

Utopia or Dystopia: The Dichotomy of “The Social Dilemma” Documentary in Shaping Public Perception

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ABSTRACT

Today's technology industry faces numerous issues, including scandals, data theft, consumer complaints, technology addiction, fake news, political polarization, and hacking. These problems are raised in the Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma*. This research discusses how algorithms and social media platform design can manipulate user behavior in both utopian and dystopian ways. It analyzes these dynamics through economic, political, sociocultural, and media perspectives, using Christian Fuchs' critical theory approach with critical discourse analysis and semiotics. The findings show that algorithms act as a double-edged sword. In a dystopian context, technology creates a bleak future in which it controls and damages human life. Conversely, in a utopian context, industrial technology has the potential to foster a more positive public perception. This research successfully explores how the increasing reliance on technology for work affects individuals' understanding of truth and shapes their perspectives on various aspects of life. By combining critical discourse analysis and semiotics, this study comprehensively analyzes the implications of digital labor on both utopian and dystopian narratives.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Semiotics, Social Dilemma, Christian Fuchs' Critical Theory, Industrial Technology

ABSTRAK

Permasalahan yang terjadi pada teknologi industri saat ini antara lain skandal, pencurian data, keluhan, kecanduan teknologi, berita palsu, polarisasi politik, serta peretasan dimunculkan pada film dokudrama *The Social Dilemma* yang ditayangkan secara streaming di Netflix. Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana algoritma dan desain platform media sosial dapat memanipulasi perilaku pengguna secara utopia dan distopia dilihat dari sisi ekonomi, politik, sosial budaya dan media melalui pendekatan teori kritis Christian Fuchs melalui analisis wacana kritis dan semiotika. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa algoritma seperti pedang bermata dua. Dalam konteks distopia, teknologi menciptakan gambaran suram tentang masa depan di mana teknologi mengendalikan dan merusak kehidupan manusia. Sebaliknya, dalam konteks utopia, teknologi industri memiliki potensi untuk membentuk persepsi publik yang lebih positif. Penelitian ini berhasil mengeksplorasi bagaimana meningkatnya ketergantungan pada teknologi untuk kerja mempengaruhi pemahaman individu tentang kebenaran dan bagaimana teknologi membentuk perspektif mereka tentang berbagai aspek kehidupan. Dengan menggabungkan analisis wacana kritis dan semiotika, penelitian ini dapat memberikan analisis komprehensif tentang implikasi kerja digital pada narasi utopia dan distopia.

Kata Kunci: Analisis Wacana Kritis, Semiotika, Sosial Dilema, Teori Kritis Christian Fuchs, Teknologi Industri

INTRODUCTION

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Social media platforms have become indispensable in our daily lives in today's interconnected digital era (Elkatmış, 2024), making it essential to critically discuss their influence on society. The Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* has sparked widespread debate by presenting contrasting views on technology's impact: Is technology leading us towards a utopia or a dystopia? Communication shapes public perceptions of complex issues (Weng & Lin, 2022). However, poor communication about a given context can lead to misguided judgments and perceptions (Dikmen et al., 2024). Currently, the algorithms behind these platforms often create echo chambers and filter bubbles, further polarizing society (Feio & Oliveira, 2024); (Park & Park, 2024). By discussing these factors, we aim to better understand the challenges in balancing technological advancement with societal well-being.

Today's issues in industrial technology include cybercrime on social media, such as phishing, malware attacks, identity theft, online fraud, and cyberbullying (Panda et al., 2023). Additional concerns involve the risk of privacy violations (Horsman, 2022), user fatigue (Pang & Ruan, 2023), cyberattacks (de Azambuja et al., 2024), and negative impacts on mental health (Brailovskaia, 2024). From a dystopian perspective, these issues portray a bleak future where technology exerts control over and corrupts people's lives. Cybercrime and privacy breaches illustrate a world where individuals lose control of their personal information, while cyberattacks and mental health effects highlight technology's potential threat to human well-being. User fatigue and cyberbullying also underscore how technology can degrade quality of life and social relationships.

