and inequality, and what the implications are for privacy, democracy, and global equity [1]. By unpacking the intersections of media, surveillance, and power, we can better understand the forces shaping our digital lives and consider pathways toward a more just and transparent media environment.

The Emergence of Surveillance Media

Surveillance media refers to the ways in which media platforms and technologies collect, analyze, and act upon user data. This includes overt practices like tracking location and browsing history, as well as less visible mechanisms such as algorithmic profiling, predictive analytics, and behavioral modeling. Digital media doesn't just passively reflect our behaviors—it systematically records and interprets them.

Historically, surveillance was associated with state intelligence agencies and physical monitoring. Today, it is woven into the fabric of commercial media ecosystems. Major technology companies build complex data infrastructures that capture interactions across platforms, devices, and services. Every like, click, share, search, and pause becomes a traceable data point. These data are then aggregated and monetized through sophisticated advertising models and algorithmic decision-making systems [2].

Power and Control in the Digital Media Landscape

Surveillance media centralizes power in the hands of a few dominant actors—global technology firms with vast data repositories and computational capacity. These entities wield enormous influence over what content is seen, promoted, or suppressed, shaping public discourse and individual choices.

Algorithmic Gatekeeping

Algorithms determine the visibility of news, opinions, and cultural content. While these systems are often framed as neutral or efficient, they reflect corporate priorities such as maximizing engagement and revenue. Content that triggers strong emotional responses—regardless of accuracy or social value—often receives priority, reinforcing polarization and misinformation.

Behavioral Prediction and Manipulation

Surveillance media doesn't just observe behavior; it predicts and influences it. By analyzing patterns, platforms can anticipate user preferences, tailor recommendations [3], and nudge individuals toward certain actions—whether consuming specific content, clicking particular ads, or reinforcing political beliefs. This level of influence raises ethical concerns about autonomy and consent.

Commodification of Personal Data

In surveillance media, personal data becomes a commodity. Users rarely pay for services in currency, but they trade their information in moments of attention and interaction. Corporations profit from profiling users and selling access to targeted audiences, creating economic value that remains concentrated within tech

monopolies rather than distributed among the individuals who generate the data.

Global Inequality and Digital Surveillance

Surveillance media does not operate in a vacuum—it intersects with existing global inequalities. Power disparities between nations, corporations, and populations shape who is watched, who benefits, and who is vulnerable [4].

Data Colonialism

Many technology platforms originate from wealthy, primarily Western nations, yet they collect data globally. This dynamic resembles historical patterns of extraction, where resources—now in the form of personal and social data—flow from global South communities to corporate centers of power. Local economies and cultural dynamics are influenced by decisions made in distant boardrooms, often without meaningful consent or benefit to local populations.

Unequal Protections and Legal Frameworks

Data protection regulations vary widely across countries. While regions like the European Union have established robust privacy laws, many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America still lack comprehensive legal safeguards. In these contexts, citizens face greater vulnerability to intrusive data practices, exploitation, and surveillance without transparent oversight or redress mechanisms.

Targeted Surveillance of Marginalized Groups

Surveillance media disproportionately impacts vulnerable and marginalized communities. Algorithms trained on biased data can reinforce stereotypes, target specific groups with harmful content, and normalize invasive monitoring. In some cases, state actors and private companies collaborate to surveil activists, journalists, and dissidents, undermining civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

Implications for Privacy and Democracy

The pervasive nature of surveillance media poses serious implications for both individual privacy and collective democracy.

Erosion of Privacy: As more aspects of life become digitized, the boundary between public and private dissolves. People may censor themselves, alter behaviors, or disengage from meaningful discourse due to fears of being monitored or misunderstood [5].

Manipulation of Public Opinion: Surveillance-driven algorithms can influence political attitudes and electoral outcomes. Targeted political advertising based on detailed personal profiles can exploit psychological vulnerabilities and obscure transparency in democratic processes.

Concentration of Power: When a handful of corporations control vast amounts of data and the algorithms that interpret them, decision-making power becomes centralized, reducing public accountability and democratic oversight.

Pathways Toward Accountability and Equity

Though the challenges of surveillance media are vast, change is possible through collective action, policy innovation, and public awareness.

Strengthening Legal Protections

Governments must enact and enforce comprehensive data protection laws that uphold privacy rights, require transparency in data practices, and provide meaningful avenues for redress. International cooperation is critical to ensure protections extend beyond national borders.

Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability

Platforms should be required to disclose how algorithms make decisions that affect public discourse. Independent audits, ethical design standards, and user controls over personalization can mitigate harm.

Promoting Digital Literacy

Empowering individuals with digital literacy skills enables people to understand how their data is collected, interpreted, and used. Education campaigns can build critical awareness about surveillance practices and reinforce informed participation in digital spaces.

Community-Owned Alternatives

Supporting decentralized and community-owned media platforms can reduce dependency on dominant corporations. Cooperative models that return data ownership and governance to users offer a path toward a more equitable digital media ecosystem.

Conclusion

Surveillance media represents a profound shift in how power and control are exercised in the digital age. What once might have been passive consumption of content has evolved into active data extraction and behavioral influence—often without clear consent or accountability. These practices concentrate power in corporate hands, exacerbate global inequalities, and challenge foundational principles of privacy and democratic participation.

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