The concept of unending consumption is straightforward to grasp. When we subscribe to media, we provide companies with constant and consistent consumption (Arditi, 2021: 17). In return, we receive ubiquitous, mobile access to individualised media based on our preferences, history and interests. The streaming economy has reduced the attractiveness of the previous on-demand economy. For example, in the 2010s I may have purchased a song on iTunes for 99c, or indeed downloaded it illegally via a service like the Pirate Bay. With my Spotify subscription I can get (just about) every song ever for £10 a month. When compared to iTunes, the Pirate Bay or buying CDs in the 1990s this is easy, cheaper and legal. Companies have used streaming technologies to change the way we consume culture. We can binge watch, binge listen, skip seamlessly between products and texts in a manner unthinkable a few generations ago. However, this also embeds us in a logic of capitalism that forces us to consume more. We only have a finite time to consume what is pushed to us (Arditi, 2021: 18) so we consume as much as we can. In addition, streaming platforms receive real-time data about the consumption of everything on their platforms, from the content of shows to the demographics of users. This then changes what is produced by producers. For example, music labels recognise what is going viral on TikTok and then create new content based on this. What emerge are cycles of viral production

In 2025, digital media is primarily a means to distribute content for profit. Profitability comes from disintermediation (Arditi, 2021: 34–36). Disintermediation refers to the removal of things that come between – having less friction. iTunes disintermediated music in the 2000s by eliminating CDs. Streaming both disintermediates and de-acquisitions us. We don't own anything; instead we subscribe – for ever. Streaming has created the experience of media as having limitless capacity because of the cloud, with higher fidelity and ubiquitous access anywhere. However, after spending £100-plus a year, what do I have to show for my Spotify use? Nothing tangible apart from a story I can share on Instagram about my annual listening habits.

You might think this is irrelevant if you don't subscribe to streaming media – but all of the media in this chapter use the logic of unending consumption. Indeed, anyone who creates content on platforms is now a quintessential part of the streaming culture. When thinking about a platform like TikTok, we are involved in an unending consumption of ourselves. The stream of content is endless, and functions at super-fast operating speeds. We watch, we consume, we repeat and we are consumed as we produce.

Box 3.3 Case Study

Pokémon GO as a Form of Surveillance Capitalism

What harm could there be in Pokémon GO? People walking around, flicking PokeBalls at cute little creatures? Harmless. It's that walking around part that makes Pokémon GO a very interesting, insightful example of the true effects of the political economy of digital media. As an application running on a mobile device, Pokémon GO has several unsurprising features with regard to surveillance of users, data production and harvesting, data processing and using that data for advertising and profiling of users. The logic of mobile media applications in this context has been a concern for many years as surveillant practices and technologies that produce, process, disseminate and utilise data from users. Bauman and Lyon (2013) use the term 'liquid surveillance' to describe how these technologies have altered the mode of contemporary surveillance. Liquid surveillance is 'the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection or direction' (Lyon, 2007: 14). The surveillance aspect of these technologies is married to the form of modernity 'that does not stand still', which Bauman defines as liquid (2007: 3). This notion of an underlying surveillant logic in digital media and the applications used through digital media underpins Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

> Surveillance capitalism is not the same as digital technology. It is an economic logic that has hijacked the digital for its own purposes. The logic of surveillance capitalism begins with unilaterally claiming private human experience as free raw material for production and sales. It wants your walk in the park, online browsing and communications, hunt for a parking space, voice at the breakfast table …
>
> (Zuboff, 2019)

Zuboff conceptualises surveillance capitalism as a drive to quantify or extract the phenomenal experience of being human, transform that experience into data and then sell that data as part of a constructed image of the user, a data subject made from the endless streams of data produced by digitally enabled everyday activity. This logic is not limited by company or by application but applies across the digital as a field of activity; anything that can produce data on the user can be enrolled into surveillance capitalism. The continual surveillance of the user is part of the new logic of capitalism itself, where value is extracted from not only the surplus labour of the user as audience, but also from all interactions with digital media, no matter how everyday or mundane.

