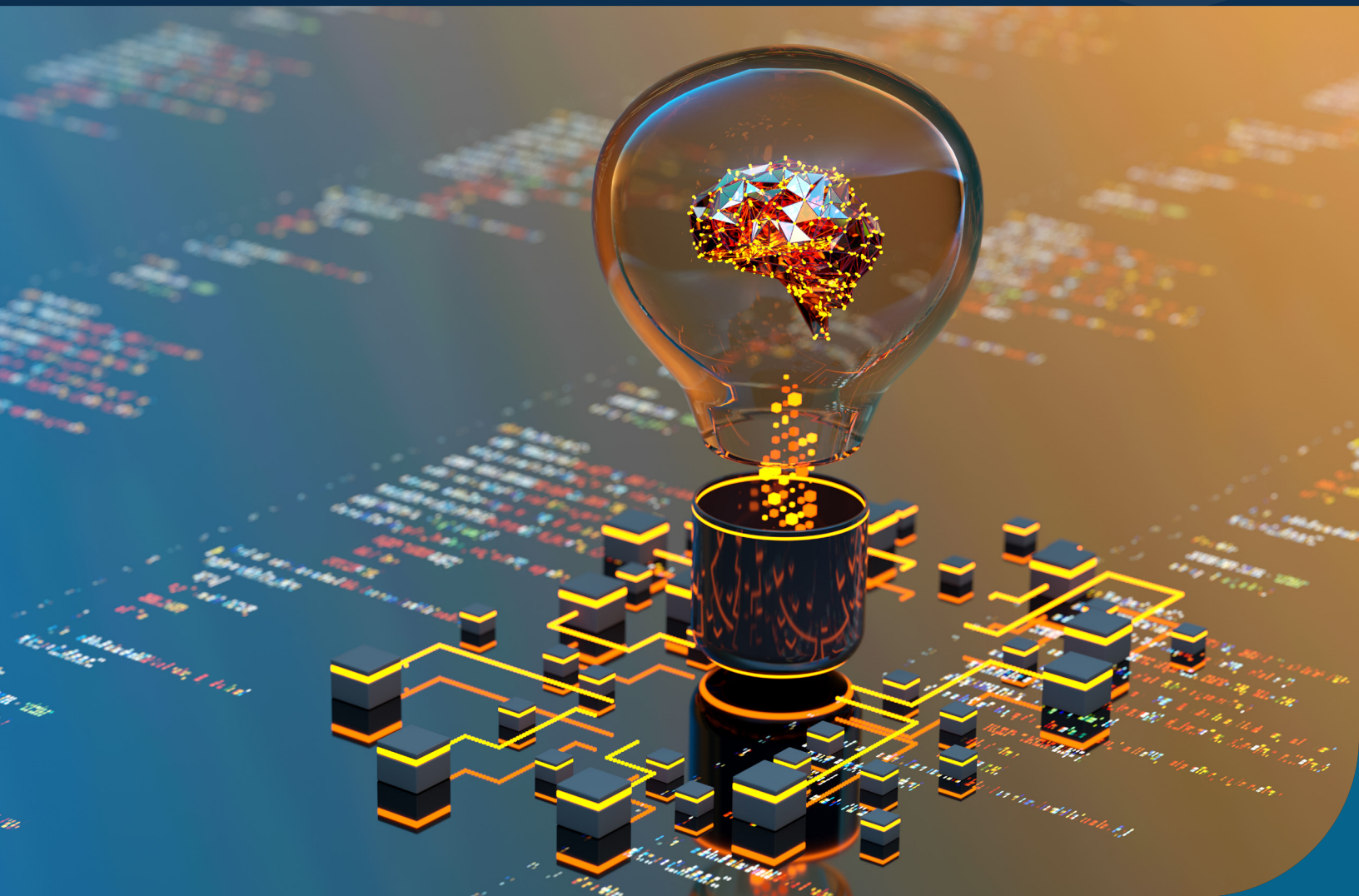


LEVERAGING AI FOR DEMOCRACY

CIVIC INNOVATION ON THE
NEW DIGITAL PLAYING FIELD

// BETH KERLEY / CARL MILLER / FERNANDA CAMPAGNUCCI



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AI FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: TILTING THE BALANCE

// BETH KERLEY

In February 2024, Belarus’s authoritarian regime held tightly controlled parliamentary elections in the wake of a brutal crackdown that has largely driven opposition underground or out of the country. To satirize the lack of real choice, the prodemocratic opposition decided to field a chatbot “candidate” called Yas Gaspadar. Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya, the opposition’s leader and widely acknowledged winner of the disputed 2020 presidential election, explained: “Frankly, he’s more real than any candidate the regime has to offer. And the best part? He cannot be arrested!”¹ And in Kenya during the early summer of 2024, protesters against the government’s attempts to force through a widely loathed tax-raising Finance Bill developed a custom AI tool to share information about the bill and its impacts, as well as another focusing on wrongdoing among the political class—“Corrupt Politicians GPT.”²

As AI technologies advance, the parameters for democratic activism are changing. The civic actors behind the innovations described above seek to compete on an unsteady digital terrain. Like social media tools before them, **generative AI models have touched off a paradigm shift in communications strategies and competencies.** Yet this shift represents only one dimension of the transformation sparked by AI’s growing role in public life—a transformation that is far from guaranteed to work in democracy’s favor.

