

DECONSTRUCTING THE THREAT OF TECHNOLOGY: A CRITIQUE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR E-DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT. This study critiques the phenomenon of surveillance capitalism in the digital era, focusing on its impact on digital democracy or e-democracy in Indonesia. Drawing from Shoshana Zuboff's framework, surveillance capitalism leverages human behavioural data as raw material for commercial predictions, threatening privacy, fostering polarization, and weakening the digital public sphere. Using a qualitative literature-based approach and semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners, the research validates its findings through data triangulation across journal articles, policy reports, and interview insights. The results indicate that social media algorithms contribute to the spread of disinformation, political polarization, and the manipulation of public opinion. For instance, during the 2024 elections in Indonesia, algorithms were found to amplify echo chambers, reduce exposure to diverse perspectives, and promote sensational content. The study concludes that technology's negative impacts are shaped by the economic structures and designs underlying its use, underscoring the need for regulatory frameworks and public awareness to address these challenges.

Keywords: Surveillance Capitalism; Social Media Algorithms; E-Democracy; Disinformation; Technology Regulation.

ABSTRAK. Penelitian ini mengkritisi fenomena kapitalisme pengawasan (*surveillance capitalism*) di era digital dengan fokus pada dampaknya terhadap demokrasi digital atau e-demokrasi di Indonesia. Berangkat dari kerangka pemikiran Shoshana Zuboff, kapitalisme pengawasan memanfaatkan data perilaku manusia sebagai bahan mentah untuk prediksi komersial, yang mengancam privasi, menciptakan polarisasi, dan melemahkan ruang publik digital. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis literatur dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan para ahli serta praktisi, penelitian ini memvalidasi temuan melalui triangulasi data yang mencakup artikel jurnal, laporan kebijakan, dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa algoritma media sosial berkontribusi pada penyebaran disinformasi, polarisasi politik, dan manipulasi opini publik. Sebagai contoh, dalam Pemilu 2024 di Indonesia, algoritma ditemukan memperkuat *echo chamber*, mengurangi eksposur terhadap perspektif yang beragam, dan mempromosikan konten sensasional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa dampak negatif teknologi ditentukan oleh struktur ekonomi dan desain yang melandasi penggunaannya, yang menekankan perlunya kerangka regulasi dan kesadaran publik untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Kapitalisme Pengawasan, Algoritma Media Sosial, E-Demokrasi, Disinformasi, Regulasi Teknologi.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media has become an essential part of daily life in Indonesia, serving as a primary platform for communication, information sharing, and expanding social networks. With over 139 million active users as of January 2024, platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook have facilitated new forms of interaction across diverse demographics (Rainer, 2024; Rizaty, 2024). Social media is often perceived as a tool for strengthening democracy by enhancing public participation, disseminating information, and fostering transparency in governance (Alvina, 2023; Bancin, 2024; Taufiq, 2019).

This optimism aligns with the concept of digital democracy (*e-democracy*), which refers to the use of information technology to broaden participation in political processes (Ali et al., 2023; Surya & Maarif,

2020). Drawing on Jürgen Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, the digital public sphere created by social media holds the potential to serve as an inclusive space for rational discourse, where individuals can exchange ideas freely, form collective opinions, and engage in decision-making (Habermas, 2022; Landemore, 2017). By enabling discussions that transcend geographical boundaries, social media seemingly embodies the ideals of deliberative democracy, fostering more interactive and inclusive participation in political life (Muttaqien, 2023).

However, this idealized vision of the digital public sphere often conflicts with the reality of how social media operates. While social media platforms provide avenues for engagement, they are also shaped by underlying economic structures that prioritize profit over democratic values. This critique aligns with Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, wherein human behavioural data is

commodified and used to predict and manipulate actions for commercial purposes (Kendell, 2020; Zuboff, 2019b). Zuboff's concept of *instrumentarian power* highlights how digital technologies are designed not only to observe but also to modify behaviour, undermining individual autonomy and democratic processes (Zuboff, 2022).