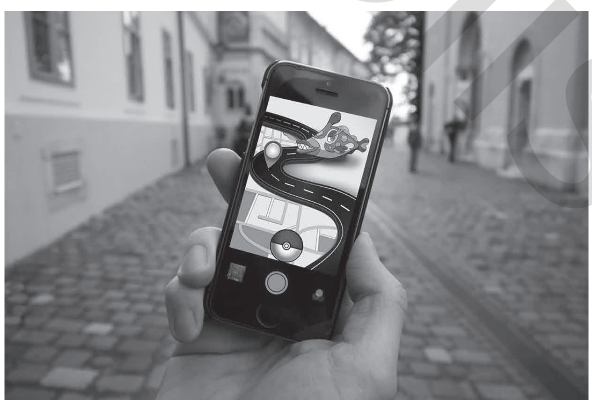

Figure 3.2 Pokémon GO

Source: https://picryl.com/media/pokemon-pokemon-go-pocket-monster-transportation-traffic-52efd2 CC 1.0

(Continued)

Unsurprisingly, Zuboff uses the development and use of Pokémon GO as an example of the pervasiveness of surveillance capitalism. In this analysis, the game itself acts as a form of concealment of the logic of surveillance capitalism. The aim of Pokémon GO is not to capture Pokémon, but for the movement and activity of the user to be captured as data for processing to be sold. As befits a product of surveillance capitalism, Pokémon GO itself was born out of Google. John Hanke (Google Maps and Street View VC) launched Niantic Labs (Zuboff, 2019: 311). Following the formation of Alphabet as a parent company for Google in 2015, Niantic was established as a separate company with $30 million in seed funding from Google. Pokémon GO represents a kind of 'living lab' for the testing and simulation at scale of not only real-time contextual data, but also the use of that data in nudging and controlling the movement of the user. Essentially, Zuboff argues that the game itself nudges players towards interactions with both other users and, most critically, specific places in a form of gamification as behavioural modification. Indeed, for Zuboff the critical aspect of Pokémon GO as an instance of surveillance capitalism is that while the game runs players through the real world as part of the game experience, this is not done for the sake of the game *that players think they are playing*.

The shaping of behaviour and our spatial experience that we see in Pokémon GO is part of a larger game of surveillance capitalism. This is exemplified through Pokémon GO promotions, how playing Pokémon GO drives footfall and how physical places are surfaced through the interface to draw the attention of the player (Zuboff, 2019: 314). Since 2017, Niantic has offered businesses the possibility of being 'sponsored locations' that pay for exposure (i.e. hosting a gym) on a cost-per-visit model. Organisations such as McDonald's have extensively used this system, sponsoring more than 3,000 locations in the game in Japan and in early 2020 entering a partnership with Niantic across Latin America and the Caribbean to promote their locations as locations within the game system (Dunham et al., 2024). The placement of key Pokémon and gyms in the game is co-ordinated with the business interests of advertisers, often without visibility to the gamer, and the playing of the game therefore becomes a series of controlled movements through a commercialised space. The game has two levels: the ludic experience and the commercial level that shapes that ludic experience.

Against this backdrop of surveillance capitalism, it is worth considering the kind of labour that Pokémon GO feeds from to sate the demand for data from this economic logic. Pokémon GO is a location-based game; to play the game is to move, to be mobile. Movement through space is the critical dynamic in the successful playing of the game for users (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017). Our work in moving is being used by the game to conduct fine analyses of mobilities and spaces for advertisers. Accordingly, players are never simply playing the game, but working within the confines of system that presents a gamic veneer. As Saker and Evans (2021) identify, the players of Pokémon GO either ignore this or do not understand how their movements are being controlled. The game being played is hidden by another game being played – but it is the player that is ultimately played.

Conclusions

While the political economy of the mass media was closely related to leveraging audiences for power based on ideological conformity, the political economy of digital media is