



Review Article

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Digital Surveillance and Social Control: A Media-Cultural Analysis of Film CTRL

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ABSTRACT

We are all currently going through the era of social media. Unbeknownst to us, our entire record has reached social media companies. Our likes and dislikes have also reached marketing companies through social media. Social media reports our physical activities to marketing companies. Through our digital media devices, marketing companies collect our location, diet, communications, and preferences. With the help of social media, digital marketing companies have captured the entire society. Digital media platforms are now gathering information that we do not want to share. The film CTRL shows that the privacy of all users on digital media platforms is available for sale. Social media forces users to live under its control, treating them as mere products.

INTRODUCTION

Society is currently in the era of digital media. Social media and digital marketing companies have engulfed the entire society. Digital media is recording our every action. Digital media platforms are collecting various types of information that users may not want to share (Adisa, 2024). All users' privacy on the digital media platform is available for sale. For social media and digital media, users are no more than a product (Jain et al., 2021; S. Kumar et al., 2016). Since the emergence of artificial intelligence, the digital media monster has gained control over users (Strachan, 2023). Vikramaditya Motwane's film 'CTRL' (Motwane, 2024) focuses on paralysing users by socially and intellectually controlling them through digital media platforms. The film draws attention to serious crimes like stealing data through social media, capturing people's personal information with the help of AI, making deepfake videos with the help of artificial intelligence, and making digital arrests of people. CTRL is a gripping and thought-

provoking film that dives deep into the unsettling reality of how technology controls users' lives. Directed with a sharp focus on the dangers of digital dependency, the movie offers a chilling perspective on the loss of privacy and the all-encompassing power that technology has over our happiness.

Netflix screen-life thriller film CTRL (the keyboard shortcut for control) is cinematographically inspired by the American film Searching (Chaganty, 2018). The plot of CTRL revolves around Nella (played by Ananya Panday) and Joe (played by Vihaan Samat), a social media influencer couple who first connected as youngsters. They quickly gain popularity on digital media platforms (Mantra Unlimited). They start earning from social media advertisements. One day, during a livestream, Nella unintentionally caught Joe cheating on her and ended their relationship. A follower suggests Nella use the AI-based CTRL app to permanently remove Joe from her digital life. The AI helper CTRL claims to erase Joe's whole

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digital footprint. The app politely requests permission to assume administrative control of her computer because the process could take longer.

Meanwhile, the film takes a new turn. The main character of the film, Joe, collaborates with a public interest tech group to investigate the theft of personal information from Mantra Unlimited's social media platform, which it then sells to journalists and politicians for profit. Joe collects evidence against it. As soon as the company's owner discovers this, he arranges for the death of Joe and all group members. The company treats these murders as accidents. The digital media platform 'Mantra Unlimited' is found to be stealing consumers' personal data and selling it for commercial profit. Nella tries to expose the reality of these social media platforms to the public through a TV journalist. Angered by this, Mantra Unlimited creates a deepfake video of Nella to damage her social image. Due to social ostracism and mental distress, Nella is forced to withdraw all her lawsuits reluctantly against 'Mantra Unlimited'. The movie gives the message that the impact of digital life can spoil one's social life.

Artificial Intelligence, Surveillance Capitalism, and Social Behaviour

The concept of surveillance capitalism has been introduced by Shoshana Zuboff. According to her, surveillance capitalism is a system where personal data from social media is collected, and analysed and then sold to private companies for profit. Marketing agencies collect data on human experiences and behaviours to change their marketing strategies for selling products or services. Political campaigns also employ surveillance capitalism to sway people's opinions. Digital media also collects data on users' visited locations and other preferred activities, leveraging this information for commercial gain (Zuboff et al., 2019). The entire premise of the presented research seems to revolve around surveillance capitalism. However, concepts like deepfakes and digital arrests do not fall under the category of surveillance capitalism.

Humans are socially intelligent species that constantly challenge their capabilities and thought processes. In this era of the fifth industrial revolution, artificial intelligence and machine learning are making humans logically lazy, which results in us losing decision-making capacity (Adel, 2022).