With AI tools from chatbots to video surveillance systems finding purchase in regimes of all political hues, new threats to personal freedoms, democratic norms, and civic space are emerging. In the information domain, **generative AI tools produce increasingly convincing facsimiles of real people, places, and events**, forcing us to fundamentally rethink our assumptions about audio and video content. In governance, **the data-driven techno-authoritarian model** pioneered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) makes an alluring promise of stability without the critical but complex policy interventions and messy public debate that democratic models afford. In stark contrast to the optimism that greeted the political advent of social media, a raft of commentators are parsing AI threats to democracy. To better the odds for prodemocratic actors in a fluid technological environment, systematic thinking about how to make AI work for democracy is needed.

WORKING AT A DISADVANTAGE

At the core of many anxieties around AI are what prominent critics view as **fundamental power asymmetries**. A handful of deep-pocketed tech companies, mostly based in Silicon Valley or the PRC, lead the resource-intensive training of “foundation models” for tools like Open AI’s ChatGPT and Anthropic’s Claude. One stage down the pipeline, well-resourced corporate and government actors with privileged access to large datasets have an edge in building custom AI applications and putting them to work. When such institutions use AI technologies to make important decisions, new challenges arise for citizens seeking to hold them accountable, since it can be functionally impossible to trace the specific pathways by which these complex tools arrive at particular conclusions.³ At stake, then, are both the public’s empowerment vis-à-vis state and corporate actors, and the agency of humans in general vis-à-vis systems upon which we depend, yet do not fully understand.

What can be done to shift these dynamics in favor of civil society, the public at large, and democratic norms that demand meaningful checks on power? Commentators have offered a range of visions when it comes to what it might mean to “democratize” AI. Some tout the benefits of **making models open-source**—as with Meta’s large language model (LLM) Llama 3.1 or Hugging Face’s Bloom—thereby allowing members of the public to explore how they work as well as refine them for custom purposes. Yet this approach has sparked debate among democracy advocates: While some welcome the promise of increased transparency and the diffusion of power, others fear that making models open will be a gift to malicious actors who seek to launch cyberattacks, produce deepfakes, or otherwise circumvent safety guardrails.⁴

Some analysts instead emphasize themes of **participation and deliberation** as central to a democratic vision for AI. The Collective Intelligence Project, for instance, recently put forward a set of proposals that emphasized on the one hand making AI development and governance more participatory, and on the

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other leveraging AI to enhance and transform wider democratic deliberation.⁵ Meanwhile, others take a geopolitical view of democratic AI. OpenAI's Sam Altman, for instance, has called for a **"coalition of like-minded countries"** to secure the lead in AI development and shape its governance globally.⁶

Underlying these debates is a fundamental recognition that AI development in a direction which advances democracy cannot simply be taken for granted. One implication, addressed in the International Forum's prior report *Setting Democratic Ground Rules for AI*, is that democratic societies are in urgent need of inclusive discussions and processes around AI governance.⁷ But whether civic activists, democratic politicians, and others are positioned to leverage AI for democratic principles effectively—to deepen civic participation, ensure government transparency, promote human rights, and more—will also shape the balance of power in this emerging landscape. **To what extent can prodemocratic actors employ AI to compete against autocrats, kleptocrats, and rights violators who themselves take full advantage of the latest digital tools?** In the face of entrenched asymmetries of resources, capacity, and information, the democracy community must adopt a multi-level approach to capitalize on AI capabilities.

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AI'S PRODEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL

In December 2023, a cross-regional group of researchers, journalists, and activists gathered at an International Forum for Democratic Studies workshop to discuss innovative strategies for making AI part of a positive vision for tech-enabled democracy. As these discussions highlighted, generative AI tools as well as more traditional machine learning (ML) tools for statistical analysis have a wide range of possible applications in the civic sphere. They can both **accelerate existing processes and lines of work**—helping resource-strapped organizations to do more with less—and **enable qualitatively new approaches**.

