



NEO-DYSTOPIAS AND DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

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Abstract

Contemporary science fiction in the twenty-first century has witnessed a crucial shift from classical dystopian imaginations to so-called neo-dystopian narratives shaped by digital technologies, algorithmic governance, and data-driven control systems. This paper argues that neo-dystopian science fiction serves as a critical literary response to the rise of digital authoritarianism, a mode of power characterized not by overt coercion but by invisible surveillance, predictive algorithms, and participatory compliance. Unlike earlier dystopias that relied on centralized totalitarian regimes, neo-dystopias depict decentralized, networked forms of hegemony embedded in everyday digital infrastructures.

Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from science fiction studies, political theory, and digital cultural studies, this research examines how contemporary science fiction re-enacts authoritarian power through themes of surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence governance, and algorithmic control. The study positions neo-dystopian narratives as cultural diagnostics of the present, revealing how digital technologies re-enact subjectivity, agency, and resistance. By analysing selected global and Indian science fiction texts published after 2000, this paper highlights the emergence of localized and postcolonial neo-dystopian imaginaries that question techno-liberty in diverse socio-political contexts.

Key words: *Neo-dystopia, Digital authoritarianism, Surveillance capitalism, Algorithmic governance, Artificial intelligence, Contemporary science fiction, Posthuman control, Digital surveillance*

Introduction

The paper argues that neo-dystopian science fiction no longer simply warns against imaginary futures, but also critically maps existing systems of control that operate through data extraction, behavioural prediction, and technological normalization. In doing so, contemporary science fiction becomes a form of speculative critique that exposes the moral and political implications of living under algorithmic regimes. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the evolution of dystopian literature by examining how neo-dystopias reflect the structural logic of digital power in the twenty-



first century, and by providing new insights into the intersections of technology, governance, and narrative form. Introduction

Dystopian literature has long served as a powerful narrative medium through which societies imagine, critique, and resist oppressive systems of power. From the totalitarian visions of the early twentieth century to Cold War anxieties about state surveillance, dystopian narratives have traditionally relied on centralized states, visible oppression, and clearly identifiable structures of dominance. However, the rapid technological transformations of the twenty-first century, marked by the proliferation of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, big data, and algorithmic rule, have fundamentally altered the nature of power itself. In response to these changes, contemporary science fiction has evolved into what can be described as neo-dystopian storytelling: narratives that depict subtle, decentralized, and technologically mediated forms of authoritarianism embedded in everyday life.

This paper suggests that neo-dystopias emerge from the convergence of digital technology and political power, leading scholars to increasingly refer to them as digital dictatorships. Unlike classical dictatorships, which rely on physical surveillance, state violence, and advertising censorship, digital dictatorships operate through data collection, predictive analytics, and participatory monitoring. Citizens are not simply observed; they are quantified, profiled, and coerced into compliance by algorithms that shape behaviour, consumption, and belief systems. Contemporary science fiction responds to this transformation by reimagining dystopia not as a distant or speculative future, but as an extension of the digital state of the present.

Theoretical discussions of dystopia have traditionally focused on themes of totalitarian rule, ideological conformity, and loss of identity. While these concerns remain relevant, they are not sufficient to explain the complex systems of power that operate in digitally networked societies. Neo-dystopian narratives shift the focus from centralized authority to distributed systems of control that exercise power through platforms, interfaces, and data-driven infrastructures. This shift reflects a broader cultural recognition that dominance in the digital age is often invisible, normalized, and internalized rather than imposed by force.

Science fiction plays a crucial role in articulating this shift because of its ability to extract from existing technological trends and imagine their long-term social implications. In the twenty-first century, science fiction has increasingly engaged with themes such as surveillance capitalism, algorithmic decision-making, and artificial intelligence. Governance, biometric surveillance. These narratives question how digital technologies reshape notions of freedom, privacy, and defence. Rather than depicting a rebellion against a single, oppressive state, neo-dystopian science fiction often depicts



characters fighting against systems that are pervasive but invisible, efficient but inhumane.

