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The Intersection of Political Power and Data Exploitation: Implications for Privacy and Security in Ghana's Digital Age

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Abstract

Digital technologies are rapidly being integrated into the political process and this massive transformation is bringing both opportunities and significant challenges. The research is focused on how the merging of political power and data exploitation has led to a new challenge known as surveillance capitalism – where personal data is gathered, commodified and used without the data owners' consent—in the privacy and security field. With the guidance of four key research questions, the study makes use of the mixed-methods approach, combining literature review with empirical data collected through surveys. Academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and PubMed, build the arsenal of the literature review, examining the theoretical frameworks of surveillance capitalism and how effective current legal frameworks, such as Ghana's Data Protection Act, 2012. The survey component captures public perceptions of political vigilantism and its exacerbation through data exploitation. The findings highlight the need for stronger enforcement of data protection laws, increased public awareness, and the development of strategies that balance innovation with privacy protection. This study provides critical insights for policymakers, emphasising the urgency of addressing the dual challenges of data exploitation and political violence to safeguard democratic processes in Ghana.

Keywords: Data Privacy, Ghana, National Security, Political Vigilantism, Surveillance Capitalism

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of digital technologies into political processes has transformed the landscape of governance and power. Ghana, like many countries, has been exposed to a number of challenges and opportunities as a result of this transformation. On one hand, digital platforms provide new platforms for political engagement and mobilisation. On the other hand, the rise of surveillance capitalism—the practice of collecting, analysing, and monetising personal data—has led to many introduced concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the integrity of democratic processes.

Surveillance capitalism, a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff, refers to the economic system where companies extract and commodify personal data, often without seeking users' explicit concerns. (Zuboff, 2019). This

phenomenon is particularly concerning in the world of politics where the improper use of data is used to skew electoral outcomes, foster political violence and undermine the trust that the public has for democratic processes and institutions. In Ghana, political vigilantism—a form of organised group violence often linked to political parties—has already posed serious threats to national security and democratic stability (Papa Bentil et al., 2024). Ghana’s Data Protection Act, 2012, represents a significant step towards safeguarding personal data in this age of massive digitalisation. However, the emergence of surveillance capitalism poses new challenges which may be best addressed with further legal and regulatory adjustments. The existing framework requires some modifications that will allow for it to remain robust in the face of the modern complexities introduced by the digitalisation of political processes and the potential for data exploitation by political actors.

This article aims to explore the intersection of political power and data exploitation in Ghana, focusing on the implications for privacy and security. By examining the mechanisms through which surveillance capitalism operates, the role of digital data in political processes, and the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the risks involved. Additionally, the article proposes strategies for balancing innovation with privacy protection, offering insights into how Ghana can navigate these challenges while strengthening its democratic foundations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Surveillance capitalism is core to understanding the modern problems associated with data privacy. Zuboff (2019) describes it as a novel manifestation of economic activity that converts human experience into free raw materials for commercial practices. This transition from commodities to the commercialisation of behavioural data reflects a grand leap away from the traditional capitalism (Fuchs, 2012). Datafication, converting different parts of social life into data, is a process that gives companies the power to predict and manipulate behaviour, a lot of times, in ways that users are unable to grasp (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013).

As far as politics is concerned, surveillance capitalism intersects with the brittleness of the state and social construct theories. Arif and Dutta (2024) mentioned that the legitimacy of a state is present in its ability to transact security and order for the people’s loyalty. Nevertheless, when the state fails to meet its end of the bargain by fulfilling its duties, non-state actors like the political vigilante groups may arise to fill in the void. In Ghana, these groups have historically functions outside existing legal frameworks, challenging state authority and fuelling political violence (Papa Bentil et al., 2024).