Artificial intelligence has affected the way of life, working, and relating among people. From social media algorithms that make recommendations to customer service, the influence of machines on human behaviour is steadily growing. As AI increasingly permeates users' lives, it begins to shape our social behaviours, including communication and decision-making processes, gaining crucial insights, and fostering relationships (Bankins & Formosa, 2023).

Artificial intelligence itself regulates interactions with human psychology, thereby influencing social behaviour.

AI systems are tailor-made to understand, predict, and manipulate human feelings, preferences, and actions. Social media algorithms use users' data to display content that best aligns with individuals' interests, thereby creating echo chambers and influencing opinions. Increased usage of virtual assistants and chatbots changes the way people relate, reducing face-to-face communication and dependence on computer-based communication (Carroll et al., 2023).

Experiences become even more personalised, possibly triggering significant changes in attitudes and behaviours due to AI's influence. While many experiences already provide customised functions, the AI component may reinforce them through habits and tastes that the person is not fully aware of, such as online shopping or entertainment preferences. This widespread, often indirect influence extends deeply down social interaction and cultural norms, right into the precincts of mental well-being (Davenport, 2023).

Artificial intelligence drives social behaviour through the collection of enormous amounts of data, pattern recognition, and predictive modelling. Digitech designed these machine learning algorithms to recognise vast amounts of associated information about large-scale human behaviour, which people observe through the analysis of data such as social media, browsing histories, voice commands, and, furthermore, linked individual behaviour patterns. These machines are capable of identifying patterns in this type of action, which allows them to predict potential actions and then tailor responses or suggestions accordingly (Brown, 2021).

Artificial intelligence will continue to revolutionise users' environments, and like most life changes, it will have both beneficial and negative effects on society. Without a doubt, artificial intelligence will lead to changes in the workforce. People will face ethical predicaments, and they will lose their employment. The alarmist headlines emphasise job losses and ethical situations. What is right and what is wrong? Who will be leading the situation—a human or an artificial intelligence program (Tai, 2020)?

In their research, Alhitmi et al. addressed data security and privacy concerns in AI-driven marketing. They found that user data is easily collected by AI-based algorithms, including general information as well as confidential health-related information (Alhitmi et al., 2024). A report published by Reuters highlighted that social media platforms gather data from users through tracking technologies. Major technology firms have been competing to obtain data sources for training their developing AI capabilities. Companies have admitted that they don't know how AI uses the data they've collected (Godoy, 2024). Data privacy is becoming a major concern in this scenario, particularly due to fears of sharing personal and confidential information anywhere. The existing data privacy act in India also appears to have many flaws, which has further increased users' concerns.



Deepfake poses a significant threat to digital media platforms

Deepfakes are digital media fabrications that mimic the appearance and sound of real people. Deepfakes can have many negative consequences. Artificial intelligence developments could soon make it quite simple to create convincing false audio and video, sometimes referred to as “deepfakes.” Making someone seem to say or do something they did not could bring the war of misinformation to a completely fresh turn (Pal, 2024).

Deepfakes can disseminate misinformation, propaganda, and distort public perception (Cote, 2022). For instance, deepfakes can be employed to fabricate news articles or to impersonate politicians, as evidenced by recent incidents involving notable public personalities such as actress Rashmika Mandana and Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Chandar, 2023). People can use deepfakes to create explicit or intimate non-consensual media. Deepfakes, for instance, can incorporate celebrities’ faces into pornographic content or produce artificially generated nude models. Netizens are all aware of the incident involving Rashmika Mandana, which is a real-life example of privacy and consent violations (Bhaumik, 2023).

Deepfakes can erode public trust in digital media by making it hard to tell what’s real. In a democratic system, where the public relies heavily on social media for information, such behaviour can lead to significant issues (Pawelec, 2022). Deepfakes present intricate legal and ethical dilemmas concerning matters like defamation, intellectual property rights, and freedom of expression. In this age of AI, it’s vital to verify facts, as it’s hard to tell what’s real (Jaiman, 2020).

