

Bare Life in the Technopoly: The Potential for Democracy Under Surveillance Capitalism in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: Through a critical biopolitical and surveillance capitalist framework, artificial intelligence can be grounded as a technology manifesting within systems of power and influencing human life as an extension of these powers. I will develop the argument that these systems of power, which fundamentally reduce the individual to that of bare life, threaten the workings of a democratic society. By understanding the harms of artificial intelligence as it becomes increasingly integrated into societal structures, I propose a revival of democracy through an emphasis on the necessity of shared physical space outside of the digital realm.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are progressively being inserted into social systems, introduced to the public in marketable forms, and, most critically, embedded in our collective cultural consciousness. While these technologies appear to introduce a host of new ethical dilemmas, it is paramount to move forward with a conception of AI that is contextualized and historically grounded. While AI presents novelty in its complexity, technologies never materialize independently; rather, they always emerge in the context of the dominant power systems around them. The ethical issues present with AI technologies are not unique, but rather *new iterations* of the ways systems of power manifest in life. Combatting these issues must involve a revival of democracy through shared discourse in physical spaces rather than digital ones.

The Rise of the Technopoly

It is productive to understand AI as fundamentally a technology, even if its particular qualities make it novel. While not about the AI technologies of today, the work of American author and thinker Neil Postman provides a distinctly prescient understanding of technology

and culture, one that is particularly relevant to the current era’s grappling with AI technologies.

In his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*, Postman writes in response to the influences of the entertainment-driven technologies of the time, namely radio and its extension into television. Postman tracks how the instantaneous nature of communication introduced by the telegram drastically molded the broader culture of the United States into one where “...all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment.”¹ His emphasis on public discourse points to a prominent concern over the impact of technology on not merely culture in its broadest sense, but specifically the culture of democracy.

Central to *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is an understanding of conversation as “...all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages,”² and that the connection of conversation to the Platonic notion that how we converse “...will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express.”³ For Postman and for Plato, the *mode* of communication determines what kinds of messages and ideas are presented, and more importantly, the messages present in public discourse. The technologies of communication, by virtue of their form, will prioritize and promote certain messages over others. For Postman at the time of writing *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, this is the shortened, overly visual communication of television. For the average person in the current United States, it is the attention-grabbing, short-form content of most social media platforms. The role of data collection and its influence on these messages will become more relevant in the section exploring surveillance capitalism, but the importance of Postman’s message from 1985 is this—technology is designed to communicate information in a certain way, and this form of communication creates *the possible discourse* of a society.

The epistemological significance of this is not lost on Postman, who argues that “...a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content—in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling.”⁴ Within Postman’s framework, the United States emerged initially as a country grounded in the written word, with the rise of television presenting not only a technological shift but an epistemological one. Truth that was once found in the written argument was then found in images and video, which, as extensions of sight, simultaneously presented an unchanging snapshot of time, while also opening the door to advertising and similar attempts at influencing consumers. With the rise of powerful generative AI capable of creating images and videos that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the previous visual “truth” established by television, a new epistemological shift is underway. A photograph or video is no longer reliable evidence of something real and tangible. Thus, AI is currently obliterating the conception of truth based in visual communication—it is warping the way the world is known to the individual.

The effects of technological modes of communication on politics are not unique to the epistemological pollution of public discourse by the advent of television Postman describes;⁵

1 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (Methuen, 1985), 3.

2 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 6.

3 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 6.

4 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 27.

5 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 28.

social media, accompanied by its algorithms, has continued this rather disastrous muddying of the shared dialogue of democratic systems of governance. Michaelangelo Anastasiou explores the role of rhetoric in the age of political discourse that has largely moved to internet-based modes of communication. Anastasiou describes how, in relation to the often incoherent, sensationalized rhetoric of right-wing politics, “democratic forces are still ensnared in drawn-out analyses and discussions that appeal to the principles of ‘internal rationality’ and the intricacies of scientific observation.”⁶ Anastasiou illustrates how the leadership of the Democratic Party in the United States is stuck in bygone modes of communication like television and the written word, while the Republican Party has adapted to the instantaneous communication of the internet, and its messaging has shifted as such. The information given through a traditional press briefing is now accompanied by social media posts directly from politicians, with the latter paving the way for sensationalized disinformation. Bias has frequently accompanied the media, but the current unfiltered flood of access directly to political leaders poses a danger to the authority of expertise. While Anastasiou argues for the Democratic Party to lean into this rhetoric, it is perhaps worthwhile to take a step back and question *how the mode of communication creates the message*.⁷