Conversely, in a utopian context, industrial technology has the potential to shape more positive public perceptions (Kong & Liu, 2023); (Yoon et al., 2022). With proper management, technology can be used to enhance cybersecurity (Aracri et al., n.d.), protect privacy (Si, 2024), and support mental health (Ma, 2025). Technological innovations can create a safe and supportive digital environment where users interact and share information without fear of cybercrime or privacy violations. In this utopian scenario, technology enriches lives, improves quality of life, and strengthens social relationships. Thus, public perceptions of industrial technology can be shaped by both dystopian and utopian narratives, highlighting the potential threats and opportunities associated with technological advancements.

Previous research using a semiotic approach indicates that the film *The Social Dilemma* effectively conveys the negative impacts of social media overuse through the symbolic elements in its scenes (Ashfiasari & Wiyata, 2021). However, this research analyzes visual signs without considering broader psychological and sociological aspects. Another study conducted by Iddianto and Azi (2022) revealed the spread of misinformation in the film *The Social Dilemma* through a Post-Truth perspective. However, Post-Truth is a condition where people quickly get caught in a storm of misleading information without factual grounding (Mofferz, 2020), making this research somewhat subjective and potentially biased.

Findings from another study (Augustine & Xavier, n.d.) support the realism of the issues raised in *The Social Dilemma* but fail to analyze social media's positive aspects. Christian Fuchs' digital labor theory was applied by Febriyanti and Ida (2023) to examine digital capitalism on the YouTube platform. Their study highlights the practice of digital capitalism, showing how audiences experience exploitation as unpaid labor on YouTube. Building on these limitations, this research seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how algorithms and social media platform designs influence user behavior from cultural, economic, political, and media perspectives in both utopian and dystopian contexts. This critical approach, combining critical discourse analysis and semiotics, provides a novel contribution by addressing the complexity of social media algorithms' impact.

The critical theory of society is essential as a framework for critical digital and social media research (Fuchs, 2022). Critical theory, inspired by Marx's (1992) theory as discussed in Allmer (2015), describes the capital circuit's three stages: money capital, productive capital, and merchandise capital. In the first stage, capitalists use money to buy labor and means of production. The second stage involves the production process, where capitalists use acquired resources to generate commodities that gain value through surplus labor. In the final stage, capitalists sell these commodities, transforming them back into money—ultimately, with more money than they started with. In summary, Marx discusses the cyclical nature of commodity production and capital accumulation.

Meanwhile, Christian Fuchs, in his book *Digital Capitalism*, argues that capitalism creates an alienated society where privileged groups with capital, political power, and reputation control economic, political, and cultural conditions. In today's digital age, digital capitalism extends this control over capital accumulation, decision-making, and reputation via digital technology, shaping economic, political, and cultural processes that produce digital products and structures (Fuchs, 2022). In reviewing the film *The Social Dilemma*, this research explores how digital capitalism influences the film's content, production, and distribution. By examining digital technology's role in narrative development, character portrayal, and the overall cinematic experience, we can critically analyze capitalism's impact on the film industry. This critical theory perspective allows us to understand how economic, political, cultural, and media factors intersect within the context of digital capitalism in *The Social Dilemma*.

METHODS

This study employs descriptive qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative research explores, examines, and describes human interactions with their natural environment (Narayanan & Murthy, 2023). The primary data source for this research is the film *The Social Dilemma*, a 94-minute documentary accessed through the Netflix streaming service. Additionally, primary and secondary data from journals, articles, books, and other relevant literature provide a comprehensive perspective, validate research findings, identify patterns, and expand context. This study uses semiotic analysis, a method that applies a set of assumptions and concepts to facilitate a structured examination of symbolic systems (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). This analysis is combined with critical discourse analysis (CDA), a transdisciplinary approach drawing from fields such as linguistics, politics, and sociology to interpret, explain, and justify aspects of social life by examining discourses, narratives, and arguments (Fairclough, 2010).