AI tools, for instance, can help newsrooms and advocacy groups with targeting content to the desired audiences; support trainers in fielding common questions from volunteers for tasks like election monitoring; or hasten the process of media monitoring, whether online or on television. They can support new modes of civic deliberation, whether by helping digital communities to set their own custom rules for online conversations or by distilling actionable takeaways from diverse participant contributions to participatory democracy processes.⁸ As highlighted in a recent study by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, they can also increase accessibility in public services, map and forecast trends in civic space, simplify document access within legislatures, and much more.⁹

As we saw in Haykuhi Harutyunyan's contribution to the Forum's previous essay collection, *The Digitalization of Democracy*, AI tools hold particular promise where

under-resourced civic actors are seeking to make sense of large datasets. In the open government space, AI can enable watchdog groups to sift through troves of public data more rapidly, identifying red flags that point to corruption.¹⁰ Investigative journalists can uncover illegal mining using satellite imagery, or tease out relevant patterns from leaked files like the Panama Papers.¹¹ For human rights activists, AI object recognition can help accelerate the process of identifying war crimes in video from conflict zones.¹²

Rapid technological advances continue to transform the landscape of the possible when it comes to civic AI. Generative AI applied to video, for instance, makes possible creative anonymization techniques that shield victims in documentary content without sacrificing emotional impact.¹³ Advances in natural language processing (NLP) are enabling researchers to work more directly with *unstructured textual data*, meaning they can use AI to draw conclusions from plain-language text rather than having to organize information beforehand in a fixed schema (such as a database). Looking ahead, multi-modal models—which can process different types of inputs such as video, text, and images—will make it easier to leverage AI for tasks such as monitoring broadcasts of legislative proceedings. Agentic systems—models that can interface with other systems and complete multi-step tasks with limited direct supervision—have the potential to partly automate time-intensive work such as filing freedom of information requests.¹⁴

LEVELING UP

From investigative journalism to civic deliberation, **thoughtful uses of AI can change the game for civic actors working with limited resources to advance democratic norms.** Yet leveraging this potential will require intentional strategies to overcome the resource and informational asymmetries that surround AI development and tech development more broadly. As with social media platforms, commercial AI systems are not optimized for civic purposes.

How, then, can civil society practitioners position themselves to not only take maximum advantage of off-the-shelf AI products, but proactively develop tools that serve their particular constituencies, goals, and values? Leveling up capacity presents challenges at the levels of decision making within individual organizations, and for the democracy support community as a whole. Among the critical questions to be addressed are:

- **Where does AI use make sense?** Within the broad domain of civic work, what specific tasks or activities might benefit from incorporating AI tools? Which tasks would on the contrary be too risky or cumbersome to approach in this way? While the democracy community should be alert to new opportunities from AI advances, a mindful approach is critical to ensure that implementers do not find themselves sacrificing privacy, security, or even efficiency in order to chase the trend. Applications in sensitive areas like the

legal sphere, where AI bias presents particular risks, may require extra scrutiny from a human rights lens. In other cases, designing a custom tool suitable for a one-off project may simply take more time than strategically approaching the same task using human labor. As AI projects proliferate, knowledge-sharing across civil society sectors can help to identify tasks where AI technologies add value—as well as highlight, on the model of the Civic Tech Field Guide’s “civic tech graveyard,” key pitfalls from past projects and tasks for which AI tools may be a mismatch.¹⁵

- **What tools match the organization’s needs and capacities?** Although generative AI systems like ChatGPT, Dall-E, and Sora are stealing the show when it comes to popular attention, they are not the only types of AI or automated systems that warrant attention from civil society groups. In the Forum’s workshop, participants emphasized that simpler, less resource-intensive tools that are developed in-house more easily are still suitable for many tasks. For instance, one participant’s organization used graph algorithms to identify corruption in procurement. Statistical ML tools that predate today’s “foundation models” have enabled groundbreaking data journalism.
- **How can civil society actors build capacity on AI?** What partnerships, knowledge, resources, internal investments, and donor support will level up civil society organizations’ ability to design, refine, and deploy AI systems most effectively? Some workshop participants stressed the benefits of building capacity (e.g., coding knowledge) among existing staff, who will have the greatest understanding of an organization’s needs and mission. On the other hand, civil society project leaders may consider cooperating with university researchers, volunteer coders, hack collectives, or private sector tech-for-good initiatives. Each of these avenues requires addressing possible misalignments: For example, university researchers may operate on different timelines than organizations seeking to address real-world problems. Private-sector collaborators and their civil society partners may clash on questions of intellectual property and data ownership. A broader question is whether fundamentally new support structures for the civil society sector, such as a clearinghouse on AI projects and resources, are needed to help accelerate learning.
- **Which roles in AI design fit the organization’s profile?** Optimal modes of engagement with the AI design process will vary depending on the orientation and technical skillset of different organizations. Groups with strong in-house technical capacities, for instance, may benefit from developing small-scale AI tools of their own. Fine-tuning publicly available LLMs (which are too resource-intensive for most CSOs to realistically consider developing independently) is another, increasingly accessible option. Alternatively, some organizations have identified opportunities to feed into the AI design pipeline at the data curation stage. Working independently or partnering with local communities, civil society can gather data and build datasets that will in turn be used to train AI tools tailored to issues of public concern—especially in the global majority, where commercial tools frequently fail to reflect local contexts.