The rationale for this study lies in the growing relevance of digital authoritarianism as a global phenomenon. While often associated with technologically advanced states, digital authoritarian practices are not confined to any one political system. They manifest in both democratic and non-democratic contexts, blurring the distinction between freedom and control. Science fiction captures this ambiguity by presenting worlds in which citizens, lured by convenience, security, and technological advancement, voluntarily participate in their own surveillance. Neo-dystopias thus reflect a paradoxical state of affairs in which hegemony operates through consent rather than coercion.

This paper situates neo-dystopian science fiction within broader debates about the evolution of the genre in the twenty-first century. Scholars have increasingly noted that contemporary science fiction is less concerned with distant futures and more focused on the near-present or alternative realities shaped by digital culture. This shift signals a shift in the very function of science fiction from speculative projection to critical reflection. Neo-dystopias do not simply imagine what might go wrong in the future; they expose what is already unfolding in the present.

The scope of this study is intentionally contradictory. It uses science fiction theory to understand genre evolution, political theory to conceptualize authoritarian power, and digital cultural studies to analyse technological mediation. By integrating these perspectives, this paper aims to demonstrate how neo-dystopian narratives function as cultural texts that map the intersection of technology and power. The study focuses on science fiction texts produced after 2000, which marked the rise of social media, platform capitalism, and artificial intelligence. This temporal framing allows for an examination of how digital technologies influence narrative structure, thematic concerns, and representations of power.

A unique contribution of this paper lies in its inclusion of global and Indian science fictions. While many existing studies of dystopia remain Euro-American in focus, contemporary science fiction from the Global South offers crucial insights into how digital authoritarianism intersects with postcolonial histories, economic inequality, and uneven technological development. Indian science fiction in particular, with its distinctive neo- Dystopian imaginaries that combine technological futures with local political realities. By incorporating these perspectives, this paper challenges the assumption that digital tyranny is a uniform phenomenon, but instead highlights its culturally specific manifestations.

The research gap that this study addresses arises from the relative lack of sustained scholarly engagement with neo-dystopia as a distinct genre in contemporary



science fiction. While numerous studies examine surveillance, artificial intelligence, and digital culture in speculative narratives, there have been few attempts to theorize neo-dystopia as a coherent response to digital tyranny. Existing dystopian frameworks often rely on models of power that are inadequate to understand algorithmic governance and data-driven control. This paper seeks to fill that gap by offering a conceptual framework that connects neo-dystopian narratives to contemporary digital power.

By analysing how science fiction reimagines authoritarianism in the digital age, this study argues that neo-dystopias represent a new stage in the evolution of dystopian literature. These narratives expose the moral and political consequences of living under systems that monitor, predict, and shape human behaviour. In doing so, contemporary science fiction not only reflects technological anxieties but also provides crucial tools for understanding and resisting digital dominance. The following sections examine this transformation in detail, beginning with a theoretical discussion of neo-dystopia and digital authoritarianism, followed by analyses of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic control, representational globalism, and Indian science fiction texts.

Neo-Dystopia as a Theoretical Model in 21st Century Science Fiction

The concept of dystopia has undergone significant transformation in response to the changing structures of power in contemporary society. Classical dystopias, particularly represented by works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, depicted authoritarian control as centralized, visible, and violent. These narratives relied on totalitarian states, ideological indoctrination, and overt surveillance to dramatize the suppression of individual freedom. However, such models of power no longer fully capture the systems that dominate the digitally mediated world of the twenty-first century. Neo-dystopia emerges in response to this historical shift, marking a transition from monolithic authoritarianism to decentralized, technologically embedded systems of control. Unlike classical dystopias, neo-dystopian narratives often lack a single repressive ruler or state. Instead, power is dispersed through networks, platforms, and algorithms that operate invisibly but widely. Control is no longer imposed solely through fear or violence, but rather through normalization, convenience, and data-driven optimization.

Neo-dystopia thus reflects a world in which individuals are controlled not only by explicit commands, but also by computational processes that shape choices, behaviours, and identities. From a theoretical perspective, neo-dystopia can be understood as a literary response to what is described as a post-dystopian society. Traditional disciplinary institutions such as prisons, schools, and factories are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by digital infrastructures that continuously monitor and control individuals. Science fiction mirrors this shift by depicting societies in which surveillance is ambient, embedded within everyday objects, and internalized by the subjects themselves. The lack



of visible force in neo-dystopian narratives often complicates resistance, as characters struggle to identify the locus of authority they can oppose.