Postman takes these baseline concepts from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and develops them into a fleshed-out framework in his 1992 book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. For Postman, culture is being exceedingly driven by information and technological progress for the sake of progress, an issue that he says leads to information glut—a decontextualized, massive amount of information that can travel rapidly across the world.⁸ The breakneck pace at which these changes have occurred leaves culture and its institutions at a loss as to how to integrate such technologies back into itself. What is left is a culture defined by its technologies and the needless search for more information, which Postman coins as *technopoly*. For Postman, it was the lack of regulation over industry and the abandonment of traditionally held cultural beliefs that led to the United States becoming the first true technopoly.⁹

Even in 1992, Postman clearly describes the beginnings of a system of surveillance working itself into the private lives of people as a direct result of this shift into a technopoly. He asks how computer technology has “...been an advantage to the masses of people... Their private matters have been made more accessible to powerful institutions. They are more easily tracked and controlled; are subjected to more examinations; are increasingly mystified by the decisions made about them; they are often reduced to mere numerical objects.”¹⁰ The kinds of technological insights Postman presents here are alarmingly pertinent to the current digital age, where the production of artificial intelligence systems directly relies upon data collected from the individual. The fact of user surveillance has become so commonplace that it hums in the background of life, in the well-timed ads on a social media page, or the wordy terms and conditions presented on nearly every webpage and app. It is the *reduction of people into numerical objects* that will prove useful to explore from a biopolitical perspective and in conjunction with a larger capitalist structure.

6 Michaelangelo Anastasiou, “The Hegemonic World Picture: Representation, Post-Truth, and Artificial Intelligence,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 0, no. 0 (2025): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537251374951>.

7 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 10.

8 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1992), 61.

9 Postman, *Technopoly*, 53.

10 Postman, *Technopoly*, 10.

Surveillance Capitalism and Control

While Postman hints at the role of capitalism in the development of technology, Shoshana Zuboff presents a framework for understanding the new ways that capitalism manifests in the digital age, coining the term *surveillance capitalism*. Zuboff outlines this surveillance capital framework as it was initially introduced by Google and quickly adopted by various digital corporate enterprises.¹¹ Google was able to sell the surplus data generated from search queries, creating a market that "...was not an exchange with users but rather with companies that understood how to make money from bets on users' future behavior...users were no longer ends-in-themselves...Instead, users are the *human natural* source of free raw material that feeds a new kind of manufacturing process designed to fabricate *prediction products*."¹² AI fits neatly into this market as it fundamentally relies on this human-generated data, and big tech companies utilize AI systems to more accurately predict the actions of the users they surveil. AI being introduced to the public in the form of chatbots, search engines, and the like, is merely the next iteration of surveillance capitalists attempting to maximize profit. Just as Google took user data and turned it into a raw product to sell to advertisers, this same raw data is now being repackaged into a new generation of products to sell back to the user, all without compensation, voice, or autonomy to the people who are exploited in the process.

The surveillance capital economic model has a certain level of opacity necessary to its function. As Zuboff writes, "economies of action go further. These new systems and procedures take direct aim at individual autonomy, systematically replacing self-determined action with a range of hidden operations designed to shape behavior at the source."¹³ What is even more profitable than highly targeted advertising is the ability to actively *control* the future of consumer behavior. Google won't just sell a *susceptible* customer to advertisers—they can sell a *guaranteed* customer. In *An Inquirer's Guide to Ethics in AI*, authors Matthew Silk and Ian MacDonald describe "nudging," where a decision is presented in such a way that it psychologically favors one choice over another,¹⁴ and subsequent "hypernudging," which "...uses AI to continuously reconfigure the nudge based on data that an algorithm is getting from you and others."¹⁵ Hypernudging with highly complex algorithms has the potential to alter what people see online in real time. This is all done with little to no regard for the autonomy of the users exploited in this system. Users are essentially manipulated, which undermines the democratic system that, on the most fundamental level, relies on the autonomous ability of the populace to think for themselves. When this ability is compromised in such a subtle fashion, it undermines a society driven by rational choice and deliberation.