The intersection of surveillance capitalism and the digital public sphere has significant implications for democracy. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement often amplify polarizing content, create echo chambers, and promote disinformation, eroding the deliberative quality of public discourse. These dynamic challenges Habermas' vision of a public sphere free from domination by economic and political forces, revealing how social media platforms deviate from their democratic potential.

Various Previous studies highlight how surveillance capitalism impacts democracy, including manipulation of user data for political targeting (Andrew et al., 2023; Bofa et al., 2022; Lejo, 2021). Zygmuntowski (2022), in his review of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, critiques Zuboff's ideas by stating that surveillance is only one part of the broader structure of digital capitalism, which includes platform-based business models and algorithms. These varied perspectives emphasize the threats posed by surveillance capitalism to individual privacy, democratic values, and digital ethics.

These discussions underscore the need to examine how surveillance capitalism operates in specific democratic contexts, particularly in Indonesia, where social media plays a crucial role in political participation and public discourse.

In this context, this study aims to critically examine the relationship between surveillance capitalism and its impact on democracy, particularly within Indonesia's digital public sphere. By exploring how economic structures and algorithmic designs in social media platforms influence political participation and public discourse, the research seeks to address the democratic challenges posed by the commodification of human behavioural data. This study offers a critical lens to understand how technology's democratic potential can be enhanced through responsible governance, contributing to the broader discourse on equitable and transparent digital ecosystems.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature-based approach supported by document analysis and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders.

Interviews were conducted with technology experts, political practitioners, and academics to gain in-depth insights into the relationship between surveillance capitalism, social media algorithms, and their implications for democracy. This method was chosen to holistically understand the phenomenon by integrating various theoretical and empirical perspectives.

The research data includes journal articles covering topics such as surveillance capitalism, social media algorithms, and digital democracy, alongside policy reports from institutions such as the Lowy Institute and other research organizations. Additionally, the study analyzed government documents, including the Personal Data Protection Law (PDP Law), its academic manuscript, press releases, and other relevant legal texts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a snowball sampling method to gather insights tailored to the research needs, particularly for data triangulation. These interviews involved informants, including academics from universities, officials and staff from central government ministries those overseeing digital governance infrastructure, and private sector representatives. To ensure validity, data triangulation was employed by corroborating findings across multiple sources.

This approach enables the study to examine how surveillance capitalism influences technology design and its perceived socio-political impacts in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Algorithms: Economic Design and Their Impact on Democracy

Algorithms on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are designed to maximize user engagement by displaying content deemed most relevant and engaging based on their behavioural data (Metzler & Garcia, 2024; Petrescu & Krishen, 2020). According to an academic informant, these algorithms not only analyse individual preferences but also utilize interaction histories to predict the type of content most likely to increase the time users spend on these platforms. For example, Facebook's algorithm prioritizes content from family and close friends by emphasizing principles designed to encourage comments and shares as indicators of engagement (Metz, 2021). Similarly, Instagram and YouTube use indicators like likes, comments, and watch duration to determine content visibility. TikTok, on the other hand, employs a highly personalized algorithm that

enables videos from users with few followers to go viral based on the initial performance of those videos (Andini & Yahfizham, 2023; Metzler & Garcia, 2024).

This algorithmic approach is rooted in the primary goal of social media platforms: increasing advertising revenue. According to an interview with a private sector informant who works in the digital advertising industry, social media platforms prioritize engagement metrics over ethical considerations. The informant explained that user data is the most valuable asset in the digital economy, and platforms will always optimize their algorithms to maximize data extraction. This confirms that the economic goals of these platforms are closely tied to their ability to collect and utilize behavioural data for targeted advertising, often at the expense of user privacy. This revenue is derived from the platforms' ability to deliver highly targeted advertisements based on users' behavioural data.

For instance, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, generated \$40.1 billion in revenue in 2023, largely from user data-driven advertising (Sandy, 2024). YouTube, another major player in the industry, reported \$9.2 billion in advertising revenue in the fourth quarter of 2023, marking a 15.5% increase from the previous year (Pramudita, 2024). Meanwhile, TikTok, despite being a newer entrant, continues to dominate global user attention, reporting \$205 million in revenue in early 2023, surpassing the combined revenue of other platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (Suharno, 2023). These figures demonstrate that the longer users engage with a platform, the greater the opportunities for these platforms to generate revenue from personalized advertisements.