A defining feature of neo-dystopia is its proximity to the present. While classical dystopias predict distant futures, neo-dystopian science fiction often situates its narratives in near-future or alternate-present settings. This temporal proximity intensifies the genre's critical power, blurring the line between speculative fiction and social reality. Neo-dystopias do not ask readers to imagine an improbable future, but rather invite them to recognize the dystopian tendencies already embedded in contemporary digital life.

Moreover, neo-dystopian narratives presuppose the erosion of privacy as a central condition of modern existence. Surveillance is no longer an exceptional practice reserved for criminals or political dissidents; it becomes a universal and normalized aspect of citizenship. Science fiction reflects this transformation by depicting worlds in which constant surveillance is justified through appeals to security, efficiency, or personalization. In these narratives, individuals often consent to surveillance, exchanging privacy for access, comfort, or social participation. Such consent complicates traditional dystopian binaries of oppressor and oppressed, revealing how power operates through participation rather than coercion.

Neo-dystopia reframes the role of technology in speculative narratives. In classical dystopias, technology often served as a tool used by the state. Maintain control. In contrast, neo-dystopian science fiction presents technology as an autonomous or semi-autonomous system that transcends human intent. Algorithms make decisions, platforms control visibility, and artificial intelligence controls access to resources. Human agency is gradually replaced by computational logic, raising deep questions about responsibility, accountability, and ethical governance.

Crucially, neo-dystopia is not simply a thematic evolution, but a formal one. Narrative structures in contemporary science fiction often reflect the fragmented and networked nature of digital experience. Nonlinear storytelling, multiple perspectives, and database-like narrative forms reflect the logic of information systems. This formal experiment reinforces the thematic concern with decentralization, emphasizing that control in the digital age is pervasive and difficult to confront directly.

By conceptualizing neo-dystopia as a specific paradigm, this study argues that contemporary science fiction provides a crucial vocabulary for understanding new forms of authoritarianism. Neo-dystopian narratives reveal how power adapts to technological change, transforming dominance into subtle, efficient, and gentle. In doing so, they challenge readers to rethink traditional assumptions about freedom, autonomy, and resistance in the digital age.

Digital Authoritarianism and Surveillance Capitalism



The rise of neo-dystopian science fiction is inseparable from the emergence of digital authoritarianism as a defining feature of contemporary governance. Digital authoritarianism is the term used to describe systems of power that rely on digital technologies to monitor, predict, and influence behaviour at both the individual and collective levels. Unlike traditional authoritarian regimes that rely on visible repression, digital authoritarianism operates through data extraction, algorithmic analysis, and behavioural modification. Science fiction engages with these developments by imagining societies that exercise control not only through censorship, but also through information overload, personalization, and predictive governance. Central to this transformation is the logic of surveillance capitalism, a term used to describe economic systems that commodify personal data for profit and control. Surveillance capitalism thrives on the continuous collection of behavioral data, transforming everyday activities into valuable resources. Neo-dystopian narratives expose the consequences of this system, depicting worlds in which individuals are reduced to data profiles, valued not for their humanity but for their predictability. In such narratives, freedom is redefined the ability to choose from algorithmically curated options, while deviating from predicted behaviour, becomes a form of risk.

Science fiction often depicts surveillance capitalism as a mutually reinforcing relationship between corporate power and state power. Blurring the distinction between public administration and corporate control, governments outsource surveillance and decision-making to private technology firms. Neo-dystopian texts depict how this convergence creates hybrid forms of authoritarianism that are difficult to challenge through traditional political systems. Resistance is undermined not by brute force, but by the seamless integration of surveillance into everyday life.

A recurring motif in neo-dystopian science fiction is the illusion of transparency. Digital systems offer visibility, efficiency, and objectivity, yet their operations remain opaque to those subjected to them. Algorithms are presented as neutral and rational, concealing the ideological assumptions and power relations embedded in their design. Science fiction narratives shatter this myth by revealing how algorithmic systems reproduce inequality, bias, and exclusion under the guise of technological progress.

