Exploitation and Inequality in Artificial Intelligence and Corporate Technology

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1. Introduction

Labor exploitation by tech companies due to rapidly progressing technological advancements, most notably in artificial intelligence is highly prevalent these days. It is easy to become enamored with the utility and prowess of artificial intelligence. However, to empower remarkable systems like artificial intelligence, economic exploitation across the technology industry is pervasive. Because of the global instantaneous sharing of information, many exploitative practices have come to light. This presents a moral and ethical dilemma for the whole world since technology is increasingly integrated with everyday life. Consumers often have few technological options to choose from, and most come with significant ethical compromises. Even though the technology industry has utilized child labor, unsustainable practices, and labor manipulation, these should not be the ethical standards of the present and future. As people continue to get exploited and inequality grows because of technology and artificial intelligence, the co-liberation of oppressed people and directly addressing these ethical issues is essential to the well-being of the global society.

2. Literature Review

Exploitation, imperialism, and racial capitalism have coexisted in the world for hundreds of years. For decades, colonial nations vied for world power, encroaching on land that was not theirs, and reaping the benefits from enslaved and exploited labor in the process. While it may not be as recognizable as the aforementioned injustices, technology has enabled other forms of resource extraction and exploitation. As outlined by the Anatomy of an AI System [1], in the technology industry, executives reap an extraordinary share of the economic benefits while the people who produce the product receive exponentially less. Consumers are often not aware of the practices that support their everyday technology thanks to underreported attention in the media and efforts from tech companies to preserve their image. As TechCrunch[2] reports, tech companies often make pledges towards safer practices, with minimal implementation, often adopting an "out of sight, out of mind" approach. Progress in this area is lacking due to insufficient national and international regulation, combined with tech companies having little incentive to adjust their practices.

As computing power and artificial intelligence ability increase, so do the practices that fuel these technologies. Companies need endless amounts of data, to be collected, tracked, and stored by underpaid workers. Companies utilize labor practices involving manipulating job classification and intense surveillance, as outlined by the Economic Policy Institute [3], in attempts to cut costs and increase the divide between the power at the top and the workers. As AI Now [4] notes, This tech revolution not only contributes to economic inequality, but it also undermines environmental justice, as data centers and advanced large language model search engines have dire implications on the environment, which are often felt by groups already feeling the burdens of exploitation. As outlined by the Harvard Business Review [5], further down the technological supply chain are African child labor practices to produce the very specific and rare metals required to construct hardware and other products. Additionally, as the Columbia Journalism Review[6] states, companies outsource 'trauma' to developing countries by barely paying workers to scour their platforms for seemingly endless amounts of offensive and disturbing content. The Anatomy of AI succinctly ties all of these problems together in their analysis of the Amazon Echo, and the pyramid-shaped economic benefit model it entails.

3. Current Strategies

3.1. Technical Strategies

Traditional strategies like social audits performed by the companies have proven to be flawed in saving the company name. The report Hidden Harm: Audit Deception in Apparel Supply Chains and the Urgent Case for Reform [7] by the non-profit organization Tranparentem points this out. There are a lot of new technical strategies that are being im-

plemented to analyze supply chains and search for potential risks. The U.S. Department of Labor's Comply Chain tool [8] helps mitigate the risks of child and forced labor through a worker-driven social compliance system, which empowers the workers to play a central role in identifying violations in their workplaces. The Better Trade tool [9] empowers users to advance efforts in supply chain transparency as well as strategic sourcing priorities. This innovative tool integrates existing reporting developed by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) with U.S. import trade data. To add on, ILAB also has a portal, ILAB Knowledge Portal[10] , a tool for those seeking to implement good practices in combating child and forced labor worldwide.

3.2. Social Strategies

Many of the current social strategies surrounding the larger scheme of exploitation in tech come down to the people who produce the technology and those who use it. Empowering tech workers to coordinate and mobilize according to their rights and interests is essential. As noted in The Socialist [11], tech workers have successfully signed petitions, organized strikes, and refused to participate in unethical tech projects. Collectively, workers have tremendous power, and can utilize this solidarity to increase their quality of life. In a similar vein to collective labor practices such as unionization, conversation in and of itself is a form of activism. Both as consumers and workers in tech, people should question how these products come to be, and to what extent we want to tolerate those practices. In reality, however, these questions become harder to act upon as technology envelops society. The overwhelming majority of people rely on products from a select few corporations and have few other options to choose from. Moreover, the large scope of large corporations encourages compatibility between products, making using their products more convenient, and leading users away from questioning how they are produced.

