AI's Influence on Political Communication and Its Threat to Democratic Integrity

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Caroline Coughlin

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
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Advisor

Kathryn Webb-DeStefano, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has altered political communication on a widespread scale, with algorithms and bots playing an increasingly large role in shaping electoral discourse. From micro-targeted political ads to automated misinformation campaigns, AI technologies have eroded transparency, making it progressively more difficult to distinguish between authentic political engagement and manipulation. This paper analyzes the disruptive impact of AI-driven disinformation by examining the case of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where the weaponization of bots and algorithms spread false narratives, polarized voters, and undermined trust in democratic institutions (Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018). As AI advances, its ability to influence voter perception, political discourse, and electoral outcomes raises critical ethical and regulatory concerns. Technology and politics continually alter and shape one another, necessitating an investigation into how AI-driven political communication works and if it strengthens or diminishes the integrity of democratic elections.

The following analysis draws into question how the political design and implementation of AI-driven algorithms and bots influence electoral integrity in democratic nations. While some argue that AI merely reflects societal biases, this paper argues that AI-driven political communication actively shapes electoral discourse by selectively amplifying certain voices, reinforcing ideological echo chambers, and enabling disinformation strategies. Rather than serving as neutral tools, AI systems are integrated with political and economic interests that direct how information is distributed to the public and consumed. The consequences of AI's role in electoral politics extend beyond misinformation; they challenge traditional democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and informed voter decision-making. This relationship between AI and the political scape can be understood through the framework of technological

politics, as it acknowledges that technologies are inherently political. Indeed, from creation to implementation, technologies consistently reinforce or reshape societal power structures. By analyzing the 2016 U.S. election through the lens of technological politics, this STS paper argues that AI in political communication is not just a passive force but an active agent in modern electoral manipulation, necessitating urgent discussions on regulation, oversight, and ethical governance (Petit, 2018).

Literature Review

A wealth of research exists that examines the influence of AI-driven disinformation on electoral discourse, processes, and integrity in democratic nations. These studies typically explore how AI technologies, such as algorithms and bots, are not merely efficiency tools but mechanisms that shape public opinion, alter political engagement, and cause election interference. The following works provide insights into how AI-driven political communication undermines the tenants of democracy as well as its processes.

In "Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy," Manheim and Kaplan (2019) argue that AI's capability to manipulate public discourse and weaken electoral integrity presents far-reaching risks to democratic institutions. They investigate how algorithms often forgo the truth in the midst of prioritizing engagement and profit, which perpetuates the spread of misinformation. This pursuit of engagement creates a media environment where disinformation is not only tolerated but incentivized, as AI systems amplify content most likely to provoke emotional reactions, regardless of accuracy (Manheim & Kaplan, 2019). Furthermore, the authors highlight that AI models utilized in social media and political campaigns

disproportionately empower large corporations, political heads, and technological giants. Those in power having access to large amounts of data and computational resources creates an imbalance, making it increasingly difficult for average citizens to make fair and well-informed political choices. Manheim and Kaplan's work provides evidence for this paper's claim that AI-driven political communication performs as an active player in framing electoral discourse, as they illuminate how economic and political interests are naturally woven into the creation and application of AI technologies, which results in a direct impact on the distribution and consumption of information in the political arena.

Petit (2018), in "Towards a Critique of Algorithmic Reason," uses a wider, conceptual lens to evaluate how AI affects democratic structures and the regulation of public discourse. Building on Manheim and Kaplan's argument, he contends that AI systems operate through "algorithmic reason," which highly weighs efficiency and control over deliberate consideration and democratic participation. Evidently, AI systems are unable to operate with neutrality, continuously acting as politically charged information processors. Petit illustrates how algorithms' curation of personalized content based on user preferences often reinforces ideological bubbles and echo chambers, trapping individuals within homogenous informational domains (Petit, 2018). Diverging perspectives are critical for democratic debate and voter education. Isolated environments that limit diversity of thought such as these enable disinformation strategies and impair healthy political communication. Petit additionally raises the concern that current governance institutions are improperly equipped to handle the political consequences of widespread algorithmic influence, resulting in little oversight of AI development. Overall, Petit's research stresses the importance of regulation in regards to the

creation and deployment of AI technologies, aligning with this paper's focus on how political actors guide AI in electoral manipulation.