The cultural significance of this critique is evident in speculative works that explore the psychological consequences of constant surveillance. Characters in neo-dystopian narratives often internalize the logic of surveillance and regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of algorithmic judgment. This internalization represents a shift from external discipline to self-monitoring, where individuals become subjects and agents of control. Such representations resonate strongly with contemporary experiences of social media visibility, rating systems, and reputation economies.



Neo-dystopian science fiction also questions the temporal dimension of digital authoritarianism. Predictive algorithms work by predicting future behavior based on past data, effectively controlling the present through the logic of the future. As actions are increasingly shaped by probabilistic predictions, this temporal inversion undermines the possibility of real choice. Science fiction dramatizes this state of affairs by depicting societies that punish or reward individuals based on predicted outcomes rather than actual actions, eroding basic principles of justice and accountability. The normalization of surveillance is further reinforced by narratives of security and optimization. Neo-dystopian texts often depict societies that justify intrusive surveillance as necessary to prevent crime, manage resources, and ensure public health. These While the goals may seem benign, science fiction reveals how such logics legitimize elaborate systems of control. The promise of security becomes a mechanism for the gradual erosion of civil liberties, a process that unfolds gradually and is therefore difficult to resist.

Crucially, neo-dystopian narratives do not portray digital tyranny as an inevitable or monolithic force. Instead, they emphasize its contingency and fragility. Systems of control depend on continuous data flows, technological maintenance, and public compliance. By highlighting moments of disruption, failure, or human unpredictability, science fiction hints at the possibility of resistance within digitally governed societies. However, such resistance is often depicted as fragmented and localized, reflecting the challenges of resisting decentralized power structures.

By examining digital tyranny through the lens of neo-dystopia, contemporary science fiction offers a critical framework for understanding how power operates in the digital age. These narratives move beyond simple warnings against technology, and instead expose the political and economic structures that shape technological deployment. Surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, and data-driven control emerge not as abstract concepts but as lived realities that redefine what it means to be human in a monitored world.

AI Governance and Algorithmic Control in Neo-Dystopian Futures

One of the most defining features of neo-dystopian science fiction is its sustained engagement with artificial intelligence as a governing force rather than a mere technological tool. In classical dystopias, power was exercised through human agents – party officials, bureaucrats or ideological enforcers. In contrast, contemporary science fiction increasingly imagines systems of governance in which decision-making is delegated to algorithms, predictive models and autonomous artificial intelligence. This shift reflects real-world transformations in governance, where computational systems are used to manage populations, allocate resources and assess risk. Neo-dystopian narratives portray AI governance as a form of power that is ostensibly impartial, efficient and objective. Algorithms are framed as remedies for human error, bias and inefficiency.



However, science fiction exposes the ideological assumptions embedded in these systems, revealing how algorithmic decision-making reproduces and exacerbates existing structures of inequality. In such narratives, AI does more than simply enforce rules; It defines norms, shapes values, and determines the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. A recurring concern in neo-dystopian science fiction is the replacement of human judgment with computational logic. As algorithms operate beyond human transparency, characters are subjected to decisions they cannot contest or understand. This erosion of accountability transforms governance into an abstract process, making it difficult to find accountability for injustice or harm. Science fiction dramatizes this state of affairs by depicting societies in which legal systems, employment opportunities, and social mobility are controlled by opaque scoring systems.

The predictive power of artificial intelligence further intensifies the dystopian implications of algorithmic control. Neo-dystopian texts frequently explore systems that predict future behaviour based on historical data, effectively controlling individuals according to statistical probability rather than lived experience. This logic undermines ideas such as free will, moral responsibility, and rehabilitation. Characters are often judged not on the basis of what they have done, but on the basis of what algorithms predict they will do, but on the basis of the fact that they create a temporary dictatorship that determines the future present.