However, these algorithms not only boost revenue but also have significant implications for democracy. By prioritizing content that drives high interaction, algorithms often promote sensational content that triggers emotions like anger or fear (Silvanie et al., 2024). Based on an interview with a political practitioner who has been involved in campaign strategies, the reliance on sensational content in political messaging has become a dominant strategy. The practitioner explained that social media platforms reward content that generates high engagement, which often means emotional and divisive messages spread faster than neutral or informative content. This practice not only shapes public opinion but also deepens political divides by reinforcing pre-existing biases. Furthermore, the interviewee highlighted how political consultants now deliberately craft campaign narratives to

fit algorithmic preferences, thereby amplifying polarization rather than fostering constructive debates.

Such content is deemed more relevant by algorithms because it generates higher levels of comments and shares. As a result, users are more frequently exposed to extreme narratives, exacerbating political polarization (Zaky et al., 2024). Studies reveal that YouTube's algorithm, for instance, often promotes videos with extreme or sensational narratives, influencing public opinion and fostering the spread of disinformation.

A Mozilla Foundation study in 2021 found that 71% of videos recommended by YouTube's algorithm were flagged as inappropriate by study participants, including content featuring pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, and misleading information (Kristensen, 2024; Mozilla, 2021). Additionally, a longitudinal analysis in 2020 uncovered that YouTube's "watch-next" algorithm actively promoted videos with conspiracy narratives, reinforcing a "filter bubble" effect that traps viewers in extreme information loops (Faddoul et al., 2020). A 2024 report by SafeNet and the European Union even identified YouTube's algorithm as one of the primary drivers of hate speech and fake news dissemination, posing significant risks to society (SafeNet, 2024; Santoso, 2024). These findings reinforce concerns that algorithms designed to maximize user engagement can inadvertently produce significant negative impacts on democracy by deepening polarization and amplifying disinformation.

Algorithm personalization creates a filter bubble phenomenon, wherein users are exposed only to content that aligns with their previous preferences. This phenomenon limits the diversity of perspectives and reinforces existing biases. In this way, the digital public sphere, which should serve as a space for cross-perspective dialogue, becomes increasingly fragmented. This polarization is further exacerbated by the spread of disinformation, which often garners high engagement levels and thus achieves greater visibility compared to informative or educational content.

Findings on social media algorithms prioritizing user engagement reflect the core of surveillance capitalism as described by Shoshana Zuboff. Surveillance capitalism, according to Zuboff (2015), operates by transforming human behaviour into raw materials to be commodified, predicted, and sold in behavioural futures markets. Algorithms designed to extend users' time on platforms are a tangible manifestation of how user behavioural data is exploited for economic purposes, with little regard for

its implications on privacy and the quality of the public sphere.

In this context, social media algorithms serve not only as tools for data collection but also as instruments of behavioural manipulation, shaping how users interact with information. This phenomenon is closely related to Zuboff's concept of *Big Other* (Zuboff, 2019a), a technological infrastructure functioning as a hidden surveillance system. *Big Other* integrates digital technology with predictive algorithms to not only observe but also steer user behaviour in ways that benefit the platform. By prioritizing sensational content that evokes strong emotions such as anger or fear, algorithms not only intensify polarization but also undermine the democratic foundation, which relies on rational and cross-perspective dialogue.

Zuboff (2020) also highlights that surveillance capitalism creates epistemic inequality, where major technology companies have full control over knowledge about users, while users remain unaware of the extent to which their behaviour is exploited. In the case of social media algorithms, users often do not realize that they are trapped in filter bubbles that limit their access to different viewpoints (Wulandari et al., 2021). Consequently, the digital public sphere becomes increasingly fragmented, reflecting the side effects of surveillance capitalism, which replaces transparency with information fragmentation for commercial gain.