Asian people under the control of social media platform giants

The emergence of social media has impacted the world in an unprecedented manner. Technological advances have significantly increased connectivity, enabling internet access in even the most remote locations. The consumption of social media in the Asia-Pacific region has seen a notable rise, with China, India, and Indonesia at the forefront regarding monthly active users. Moreover, individuals in the Philippines dedicated the most time to social media each day, surpassing the global average (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

The rise of consumerism and increased disposable income have led to greater accessibility of smartphones and connected devices for individuals in the APAC region, contributing significantly to the growth and proliferation of social media usage throughout the area (Hodgson & Rude, 2024; Sharma & Kumar, 2023). In the Asia-Pacific region, users may now utilise social media for purposes beyond simply interacting with friends and family thanks to faster broadband speeds and more reliable internet access. With the rapid growth of the social commerce industry, consumers now use social media platforms to

shop, review, and discover new products (Ivorra et al., 2024).

Facebook (Meta), along with Instagram, continues to be a significant social media platform globally. The majority of Asian countries, including India, Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Taiwan, and South Korea, primarily use Meta’s products such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Meta (Facebook’s parent company) has the highest number of users in the world in India (Shvartsman, 2024). Tencent’s WeChat (Weixin) holds a commanding position in China’s instant messaging market. The Messenger application boasts more than 1.3 billion active accounts globally (Kharpal, 2019).

With over a billion subscribers, Asian social media is an important marketing tool. In an increasingly digitised market, 64% of Eastern Asians and 55% of Southeast Asians use social media. Western digital marketers are aiming to dominate Asian social media users because of their unique consumption habits (Principle, 2019). Social media advertising in Asia is fast-growing. In 2024, ad expenditure on social media will total \$96.1 billion. We anticipate a 4.20% annual growth rate in ad spending (CAGR 2024-2028), resulting in a predicted market volume of US\$113.3 billion by 2028 (Statista, n.d.).

CTRL is a thought-provoking film

CTRL is a gripping and thought-provoking film. The concept of the CTRL bears similarities to a few Western films, but it is entirely new to Bollywood. Vikramaditya Motwane, Avinash Sampath, and Sumukhi Suresh’s script bears a striking resemblance to the film *Missing or Searching*. Ananya’s performance is surprisingly good. In comparison to her recent films, “Call Me Bae” and “Kho Gaye Tum Kahan”, Ananya Panday has quickly upgraded her performance. However, the narrative focuses solely on the lead (Ananya), leaving the omnipotent AI god and conspiracy underexplored. Despite excellent performance and an engaging plot, it leaves viewers craving complexity and depth. Director Vikaramditya Motwane’s CTRL focuses on the current generation’s reliance on social media. The film’s topic resonates with the current social structure and the major problems faced by young people, but there is room for improvement in the cinematography, particularly given the tendency for films to become slow and repetitive. The use of light and sound is average, but the director has put his focus on graphics. As a result, the graphics are attractive and relevant. Film CTRL has received a 5.3 rating on Netflix. The film has also scored a 6.3 rating on IMDb.

Deepfakes present considerable risks across multiple domains, such as cybersecurity, digital security, educational institutions, commercial enterprises, and personal online safety. Deepfakes facilitate the execution of social engineering attacks, phishing scams, and phishing attempts by generating remarkably convincing

impersonations of individuals. This method may facilitate access to confidential information, organisational systems, and personal data by mimicking trusted individuals or entities (Roy, 2024). Malicious actors may exploit the situation to disseminate misinformation, influence public perception, or damage the reputations and credibility of organisations or individuals (Kumar & Sharma, 2023).

The film CTRL is a compelling wake-up call, serving as a cautionary tale for our digital age. It leaves the audience questioning not just the role of technology in their lives but whether people have already ceded control over their happiness and autonomy. This film is a must-watch for anyone who's ever asked themselves, "How much control do social media users really have in this hyper-connected world?" Film offers people a fresh perspective on the influence of social media on their lives. Social media presents various privacy and security challenges. The personal information that individuals disclose on social networking sites often faces significant risks of exploitation when security measures are insufficient. These big social media giants are trying to influence users' choices, altering their logical understanding to suit their interests. They are making decisions about everything, from what people eat and wear to who and how they interact. People must awaken and reclaim their logical and ethical thinking, lest these AI-powered autobots and robots replace humans. Humans need to establish or improve the accountability of these social media companies who are stealing users' data without their consent.

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