Importantly, neo-dystopian science fiction emphasizes that algorithmic rule is not inherently authoritarian, but becomes so through its combination with political and economic power. Artificial intelligence is portrayed as a technology that reflects the preferences of those who design and deploy it. When combined with state surveillance or corporate profit motives, AI becomes a mechanism for large-scale social control. Thus, science fiction resists techno-determinism, instead acting in the light of the political choices that shape technological systems. Another important aspect of AI rule in neo-dystopian narratives is the transformation of subjectivity. Individuals internalize algorithmic evaluations and modify their behaviour to match system expectations. This internalization represents a shift from external discipline to self-regulation, where subjects regulate themselves in anticipation of algorithmic judgment. Science fiction portrays this condition as deeply alienating, as characters struggle to reconcile their lived identities with the data-driven representations imposed on them.

Resistance within these narratives often takes unconventional forms. Rather than subverting a central authority, characters seek to disrupt data flows, manipulate algorithms, or reclaim unpredictable spaces. Such acts highlight the fragility of algorithmic systems that rely on stable patterns and continuous data input. Therefore, neo-dystopian science fiction suggests that human unpredictability remains a potential center of resistance, even in highly controlled digital environments. Contemporary



science fiction, with its focus on AI governance, presents a critical vision of power in the digital age. These narratives reveal how power is increasingly exercised through systems that claim to be neutral, while obscuring their ideological foundations. Neo-dystopian science fiction challenges readers to question the legitimacy of algorithmic decision-making and consider the ethical implications of handing over governance to machines.

Global and Indian Science Fiction Case Studies

Neo-dystopian concerns about digital tyranny are not limited to Western science fiction. Contemporary global and Indian science fiction offers diverse and context-specific explorations of algorithmic control, surveillance, and technological dominance. These narratives demonstrate that digital tyranny operates differently in cultural and political contexts shaped by local histories, social structures, and economic conditions. In global science fiction, neo-dystopian narratives often depict technologically advanced societies where surveillance and control through digital convenience are normalized. For example, speculative fiction inspired by platform culture explores worlds where social participation is mediated through ratings, reputation systems, and algorithmic visibility. Such narratives resonate with anxieties surrounding social media, data profiling, and the commodification of identity. In this context, neo-dystopian fiction critiques the illusion of choice offered by digital systems, revealing how personalization functions as a system of control.

Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* exemplifies this trend, depicting a privatized surveillance regime that offers financial security in exchange for total control. The novel is about how citizens willingly submit to authoritarian structures when technological systems offer stability and comfort. Atwood's work underscores a central argument of neo-dystopian theory: that dominance in the digital age often operates through consent rather than coercion.

Similarly, hypothetical narratives influenced by cyberpunk traditions, such as those associated with William Gibson, evolve in the twenty-first century to focus less on rebellious hackers and more on pervasive systems of control. Neo-dystopian cyberpunk shifts from a vision of resistance to the banality of surveillance, portraying digital tyranny not as an extraordinary crisis but as a normal condition of life. Indian science fiction offers a particularly compelling perspective on neo-dystopia, as it juxtaposes digital tyranny with post-colonial realities, bureaucratic governance, and socio-economic inequality. In contrast to Western narratives that often embrace widespread technological access, Indian neo-dystopian fiction highlights uneven digital development and the exclusionary consequences of algorithmic systems. These texts question how digital governance disproportionately affects marginalized populations, reinforcing existing hierarchies under the guise of modernization.



Works by writers such as Vandana Singh explore technological futures that are deeply entangled with local cultural and ethical concerns. Rather than presenting technology as an external oppressor, Indian science fiction often depicts it as embedded in everyday social practices. This approach allows for nuanced critiques of digital tyranny, which account for its oppressive and transformative potential. Samit Basu's speculative narratives similarly engage with bureaucratic and algorithmic control, often mixing satire with dystopian critique. His works reveal how digital systems intensify the power of governance and turn citizens into data points in broader governance infrastructures. Thus, Indian neo-dystopian fiction foregrounds the relationship between technology and the state, emphasizing how digital devices expand existing forms of bureaucratic surveillance.