Zuboff describes how "...populations are conceptualized as undifferentiated 'users,' who are merely the sources of raw material for a digital-age production process aimed at a new business customer...social relations are no longer founded on mutual exchange."¹⁶ The notion of mutual exchange being necessary for social relations is a compelling idea in relation to democratic governance. Élodie Marchand, Théo Durand, and Maëlle Dubois tackle this is-

11 Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action," *New Labor Forum* 28, no. 1 (2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796018819461>.

12 Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism," 13.

13 Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism," 18.

14 Matthew S.W. Silk and Ian J. MacDonald, *An Inquirer's Guide to Ethics in AI* (Broadview Press, 2024), 198.

15 Silk and MacDonald, *An Inquirer's Guide*, 199.

16 Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism," 21.

sue, describing how, from a marketing perspective, the highly individualized feedback loops of AI-driven advertising "...could lead to a world where public discourse even around brands or products is splintered—fewer unifying cultural moments, more niche microcultures."¹⁷ Even if one is to accept capitalist markets as permissible, embedding AI into structures like marketing leads to a narrowing of the world and a loss of connectivity with others. Completely personalized advertisements drastically limit the choices a consumer can make and present different versions of entertainment and products to each person on an individual level. This results in a loss of word-of-mouth recommendations and shared discourse about brands and products unmediated by technology. Marketing often attempts subtlety, but there is a striking difference between colorful packaging in the supermarket and an algorithm that can predict the most opportune moment when the user is most susceptible to an advertisement.

It is worth noting that Zuboff would perhaps see the root of the issues of AI technologies as lying solely with the economic power systems around them, rather than with something inherent to the technologies themselves. She writes, "The primacy of economics over technology is not new, but capitalism has long found it useful to confound society by concealing itself within the Trojan horse of technology, in order that its excesses might be perceived as the inexorable expression of the machines it employs."¹⁸ While it is true that technology is something that can be weaponized by those in power, Postman provides a more nuanced understanding where technologies are not neutral, but visions for possibilities of the future. For Postman, technology and its integration into daily life change the way certain values are understood by shifting the context around them, such as the advent of television leading to a valuing of entertainment over reliable information.¹⁹ The way that a technology is designed is essential to how it will impact society.

This does not mean that Postman is dismissive of the role of capitalism in technological development. If anything, he would argue that the digital milieu of the current day, and all the technologies it employs, were developed with capitalism in mind. In his 1998 talk "Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change," Postman states that "The consequences of technological change are always vast, often unpredictable, and largely irreversible. That is also why we must be suspicious of capitalists. Capitalists are by definition not only personal risk takers but, more to the point, cultural risk takers."²⁰ Technology is rarely a factor that is added or subtracted while avoiding unforeseen, far-reaching consequences.²¹ Those who invent technologies are the arbiters in shaping the *values* of society, yet they often do so impulsively and with little regard for the permanency of these changes. The introduction of smartphone technology created unprecedented user access to the world, while at the same time halting in-person interactions. It is not obstinate to recognize that in public settings, the majority of people focus their attention on their phones rather than on those around them. This is a change that is unlikely to go away, given that a smartphone is nearly necessary to effectively navigate society. Suffice to say, the one driving force for the capitalist is the

17 Marchand, Élodie, Théo Durand, and Maëlle Dubois. "Surveillance Capitalism, Consumer Subjectivity and Marketing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence." *Social Science Chronicle* 5, no. 1 (2025): 8, <https://doi.org/10.56106/ssc.2025.001>.

18 Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism," 12.