The Social Dilemma was released on 9 September 2020 as a docudrama on Netflix. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, the film attracted 38 million viewers in its first four weeks. The film is aimed at the general public and addresses complex issues related to the operation of information technology and the impact of social media (Mansell & Preston, 2020). In the first scene, one of the hallmarks of the film is the mobilization of technology experts from major corporations, practitioners in information technology and media, and academics to illustrate the dark side of social media models and operations. Experts in psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, neuropsychology, law, public policy, and human rights defenders are also interviewed in the film.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

About the Social Dilemma Movie

The film *The Social Dilemma* was released on 9 September 2020 as a Netflix docudrama. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, the film attracted 38 million viewers in its first four weeks. Aimed at the general public, the film addresses complex issues related to the operational aspects of information technology and the influence of social media (Mansell & Preston, 2020). In the first scene, one of the film's distinctive features is the inclusion of technology experts from major corporations, practitioners in information communication technology and media, and academics to illustrate the darker aspects of social media models and operations. Additionally, experts in neuropsychology, psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, public policy, law, and human rights advocacy are interviewed throughout the film.

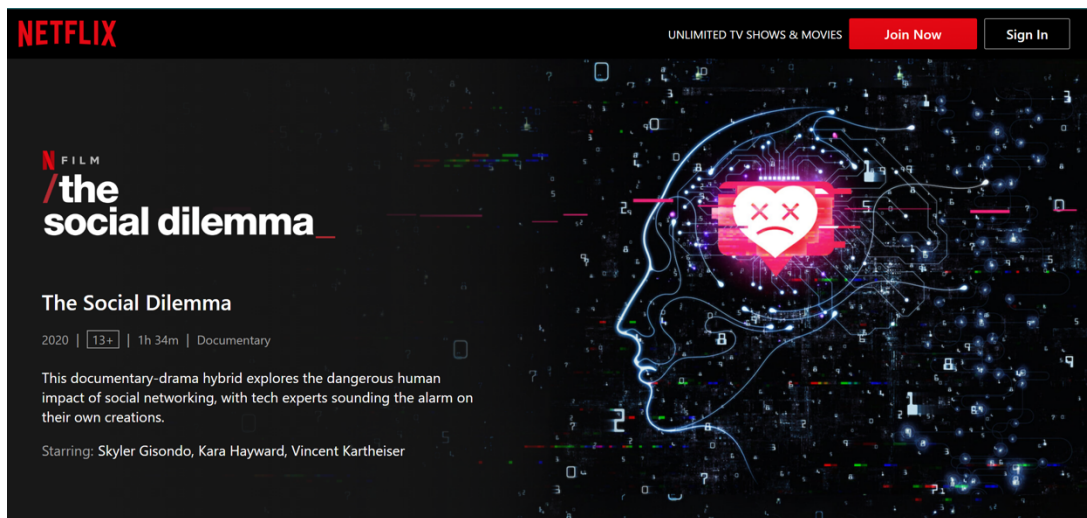


Figure 1. The Social Dilemma Movie View
Source: Netflix

The rise of digital streaming platforms like Netflix has expanded the reach of documentary films, enabling them to address social and scientific issues on a larger scale. One such film, *The Social Dilemma*, specifically targets various groups to spread awareness and exert pressure on tech giants (Yeo & Silberg, 2021). Written by Davis Coombe, Jeff Orlowski, and Vickie Curtis, the film aims to bring algorithms to life, offering audiences new perspectives on technology platforms. By following the story of a fictional family, the film illustrates the real-world harm caused by technology, including the negative effects on Isla's mental health, the political polarization affecting Ben, and the family's struggles to connect. Through these portrayals, *The Social Dilemma* exposes the exploitative, profit-maximizing practices of major tech companies that operate under the guise of providing free services (Du, 2022).

