

Surveillance Capitalism in *Black Mirror*'s "Joan Is Awful"

Dr. Syeda Narjis Fatima

Associate Professor of English, Bhoj Reddy Engineering College for Women,
Hyderabad, India

Paper Received on 09-05-2026, Accepted on 10-06-2026

Published on 11-06-26; DOI:10.363993/RJOE.2025.11.02.789

Abstract

The rise of advanced digital technologies has enabled the collection and sharing of personal information for commercial purposes. This has also revolutionized the form of entertainment, with personal lives being converted into consumable content. This study analyzes the *Black Mirror* episode "Joan Is Awful" to examine how private experiences are commodified for public entertainment through Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. The paper argues that the episode critiques the economic logic behind the deployment of technology and not the technological advancement in itself. It demonstrates that surveillance capitalism operates through instrumentarian power, aimed at tuning the audience to augment engagement. "Joan Is Awful" depicts the use of artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies to extract behavioural data and modify it to intensify public scrutiny, supporting marketing objectives.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Black Mirror, Deepfake Technology, Instrumentarian, Public Scrutiny, Surveillance Capitalism

Introduction

"Joan Is Awful" is the premiere episode of the sixth season of the popular series *Black Mirror*, written by Charlie Brooker and directed by Ally Pankiw. The story centers on Joan, an average woman whose life is turned around when she discovers that the online streaming service Streamberry has developed a television show based on her life. Based on Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism, this paper contends that the episode not only shows the concept of surveillance as observation but also as reconstruction, where digital platforms are reconstructing reality to meet market

demands. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism is the unilateral claiming of private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data (8). This system operates through instrumentarian power that transforms society to achieve capital gains (Zuboff 352–53). The paper argues that the episode critiques the economic logic behind the deployment of technology and not the technological advancement in itself. It contends that technology is not an autonomous force and its detrimental effects arise when it's mishandled for specific commercial outcomes. As reflected in Streamberry, a surveillance capitalist deploys technology strategically to achieve economic goals. This study explores how surveillance capitalism operates through the commodification of personal experiences.

Literature Review

Black Mirror has been widely studied as a critique of the social and ethical implications of emerging technologies. Scholars have argued that the series examines how technological innovations become intertwined with systems of surveillance, capitalism, and social control (Fuchs). Rather than presenting technology as inherently harmful, *Black Mirror* often highlights the consequences of its deployment within profit-driven structures.

Research on digital media has increasingly focused on the commodification of human experience. Christian Fuchs argues that social media platforms generate economic value by transforming users' everyday interactions and activities into data that can be monetized (Fuchs). Similarly, Couldry and Mejias contend that contemporary digital platforms extract data from human life in ways that resemble new forms of colonial appropriation, where personal experiences become valuable resources for corporations (Couldry and Mejias 3–5).

Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism provides an important framework for understanding these developments. According to Zuboff, digital corporations collect behavioural data beyond operational requirements and transform it into profitable predictive products (94–97). Through what she calls instrumentarian power, these systems influence and shape human behaviour to serve commercial objectives (352–76). Recent studies have also examined the representation of artificial intelligence in *Black Mirror*. Vocásek argues that “Joan Is Awful” reflects contemporary anxieties surrounding AI-generated content and the

commercialization of human identity (480–92). Likewise, Öhman and Floridi discuss the ethical concerns associated with digital replicas and AI-generated representations, particularly issues of consent, ownership, and identity control.

While existing scholarship has explored technology, surveillance, and artificial intelligence in *Black Mirror*, limited attention has been paid to how “Joan Is Awful” specifically illustrates surveillance capitalism through the commodification of personal experience. This study addresses that gap by applying Zuboff’s concepts of behavioural surplus and instrumentarian power to analyse the episode.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach by employing a textual analysis of the episode. It examines themes, characters, and dialogues through Zuboff’s theory of surveillance capitalism, focussing on behavioural surplus and instrumentarian power. It applies Zuboff’s (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism to examine how companies commodify human experiences into data for entertainment and profit.

