

# **The Shadow That AI Casts Over Democracy**

by Rania Singla



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## **The Shadow That AI Casts Over Democracy by Rania Singla**

Artificial Intelligence (AI), while coined in the 1950s, made its debut into everyday life only in the 21st century. Much of this fame—or infamy—is connected to advancements in machine and deep learning, making AI more accessible for institutions and the general public. Software like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and DeepSeek have taken the world by storm, integrating seamlessly into education, healthcare, creative industries, and daily communication. While many argue that AI has made their lives easier by automating ordinary tasks and expanding access to information, others worry about the consequences that this influx of AI use has. One such consequence, and the focus of this paper, is its impact on democracy.

Democracy, known widely as “of the people, by the people, for the people,” is the cornerstone of the modern sociopolitical environment. It marks a turn toward freedom for various communities, many of which were previously marginalised. The establishment of democracy is the result of centuries of sacrifice and demands for justice. Robert Dahl asserts that democracy requires “the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens” (Dahl, 1989). But what happens when AI begins to interfere with this responsiveness—when algorithms, rather than citizens, begin shaping public thought and discourse? What happens when AI starts threatening the very root of democracy, the freedom of having our own, unique voice?

AI systems have long been marketed as possessing autonomy, but this autonomy has been growing at an exponential rate. AI now generates content, makes recommendations, moderates discourse, and influences voter preferences. With teenagers and young adults adopting AI in their daily lives, AI-based algorithms on social media begin shaping their opinions, especially on politics and current affairs. At the same time, AI’s influence on existing media structures cannot be ignored. Major publishing houses and news platforms, often driven by profit motives, adopt AI technologies to produce content quickly and cheaply. However, these same tools can reinforce biases already present in data and information ecosystems. The result is an echo chamber effect, intensifying polarization by only confirming users’ preexisting beliefs. When public discourse becomes fragmented, the democratic purpose of deliberation—collective reasoning, compromise, and empathy—fades from civic life.

AI has embedded itself in daily life in countless ways, each with consequences that cannot yet be fully anticipated. For instance, AI-generated images and deepfakes flooded the internet during the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. AI-generated images and videos depicting false political endorsements circulated widely, misleading voters and undermining confidence in democratic institutions. Similar patterns emerged during the 2023 Argentinian presidential election, where disinformation campaigns exploited AI tools to amplify smear tactics. As distinguishing genuine from artificial information

becomes increasingly difficult, public trust in journalism, policymaking, and even election results deteriorates. AI systems frequently rely on historical data that may contain embedded biases, producing discriminatory outcomes. Democratic nations now face significant obstacles to maintaining electoral integrity, whether from disinformation campaigns or the rise of digital authoritarianism.

Recognising the real-time effects of artificial intelligence, several policies and regulations have already been implemented globally. These include the European Union's AI Act and California's Digital Content Provenance Standards bill. While the EU legislation requires that AI-generated content remain detectable and transparent, the California bill focuses on mandatory AI watermarking, supported by Microsoft, Adobe, and OpenAI. Watermarks, whether visible or digital, aim to clearly identify AI-generated content. Visible watermarks promote higher transparency of AI-generated content, whereas digital watermarks are more difficult to see firsthand, yet easier to manipulate. Hence, watermarking tends to face technological challenges, as well as with accuracy and robustness, complicating long-term policymaking.

Given the global and interconnected nature of AI and online content, collaboration between governments and policymakers is more crucial than ever. AI evolves faster than legislative processes, requiring international forums to share best practices and develop regulatory frameworks that can rapidly adapt. Decisions made by one government can have global implications, influencing supply chains, research ecosystems, and geopolitical stability. International dialogue, including discussions within groups such as the G7 and G20, is essential for establishing a stable digital environment.

Several technology companies have also taken steps to address AI's threat to democracy. For instance, Microsoft has developed Content Integrity tools to authenticate content and combat disinformation—resources available to political campaigns and media organisations. However, the most impactful regulations typically emerge from governments and international bodies. Policies targeting deepfakes, elections, and voter education are among the most crucial for mitigating AI-related democratic risks. Finland stands out in the EU for its governmental initiatives promoting digital and AI education. Its national AI literacy programs strengthen citizens' technical expertise and critical thinking, helping build resilience against misinformation.

However, progress remains uneven globally. For many countries, developing effective AI regulation is a race against time. As technology evolves, existing detection systems and oversight frameworks often become obsolete within months. This regulatory lag produces inefficiencies and bureaucratic redundancy, leaving societies vulnerable to disinformation, electoral interference, and surveillance misuse. Authoritarian regimes, in particular, exploit AI to reinforce digital control—deploying predictive policing, online censorship, and mass surveillance in ways that directly undermine

democratic ideals. Thus, AI's threat to democracy is not only one of misinformation but also of potential political weaponization.

In the absence of coordinated public and private initiatives that integrate governance, technology, and education, societies remain vulnerable to both domestic and foreign manipulation. Protecting election integrity, promoting media literacy, and enhancing civic participation require a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and whole-of-society approach. Such collaboration can ensure that innovation continues without eroding human dignity or civic freedom.

Ultimately, democracy's survival in the age of artificial intelligence will depend on our collective ability to preserve the balance between progress and accountability. AI should serve as a tool that amplifies human capacity for understanding—not one that replaces it. To achieve this, humanity must continually assert control over technology, reaffirming the principle that while algorithms may inform opinion, only people can define the values that guide them. AI should augment, not replace, the human pursuit of knowledge and collective reasoning. If humanity succeeds in aligning technological progress with ethical responsibility, the democratic promise of equality and agency can endure. But if control over information and perception is ceded to opaque computational systems, democratic societies risk becoming spectators to their own disenfranchisement.

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