Data Analysis

Fairclough formulated the CDA agenda as follows: (i) the emergence of discourse; (ii) the relationship of dialogue, contestation, and domination between discourses; (iii) the recontextualization of discourse; and (iv) operationalization of discourse (Fairclough, 2010). The first agenda of CDA is the emergence of discourse. This agenda examines how discourse represents objects, events, and actions, as well as the social agents and institutions it involves. In *The Social Dilemma*, various experts and former employees of major tech companies discuss how social media discourses influence people's behavior and perceptions. They illustrate how platforms manipulate users' online experiences through algorithms that amplify specific content to increase engagement, ultimately shaping how individuals interact with technology and each other in the digital world.

The second agenda, the relationship of dialogue, contestation, and domination between discourses, explores how certain discourses become prominent or dominant. In the film, tech employees describe how social media platforms influence user behavior and perceptions through algorithmic manipulation. This dialogue reveals how specific discourses can gain hegemony, affecting how information is consumed and shared online.

The third agenda, discourse recontextualization, refers to the spread and adaptation of dominant discourses across different social contexts and scales. This is illustrated in the film by how social media algorithms continuously present divisive or extreme content to users, often leading them into cycles of misinformation and polarization. The portrayal shows how such algorithms can shape individual beliefs and behaviors, demonstrating how dominant discourses are perpetuated across various social contexts.

The fourth agenda, discourse operationalization, focuses on how discourse is implemented in social contexts and its role in social transformation. The film demonstrates this by showing how social media algorithms curate content based on users' preferences, reinforcing certain ideologies and perceptions. By illustrating the recontextualization of this dominant discourse across social contexts,

the film highlights how discourse operationalization on digital platforms significantly influences users' perceptions and behaviors.

The findings of the critical discourse analysis in this film are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. CDA Findings in The Social Dilemma Film

Discourse Analysis	Context	Findings	Use of Signs, Symbols, Terms, Metaphors, Images, etc.
Discourse analysis on algorithm manipulation	Social media algorithms are designed to manipulate user behaviour for commercial gain	CDA reveals that the film's language and narrative illustrate how algorithms not only shape individual preferences but influence social behavior on a larger scale	Use of terms: "exploitation", "manipulation", and use of <i>Ben's</i> avatar
Discourse analysis on political polarization	Social media is used as a tool to spread divisive content	CDA identifies that the film's narrative links polarization to algorithms that prioritize controversial content to boost engagement.	Use of metaphor: "rabbit hole"
Discourse analysis on mental health	The impact of social media on mental health, especially adolescents	CDA indicates that the film's language frames social media as a threat to mental well-being	Use of terms: "depression" and "anxiety"
Discourse analysis on the digital economy	Critique of tech companies' business models that focus on monetizing user data	CDA shows how the film's narrative depicts the exploitation of the digital economy in a context of social criticism.	The use of the terms "surveillance capitalism" and "product"
Discourse analysis on social control	Social media as a tool for social control	CDA illustrates that the film's language portrays social media as a tool for controlling and influencing behavior.	Use of the terms "manipulation" and "surveillance"
Discourse analysis of the media	Social and digital media as tools for connecting with others and disseminating information.	CDA reveals that social media and digital media not only connect people but have evolved into instruments of surveillance, manipulation, and social control.	Illustration of notifications, fingers, and social media users (as shown in Figure 2)