Although Zuboff firmly places the threat to democracy within the system of surveillance capitalism, these findings also underscore criticisms of her perspective, which tends to inadequately distinguish between technology as a tool and the underlying economic structures shaping it. Algorithms are fundamentally neutral tools that can be directed toward various purposes. However, in the context of surveillance capitalism, these tools are designed to maximize economic profit. Therefore, the threat to democracy does not inherently lie in technology itself but in the design and economic objectives shaping it. This reinforces the argument that regulation and alternative designs are essential to mitigating the negative impacts of surveillance capitalism.

Additionally, algorithms that exacerbate disinformation and polarization illustrate how *instrumentarian power*, as described by Zuboff (2022), operates to influence human behaviour on a collective level. This power not only passively observes but actively manipulates, creating interaction patterns that benefit platforms while undermining healthy political participation. Thus, social media

algorithms serve as concrete examples of how surveillance capitalism threatens not only privacy but also broader social and political structures.

In the context of Indonesia's 2024 elections, the influence of social media algorithms on political polarization has become increasingly evident. As stated by government officials in an interview, the 2024 elections in Indonesia saw an unprecedented level of political segmentation driven by social media algorithms. The official, who has been involved in digital policy-making, noted that they observed a clear pattern where certain voter groups were continuously exposed to narratives that reinforced their existing beliefs, while opposing views were systematically filtered out. This resulted in algorithm-driven campaigns that created echo chambers, limiting users' exposure to diverse perspectives and intensifying divisions among voters. The official further emphasized the need for stricter algorithmic transparency measures to prevent such polarization in future elections.

A study conducted in Medan (Maisaroh et al., 2024) revealed that Facebook's algorithms significantly amplify the effects of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where 60% of users are exposed only to information supporting their views, while 40% lack access to alternative perspectives because opposing content is filtered out. Algorithm-driven personalized feeds result in users frequently encountering content that reinforces their political views, with 65% of respondents reporting that this content strengthened their political beliefs. Furthermore, social interactions on social media have become more homogeneous, with 55% of respondents only discussing issues within groups that align with their views, reducing openness to differing perspectives. Sensational or controversial content tends to gain greater attention, accelerating the spread of disinformation and hoaxes. This phenomenon not only deepens social segregation among politically affiliated groups but also threatens democratic stability by increasing the risk of social conflict during election periods.

Additionally, social media algorithms have become primary tools for disseminating digital propaganda during political campaigns. For instance, in the 2024 elections, hashtags like #Pilpres2024 and others supporting specific candidates not only trended on social media but also mobilized political narratives favouring particular groups (Zaky et al., 2024). Bots and fake accounts were used to accelerate the spread of such content, creating an illusion of mass support and influencing public perceptions of candidates' popularity (Mediana, 2023). These practices not only reflect how algorithms are employed to amplify

certain narratives but also highlight the threats to the transparency of democratic processes.

From the perspective of the political economy of social media, findings show that major technology companies like Meta (Facebook and Instagram) leverage their algorithms to maximize economic profit at the expense of public discourse quality. In Indonesia, this is evident from the significant digital campaign budgets spent by specific candidate pairs, amounting to billions of rupiah for social media advertising. These campaigns often rely on algorithm manipulation to target specific audiences with content designed to shape their opinions (Alfitroh, 2023; Wijayanto, 2023).

The impact of social media algorithms on democratic processes is also evident in the spread of disinformation. Data from the Independent Election Awareness Committee (KISP) reveals that platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook were the main channels for spreading hoaxes during the 2024 elections (Muzaki, 2024). Short video content with emotional and manipulative narratives was often amplified by algorithms prioritizing high-engagement content. This not only undermines public trust in the electoral process but also exacerbates social fragmentation and delegitimizes democratic institutions.

This phenomenon demonstrates how surveillance capitalism operates within the context of e-democracy in Indonesia. Social media algorithms not only influence individuals but also shape social and political dynamics collectively. By creating echo chambers, exacerbating polarization, and promoting sensational content, algorithms become instruments of *instrumentarian power*, as described by Shoshana Zuboff. In this regard, social media platforms function as the *Big Other*, a hidden surveillance system that not only observes but also manipulates user behaviour for economic gain.