All in all, these sources produce the conclusion that AI functions as an active agent in shaping the political landscape rather than a passive reflection of existing societal biases. Manheim and Kaplan offer a legal and political analysis of AI's effects on democratic processes, while Petit provides a theoretical critique of algorithmic logic and its ramifications on political communication. Both viewpoints provide insight into how the design and implementation of AI-driven algorithms and bots influence electoral integrity, and establish a foundation for this paper's examination of the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a case study in the political agency of AI.

Conceptual Framework

The design and implementation of AI technologies, such as algorithms and bots, and their respective impact on electoral discourse and integrity can be methodically analyzed through a technological politics framework. Developed by Langdon Winner, technological politics is a framework that combats the misconception that technology has a neutral effect in the political realm. Rather, this theory argues that the structure and function of technologies can shape societal outcomes, distribute power, and enforce certain ideological agendas. The first principle of technological politics is that technologies can be innately programmed with certain political ideologies and reflect these interests in their operations. Winner argues that particular technologies intrinsically reinforce specific forms of power and authority, which means regardless of user intention that they function as political actors. These particular technologies

are not simply used for political ends but require or reinforce specific forms of power, authority, and social order by virtue of how they are built and implemented (Winner, 2017). Due to the engineering of such systems within distinct political and economic contexts, they may either intentionally or unintentionally dictate how political information is disseminated and consumed.

The second aspect of technological politics is the notion that technological design is not an impartial entity, but a result of social choice that generally avoids democratic supervision. In modern day, a large portion of decision-making power is oftentimes given to technical giants and private corporations, leaving technologies to be programmed with elite interests in mind rather than the public good. As technology rapidly advances, increasing in computational complexity, public involvement in technological decision-making will continue to decrease. This disparity between technological control and democratic governance raises critical concerns about accountability. Winner contends that disregarding the political aspect of technological design will result in the alteration of societal structures without any public consultation (Winner, 2013). Lastly, a third core principle of technological politics is that technology has the power to change how people engage with political processes, at times limiting or facilitating behavior in ways that are not immediately apparent. This notion further conveys that technological artifacts have "politics" ingrained in both their intended use and effects, as they impact human behavior and institutional dynamics (Winner, 2017).

By utilizing the framework of technological politics, this paper will examine how the political design and implementation of AI-driven technologies influence electoral integrity, employing the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a case study. Instead of viewing AI solely as a neutral tool that can be exploited by malicious individuals, this framework allows us to grasp how the inherent constitution of AI systems plays a role in political manipulation. The analysis

that follows will use this perspective to illustrate how AI-driven political communication does not just passively reflect societal bias but also actively impacts electoral discourse, processes, and integrity in democratic nations.

Analysis

AI Technologies: Political Actors with Embedded Power Structures

One of the main principles of technological politics is that through their architecture, certain technologies innately uphold specific power structures and social orders. AI-powered political communication channels, specifically throughout the 2016 U.S. presidential election, operated as political entities rather than mere tools employed by campaigns. Their operations were embedded within power dynamics and thus, had widespread effects on electoral discussions. These systems were designed to enhance engagement, visibility, and targeting of certain demographic groups, thereby promoting specific political messages while silencing others.

Through the duration of the 2016 U.S. election, bots were sent out "to generate, shape, and steer political conversations online" (Howard, Woolley and Calo, 2018). Deploying mechanisms in this manner was intentionally done to amplify disinformation, polarize political conversation, and support certain campaigns. These bots were politically charged by nature, proving that certain artifacts "by design or arrangement become ways of settling an issue in a particular community" (Winner, 2017). In this instance, the design of AI systems employed by platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook resolved the matter of political visibility not

via open discussion but through algorithm-driven curation–boosting content that resonated with radical or extremist perspectives.