Source: Author's analysis

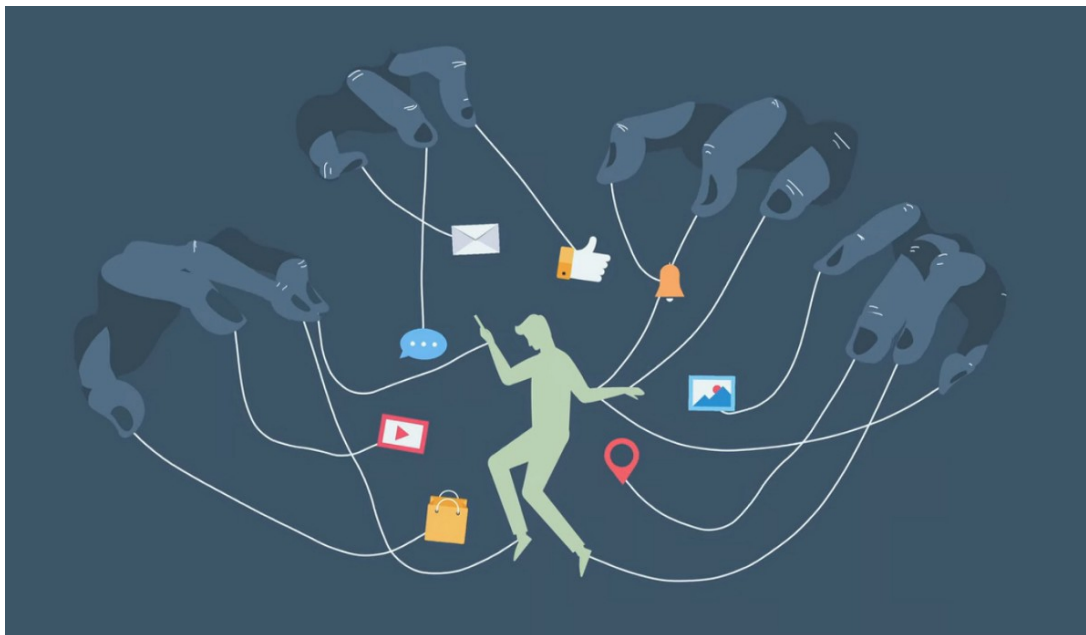


Figure 2. Illustration of Notifications, Fingers, and Social Media Users in the Film *The Social Dilemma*
Source: Netflix

Digital Technology Utopias and Dystopias Shape Public Perceptions

Information Technology

The term "exploitation" in *The Social Dilemma* denotes technology companies' use of user data for financial gain, as interactions such as likes, shares, and comments generate data that is monetized through targeted advertising. Similarly, the term "manipulation" highlights how social media algorithms are designed to influence user behavior by learning preferences and habits to serve content that maximizes user engagement. In one scene, employees create an avatar of Ben, a film character, which continuously updates to simulate the accumulated data of each user.

The film also raises principles such as privacy, business ethics, agency, transparency, and autonomy within the realms of big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning. AI, a form of software exhibiting human intelligence characteristics (Burton & Soare, 2019), operates without direct human intervention by optimizing through machine learning. The film presents AI as a system capable of driving misinformation and propaganda (Sultan et al., 2024), not merely as a tool but as a manipulative force in digital environments. In platforms like Google, vast rooms of interconnected computers communicate to process and transmit information. This illustrates a shift from a tool-based to an addiction-based and manipulative technological environment. AI works by generating predictions, rules, recommendations, or similar results through analytical models (Janiesch et al., 2021).

Technological development, viewed dialectically, embodies both progress and risk. Technological advances hold global utopian potential to address poverty and scarcity (Allmer, 2015). Yet, profit-driven social media strategies create tensions between connectivity and threats to privacy and surveillance. Algorithmic systems employed across sectors manipulate information and influence identities (Aysolmaz et al., 2023) and social interactions (Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019).

Digitalization, often seen as a strategic asset, has enabled market value creation, organizational innovation, and new products and services (Chatterjee & Sarker, 2024). Proponents argue that AI can address societal issues, enhance productivity, and assist in sectors from finance to healthcare (Na & Preston, 2020). *The Social Dilemma* primarily explores the adverse impacts of digital platforms on users, omitting the negative effects on employees (Murdock & Preston, 2020). Although the film warns of algorithms as a threat, it also acknowledges their utility in providing personalized recommendations, thereby saving time and enhancing efficiency in user experiences.

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Political Polarisation

The term "rabbit hole" in *The Social Dilemma* refers to how social media algorithms can lead users into cycles of increasingly extreme and time-consuming content. These algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, contribute to political polarization by propagating divisive content. The film illustrates this through Ben's experience, showing how algorithms drive political discourse on social media, often escalating tensions beyond individual control. For example, in Hong Kong, fake accounts created in China aimed to delegitimize the pro-democracy movement, while in Myanmar, pre-installed Facebook accounts facilitated information dissemination that allowed government monitoring. According to Fuchs(2022) right-wing movements also leverage social media to spread propaganda, further challenging political positions.