Table 1: Summary of Key Theoretical Frameworks

Theory	Key Concepts	Relevance to the Study
Surveillance Capitalism	Commodification of personal data, behavioural data	Explains the economic incentives behind data exploitation
State Fragility Theory	Weak state institutions, non-state actors filling gaps	Contextualises the rise of political vigilantism in Ghana
Social Contract Theory	State’s legitimacy based on providing security	Illustrates the breakdown of state-citizen relationships due to vigilante groups

2.2. Empirical Studies

The Empirical studies on Privacy of Data underscore the distinct effects of surveillance capitalism on individual rights and societal well-being. Findings suggest that companies like Facebook and Google extensively collect data; a practice that has profound consequences for privacy, autonomy, and democracy (Anderejevic, 2014; Van Dijk, 2014). The scandal involving Facebook and Cambridge for example illustrates how personal data could be exploited for political manipulation, begging questions surrounding serious ethical and legal considerations (Isaak & Hanna, 2018).

Ghanaian political vigilantism persists as a serious issue, with groups like the Delta Force and Azorka Boys engaging heavily in electoral violence (Gyampo et al., 2017; Debrah et al., 2024). These groups, backed by political parties that benefit from their activities, often operate with impunity. Utilising digital data in these contexts can further solidify their power, since it has become easier in this digital age to conduct targeted misinformation campaigns and voter manipulation (Papa Bentil et al., 2024).

2.3. Comparative Analysis

Surveillance capitalism and political vigilantism are global phenomena. Similar dynamics have are very much present in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, that have weak state institutions and intense political competition which have accommodated organised group violence and the exploitation of personal data (Agbibo, 2018; Mwangi, 2012). These examples highlight the immense relevance of having legal frameworks that are properly set-up and implemented. It also shows the need for international cooperation to make contributions toward addressing these challenges.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Surveillance Capitalism and Political Vigilantism

Aspect	Surveillance Capitalism	Political Vigilantism
Definition	Economic system that commodifies personal data	Organised group violence linked to political parties
Key Actors	Corporations (e.g., Facebook, Google)	Vigilante groups (e.g., Delta Force, Azorka Boys)
Main Activities	Data collection, analysis, monetisation	Intimidation, violence, protection of political interests
Impact on Society	Privacy violations, behavioural manipulation	Undermining democratic processes, national security threats
Legal and Ethical Concerns	Lack of transparency, consent, and data protection	Erosion of state authority, impunity for violence

3. Methodology

This study makes use of the mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of existing literature with quantitative data collection through surveys. The mixed-methods approach is best suited to addressing the research questions that extend to both the theoretical and empirical aspects of the union between political power and the exploitation of power in Ghana.

3.1. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which surveillance capitalism operates in the digital age, particularly in the context of political processes in Ghana?
2. How effective are existing legal and regulatory frameworks, including Ghana's Data Protection Act, 2012, in protecting privacy and mitigating the risks associated with data exploitation?
3. What are the public perceptions of political vigilantism in Ghana, and how does data exploitation exacerbate this issue?
4. What strategies can be implemented to balance technological innovation with privacy protection and enhance national security in Ghana?

3.2. Justification for the Mixed-Methods Approach

The mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive deep-dive of these research questions, enabling the integration of both qualitative insights and quantitative data, exploration of complex phenomena, and offering nuanced understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3.3. Qualitative Component: Literature Review

Extensive literature review was essential in the qualitative component of the study as it shed light on the theoretical foundations that backed surveillance capitalism and its implications for data privacy and political processes. This review was conducted using several academic databases, including **Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and PubMed**; chosen for their wide-ranging coverage of scholarly articles, books, and reports relevant to the study's focus.

Search terms included "surveillance capitalism," "data privacy," "political vigilantism," "Ghana," "GDPR," and "Data Protection Act, 2012." The search was refined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) ensuring that the papers included were only the ones that were recent and most relevant to the study.

3.4. Quantitative Component: Survey Design and Implementation

Capturing public perceptions of political vigilantism and data exploitation in Ghana through surveys was the approach used to complement the qualitative analysis. Surveys are renowned in the space of social research as a method for gathering empirical data from a large population, enabling the identification of trends and patterns (Fowler, 2014).