From the discussion above, it is evident that social media algorithms designed to increase user engagement have profound consequences for e-democracy in Indonesia. Political polarization, the spread of disinformation, and the manipulation of public opinion resulting from these algorithms illustrate how technology designs driven by economic motives can undermine the quality of public discourse and democratic values. This phenomenon reflects the core of surveillance capitalism, as articulated by Shoshana Zuboff, wherein user behaviour is not only observed but also manipulated. Thus, the shift in technology's role from an empowering tool to an instrument of surveillance and exploitation emerges as a central

issue to be addressed. This raises larger questions about how technological power is used to influence minds and shape opinions in society.

Surveillance Capitalism: Manipulation of Minds and Public Opinion

Surveillance capitalism, as described by Shoshana Zuboff, creates a new landscape where human behavioural data is not only collected but manipulated to generate predictions that can be sold in behavioural prediction markets. This phenomenon is highly relevant to today's social media ecosystem, where algorithms employed by major platforms like Meta, Google, and TikTok are designed to maximize user engagement. These algorithms not only target user preferences but also exploit cognitive vulnerabilities, such as humans' attraction to emotional or sensational content, to increase screen time and ultimately drive economic profits for tech companies. According to an academic informant, these algorithms are intentionally designed to capitalize on human psychological tendencies, particularly emotional triggers, as a means to maximize engagement and advertising revenue.

The Cambridge Analytica case illustrates how surveillance capitalism exploits personal data for political manipulation. By accessing millions of Facebook users' data, the firm built psychological voter profiles to craft highly targeted campaigns, reinforcing polarization and influencing elections (Bofa et al., 2022). This case underscores the risks of inadequate data regulations and how digital platforms can be weaponized for opinion engineering.

Using seemingly harmless survey applications, Cambridge Analytica not only gathered user data but also extracted information from their networks, creating an extensive digital profiling system. This aligns with Zuboff's concept of *instrumentarian power*, where digital technologies do not merely observe but actively direct user behaviour. The firm's role in Trump's 2016 campaign and Brexit highlights the global democratic threats posed by unregulated data exploitation.

Public backlash led to congressional hearings and increased scrutiny on tech firms, yet regulatory measures remain insufficient. The case demonstrates the urgent need for stricter policies to ensure accountability in personal data handling and algorithmic transparency.

The Cambridge Analytica case serves as a call to action, advocating for stronger regulation and greater transparency in the management of personal data. Ensuring that data is not used to manipulate

collective behaviour without user consent can be a starting point to mitigate the negative impacts of surveillance capitalism on democracy.

In the context of Indonesia's 2024 elections, the role of bots and fake accounts in manipulating public opinion offers a concrete example of how surveillance capitalism poses a threat to democracy. One notable case involved the disappearance of Mahfud MD's name from search results on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). An investigation by *Kompas* in 2024 revealed that this incident was caused by a bot spam attack flooding the platform with irrelevant content containing Mahfud MD's name (Mediana, 2024). This strategy aimed not only to tarnish his reputation but also to obscure relevant information on the political issues at hand. These bots systematically replaced authentic content with information designed to manipulate public perception, resembling a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack in the digital space.

This phenomenon illustrates how social media algorithms can be exploited by certain actors to disrupt democratic processes. By disseminating manipulative content in large volumes, these bots leverage algorithms that prioritize high engagement. In the case of Mahfud MD, for example, the bots effectively obscured facts through repeated use of inauthentic keywords, exploiting algorithmic mechanisms incapable of distinguishing between genuine and manipulative content. This highlights how surveillance capitalism operates not only at the individual level but also systemically, affecting the entire digital public sphere.

This case also underscores the lack of effective regulations to address unauthentic behaviour on social media. Although Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) has partnered with platforms like X to mitigate the impact of such attacks, these responses are often delayed. This challenge reveals the gap between the complexity of digital threats and current regulatory capabilities to address them. As researchers from the Safer Internet Lab have noted, closer collaboration between governments and tech companies is necessary to establish better standards for detecting and preventing such attacks before they cause widespread harm (Mediana, 2024).