A key difference in Indian neo-dystopian science fiction is its degree of intervention. Digital tyranny is not always depicted as comprehensive or technologically sophisticated; instead, it emerges through fragmented, inconsistent, and often dysfunctional systems. This depiction challenges dominant narratives of technological efficiency, revealing how digital governance can create chaos, exclusion, and resistance alongside control. By engaging global and Indian science fiction in conversation, this study demonstrates that neo-dystopia is a flexible and adaptable narrative mode. While unified by concerns about surveillance, algorithmic control, and AI governance, neo-dystopian texts reflect diverse cultural anxieties and political realities. This comparative perspective underscores the importance of moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks when analysing contemporary dystopian literature.

Ultimately, global and Indian neo-dystopian science fiction reveals that digital authoritarianism is not a uniform phenomenon. Rather, it manifests itself through context-specific configurations of technology, power, and culture. Science fiction replicates. These variations offer hypothetical spaces in which the consequences of algorithmic governance can be examined, contested, and rethought.

Conclusion

This study argues that contemporary science fiction has entered a specific neo-dystopian phase shaped by the rise of digital authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism, and algorithmic governance. In contrast to classical dystopian narratives that relied on centralized state power, visible repression, and ideological totalitarianism, neo-dystopian science fiction reflects the pervasive, invisible, and participatory nature of twenty-first-century control. Power in these narratives is not simply imposed; it is embedded in digital infrastructures that shape everyday life through data-driven systems, shaping subjectivity, behaviour, and agency. By tracing the evolution of dystopian representation from overt totalitarianism to algorithmic rule, this paper demonstrates how neo-dystopias function as



cultural diagnostics of the present, rather than speculative warnings about the distant future.

How surveillance operates through normalization, convenience, and predictive logic, making dominance efficient and often invisible, is exposed in contemporary science fiction. In doing so, neo-dystopian narratives challenge the assumption that technological progress will inevitably lead to greater freedom or transparency.

Analysis of digital authoritarianism and surveillance capitalism has revealed that control in the digital age is inseparable from economic structures that commodify human behaviour. Neo-dystopian science fiction criticizes the transformation of individuals into data subjects whose value lies in unpredictability. These narratives highlight the moral consequences of entrusting governance to algorithms that claim to be impartial while reproducing systemic bias and inequality. By presupposing the opacity of algorithmic decision-making, science fiction questions the legitimacy of technological power and exposes the political choices embedded in digital systems.

The debate over AI governance has increasingly emphasized the erosion of human agency under algorithmic control. Neo-dystopian narratives depict societies in which artificial intelligence not only enforces laws, but also defines norms and reshapes moral and legal frameworks. The displacement of human judgment by computational logic raises fundamental concerns. Responsibility, justice, and autonomy. Science fiction's engagement with these themes underscores its role as a critical space for examining the ethical limits of automation and predictive governance. A key contribution of this study lies in its comparative approach, which places global and Indian science fiction in dialogue. While Western neo-dystopian narratives often focus on technologically saturated societies, Indian science fiction reveals how digital authoritarianism intersects with postcolonial histories, bureaucratic rule, and unequal access to technology. These narratives demonstrate that algorithmic control does not operate in a uniform manner, but rather adapts to local political and cultural contexts. In particular, Indian neo-dystopian fiction challenges dominant narratives of technological efficiency by exposing the fragmented, exclusionary, and often contradictory nature of digital governance.

Importantly, neo-dystopian science fiction does not portray digital tyranny as an inescapable condition. These narratives suggest that, while resistance is fragmented and uncertain, unpredictability, moral reflection, and narrative imagination remain potential sites of disruption. By dramatizing the vulnerability of algorithmic systems, science fiction reminds readers that digital power depends on continued compliance and stable patterns—conditions that are never fully guaranteed.

In conclusion, neo-dystopian science fiction represents a critical evolution in the genre's engagement with power, technology, and society. It moves beyond the vision of



tyranny to examine the subtle mechanisms by which control is exercised in digitally mediated worlds. As digital technologies continue to shape governance, economics, and culture, neo-dystopian narratives offer essential insights into the political and moral stakes of contemporary life. This study confirms that science fiction in the twenty-first century is not merely speculative literature, but a vital form of critical inquiry—one that empowers readers to identify, question, and imagine alternatives to the structures of digital dominance that increasingly define the modern condition.

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