AI and algorithms serve as tools for governments to monitor and prevent harmful activities, yet they simultaneously enable radicalism and political violence (Burton, 2023). Based on Raymond Williams' approach (Fuchs, 2024), social media acts as a forum for social production, essential for collective decision-making. At an international level, institutions aim to reduce violence in political discourse through enhanced political communication. However, the crisis of capitalism has intensified online political aggression, including anonymous threats of violence (Fuchs, 2024).

Mental Health

The term "depression" in the film highlights the mental health risks associated with excessive social media use. Isla, a character in the film, experiences depression stemming from a single negative comment about her appearance, despite many positive ones. Her constant need for social validation—such as the use of filters and the pursuit of "likes"—reflects a broader tendency to seek approval both online and offline. Similarly, "anxiety" is depicted through Ben's restlessness caused by relentless notifications, emphasizing social media's role in heightening anxiety and distraction.

The film underscores the impact of social media on Generation Z, who appear more vulnerable to depression and anxiety due to social pressures. The "like" button can exacerbate social anxiety, particularly for those with low self-worth (Bayer et al., 2022). While social media fosters connection, it can also strain real-life interactions, especially within families. However, the notion that social media alone drives this disconnect may need reconsideration, as social behaviors vary widely and have existed before digital platforms.

Digital Economy

Shoshana Zuboff's term "surveillance capitalism" describes tech companies' exploitation of user data for profit, driven by subtle changes in behavior and perception. As Tristan Harris puts it, "If you are not paying for the product, you are the product." Through engagement, growth, and advertising goals, algorithms are fine-tuned to keep users active, leading to profit from ads, as companies sell user attention (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

This practice aligns with Febriyanti & Ida (2023), who found that platforms like YouTube exploit audiences as "free labor," contributing to data sold to advertisers. Fuchs (2022) adds that platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and other internet leverage digital labor as users produce content. Although digital technology empowers workers to unite against capitalist exploitation, it also allows companies to commodify user data (Wu, 2021). Data becomes a "traded" asset for advertising profits, impacting stock values positively. Algorithms help manage and execute trades, demonstrating their economic significance (Hatch et al., 2021).

Unlike social media platforms, subscription-based streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime rely on direct user payments, not personal data. With a monthly subscription model, streaming platforms can generate consistent revenue without increasing user engagement. This approach benefits users, who pay with currency rather than data, and content is curated and fact-checked by experts to maintain high standards..

Social Culture

The terms "manipulation" and "surveillance" in *The Social Dilemma* underscore social control mechanisms. Manipulation occurs subtly, as users engage with algorithm-driven content without realizing they are being influenced, while surveillance exposes the ethical and privacy violations of tech companies collecting personal data without consent. According to CDA, web applications and platforms systematically collect users' behaviors, preferences, and interests (Sabatino & Sapi, 2022)

through automated processes, selling this data to advertisers to increase profits. This commercial sale of personal data is often hidden within corporate privacy practices, with digital imaging techniques used to create psychological profiles, leading to potentially unethical experimentation and severe privacy concerns (Saura et al., 2021); (Arora & Jain, 2024).

To counteract these concerns, a critical surveillance movement could raise awareness and empower individuals and organizations to push back against corporate data practices. Criticism of surveillance can occur through various channels, including films, social media campaigns, customer advocacy, and reviews. For instance, hashtags on Twitter enable public discourse and community formation around shared interests, fostering connection and engagement related to specific events. Unlike traditional communities, these publics are more transient social phenomena, often bound by temporary or issue-specific connections (Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019).

Undoubtedly, digitalization has provided abundance, convenience, and mobility in terms of information and entertainment (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Yet, as people become more aware of digital media's limitations, calls for stricter democratic oversight of media technologies grow. Society must actively participate in managing modern systems, including their economic, political, and technological facets. The digital age has also fragmented the media system, resulting in increased market segmentation and the emergence of new actors and power structures. This shift has the potential to homogenize media systems, as new players shape news and information processes and influence public discourse (Hallin & Mancini, 2019).