VISIONS OF PRODEMOCRATIC AI

The following contributions, drawn from participants in the Forum's December workshop, outline two different pathways toward a prodemocratic vision for AI.

In **"From Data Deserts to AI Oceans,"** **Fernanda Campagnucci** offers an example of how AI advances are transforming existing directions of prodemocracy work. In the open government space, government watchdogs and select civic organizations have previously experimented with using AI to identify red flags and thereby prioritize efforts in corruption monitoring, relying on fixed-format, structured data such as government officials' expense reports. **The advent of AI tools better equipped to handle natural-language information (such as the free-form text of an article or a speech) makes possible more creative and adaptable approaches.** Campagnucci describes the potential implications of this shift, with a spotlight on how tech pioneer Open Knowledge Brasil is irrigating "data deserts" by making municipal gazettes available for machine processing. In such contexts, combining new AI technologies with established civil society efforts can help watchdog organizations work more effectively, open up new research directions, and deepen understanding of challenges to democracy.

Carl Miller's essay, **"Reclaiming Technology for Democracy,"** sheds light on how AI might enable fundamentally new forms of democratic participation. In the domain of civic deliberation—enabling members of the public to exchange views and formulate opinions that ultimately feed into policies—recent advances in AI language processing, once again, widen the frontiers of the possible dramatically. With earlier generations of AI—such as the platform Polis, used most prominently by Taiwan's civic tech community—civic technologists leveraged the power of machine learning to design content curation algorithms that foreground points of consensus, making it easier to identify possible avenues for action.¹⁶ **With LLMs, new capacities for summarization, moderation, and translation, among other tasks, hold the potential to facilitate tech-assisted deliberations at scale.**¹⁷ These capacities, which are being tested for purposes that range from peacebuilding to writing rules for AI models, may create new connective tissue between an alienated public and decision making processes. Yet, as Miller observes, leveraging this potential will require fresh thinking about not just new deliberative technologies, but political innovations to make them meaningful.

The two pathways outlined in this collection—amplifying the work of existing civil society organizations and facilitating new forms of democratic practice—represent only a sampling of the possible approaches to tilt our emerging digital playing field back in democracy's favor. Another set of promising efforts centers around data: While open government groups consider how AI can make sense of existing public-sector data, organizations like the African feminist tech collective Pollicy (profiled in the Forum's forthcoming Q&A with Irene Mwendwa) are examining how data curation shapes the AI tools on which we rely.¹⁸ Datasets

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that fail to represent women in politics, for instance, yield AI image generators that depict only male candidates, campaigners, and election officials. **By building data literacy and pushing for more meaningful inclusion in AI design, civil society can steer our commercial digital design ecosystem in directions that more readily encourage political participation.** Elsewhere, groups like Open Data Charter are thinking about strategies that will make AI tools trained predominantly on data from the Global North perform better in global majority settings. Through an intentional approach to data, civil society can support the design of both custom AI tools that work for specific causes and communities, and commercial AI tools that work better for democracy writ large.

The digital authoritarian system we see taking shape in the PRC is, by its nature, holistic—data from an ever-growing number of public and private sources feed into ever-more centralized systems that output the “correct” response to governance dilemmas. As data-driven technologies permeate our social and political worlds, AI tools will continue to offer governments around the world opportunities to convert pervasive surveillance into high-tech manipulation, automated policy prescriptions, and other technologies of social control—a tempting alternative to democratic competition. This model’s advance poses fundamental challenges to democratic norms around freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and civic participation, already under siege globally in an era of democratic backsliding and authoritarian retrenchment.

In contrast to the totalizing impulse of techno-authoritarianism,¹⁹ a democratic response will necessarily be pluralistic—the outgrowth of an assortment of diverse, bottom-up visions and initiatives for leveraging AI on the side of government transparency, human rights, political participation, and the wider set of democratic values. It must identify ways of engaging with technology that mitigate power and resource imbalances, empower citizens in holding institutions accountable, and center—rather than circumvent—human agency, deliberation, and connection. As AI development hurtles onward, with innovations such as agentic systems opening up new technological horizons, the opportunities available to civil society will continue to evolve. For the constellation of prodemocratic donors, journalists, advocacy groups, and grassroots activists seeking to find their footing on this rapidly shifting terrain, however, the time for intentional thinking about leveraging AI for democracy is now.

A democratic response to techno-authoritarianism must center—rather than circumvent—human agency, deliberation, and connection.

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AI for Civil Society: Tilting the Balance

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