Impact of AI on Democracy

AI & Society

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence is reshaping democracy, but at what cost? While hailed as a tool for innovation, AI's role in politics has sparked fears of manipulation, inequality, and erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Algorithms that shape public opinion and drive decision-making raise critical questions: Are they empowering citizens, or are they tools of control wielded by the few? Popular press warns of filter bubbles, misinformation, and political polarization, while scientific research exposes deeper structural risks like algorithmic bias and concentration of power. This report delves into these contrasting perspectives, highlighting the urgent need to address AI's double-edged influence on democracy.

Usage and Impact of AI on Democracy

The impact of Artificial Intelligence technologies on democracy is a topic that has sparked a lot of controversies in today's society. AI technologies aim to strengthen democracy while simultaneously posing challenges to their implementation and usage in society.

Some arguments for the use of AI include helping design inclusive policies, improving citizen engagement in discussions, decision making, combating misinformation, and even AI as a candidate for leadership positions. Opponents of the use of AI in society argue that the use of AI could undermine democratic values through further division of power in society, erosion of privacy, risk of bias, manipulation, and misinformation. Others worry about difficulties with accountability, associated environmental concerns, and lack of human understanding.

Popular press perspective

1 Public opinion perception

The algorithms in social media platforms promote content that generates strong emotional reactions, by showing users content that either aligns well with their existing beliefs and opinions or strongly contrasts their opinions. On one hand, this helps users easily find content that they are interested in. However, this can lead to echo chambers and confirmation bias, which can in turn increase political polarization. The article by the New York Times [9] highlights how supporters of impeached South-Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol thank their right-wing YouTubers that glorify the president and "feed tales of spying and voting fraud to Yoon and backers". The article, however also mentions that it was also YouTube's algorithm that helped the news of the president' martial law declaration go viral, driving widespread attention and leading citizens to rush to the assembly.

Combating misinformation has become a pressing challenge in the age of technological innovation. Misinformation can distort public opinion, erode trust in institutions, and create a divisive and ill-informed society. As citizens increasingly rely on digital platforms for news and information, the need to address the spread of falsehoods has never been more urgent. Some argue that AI technologies offer a promising solution and thus can protect the integrity of public discourse. The article [4] discusses how AI can be instrumental in detecting fake news and plagiarism by analyzing content for inconsistencies, identifying manipulated media, and flagging unreliable sources. However, the article also emphasizes that it is important to pair these AI-driven solutions with ethical guidelines and human oversight to ensure that they do not inadvertently suppress free speech or amplify bias.

2 Hybrid threats undermining countries' democracy

Hybrid threats, which combine various tactics such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and the exploitation of societal vulnerabilities, pose significant challenges to the stability of democratic nations. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) has developed the 'Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem' (CORE) model, a systems-thinking approach designed to assist policymakers in countering these complex threats efficiently and in a coordinated manner [5].

Recent events in Romania exemplify the impact of hybrid threats on democracy [3]. In a surprising turn, Romania cancelled its presidential runoff election following allegations of Russian interference. Far-right candidate Călin Georgescu, known for his pro-Putin stance, reportedly benefited from a sophisticated campaign that exploited TikTok algorithms and involved substantial payments to influencers to boost his popularity. Despite Georgescu's claims of zero campaign spending, investigations revealed coordinated efforts to manipulate public opinion through social media platforms. This scenario mirrors tactics observed in previous instances, such as the Cambridge Analytica [7] scandal during the Brexit referendum. Cambridge Analytica used data from millions of Facebook users without consent to craft targeted political messages aimed at influencing voter behavior. This misuse of personal data for political purposes highlights the vulnerabilities in digital platforms and the potential for external actors to undermine democratic processes.

3 AI as decision making tool

The use of AI technologies in decision-making processes has garnered significant attention, especially after scandals like the Dutch childcare benefits scandal [1], which highlights the potential dangers of relying on algorithms without adequate oversight. In this case, algorithms were employed to detect fraud in childcare benefits claims but disproportionately targeted ethnic minorities, leading to unjust accusations, financial devastation for thousands and in some cases parents taking away their own lives and more than a thousand children ending up in foster care. The scandal revealed the inherent biases in the algorithm, stemming from flawed data and a lack of transparency in its decision-making process. The Dutch scandal underscores that while AI has the potential to improve efficiency in decision-making, unchecked use can erode democratic values and harm citizens' rights, making the responsible use of AI a critical priority for Europe.

Scientific perspectives

1 Epistemic Impossibility of AI takeover of Democracy

The article [8] critically examines the idea that artificial intelligence (AI) could replace or take over democratic processes. The central argument is that an AI takeover of democracy is epistemically impossible due to the unique epistemological and normative foundations of democratic systems, which AI cannot replicate. The article argues that democracy relies on collective deliberation, pluralistic values, and the ability to incorporate diverse perspectives, which AI technologies inherently lack. Moreover, the author argues that algorithms are limited to the biases and constraints of their data, which are shaped by existing inequalities and may exclude marginalized voices. Although the article highlights AI's inability to replicate human judgment and democratic values, it might underplay the practical risks of AI's misuse in ways that could erode democratic processes. For example, AI systems could enable authoritarian control or manipulation of public opinion without needing to "understand" democracy.

2 Structural issues

Another perspective, explored in [2], focuses on the structural issues that AI introduces, including algorithmic bias and inequality. Critics argue that AI's opacity and concentration of control among a few powerful technology companies undermine accountability, as flawed or biased algorithms disproportionately harm marginalized communities. They also give examples such as the Dutch childcare benefits scandal, illustrating how unchecked reliance on AI in decision making can lead to systemic injustices, with devastating social consequences.

3 Hybrid Threats and Pseudo-Public Political Speech

In the context of hybrid threats, AI facilitates disinformation campaigns and pseudo-public political speech [6]. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how microtargeted messages, hidden from public scrutiny, can manipulate voter behavior on an unprecedented scale. Advocates for transparency suggest publishing microtargeted messages in public databases to safeguard democratic accountability and foster an informed electorate.

4 AI as decision making tool

The article [10] discusses the integration of artificial intelligence in public administration to enhance equity and inclusivity through participatory governance. It highlights the technological potential to improve decision-making, streamline public services, and promote transparency. However, it emphasizes the need to democratize AI by involving marginalized communities and ensuring that its design and implementation prioritize equity.

Comparative Analysis

The perspectives presented in popular press and scientific literature on the role of AI in democracy share notable overlaps but differ significantly in focus, depth, and evidence. Popular press articles tend to emphasize immediate societal concerns, illustrating the risks of AI through compelling real-world examples. Such articles focus on the tangible effects of AI—like misinformation, manipulation of public opinion, and the erosion of free speech.

In contrast, scientific literature delves deeper into the structural, epistemic, and ethical dimensions of AI. For example, studies on hybrid threats and decision making explore systemic issues such as algorithmic bias, inequality, and power concentration with empirical rigor and long-term solutions in mind, with regards to transparency, bias audits, and participatory governance.

Conclusion

AI's integration into political and social systems poses both opportunities and risks for democracy. Popular press and scientific literature together present a comprehensive narrative: the press raises urgent societal concerns, while scientific discourse provides in-depth analysis and pragmatic solutions. To navigate the challenges posed by AI, it is critical to bridge these perspectives, ensuring that public debates are informed by rigorous research and that scientific insights address pressing societal needs. Transparent regulatory frameworks, inclusive policymaking, and interdisciplinary collaboration are essential to harness AI's potential while safeguarding democratic integrity.

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