The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, making room for the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data. Closed-ended questions facilitated statistical analysis, while open-ended questions provided rich qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perceptions.

3.5. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the survey reached individuals that had the relevant experiences or knowledge of political vigilantism in Ghana. This approach is particularly effective in mixed-methods research where it is required that the answers to the research questions are specific, and conclusions, recommendations and arguments are built on the basis of informed perspectives (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed by summarising key findings using descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was applied to address the open-ended questions from the qualitative data. The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, grounded in both empirical data and theoretical analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 3: Survey Responses on Political Vigilantism

Survey Question	Response Options	Percentage (%)
Awareness of political vigilante groups	Very aware	65%
	Somewhat aware	25%
	Not aware	10%
Affected by vigilante group activities Perception of the impact on the electoral process	Yes	40%
	No	60%
	Very negative	55%
	Negative	30%
	Neutral	10%
	Positive	3%
	Very positive	2%
Effectiveness of government action	Very effective	5%
	Effective	10%

Survey Question	Response Options	Percentage (%)
	Neutral	25%
	Ineffective	30%
	Very ineffective	30%

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, such as providing all participants with the free-will of engagement (informed consent), and treating their data with confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review boards, in line with the guidelines set by the British Psychological Society (2018).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Surveillance Capitalism in Ghana

In Ghana, the digital revolution has opened the doors for political engagement but at the same time, exposed new risks as far as surveillance capitalism is concerned. Digital platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, which can be used to influence voter behaviour, spread misinformation, and exacerbate political tensions. Significant privacy concerns are raised in the absence of collection without explicit consent (Zuboff, 2019).

Targeted advertising, personalised recommendations, and predictive algorithms, are some of the various ways through which surveillance capitalism operates. These tools are used not only by corporations to maximise profits but also by political actors intended on swaying public opinion and manipulating the outcomes of the electoral process. The opacity of these practices, coupled with the asymmetry of power between users and data collectors, weakens public trust in digital platforms and democratic processes (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

4.2. Political Vigilantism and Data Exploitation

The rise of political vigilantism in Ghana is closely linked to the country's political history, characterised by intense competition between the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Papa Bentil et al., 2024). These groups often use violence as a means to protecting their interests, especially during election seasons. The exploitation of digital data can further entrench the power of these groups, as it allows them to target opponents, spread fear, and manipulate public perception.

For instance, in the 2020 general elections, vigilante groups used social media to organise, recruit, and execute violent actions. The ability to target specific individuals or communities with misinformation or threats has made digital platforms a powerful tool for political violence (Gyampo et al., 2017; Debrah et al., 2024). This convergence of surveillance capitalism and political vigilantism gravely threatens national security, eroding public trust presents a serious threat to national security, as it erodes public trust in both the state and digital platforms.

4.3. Impact on National Security

The effects of surveillance capitalism on Ghanaian national security are so significant to be parted with. The ability of political actors to utilise personal data, merely for the electoral gain of it greatly erodes the legitimacy of the democratic process and adds to the staining of the cultural fabric. Again, the withering of privacy and the exploitation of digital surveillance tools can teardown social cohesion since citizens begin to lose trust in both their state and their fellow citizens (Zuboff, 2019).

Facilitating the political process with digital technologies has opened the door further for foreign interference in domestic affairs. The global nature of platforms means that it is accessible all around the world, despite the location of their collection, potentially exacerbating political tensions and undermining national security, as far as Ghana is concerned (Schwartz & Peifer, 2020).

4.4. Legal and Regulatory Frameworks for Data Protection

To combat the issues surrounding data privacy and the risks posed by surveillance capitalism as expressed by the masses, a number of jurisdictions have put in place comprehensive legal frameworks. Included in the list of most notable are the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union, and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States. These frameworks present full-bodies rights for individuals with regard to their personal data whether it is the right to access, rectify or delete their information.