19 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 7.

20 Neil Postman, "Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change" (lecture, Denver, CO, March 28, 1998).

21 Postman, *Technopoly*, 5.

accumulation of capital, and this easily lends itself to the collection of power and control over the market. It is all too easy for the capitalist to integrate the individual into the market *as an object* if doing so presents a compelling economic interest. It is when the capitalist is left unregulated, with complete control over the market, that this *reduction of human life* takes on a biopolitical significance.

Biopower and the Apparatus

Zuboff astutely describes how the result of this surveillance capitalist system “...has been an involuntary merger of personal necessity and economic extraction, as the same channels that we rely on for daily logistics, social interaction, work, education, health care, access to products and services, and much more, now double as supply chain operations for surveillance capitalism’s surplus flows.”²² It is becoming increasingly difficult to function without relying on technologies of some kind that are integrated into a surveillance capital system, whether it be through a bus pass that is only available on an app, an automated customer service agent answering the phone, or an AI summary embedded in a previously used technology.

The technologies of surveillance capitalism, and by extension AI, have become unavoidable in daily life. Not only this, but the powers that implement these technologies have a distinct interest in the private lives of individuals. As Zuboff states, “surveillance capital wants more than your body’s coordinates in time and space. Now it violates the inner sanctum, as machines and their algorithms decide the meaning of your sighs, blinks, and utterances; the pattern of your breathing and the movements of your eyes; the clench of your jaw muscles; the hitch in your voice.”²³ While Zuboff’s description appears exaggerated, one has to look no further than the use of Flock cameras²⁴ and similar surveillance technologies to grasp the extent of surveillance capitalism’s invasion into the private sphere. Regarding camera surveillance, Jay Stanley, policy analyst for the ACLU, describes the development of “...algorithms that can detect people or behaviors that are ‘unusual,’ ‘abnormal,’ ‘deviant,’ or ‘atypical.’ Finding statistical deviations may be an interesting mathematical challenge, but when that shades into finding deviant people it should raise alarms.”²⁵ From determining a customer’s buying patterns based on grocery store footage to policing the movements of a crowd of protesters, the companies developing surveillance technologies stand to profit from dissecting the minutiae of human behavior. The technologies of the surveillance capitalists become embedded in social life to the extent that their power feels indistinguishable from the power of formal governance, often because the government invests in and implements these very surveillance technologies. This power exerts itself blatantly and completely on the individual and how they live.

Giorgio Agamben extrapolates on Michel Foucault’s conception of *biopower*, which can be understood as “...what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.”²⁶ Biopower

22 Zuboff, “Surveillance Capitalism,” 25.

23 Zuboff, “Surveillance Capitalism,” 17.

24 Jay Stanley, “Flock’s Aggressive Expansions Go Far Beyond Simple Driver Surveillance,” *Free Future* (blog, American Civil Liberties Union, August 18, 2025), <https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/flock-roundup>.

25 Jay Stanley, *The Dawn of Robot Surveillance: AI, Video Analytics, and Privacy* (American Civil Liberties Union, June 13, 2019), <https://www.aclu.org/publications/dawn-robot-surveillance>.

26 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Reprint,

is essentially the various methods that the State employs to control large populations, often with a focus on how life is lived. In this definition, the connection is already apparent between biopower and the mechanisms by which surveillance capitalism functions. However, Agamben develops this understanding further. For Agamben, “...the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible...without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate techniques, so to speak created the ‘docile bodies’ that it needed.”²⁷ In order for human labor to be extracted and exploited under a capitalist structure, the individual must be seen as a cog in society whose life can be regulated, controlled, and disciplined by the State. It is apparent how the reduction of human life into mere data for surveillance capitalism is an iteration of the biopower at play that capitalism more generally relies on, a creation of docile bodies in the form of the user who generates the data surveillance capitalism requires.