This case further strengthens the argument that algorithms supporting surveillance capitalism are not neutral. On the contrary, these algorithms function as instruments of power that not only observe but also actively direct public behaviour and perceptions. Thus, the primary threat to democracy stems from how algorithms and technologies are used

to exploit data and strengthen control by specific political actors. Despite differing viewpoints and arguments, the implications align with Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of *instrumentarian power*, where digital technologies not only collect data but are also employed to manipulate collective behaviour for economic and political purposes.

Furthermore, Evgeny Morozov highlights that reliance on technology to solve social and political problems often results in "solutions" that exacerbate the very issues they aim to address (Morozov, 2011). In the context of surveillance capitalism, technology intended to enhance transparency and fairness is instead used to manipulate public opinion, create illusions of consensus, and distort social realities. In Indonesia, disinformation spread through social media algorithms not only obscures factual information but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions, an impact consistent with Morozov's analysis of the erosion of e-democracy (Morozov, 2013).

Manipulation of public opinion on social media not only involves technology utilizing algorithms but also the organization of digital actors working in networks to create specific narratives. An investigation by *Kompas* in 2023 found that buzzers and cyber troops exploit identity sentiments to influence public opinion during political campaigns (Mediana, 2023). This phenomenon is highly relevant to Evgeny Morozov's analysis, which highlights that technology is often used to strengthen political power rather than support transparency or healthy public participation (Morozov, 2011). According to Morozov, digital technology, instead of being a tool for empowerment, becomes an instrument for controlling discourse and creating an illusion of public support.

Buzzers in Indonesia operate in highly organized patterns. They not only spread narratives favourable to their political clients but also amplify content through hashtags and memes designed to go viral (Mediana, 2023; Wijayanto, 2023; Zaky et al., 2024). For example, during the 2019 presidential campaign and the revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law, buzzer networks created a tsunami of social media conversations that significantly influenced public perceptions. In this case, hashtags such as #KPKPatuhAturan and other propaganda visuals were used to obscure facts and steer public opinion toward specific political agendas.

This phenomenon also highlights the role of micro-targeting carried out through social media algorithms. With highly granular user data, digital campaigns can target specific groups based on their political, religious, or social preferences. This

approach not only increases campaign effectiveness but also exacerbates political polarization by creating echo chambers that reinforce user biases. It is within this context that Morozov (2011) criticizes digital technology as a tool facilitating mass psychological manipulation, often undetected by the general public.

Manipulation of public opinion is not limited to positive narratives about certain candidates but often involves negative campaigns and disinformation to undermine political opponents. One significant finding is the spread of content associating specific organizations with controversial labels such as “radical” or “extremist” (Muzaki, 2024; Santoso, 2024; Zaky et al., 2024). This approach aims to discredit institutions or individuals and divert attention from substantive issues to emotional sentiments. In Morozov’s analysis (2013), such strategies reflect how surveillance capitalism exacerbates social injustice by creating manipulated realities to serve political elites.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the manipulation of public opinion is not merely a technical threat but also a systemic challenge requiring better regulation and digital literacy. As Morozov (2013) asserts, solutions to these challenges cannot rely solely on technology but must consider broader social, political, and economic contexts. Without such measures, social media will continue to serve as a battleground that undermines the foundations of democracy.

Additionally, a report by the Lowy Institute in 2024 indicates that the business model of surveillance capitalism also generates a significant legitimacy crisis (Khalil, 2024). When decisions about data management and content moderation are made by a handful of large companies without transparency or accountability, digital users are treated merely as sources of data, not as citizens with rights to privacy and accurate information. In Indonesia, this is exacerbated by a lack of effective regulation, allowing tech companies to exploit user data without adequate oversight.

In Indonesia, the regulation of personal data protection and digital activities has gained a legal foundation through Law No. 27 of 2022 on Personal Data Protection (PDP Law) and Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE Law) and its amendments. The PDP Law is designed to protect individual rights against the exploitation of personal data by tech companies and other parties. Article 5 of the PDP Law, for instance, grants data subjects the right to obtain clarity regarding the use of their data and ensures that data processing is conducted lawfully and transparently. However, the

implementation of the PDP Law faces significant challenges, including a lack of oversight capacity and effective regulation to ensure compliance by major tech companies.

