

DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF A.I.

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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Artificial intelligence is now one of the central battlegrounds of public life. It is being sold to the world as inevitable, neutral, and unstoppable—an innovation we are expected to adapt to, manage, and eventually celebrate. But that way of posing the question already gives too much away. It assumes that technology develops according to its own logic, above politics and beyond democratic control. It assumes that society's job is merely to catch up. And it assumes that the only serious debate is over how to adapt to, regulate these tools once they are already here.

We reject that starting point. A.I. is not neutral. Technoscience is not neutral. It is shaped by power, ownership, ideology, and struggle. The insistence that technology is merely a tool—good or bad depending on who uses it—has long served as a convenient myth for capital, the state, and the institutions that profit most from “labor saving” and process accelerating technological changes. It encourages passivity. It trains the public to think that every technical development must be accepted first and debated later. And it leaves the field open to those with the most money, the most infrastructure, and the least democratic accountability. If one raises criticisms, they immediately , “but the Chinese!”

That matters because some technologies are not simply neutral instruments waiting for a moral purpose. Nuclear weapons are the clearest example. Their destructive logic is built into what they are. At that stage of history, they were not just badly used technologies; they were fundamentally anti-human ones. A similar question now has to be raised, openly and without hesitation, about A.I. We should not assume in advance that every form of artificial intelligence is socially desirable, democratically governable, or compatible with human freedom. The burden of proof should not rest on the critics. It should rest on those asking society to reorganize itself around systems whose consequences are still unfolding.

This is where the precautionary principle belongs. When a technology carries profound social risks—when it threatens to deepen surveillance, deskill labor, privatize knowledge, manipulate public perception, and concentrate power at enormous scale—the obligation is not to charge forward and patch up harms later. The obligation is to ask, before further expansion: what damage may this do, who bears the risks, who benefits, and what democratic control exists over its

development? In the current political economy, those are not abstract questions. They are urgent ones.

Technology Is Not Floating Above Society

A technology introduced into an unequal and undemocratic society does not float above its social conditions. It is shaped by them and, in turn, deepens them unless consciously contested. That is exactly what we are seeing now. The largest corporations and wealthiest individuals in the world are pouring astonishing sums into the A.I. field—not out of a disinterested desire to expand human knowledge, but because they understand that whoever controls this infrastructure will likely shape communication, labor, education, security, research, and governance for years to come.

Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Peter Thiel, Sundar Pichai, and the corporate systems around them are not pouring money into A.I. because they are committed to making life easier for working people or deepening democracy. They are investing because they understand that whoever controls this infrastructure will help shape labor, communication, education, security, commerce, research, and governance for years to come. Musk's xAI raised billions in private capital in an effort to become a major force in the field. Microsoft committed tens of billions of dollars to A.I.-driven data center expansion. Meta announced capital spending on the order of sixty to sixty-five billion dollars in a single year as it races to build out its own A.I. infrastructure.

Alphabet has signaled roughly seventy-five billion dollars in capital expenditures tied heavily to A.I. and cloud expansion. Amazon has projected still larger spending, well above one hundred billion dollars, much of it tied to cloud and A.I. systems. And the Stargate project announced by OpenAI, SoftBank, and Oracle put forward a headline number of up to five hundred billion dollars over the coming years. Whatever else this is, it is not neutral. It is a massive struggle over who will own, direct, and profit from a new layer of social power.

Once that is understood, the debate changes. We are no longer discussing a free-floating innovation that society may or may not decide to adopt. We are discussing an organized project of technological development being driven by

corporate giants, investors, military and security interests, and political actors eager to shape the future in their own image. And working people are being asked to absorb the social costs of buildout as well: higher electricity demand, strained grids, public infrastructure burdens, water use, land use, and utility costs that ordinary households will help carry while the rewards flow upward. is one reason the language of inevitability is so dangerous. It hides the hand of power behind the mask of progress.

Against Technological Determinism

Much of the public discussion of A.I. is still trapped inside technological determinism—the belief that technical change follows its own autonomous path and that politics can do little more than adjust to it. That way of thinking is especially useful to those already winning from the present direction of change. If A.I. is inevitable, then opposition appears foolish. If A.I. is neutral, then criticism appears ideological. If A.I. is simply “the future,” then democratic resistance can be dismissed as nostalgia or fear. We are all luddites if we want to choose the kind of world we envision for ourselves and our children.

But that is not how social life works. Technologies are developed in institutions, financed by interests, trained on archives, governed by specific legal regimes, and embedded in unequal social relations. They are designed, deployed, and normalized by people and organizations with concrete goals. To treat them as neutral is to strip them of their politics at the very moment when politics matters most.

The deeper danger is that A.I. is arriving in a period already marked by democratic crisis, social fragmentation, and rising authoritarianism. Public reasoning is weak. Trust is low. The media sphere is disordered. Wealth is concentrated. The Right is organized. Under those conditions, technical systems that promise speed, scale, prediction, and behavioral influence are far more likely to be bent toward domination than emancipation unless powerful counter-forces intervene.

What Kind of Power Is Being Built?

The question, then, is not whether A.I. is “good” or “bad” in the abstract. The question is what kind of power is being built through it. Under present conditions, A.I. is helping deepen surveillance, reinforce monopoly control over knowledge, accelerate disinformation, extend managerial authority over labor, and remove human and humane restraint from organized violence. It is being integrated into the institutions of policing, war-making, border control, education, hiring, social media, and administration. It is becoming part of the everyday machinery through which people are classified, sorted, watched, persuaded, managed,

targeted, and, increasingly, attacked. When A.I.-directed drones, targeting systems, and autonomous weapons enter the picture, the issue is no longer bias or efficiency. It is the automation of coercion and the loosening of human responsibility at the point where life and death are decided.