This derived power imbalance was calculated and not coincidental by any means. According to Manheim and Kaplan, AI platforms utilized for political communication are generally optimized for profit rather than for transparency and accuracy (Manheim and Kaplan, 2019). This profit-driven motivation aligns the algorithms of these platforms with those who can afford to exploit them, including political elites, PACs, and foreign actors. Ultimately, these systems bolster existing power hierarchies in electoral processes, serving not as impartial entities, but as political tools crafted to favor certain candidates over others.

Absence of Democratic Governance in AI Design and Implementation

A second key principle of technological politics is that technological design is not an impartial entity, but a result of social choice that generally avoids democratic supervision. The creation of AI systems for political communication ties into a wider pattern of privatized technological governance, where corporations take charge of decisions that hold considerable democratic consequences and they rarely allow for public involvement.

Throughout the 2016 U.S. election, Facebook and Twitter took almost full control over algorithms that framed political discussion, while concealing truths about their functioning and the influence of external actors (Howard et al., 2018). As Winner illustrates in *Democracy in a Technological Society*, when societies permit essential technological systems to develop outside of public oversight, democratic virtues are made inferior to technical and commercial interests (Winner, 2013). The loss of public control and governance of these systems has critical

consequences for democratic processes and necessitates urgent remedial action. However, the primary obstacle is that AI's manipulation of political discourse takes place in a regulatory vacuum, with no institution having the authority or desire to verify that these systems support democratic ideals rather than harming them (Manheim and Kaplan, 2019).

AI technologies do not solely undermine the U.S.'s democratic processes, but additionally challenge the foundations of democracies around the world. In a comparative study of AI's role in politics in Germany, France, the UK, and the U.S., democratic societies were found to utilize AI systems in elections often without adequate regulation or public involvement (Ejimadu, 2021). For example, voter behavior in the UK's Brexit referendum was significantly influenced by targeted advertising powered by opaque data methods. Evidently, global election integrity is increasingly under risk due to the absence of democratic oversight over AI's development and use.

<u>AI's Hidden Influence in Structuring Political Participation</u>

The third aspect of technological politics is the notion that technology shapes conduct by defining the conditions of participation, in ways which may not be immediately apparent. AI systems utilized in political communication influence how voters participate in elections, including what information they are given, how they understand it, and sometimes whether they cast a ballot.

According to Petit, algorithmic systems foster a new kind of "algorithmic reason," in which personalization and efficiency take precedence over consideration and democratic complexity (Petit, 2018). This computational logic limits discussion to high-performing content

in regards to electoral politics, which is frequently sensationalist, divisive, or deceptive. Without exposure to diverse viewpoints or counterarguments, voters are only faced with reinforcing views. Thus, as a result of the filtering logic, homogeneous media channels develop, producing dangerous ideological echo chambers. This reshaping of public space is political in nature as it prioritizes easy, frictionless consensus above purposeful democratic participation (Winner, 2017).

The employment of AI techniques in election interference raises significant concerns regarding political manipulation and sovereignty on a global scale, especially in instances such as the 2017 French presidential election (Kenny, 2021). These methods, which are typically even less transparent, frequently use the same behavioral targeting and data exploitation techniques as those used in the United States. AI-enabled psychological operations are often used by state and non-state actors to directly shape voter behavior without the voters' awareness. According to Vacarelu, this kind of manipulation greatly threatens international psychological security since it erodes confidence in both elections and the democratic process in general (Vacarelu, 2023).

Beyond just the design and implementation of AI technologies being psychological operations, the corresponding consequences are psychological as well. AI is essentially a tool of behavioral governance rather than only communication because of its capacity to control attention, perception, and emotion (Serbanescu, 2021). AI-generated political information holds persuasive power that does more than merely inform; it also guides and influences, frequently without the user's knowledge. This aligns with Winner's theory that technologies become a part of society's physical infrastructure, subtly influencing behavior, choices, and decision-making (Winner, 2013).

