

Artificial Intelligence: The Biggest Threat to Democracy Today?

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Abstract

The impact of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) on increasing misinformation is well-understood. But there remain questions on how GenAI impacts the well-being of individuals and societies at large. This paper tackles this question from a political science standpoint and considers the impact on democracy, which is linked to individual and social well-being. It examines aspects of AI systems, including GenAI systems, that threaten to undermine democracy the most, such as misinformation. This paper also clarifies the nature of these threats to democracy, makes the connection to epistemic agency and political trust, and outlines potential outcomes to society and political institutions, including accelerating the rise of populism, the enhancement of authoritarian governments, and the threat of rule by algorithms.

Introduction

In 2022, OpenAI's ChatGPT ushered in a wave of new generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools. These tools made it easier and more accessible for the public to create images, write poetry, and analyze large data sets. However, alongside the benefits of this emerging technology, there is a growing concern about the threats it poses to democracy.

Democracy is shown to positively impact both individual well-being and life satisfaction (Orviska et al. 2014). This central tenet to well-being faces increasing threats from threats related to GenAI, including misinformation, targeted political messages, and mass surveillance tools. While GenAI is not a threat in itself, it has the ability to be harnessed by bad actors to undermine political trust, a foundational pillar of liberal representative democracy. The potential outcomes include a rise in power of the populist radical right, authoritarianism, and even rule by algorithms, or “algocracy.”

The development of AI, especially generative AI tools, has already caused controversy and has had manifold impacts on society. For example, AI labs are generally not transparent about their training data sets, and many data sets are at least partially manually coded by engineers (Kreps et

al. 2021). AI models trained on these data sets often make biased decisions, reflecting the biases of the engineers who coded them.¹

From a social science standpoint, Coeckelbergh (2022) argues that AI endangers democracy by undermining epistemic agency and political agency, which are essential for a functioning democracy. If the action central to a functioning democracy is being able to step into a ballot box and make an informed decision on what to vote for without undue outside influence, then a key prerequisite of this action is epistemic agency. Olson (2015) defines epistemic agency as “motivation and ability to refine and alter one's belief-forming methods and subsequent belief-forming practices.” Epistemic agency is not the ability to form one's own opinion utterly devoid of outside influence (as this is not possible), but it necessitates being informed about and having control over what factors form one's beliefs. This is essential to democracy because of the importance of independent decision-making (Cohen 1986).

Linkages with Epistemic Agency and Political Trust

Misinformation, exacerbated by GenAI tools, threatens the epistemic agency central to democracy. Kuklinski et al. (2000) define a person as misinformed if he or she confidently holds the wrong information. The real danger lies not just possessing incorrect facts, but in the confidence an individual has that their information is correct.

This phenomenon becomes even more harmful when bad actors, such as political parties, the media, or even foreign actors, purposely create misinformation to nudge people toward specific outcomes. Although this has been a common occurrence throughout history, most notably with propaganda disseminated by authoritarian governments, the popularization of social media has made it easier than before for bad actors to spread misinformation on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms. Although

propaganda is harmful to democracy, non-propagandistic misinformation is just as problematic, and it is even harder to detect and regulate (Brown 2018).

In the case of Brexit, mass media propagated falsehoods and used misleading information to manipulate voter perception of the EU. The most egregious example was the right-wing tabloid Daily Mail's headline, "Every week we send £350 million to the EU," which impacted UK voters' ability to make informed decisions on issues concerning the economy and the relationship with the EU (Watson 2018).

Misinformation can also be harnessed by foreign actors seeking to interfere in democratic processes, such as elections. Russia has not only interfered in the 2016 US presidential election but also in elections throughout Europe, including Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, France, Germany, and Italy, by manipulating voter beliefs through misinformation and fake news (Kaplan 2020). It has also created bots to instill general skepticism about truth or democratic regimes (Schlumberger et al. 2023).

Furthermore, with the rise of GenAI-powered deepfake and image-generating technologies, anyone can create a convincing image or video of their leaders. Recent examples include the spread of deepfake images of Trump's arrest in March 2023 (Feldstein 2023) and an audio deepfake of a Slovakian party leader discussing how to rig the election ahead of the September 2023 national election (Meaker 2023). While people may think they can detect fake videos, they can only distinguish fake videos from real ones about 50 percent of the time (Kaplan 2020). Furthermore, the exponentially growing nature of AI means that soon, it will be incredibly difficult to recognize fake media.

Now, sophisticated social media tools, including micro-targeting of ads powered by AI, can also be harnessed by bad actors to manipulate citizens (Coeckelbergh 2022). For example, in the 2016 US presidential election, Cambridge Analytica micro-targeted political ads for Trump, leading to the mass manipulation of American voters (Hu 2020). They used data illicitly gathered from Facebook to build profiles and guess their political affiliation based on thousands of data points, and they targeted their ads based on these profiles. Although the verdict is still out on what impact Cambridge Analytica had precisely on the US election, the manipulation of personal political beliefs was an action that threatened voters' political agency.

The immediate impact is the erosion of interpersonal and political trust, which are underlying principles crucial to a well-functioning liberal representative democracy. In extreme cases, it can lead to the destruction of the democratic order and call for regime change. Easton (1957) envisages political trust as a reserve of support that, once it runs dry, may lead to dissatisfaction with the regime and demands for regime change. This is exactly the impact Russia hopes to have on democracies — the state has

interfered with democratic elections across the world in an attempt to erode faith in democracy itself.