Ghana's Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) stands as the fundamental legal determiner for protecting personal data. The aim of this Act's establishment was to regulate how data collectors and processors acquire, analyse/process, and use the personal data of individuals in the country, avoiding an infringement on their rights. The Data Protection Act is there to put in place measures that makes it compulsory for personal data to be processed fairly and lawfully, especially mandating organisations to first receive consent before acquiring or using personal data. Data controllers are obliged to ensure data security and give individuals the right to access their data and seek compensation if their rights are infringed upon.

Irrespective of these provisions, it is still difficult to enforce and spread the awareness of the Data Protection Act, especially in the conversation of political data exploitation. The Act, although comprehensive, requires robust mechanisms that aid in better enforcement and broadens public awareness, in a bid to address the challenges that arise from the convergence of political power and data exploitation in Ghana.

To provide a comparative analysis, *Table 3* summarises the key features of the GDPR, CCPA, and Ghana's Data Protection Act, 2012, highlighting the strengths and areas for improvement in Ghana's existing framework.

Table 4: Legal Frameworks for Data Protection

Feature	GDPR	CCPA	Ghana's Data Protection Act, 2012
Jurisdiction	European Union	California, United States	Ghana
Scope	Applies to all entities processing EU data	Applies to businesses meeting certain criteria	Applies to all data controllers and processors operating within Ghana
Consent Requirements	Explicit consent required	Opt-out model for data sales	Explicit consent required for data collection and processing
Enforcement	Fines up to €20 million or 4% of turnover	Civil penalties up to \$7,500 per violation	Enforcement by the Data Protection Commission; penalties for non-compliance
Rights of Individuals	Right to access, rectify, erase data	Right to know, delete, and opt-out of data sales	Right to access, correct, and request deletion of personal data
Challenges	Cross-border enforcement, compliance costs	State-level enforcement, varying compliance	Limited public awareness, need for stronger enforcement mechanisms

5. Recommendations

5.1. Enhancing Legal Frameworks

It is important to build upon the existing Data Protection Act, 2012 in order to improve and strengthen Ghana's data protection regime. As mentioned earlier, it is important to enhance enforcement mechanisms, increase public awareness and ensuring that the Act is better equipped to face the challenges of the time. Nevertheless, in addition to this, feeding of the brains of legal frameworks such as the GDPR and the CCPA, could be beneficial in providing valuable insights into renovating the Ghanaian legal framework. Modified provisions could include those for explicit consent, data minimisation, and transparency in data processing activities (Voigt et al., 2017).

5.2. Increasing Law Enforcement Capacity

Empowering law enforcement agencies with the capacity to address digital threats is equally vital. This could manifest in several ways, including better-funded training programmes, enhanced resources, and deeper cooperation between security agencies and technology companies. It is crucial that law enforcement is properly equipped to handle the complexities of digital data and its potential misuse in political contexts (Agbiboa, 2018)

5.3. Promoting Political Accountability

Parties and their leaders must be brought to the accountability alter for their part in fostering political vigilantism. This could be done through the introduction of stricter regulations on political campaigning, especially those that make use of digital data. Openness in political funding and campaign practices (transparency) could also water down the influence of vigilante groups (Papa Benti et al., 2024).

5.4. Encouraging International Cooperation

Considering how global digital data is, cooperation on an international scale is essential in solving the problems of surveillance capitalism. Ghana should partner with international bodies to share best practices, enhance cross-border data protection measures, and develop joint strategies for dealing with political violence in the digital age (Schwartz & Peifer, 2020).

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the intersection of political power and data exploitation in Ghana, focusing on the implications for privacy and national security. The findings imply that the union between surveillance capitalism and political vigilantism birth serious challenges to the democratic process and the respect of human rights. To see to the addressing of these challenges, a multifaceted approach is required, involving stronger legal frameworks, enhanced law enforcement capacities, political accountability, and international cooperation. Taking these steps will put Ghana in a position where it can safeguard both privacy and national security, especially in this digital age. The aim however is not to demonise technology, but to realise it without compromising democratic values.

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