Alternative Viewpoint

Some scholars contend that the impact of AI on electoral politics is overplayed, or that these technologies might encourage rather than impede political engagement. Proponents of "civic tech" argue that AI has the ability to increase political information accessibility, boost participation from marginalized groups, and facilitate well-informed decision-making. For instance, AI tools have been utilized to create policy simulations, expedite channels for citizen involvement, and help voters comprehend candidates' positions (Savaget, Chiarini and Evans, 2019). According to this viewpoint, AI is not innately negative; it all depends on how it is developed and used. AI systems have the potential to be effective instruments for reviving democracy if they are developed with openness, moral principles, and public input.

Although this is a persuasive argument, the current political implementation of AI still raises serious concerns. Modern algorithmic systems are designed for profit and prediction rather than for deliberative empowerment, which skews political communication (Petit, 2018). Moreover, the civic applications mentioned are usually created at lower scales or in controlled conditions, unlike the AI technologies influencing national elections, which continue to be majorly uncontrolled and opaque. Furthermore, in his comparative analysis, Ejimadu discovers that the use of AI in elections has been more often associated with manipulation than with empowerment in all four democracies, especially when it is used by private interests (Ejimadu, 2021). Current applications strongly suggest that AI is being misused, even though future reforms may enable it to promote democratic ideals and institutions. Thus, the immediate dangers surrounding unaccountable, AI-driven electoral manipulation are far greater than the potential for civic benefit.

AI Electoral Manipulation on the Global Scale

Although the 2016 U.S. election is the main focus of this paper, it is crucial to apply this analysis to the global setting, where comparable political and technological relations are at work. With similar tactics and techniques employed across democracies, AI-enabled election interference has emerged as a global problem.

Ejimadu illustrates how political players in France and Germany have been using AI technology in their campaigns increasingly often, especially with micro-targeted advertising and predictive analytics (Ejimadu, 2021). The political issues of elite control, behavioral manipulation, and the decline of deliberative discourse are all exacerbated by these AI systems, just as they are in the United States. For example, AI-driven disinformation efforts targeting Emmanuel Macron during the 2017 French election mirror those employed in the United States the previous year (Kenny, 2021). The role of AI in the Brexit campaign in the UK was equally controversial. Based on thorough psychological profiling, which manipulates emotional reactions rather than logical reasoning, targeted advertisements were sent to Facebook users. Vacarelu asserts that these strategies are not unique; rather, they reflect the intentional normalization of AI in electioneering and point to a larger pattern of technological meddling in democratic administration (Vacarelu, 2023).

The globalization of AI-driven political manipulation ties back to Winner's assertion that once technology is broadly embraced, it not only changes local practices but the fundamental conditions of society itself (Winner, 2013). The tools and applications of algorithmic governance, which are created and adapted in one nation, are quickly exported, copied, and used internationally. This rapid spread establishes a new global political power structure that often functions without legal or moral regulation.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that, both in the United States and globally, AI-driven political communication actively impacts electoral rhetoric, behavior, and democratic integrity rather than acting as a neutral reflection of societal dynamics. Using the case study of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and comparative international evidence, the analysis conveyed how AI technologies like bots and algorithms serve as political actors. The paper utilized Langdon Winner's framework of technological politics and the three main principles of the theory to demonstrate how AI systems embed political ideologies into their design, evade democratic scrutiny, and reshape the conditions of political involvement. AI technologies have been shown to perpetuate particular power dynamics, providing a distinct advantage to actors having access to data, computing capacity, and control over digital platforms. These technologies are also created and applied largely without regulatory oversight or public input, defying democratic foundations in the process. Moreover, by curating content, influencing perception, and strengthening ideological divisions–often covertly and without accountability–AI changes the behavioral aspect of political communication.

When viewed through the lens of technological politics, AI can be seen as a form of infrastructure with inherent political implications rather than as a passive medium. This awareness is critical for scholars, engineers, and legislators. These influential groups should consider the potential democratic consequences of technological systems upon their invention, rather than when harm is already induced. As AI continues to impact electoral systems around the world, it becomes increasingly important for future engineering endeavors and research to intertwine with political theory. To ensure that AI upholds rather than threatens global

democratic institutions, it is crucial to prioritize ethical and transparent design, democratically informed regulation, and public accountability measures.

(3108 words)

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