3.3. Political Strategies

Political strategies for curbing the widespread exploitation in tech mainly revolve around regulation. However, as noted previously, major tech companies often evade regulation and are able to continue benefiting from illegal means such as child labor [5]. Thus, it is absolutely vital for governments, especially in the United States, to ensure tech companies are acting ethically. Departments such as the U.S. Department of Labor work on these sorts of regulations and outline various problematic aspects of global supply chains. While the United States government can intervene to preserve ethical practices, so can other nations. For example, as the Department of Labor [12] suggests, countries like the Congo can take additional steps to ensure worker rights, support enforcement agencies, and improve education. Other transnational organizations such as Amnesty International help ensure coordination between nations and the implementation of regulations. National and transnational government action and coordination is used to monitor practices and protect vulnerable populations.

4. Critical Analysis of Current Strategies

4.1. Technical

There are significant concerns about current technological strategies used to monitor technological advancements. Even though there are tools like the US Department's Comply Chain tool and the ILAB Knowledge portal, there are no mandates laid upon companies by any authoritative body to ensure companies follow them. "If we're not thoughtful, and careful, we're going to end up with redlining again," says Karen Mills, senior fellow at the Business School and Head of the US Small Business Administration from 2009-2013. With technology like AI advancing at a rampant pace, it is quintessential to have authoritative bodies to rigorously govern the practices of companies especially in fields like AI. Lawsuits against big companies for the use of Generative AI technology to improve their product is not rare news anymore. According to Reuters[13], Microsoft and OpenAI, big players in the AI game, were sued by anonymous litigants for training their code-writing software Github Copilot on people's code. Most of the lawsuits come from companies copyrighting other people's data to improve their products which is a concern that needs to be addressed.

4.2. Social

Perhaps the most glaring deficiency in collective efforts to curtail exploitation and economic inequality in technology is the stranglehold that the major companies have on everyday people. As mentioned previously, technology companies themselves hold tremendous power over their employees, their productivity, their activity, and their actions. In some ways, this control is structural, as capitalist systems enable these sorts of behaviors. Yet, the issues outlined previously still go unnoticed among the public as technology consumes more of society. It is difficult to abstain from using tech products that employ unethical strategies since they are widespread and even mandatory in certain situations. However, utilizing empathy and tapping into the collective human experience will start to address the stranglehold of corporate technological consolidation. Even if child labor occurs in a distant continent, underpaid traumatic labor takes place in distant cellars, or tech workers are being manipulated in Silicon Valley, conversing and evaluating the values of society is the first step to challenging these practices. While not directly hitting the monetary figures of the corporations, articulating the ethical dilemmas

associated with technology encourages others to critically think about them as well. Consumers can discuss the ethical dilemmas of the items they purchase. Tech workers can converse amongst themselves about what kind of work environment they want to contribute to, as well as what they want their legacy in the field to be. In order for change to happen, people must be thinking about the issues and discuss what action can be taken. Conversing can lead to more direct action, such as purchasing alternative products, protesting and activism, and collective labor unionization and activism. Similar to how workers have immense collective power, consumers can choose how to spend their money, which companies they support, and what kind of world they want to be in.

4.3. Political

While there are large national and transnational governmental bodies across the world, the coordination and implementation of ethical standards in technology can be lacking. Companies successfully maneuver around national and international law to cut costs and increase profit. For example, to prevent the under-compensation for tech workers, the United States government needs to adapt its labor laws to prevent some of the manipulation tech companies do to keep their employees as surveilled 'private contractors'. National governments need to also rigorously audit the labor practices of tech companies in their nation, and transnational organizations need to continue auditing to prevent nations and corporations from outsourcing unethical behavior. Additionally, large technology corporations themselves need to take more accountability for their practices. This includes implementing codes of conduct and mechanisms for auditing and compliance. If there are no ramifications within an organization for implementing immoral practices, employees will face less incentive to act ethically. Furthermore, it is vital to combine public and private coordination for tech companies. Technology companies must be regulated by the government and themselves because they possess most of the power and resources. Until technology corporations and governments can increase their coordinated efforts to prevent harm and protect people, the current political enforcement framework is insufficient.

5. Conclusion

In general, collective action, even if small, is the key to overcoming the stranglehold of exploitation and inequality in technology. Technology itself can help shed light on unethical practices and encourage legal action to address them. Civilians across the world can also initiate change by opening a dialogue on their values. Whether those conversations focus on consumer behavior, the well-being of others in foreign lands, or the role of a select few corporations in everyday life, these conversations are a form of activism themselves. Governments can impose stronger regulations on technological corporations to prevent further damage done. Technology companies can and should transparently regulate and audit their practices to ensure ethical practices. Lastly, transnational organizations should continue to facilitate the coordination between governments, corporations, and the workforce to promote a more equitable and ethical world.

Obviously, large-scale government cooperation and implementation of stronger regulations and institutions is not an automatic and efficient process. Collective action to question consumer choices and workplace environments takes time, effort, and tremendous sacrifice. Moreover, structural inequality originated hundreds of years ago and cannot be simply eroded. Yet, the first step to addressing these issues is to evaluate the products and services that society revolves around and reflect upon each individual's role in the ecosystem of exploitation in artificial intelligence and modern technology.

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