[**Age of surveillance capitalism**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1665518/age-of-surveillance-capitalism)

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The writer completed his doctorate in economics on a Fulbright scholarship.

THROUGHOUT history, intellectuals have grappled with finding ways to bring about social and economic order. In this quest, where some have identified the market as the institution that instils order, others have looked to the state. But, capitalism has always existed as a hybrid economic system combining the properties of both the state and the market to sustain social and economic order. The advent of surveillance capitalism is changing these age-old dynamics. If people’s personal data is not prevented from becoming a commodity, big data firms would become unassailable and may come to dominate future social and economic life.

The idea that markets bring about economic gains is widely established. Markets that are free from excessive state regulation not only deliver economic gains, but also infuse social order, it is argued. Markets, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, also increase the freedoms available to people when they freely engage in buying and selling. However, if markets are left to their own devices, failures happen in the shape of a chronic undersupply of public goods like education and healthcare that may, in turn, lead to social unrest. For this reason, from time to time, the state has intervened in order to put things on an even keel.

Even during the heyday of the Industrial Revolution as the factory system and mass production got underway, the British state was protecting the interests of its citizens. Repeatedly, the British state intervened to make working conditions less onerous. Earlier through the Factory Act of 1833 and later through the Ten Hours Act of 1848, the working day was first capped at 12 and then at 10 hours. The Gilded Age that opened up new vistas for wealth creation under captains of industry like John Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie, saw sustained efforts by the US state to rein in large corporations through antitrust legislation that started with the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1874 and continued through the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914. And, after the Great Depression, the entire edifice of Keynesian macroeconomic policies was, arguably, a way for the state to provide a much-needed corrective.

The economic rise of China has also lent credence to the claim that both the state and the market have worked together to bring about economic gains since the Chinese economy is a veritable kaleidoscope exhibiting hues of both the state and the market. Additionally, East Asian nations also used the hybrid or the state-market model of development to bring about impressive economic gains.

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Since the turn of the 21st century, big data firms have emerged as a new challenger to the hybrid economic system because of the incredible amounts of personal data that has since become available. Our tastes, habits, financial transactions and physical movements are all now monitored and available for sale by big data firms like Facebook/Meta and Google. This commodification of personal data is now heralding the age of what Shoshana Zuboff has labelled ‘surveillance capitalism’. The analysis of personal data creates an incredibly detailed picture of the consumer, who can then be subliminally bombarded with specific cues to bring about a desired action in the shape of purchasing something.

In a sense, the rise of big data firms is fast displacing hybrid economies as through incredibly powerful artificial intelligence and machine learning, these firms are now poised to completely dominate future economic life. In so doing, these firms will even bypass the market that has served as an arena where consumers exercise a modicum of economic freedom and where important economic questions regarding what to produce, how to produce and for whom to produce are answered through the forces of supply and demand. Soon, freed up from supply and demand forces, data firms will decide what and how much to produce, while avoiding the market altogether and delivering the goods directly to consumers via aerial drones.

In the age of surveillance capitalism, moreover, the state cannot be relied upon to provide its traditional corrective as it has also been co-opted by big data firms. More and more nations are collaborating with big data firms for surveillance, social control or for intervening in adversaries’ electoral processes — British firm Cambridge Analytica allegedly tried to change the outcome of US elections. The Covid-19 pandemic has also created a convenient pretext for states to continually monitor citizens and create new alliances with big data firms as the movement of vaccinated or unvaccinated citizens is monitored.

Does the advent of surveillance capitalism spell doom for freedom as everyone will walk around with a veritable barcode on their forehead? The answer is that it depends on whether the people will fight to protect their personal data. Given how surveillance capitalism is narrowing the scope of our freedoms, the protection of our personal data is fast turning into a fundamental right. And the only institution that has assisted people in safeguarding their fundamental rights throughout history is democracy. However, democracy can only be an effective bulwark against surveillance capitalism if nations are able to enshrine what Robert A. Dahl called ‘substantive democracy’ — representative, responsive and accountable.

What this points to is that the reforms agenda in Pakistan must include democratic reforms at multiple levels in order to strengthen democracy. Citizens must be educated enough to be able to evaluate the quality of candidates. Citizens must be empowered to freely express their preferences without let or hindrance. And society must be able to develop quality assurance mechanisms so that the names of the best candidates appear on the ballot. In the final analysis, all societies must focus on democratic reforms because a consolidated and substantive democracy is perhaps our only hope in the age of surveillance capitalism.

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