Misinformation is damaging not only at the epistemic agency level but also at the procedural democratic level since citizens may not even trust their own legitimacy as voters capable of making independent, informed decisions (Coeckelbergh 2022). Nisbet et al. (2021) found that in the 2020 US election, even the presumed influence of misinformation on oneself and others eroded people's satisfaction with American democracy as a whole. This doubt in the procedural aspect of democracy leads to a decline in political trust. It causes voters to believe less in the legitimacy of elected leaders and be less politically engaged in the traditional sense. In order for there to be a liberal representative democracy, citizens must be able to make enlightened collective decisions, but misinformation threatens a prerequisite of this action: being able to form factual beliefs (Brown 2018).

Potential Range of Outcomes

The potential impacts to democracy are far-ranging. One outcome we are already seeing today and may continue to see is the increase of the radical populist right, defined by Mudde (2007) as a movement characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Radical populist right actors are most likely to spread their nativist ideology with the use of misinformation and micro-targeting to disseminate anti-immigration rhetoric. As Bergmann (2020) explains, populists, driven by nativism, are often prone to conspiracy theories, especially surrounding the concept of a "new world order" where the "other" replaces the native population. He uses the example of anti-Muslim rhetoric disseminated by Geert Wilders, who tweeted that "our population is being replaced," and by Marine Le Pen, who claimed that France was under "migratory submersion" (Bergmann 2020). With the rise of AI, these messages will become more powerful as they reach people on social media that have pre-existing leanings towards the radical populist right. People already tend to seek out information that fits with their political party or ideological worldview (Jerit and Zhao 2020). Algorithmic filtering reinforces users' pre-existing beliefs and increases biases, leading to further polarization (Christodoulou and Iordanou 2021).

Another outcome that directly threatens liberal representative democracies is the bolstering of authoritarian regimes by AI, mass surveillance, and mass propaganda. China serves as a prominent example, where state use of digital surveillance systems and social credit systems have already entered the realm of dystopian science fiction. However, by harnessing their growing AI power, China will be able to exert its state influence even more. Zeng (2020) explains how China, an AI powerhouse, has used AI

capabilities “not only to build a more efficient and capable government to deliver better public services but also to strengthen state control to ensure the continuation of the authoritarian order.” The “Great Firewall” is already well-known. However, China is starting to enhance its state control of information by selectively censoring content, repressing digital dissent, and suppressing messages from the rest of the world. And soon, China will be able to use its AI power to predictively identify and control dissenters (Wright 2023). Furthermore, the lack of stringent data and privacy regulations in China allows for extensive data collection and the implementation of insidious actions. Although there is no evidence to conclude that digitization and AI will lead to more authoritarian governments, it will certainly “upgrade” autocracies, making them more efficient in targeting dissent and making it more difficult to challenge their regimes through democratic uprisings (Schlumberger et al. 2022).

Beyond mere authoritarianism, there is also a threat of “algocracy,” a governance system organized and structured on the basis of computer-programmed algorithms as coined by Dahaner (2016). What happens when humans are no longer in charge of political decisions? This would not constitute democracy as we know it today. While some may argue that an algorithm may be less biased than a human leader, as discussed above, algorithms and AI models are trained on data embedded with biases of the developers. Furthermore, most sophisticated systems cannot be fully explained. The high level of opacity and “hiddenness” surrounding algorithmic decision-making actually undermines the legitimacy of a decision because it threatens epistemic agency (Dahaner 2016).

I argue that the existence of algocracies is the most probable of the aforementioned outcomes. Already there is a movement to transition to digital governments in order to cut costs, decrease bias, and increase efficiency of taxholder dollars. And already there are algorithms, often called automated decision systems (ADS), to streamline many aspects of governance, from allocating welfare benefits to flagging potential fraud risks to detecting crime (Redden 2022). In many cases, the stakes are high, and a “wrong” choice can entirely change the course of people’s lives.

In a world where growing population necessitates scalable government solutions, where efficiency of tax spending continues to be of utmost importance to voters, and where technological capabilities are advancing at unprecedented speed, I believe that ADS will take over more and more of the government. Not only will algorithms continue to be used for more and more government services, in the future, ADS may go from aiding human decision-making to calling the shots itself. And how can we hold an algorithm accountable if we cannot vote for or against it?

Conclusion

This paper has argued that AI-powered systems threaten democracy because they reduce epistemic agency, breed mistrust, and undermine the procedural aspects of democracy. It discusses potential outcomes ranging from the rise of the radical populist right, the enhancement of authoritarian governments, and the threat of “algocracy.”

However, many underlying assumptions can be challenged. For example, is epistemic agency for all necessary for a functioning liberal representative democracy? Being able to perform collective decision-making for the general will is a populist tenet (Cohen 1986), but is this form of democracy the most effective? Furthermore, should we blame the tool or blame the users? Similar to the debate on whether guns or people are to blame for violence, should we consider that even if we regulate or even cease the development of generative AI, bad actors will find alternative means to achieve their goals? Lastly, should “algocracies” be considered harmful to democracy? Perhaps the definition of democracy will evolve as more and more non-human actors enter the playing field.

The verdict is not out on any of these questions. However, we do know this: advanced AI capabilities will continue to increase exponentially, and we do not know what they may be capable of in the future or what unintended consequences on society they may have (Svensson 2021). This underscores the importance of the European Union’s AI Act and other AI and digital rights regulation to safeguard democratic rights in an uncertain future.

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