Results and Discussion

“Joan Is Awful” acts as a critique of economic logic that commodifies privacy, elucidating technology as an instrument of capitalist exploitation. The television show, which is updated in real-time, reflects her personal conversations, professional choices, and personal shortcomings to the world. As the series based on her life gains popularity, Joan begins losing control over her identity. She articulates this loss directly when she says, “I am not even the main character in my own life” (“Joan Is Awful”).

She realizes that her actions are no longer hers alone but are always edited and replayed by the system. She feels exhausted and defeated. Joan becomes more self-conscious about her actions and alters her behavior because she knows that it can be used as content. This is an example of instrumentarian power, where power is not exerted through violence but through technological systems that regulate how people are perceived and understood (Zuboff 376). Such trends can also be noticed in today’s digital culture, where visibility is a constant factor that makes people observe and regulate their own behavior, especially on social media.

Joan is presented as “awful” not because this reflects her true character, but because negative and sensational portrayals are more dramatic and engaging. As one

explanation within the episode suggests, audiences are drawn to behaviors that feel uncomfortable or controversial (“Joan Is Awful”). This reflects Shoshana Zuboff’s idea of behavioral surplus, in which personal data is collected and reused to generate profit by shaping content around what holds audience attention (Zuboff 94–97). The episode shows how surveillance capitalism turns Joan’s personal experiences and identity into content that can be used for profit and entertainment.

When Joan attempts to take legal action, she realizes that her life has been “sold” through the terms and conditions agreement that she accepted upon joining the platform. Her lawyer explains that Streamberry has the legal right to monitor her devices—and the devices of those around her—to extract data for content creation (“Joan Is Awful” 22:10). This agreement, which she does not take seriously at the time, gives the platform Streamberry legal access to her data and likeness. This reflects broader concerns that users frequently accept digital agreements without fully understanding their implications (Bakos et al.). Consequently, deeply personal moments are transformed into entertainment. This highlights the issue of inequality in digital culture, where platforms are more concerned for a celebrity than a regular user. At first, Joan feels hesitant to commit an act of rebellion as it might damage the public image of Salma Hayek. This explains how responsibility is displaced from corporations to individuals like Joan, even when they are the ones being exploited. This further resonates with the debates surrounding AI-generated performances and the loss of control over digital images (Couldry and Mejias 3–5).

The series ends with Joan and Salma Hayek destroying the quamputer, which is the quantum computer used for the real-time CGI simulation, symbolically dismantling the system that controls their images. This is the point where Joan finally regains control of her life. She is once again able to act freely without being watched or edited. The ending is quite optimistic compared to other episodes of *Black Mirror*. However, it illustrates that taking back control means challenging and disrupting the systems of technology that make such surveillance and exploitation possible.

Conclusion

Thus, “Joan Is Awful” exposes the contemporary digital structures. Its central argument is not focussed on technological innovation in itself, but the inherent economic logic that pervades the system. This system views human

experiences as raw material for profit and individuals just as consumers. In the episode, the platform Streamberry utilises Artificial Intelligence and deepfake technology to portray Joan as awful. This demonstrates how surveillance capitalism employs instrumentarian power to extract and modify behavioural surplus. The resultant public scrutiny serves as a mechanism to enhance engagement, thereby illustrating that the digital economy seeks constant behavioural modification to achieve economic imperatives. The episode reflects on the commodification of identity, privacy and agency through digital platforms. “Joan Is Awful” extends beyond fiction to highlight the problems of the contemporary digital culture, particularly the capability of AI technologies to imitate human behaviour.

Works Cited

- Bakos, Yannis, et al. “Does Anyone Read the Fine Print? Testing a Law and Economics Approach to Standard Form Contracts.” *The Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–35. doi:10.1086/674424.
- Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford UP, 2019.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed., SAGE, 2017.
- “Joan Is Awful.” *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, season 6, episode 1, directed by Ally Pankiw, Netflix, 15 June 2023.
- Öhman, Carl, and Luciano Floridi. “Persons and Their Digital Replicas.” *Philosophy & Technology*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2025, article 12. doi:10.1007/s13347-025-00854-V.
- Vocásek, Tibor. “Who Is Awful? Black Mirror and the Dystopian Imaginary of AI Labor.” *Human Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2024, pp. 480–492. doi:10.1515/humaff-2024-0037.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.