Media

In *The Social Dilemma*, the illustrations (as shown in Figure 2) of notifications, fingers, and social media users—depicted in symbols like a yellow shopping bag, a red YouTube icon, a blue chat dot, an envelope for messages, a thumbs-up for likes, a bell for notifications, and a red dot for location—underscore themes of technology, social media, and algorithmic influence on behavior. The finger symbol with a string suggests a continuous connection between algorithms and users, highlighting digital platforms' pervasive role in modern life.

In terms of media, the film provides examples of misinformation and the rapid spread of rumors through social media. Devices and machines are now becoming communicators, replacing journalists as communicators (Jamil, 2020). For instance, anti-surveillance protests in Hong Kong, where demonstrators dismantled smart light poles, were misrepresented in video footage that resurfaced online, falsely linking the lampposts to COVID-19. According to Tristan Harris, the video was used as an example of how we are currently bombarded with rumors. So, through this film, it is hoped that the audience can understand and see how misinformation and distortions are spread. All social media platforms enable the spread of manipulative narratives very quickly and cheaply.

As social media becomes a central medium for communication, the growth and impact of digital capitalism in public discourse intensify (Fuchs, 2022). However, they have become prominent in public attention and debate (Preston, 2020). AI technologies further complicate this landscape by enabling deepfake images and videos, which can amplify disinformation and erode public trust in civic institutions (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). There has never been a communication medium that has not triggered a backlash or even a moral panic regarding its possible impact (Siapera & Preston, 2020).

The internet has also weakened the economic foundation of traditional media, particularly print (Hallin & Mancini, 2019), even as print still influences agenda-setting for other media like TV and online platforms (Fortunati & O'Sullivan, 2019). Cinema, once limited to theatres, has also shifted due to streaming services like Netflix, which utilize technology to offer more accessible viewing experiences (Ong et al., 2024). This shift represents the broader evolution of media in a digitally driven society (Fithrotulhaq, 2024).

Implications

The use of a critical theory approach, combined with CDA and semiotic analysis, enables this study to provide a deeper multidisciplinary insight into how social media algorithms are perceived and critiqued. This approach addresses gaps in previous research, contributing to a richer understanding of the complex impact of social media algorithms by examining both positive and negative implications. For instance, while earlier studies like that of Ashfiasari and Wiyata (2021) may have examined specific aspects, this study delves into various facets with greater depth, offering a holistic view. Additionally, to mitigate potential bias from the post-truth perspective noted in

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Iddianto and Azi's (2022) research, this study incorporates CDA and semiotic methods for a balanced analysis.

Furthermore, this study also fills a gap by exploring the film's utopian perspective, which was previously overlooked by Augustine and Xavier (n.d.). The findings align with Febriyanti and Ida (2023) on the critical theory of digital labor, particularly as it pertains to industrial technology, emphasizing how algorithms are used to exploit digital labor while also considering their potential benefits. By integrating these methodologies and perspectives, the study presents a holistic view of algorithmic influence, opening up new avenues for understanding the intersections between technology, society, and culture.

CONCLUSION

This research examines both utopian and dystopian perspectives on digital technology, focusing on themes of algorithmic manipulation, political polarization, mental health, the digital economy, social control, and media. Using discourse analysis, the study critiques social, economic, political, and media frameworks, particularly highlighting the adverse impacts of social media. Through semiotics, it analyzes symbols and signs in the film, revealing how technology shapes public perception and raises awareness of its societal implications. By integrating semiotic analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Christian Fuchs' critical theory, this research offers a multidimensional approach to understanding how discourse can reinforce or challenge specific power structures and ideologies. This approach provides a comprehensive insight into the ways digital technology affects individual autonomy, privacy, and societal cohesion, helping to illuminate both the promises and perils of our increasingly digital world.

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