SJIF Impact Factor (2026): 8.863| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 11 | Issue: 5 | May 2026 - Peer Reviewed Journal

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE AND INTERNET ALGORITHMS: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra27838
DOI No: 10.36713/epra27838

ABSTRACT
Digital technologies and internet algorithms have become a part of our everyday lives. But rarely, we pay attention to the implications of these surveillance technologies, and how our choices are subtly manipulated by them. Popular social media sites now actively influence people's thoughts and viewpoints rather than serving as merely neutral forums for sharing and communication. The complexities of the political process, the challenges of governance, or the effectiveness of the state policies become simplified with digital representations, as, the question is no longer limited to what has been done to improve the lives of the common people, but how the government and other political parties influence them through digital algorithms. Politics becomes a spectacle-driven world where visibility takes precedence over thought and understanding. Emotionally appealing narratives that are optimised for widespread reach are created by simplifying complex political concerns.
KEYWORDS: *Digital algorithms, digital surveillance, hyperreality*

INTRODUCTION

Digital infrastructure has surrounded us throughout the day, without rest. While we casually browse through the internet, steer through Facebook and Instagram, unknowingly, we get ourselves exposed to 'algorithms'- that create a profile of us, take stalk of our likes and dislikes, pays attention to the posts we spend more seconds on, and the posts we move past without a blink. They know us better than our close ones, and update with our changing interests. Algorithms work without our conscious inputs, silently stalking us through our digital presence, and unknowingly, we feed them with crucial information about ourselves.

When Jurgen Habermas talked about the decline of the public sphere in his 1962 book, 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', he majorly focussed on how the spontaneous hangouts and opinions in the public sphere started getting manipulated through the private ownership of magazines and newspapers that curated the perspectives of the readers according to their political benefits. With the emergence of digital technologies, this control has multiplied manifold. But the subtle manipulations and influence of the algorithms in creating 'realities' can be alarming, once its reach and power is understood and accepted by the internet users. On the other end of the spectrum, digital surveillance has started playing a corroborative role to internet algorithms. Simple clicks on cat videos, likes, comments on posts, or spending a few extra seconds on a reel- all of this information are elaborately stored, for the creation of individual profiles that can be targeted for advertisements, for political campaigns, and so on. Not a moment spent on the internet is free from surveillance- so much so that even one's private choices are not really private anymore.

Digital infrastructures control how people obtain information, feel emotions, develop cravings for consumption, develop political opinions, evaluate performance of government and so on. It is more of how it is portrayed digitally, than what went down on the grounds. Social media platforms have become essential organisations for organising public debate, spreading ideologies, and engaging in symbolic activities. Popular social media platforms do not act as mere spaces for neutral communication and sharing for individuals anymore, but rather they actively shape opinions and perspectives. The rapid increase in smartphone usage and affordable internet access in India has allowed digital platforms to become deeply embedded in everyday social life, altering the relationship between technology, politics, and citizenship. Before the digital platform, Patriotism and nationalism, two intricate sentiments that are essential for the citizens of a country, were disseminated through school education, cultural events, movies and books. But today, the primary lessons in patriotism and nationalism are spread through the internet, where algorithms play the most essential role. Today, algorithmic communication systems play a bigger role in mediating nationalism. Through algorithmic curation, on one hand,

social media platforms actively shape visibility, emotional engagement, and ideological reinforcement in addition to disseminating political information. As a result, political awareness is algorithmically structured. On the other hand, so called 'anti-national', or 'anti-patriotic' activities are quickly identified through the mechanisms of digital surveillance through tracking one's digital footprint.

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India has over 1.03 billion active internet users, which is almost 70% of the total population. The widespread use of social media actively helps the algorithm to influence almost all aspects related to our likes and dislikes, evaluations of policies, emotional mobilizations, and undoubtedly, political opinions.

NATIONALISM AND DIGITAL ERA

Communication technology has always been essential to the growth and legitimacy of nationalism. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, newspapers, radio, television, and films all had a significant impact on the development of the nation's collective consciousness. However, social media sites and internet algorithms have become significant players in the creation and dissemination of nationalist narratives in the digital age.

Nationalism is increasingly using decentralised, algorithmically mediated communication networks in the internet age. State defined 'Nationalism' is actively circulated, reproduced, and performed in participatory digital cultures, which have supplanted centralised state narratives as the primary source of national identity construction.

The complexities of the political process, the challenges of governance, or the effectiveness of the state policies become simplified with digital representations, as, the question is no longer limited to what has been done to improve the lives of the common people, but how the government and other political parties influence them through digital algorithms. Politics becomes a spectacle-driven world where visibility takes precedence over thought and understanding. Emotionally appealing narratives that are optimised for widespread reach are created by simplifying complex political concerns.

In India, social media sites like Instagram and WhatsApp are very important in fostering daily nationalism. Intimate communication networks that are ingrained in local communities, friendship circles, and family groups are increasingly used to spread political ideas.

THE COLLAPSE OF TRUTH AND HYPERREALITY

Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist and philosopher, created the idea of hyperreality. It describes a state in which media creations, simulations, pictures, and representations take on greater realism and influence than the real world. The emergence of algorithmic nationalism adds to what Jean Baudrillard called hyperreality, a state in which the influence of mediated representations surpasses that of objective reality. Algorithms have developed all the tools and techniques to influence opinions and choices, so much so that false propaganda, misleading information, or simply made-up stories are often represented in glorious attractive manner to attract attention of the right people. This often blurs the difference between factual reality and manipulated content.

Emotional plausibility is often given precedence over factual reality in digital political environments. Because they elicit greater emotional engagement than confirmed facts, edited movies, made-up data, decontextualised graphics, and conspiracy theories frequently spread more quickly. It has become extremely easy and convenient to create hyperreal portrayals of incidents via posts, reels or videos that look absolutely real and appealing, and often consumed by the common man without question. In this respect, digital environments create controlled spaces, and reinforce ideologies and emotions convenient for governance- so much so that it becomes difficult to differentiate between neutral communication and subtly manipulated ones in digital environments.

CONCLUSION

Since digital infrastructures are an unavoidable part of our lives today, conscious use of the Internet is essential to avoid the traps of algorithms, and their manipulations. Hours of mindless browsing must be avoided to feed unintentional yet crucial information to the algorithms, that can later be used for targeting of advertisements or other vested interests. The practice of taking things at face value in the Internet must be avoided, so that misleading information or hyperreal portrayals of incidents do not create false consciousness in the viewers. Fact checking before acceptance of such portrayals must be followed, instead of further sharing of false information. This has a much greater significance for the society and social well-being. Development of policies on the issue of digital surveillance must also be done from the national and international bodies in order to respect privacy and freedom of the common man.

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