That is why it is not enough to say that A.I. could also be used for good. Of course it could. Many technologies can be redirected under different social arrangements. But in politics, possibility is not the same as reality. The present reality is that A.I. is being developed at extraordinary speed by actors commiwhose operating logic is accumulation, control, and competitive dominance. Any serious democratic politics has to begin there.

This does not mean movements should retreat into reflexive anti-technology politics. It does mean they should stop surrendering the argument in advance. The task is not to worship A.I. or to treat every new system as a civilizational breakthrough. The task is to assess, concretely and politically, which technologies strengthen democratic life, which undermine it, and which may be too dangerous to normalize under current conditions. That is the real alternative to both boosterism and fatalism.

Democracy, Knowledge, and Human Agency

There is another reason the struggle over A.I. matters so much. Democracy depends on more than institutions and elections. It depends on the ability of ordinary people to make sense of their world, share knowledge, test claims, argue in public, and act together. Any technology that reorganizes how information is produced, circulated, trusted, and acted upon is also reorganizing the conditions of democratic life.

There is another problem that must be named clearly: A.I. is not standing still long enough for public institutions, workers, educators, or communities to catch up. Two, three or five iterations ago, “it” was something different. The systems being released today often have capacities, speed, and reach that were not publicly debated, democratically evaluated, or even fully understood in their earlier forms. New versions with more power are rolled out before previous versions have been adequately assessed. That is not responsible innovation. It is a release model driven by competition, capital, and speed rather than democratic oversight. In a field evolving this rapidly, the precautionary principle matters even more, because the public is repeatedly being asked to absorb new risks before the old ones have been reckoned with.

A.I. can make some kinds of information more accessible. It can help summarize complex materials, compare documents, and lower some barriers to entry. Those uses are real. But they exist alongside another tendency: to replace judgment with output, dialogue with extraction, interpretation with automation, and human learning with dependence on opaque systems. When that happens, people may gain speed while losing depth. They may gain convenience while losing agency. They may gain information while losing the collective practices through which understanding is built.

That is why a democratic response to A.I. must insist that these tools remain subordinate to human beings, democratic institutions, and organized publics. They cannot be allowed to become substitutes for political education, critical thought, or public reasoning. They cannot become unchallengeable authorities. And they certainly cannot become the private property of a handful of firms that increasingly mediate how millions of people know, work, and communicate.

What a Democratic Response Requires

A democratic response to A.I. must begin with honesty. First, movements, communities, and democratic institutions must reject the myth of neutral technology. Second, they must contest the idea that whatever can be built should be built. Third, they must insist that the public has a right not only to know what is being developed, but to shape whether and how it is allowed to structure social life.

That means fighting for transparency, public accountability, labor protections, limits on surveillance, and democratic oversight. It means building popular understanding of what these systems actually do and how they are being used. It means opposing the privatization of collective intelligence. It means refusing the quiet conversion of schools, workplaces, hospitals, and civic institutions into testing grounds for systems the public neither designed nor approved. And it means being willing, in some cases, to say not simply “slow down,” but “no.”

At the same time, democratic movements should be thinking seriously about how tools can be subordinated to democratic purposes rather than the other way around. Used carefully, under public norms and human accountability, certain forms of A.I. may help communities interpret public budgets, compare legislation, strengthen multilingual organizing, or make technical information more legible. But those uses are legitimate only when they expand collective capacity rather than deepen dependence. A tool that assists democratic work is one thing. A system that quietly reorganizes democracy around itself is another.

From Artificial Intelligence to Democratic Strategy

The larger issue is not only A.I. itself. It is whether democratic forces are prepared to meet a new concentration of technical power with political clarity and organized resistance. That will not happen through regulation alone, nor through ethical language detached from social struggle. It will happen only if people build institutions, alliances, and forms of public action capable of challenging the corporate and authoritarian direction of technological change.

That is why democratic strategy in the age of A.I. must include more than critique. It must include public education, movement coordination, and spaces where people can think together about what kind of future they are being asked to accept. We need dialogue sessions rooted in communities, organizations, unions, schools, and civic life—places where people can examine these technologies, compare experiences, test arguments, and develop shared strategy. We need the kind of democratic practice that helps people become subjects of political judgment rather than passive recipients of expert management.

In that sense, the struggle over A.I. leads back to an older and deeper democratic question: how do ordinary people build the power to govern the conditions of their own lives? That question is central to the fight for strong democracy. It is also central to the work of the Southeast Community Research Center and to the broader tradition of community-based participatory research. The point of that work has never been simply to study communities, but to help communities study their own conditions, generate usable knowledge, and act collectively on what they learn. That is the democratic horizon that should guide any conversation about A.I.—not adaptation to power, but the building of shared capacity from below.

If A.I. is to be part of a democratic future at all, it will be because it has been forced to answer to that horizon. Not because billionaires promised progress. Not because tech firms claimed neutral intent. And if this perspective sounds overstated, it is worth asking a simple question: does anyone seriously believe that the oligarchs driving A.I.—while pursuing systems that by any rational assessment could throw millions of people out of work—are preparing to use their profits to fund a just universal basic income for working people? If the answer is no, then the implications are clear. We are looking not at a humane social compact waiting to be unveiled, but at a project that could deepen inequality, intensify insecurity, and leave displaced workers to bear the costs of a transformation they did not choose and will not control.

That is why democratic strategy in the age of A.I. cannot rest on trust, hype, or technological wishful thinking. It has to rest on organization, public power, and a willingness to fight for a future in which human beings matter more than the fortunes of those trying to automate the world around them.

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