On the other hand, the ITE Law serves as the primary legal framework for regulating digital activities, including the dissemination of electronic information. While the ITE Law contains provisions to address cybercrimes such as the spread of false information and privacy violations, these provisions are often considered controversial. Article 27 of the ITE Law, for example, is frequently used to address the misuse of electronic information, but its application has drawn criticism for potential misuse by authorities. Furthermore, Article 26 of the ITE Law regulates the obligation to delete irrelevant electronic information, which could be used to address manipulative content, but its implementation remains heavily reliant on the active role of electronic system operators.

Although these regulations exist, case studies on public opinion manipulation through buzzers and the misuse of algorithms reveal that the current legal framework has not fully protected the digital space from data exploitation and narrative manipulation (Mediana, 2023; Wijayanto, 2023; Zaky et al., 2024). The PDP Law and the ITE Law do not specifically address mechanisms for addressing exploitative behaviours involving social media algorithms and micro-targeting.

In an interview, a government official acknowledged that while the Personal Data Protection (PDP) Law is a step forward in safeguarding user data, its implementation remains largely reactive. The official, who has worked on digital governance frameworks, stated that most of the regulatory mechanisms focus on handling data breaches and user complaints, but there is little oversight on how platforms use algorithms to manipulate public discourse. The official further emphasized that the absence of specific measures to regulate algorithmic transparency and data-driven manipulation allows platforms to continue prioritizing economic gains over public interest. Without stronger regulatory enforcement, the official warned, social media will continue to be a tool for disinformation and opinion engineering rather than a democratic space for open dialogue. Existing provisions focus more on reacting to violations rather than preventing the structural manipulation at the core of surveillance capitalism.

This demonstrates that threats to democracy arising from data and algorithm exploitation require a more holistic regulatory approach. In addition to strengthening the implementation of the PDP Law

and the ITE Law, additional proactive regulations are needed to govern algorithmic transparency and limit the dominance of major technology platforms in controlling public narratives. In this way, regulation can truly become a tool to mitigate the negative impacts of surveillance capitalism on democracy.

Thus, the implications of surveillance capitalism for democracy go beyond direct manipulation of individuals. This system fundamentally changes how individuals interact with information, creating conditions in which personal autonomy is eroded by algorithms that continually steer choices and behaviours. In this context, threats to democracy do not stem solely from the technology itself but also from the underlying economic design that prioritizes profit over public interest.

Critique of Shoshana Zuboff's Thoughts

Findings regarding public opinion manipulation on social media indicate that technology, particularly social media algorithms, is designed and utilized for specific purposes beyond mere data collection. In this context, a central critique of Zuboff's perspective becomes relevant: Zuboff's (2022) view that digital technology represents an inherent systemic threat often overlooks the role of economic structures and political motives driving its design and usage. As demonstrated in the case studies discussed earlier, public opinion manipulation through buzzers, bots, and micro-targeting does not occur automatically due to the nature of the technology itself but rather as a result of strategic decisions by political and economic actors exploiting technology to achieve their goals.

Zuboff (2015) introduced the concept of *Big Other* to describe how surveillance capitalism leverages technology to create an extensive, hidden surveillance system. However, this approach does not sufficiently address how such technologies are often developed and utilized with highly specific designs to support commercial or political agendas. For instance, the case of buzzers in Indonesia reveals that social media algorithms are designed to amplify viral content, which frequently includes disinformation or propaganda. This highlights not only the systemic threat of digital technology but also the significance of economic motives and deliberate algorithmic designs in exacerbating political polarization.

Moreover, manipulative strategies such as micro-targeting reinforce the argument that technology is a neutral tool designed according to the objectives of its creators. In the context of political campaigns in Indonesia, granular data collected through surveillance capitalism enables political actors to target specific groups based on their preferences. With algorithms

that reinforce echo chambers and user biases, micro-targeting exacerbates social fragmentation and diminishes the quality of inclusive public discourse. This phenomenon underscores that the threat to democracy does not inherently stem from technology but from how it is designed to exploit data for commercial or political gain.

Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism is relevant in exposing the threats arising from the commodification of user data. However, her analysis falls short in distinguishing between technology as a tool and the purposes underlying its use. In the Indonesian context, algorithms designed to prioritize engagement are frequently utilized by political actors to create false narratives, amplify emotional sentiments, and worsen polarization. Thus, the argument that threats to democracy are more related to the design and regulation of technology becomes increasingly pertinent. Rather than blaming technology itself, attention should focus on the economic structures and policies shaping its use.

This phenomenon highlights that solutions to democratic threats require not only changes in technology design but also stricter regulations and public education to enhance digital literacy. By understanding technology as a tool that can be directed toward various objectives, this study emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges posed by surveillance capitalism. Without these measures, digital technology will continue to be used as an exploitative tool that undermines democratic foundations rather than strengthening them.

As with critiques of widespread misunderstandings regarding the role of social media in the digital public sphere, many parties mistakenly view social media as a *public sphere* in the Habermasian sense—a space where deliberative democratic activities can occur equally, rationally, and inclusively. However, this understanding often ignores the fundamental nature of social media as an economic product designed to maximize commercial profits rather than support healthy democratic discourse.

Habermas envisioned the *public sphere* as a neutral space free from the domination of economic or political forces, where individuals could exchange ideas openly to achieve consensus (Habermas, 2022; Muttaqien, 2023). In contrast, today's social media platforms are operated by corporations prioritizing their economic interests. The algorithms underlying these platforms are designed to maximize engagement by promoting content that evokes strong emotions, such as anger

or fear—often contradicting the principles of rational discourse envisioned by Habermas. As a result, today's social media more closely resembles a competitive commercial marketplace than a deliberative public sphere.

To illustrate this difference, one could use an analogy between a government-managed public field as a public facility and a privately owned field managed for commercial purposes. A government-owned public field is designed to serve the collective needs of the community, where all individuals have equal access without additional fees or commercial rules. Conversely, a privately owned field operates to generate profit. Access to this field is restricted by the ability to pay, and permissible activities are often determined by economic considerations rather than public interest. Today's social media platforms are more akin to this private field: spaces where rules are determined by the commercial interests of platform owners rather than the needs of deliberative democracy.

The fundamental misunderstanding of social media as a *public sphere* often arises from unrealistic expectations of technology. Instead of viewing technology as a neutral tool that can be directed toward various purposes, many people assume that social media inherently facilitates inclusive and deliberative political participation. However, from the outset, the design of this technology has been dictated by the logic of surveillance capitalism, where user data is monetized for economic gain. Consequently, algorithms are more likely to reinforce biases and polarization than encourage cross-perspective dialogue.

The main argument of this study asserts that the threat to democracy does not originate from social media itself but from how the technology is designed and utilized. Social media, akin to the private field in the earlier analogy, cannot inherently function as a democratic public sphere without proper regulation and redesign to support this role. Without adequate regulations and efforts to redesign algorithms and business structures of digital platforms, social media will continue to serve as a tool for commercial exploitation, undermining the foundations of democracy.

Thus, this study invites us to rethink our expectations of social media and affirms that a true public sphere cannot emerge from technology dominated by economic motives. Instead, a democratic public sphere must be supported by structures that ensure inclusivity, equal access, and a focus on rational discourse rather than financial profit.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores how surveillance capitalism, as conceptualized by Shoshana Zuboff, fundamentally transforms social media algorithms into tools for behavioural manipulation, amplifying polarization, spreading disinformation, and undermining democratic values. However, while Zuboff attributes the primary threat to democracy to the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism, this research argues that the issue lies in the economic motives and structures shaping technology design. Algorithms, as neutral tools, are exploited to prioritize engagement and profit over public interest, as demonstrated by cases like the Cambridge Analytica scandal and bot-driven manipulation in Indonesia's 2024 elections. These findings reveal the need for a critical reassessment of Zuboff's framework to distinguish between technology as a tool and the economic systems that govern its application. Addressing these challenges requires proactive regulatory measures, such as algorithmic transparency and stricter data governance, alongside ethical technological designs that realign technology's purpose to support democratic values and public interest.

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