For Foucault and for Agamben, biopower is not merely a representation of the State’s power. Biopower goes beyond the classical models of sovereignty and instead embeds itself into much larger frameworks. In part, this involves “...*technologies of the self* by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power.”²⁸ There is an element of self-monitoring to biopower, one that is far more subtle than the explicit, forceful power from the traditional State. Biopower plays out in social norms, internalized by the individual. It is in the way that young girls learn beauty standards, that gender is performed through clothing or mannerisms, and the expectation to maintain the health of the body to maximize productivity.

Author Mikkel Kenni Bruun explores the use of wearable devices as modes of self-surveillance. As Bruun describes it, “the surveilling gaze has, in an important sense, been inverted—turned inwards—as we are increasingly encouraged and required to watch our selves.”²⁹ These are the exact kinds of technologies of the self that Foucault and Agamben describe; it is the kind of power that manifests itself as a self-imposed, inward surveillance. In the case of wearable devices such as Fitbits, Apple Watches, or Oura rings, companies present a self-surveillance technology justified as a tool to optimize mental and physical health, and the body becomes an object that requires monitoring to meet normative standards of health.³⁰ All the while, the highly personal data that is collected by these technologies is at best kept in a data center that could potentially be accessed by threat actors, and at worst, is free to use by these companies for their own capital gain. While user agreements are implemented by these companies to avoid potential legal repercussions, such agreements are often lengthy and filled with language that is difficult for the user to understand. Thus, such agreements rarely feel like a fair interaction or exchange between the user and the company.

It is this form of biopower operating through technologies of the self that Agamben relies heavily on in his larger framework, where he establishes “bare life” as that which is included in the social order only through its exclusion.³¹ As Agamben writes, “in such a space of exception, subjection to experimentation can...either return the human body to life...or

Pantheon Books, 1978), 143.

27 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 3.

28 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5.

29 Mikkel Kenni Bruun, “Watching Our Selves: Fitness and Mindfulness as Practices of Self-Monitoring in Britain,” in *Rhythm and Vigilance* (Policy Press, 2025), 26.

30 Bruun, “Watching Our Selves,” 27.

31 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 29.

definitively consign it to the death to which it already belongs. What concerns us most of all here, however, is that the physician and the scientist move in the no-man’s-land into which at one point the sovereign alone could penetrate.”³² Agamben’s concern is not merely over the consequences of the traditional sovereign holding power over life itself. It is when this sovereignty is expressed in non-governmental entities, when biopower is delivered in all the nuances of the bureaucratic structures, that the individual is reduced so completely to bare life, to simply the biological state of being alive rather than a qualified, political existence. Instead of the physicians or scientists, it is the surveillance capitalists who have now entered this no-man’s-land of the sovereign. Users are taken merely as living beings, whose actions can be manipulated in order to extract further capital.

Agamben sheds light on how the State became so invested in the life of the individual through the use of the term “apparatus.” Agamben modernizes Foucault’s earlier conception of the apparatus, understanding it as “...anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”³³ In this light, the modes of communication in the technopoly, including the surveillance technologies employed by capitalists, are all forms of apparatuses that influence and shape life. Agamben even states that it is possible to define “...the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses.”³⁴ Viewing AI technologies through the lens of the apparatus is particularly helpful for understanding how technologies come to impose themselves on life in a surveillance capitalist system.

What the current biopolitical system of surveillance does is, fundamentally, to justify total control with the most contradictory claims to the reality of the situation. Agamben writes that “it is only an apparent paradox that the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies... who readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest details by apparatuses, is also considered by power... as a potential terrorist.”³⁵ The individual caught up in the technological apparatuses of our time is a normal, predictable human to be collected in datasets and calculated; yet, they are somehow equally a potential terrorist and threat to the State, which justifies such surveillance.

This kind of surveillance can be classified as a *banopticon*, where the state of emergency invoked by the government involves the use of surveillance technology to categorize individuals and evaluate their potential threat.³⁶ As Guilherme Giantini describes, “...the use of personal databases did not remain exclusive to...the intent of maintaining social order. In the era of mass communication media, political instability, and consumerism, personal data started to draw attention to occurrences in which their instrumentalization by powerful AI processing tools started attending interests from political, economic, religious, and gov-

32 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 159.

33 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

34 Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 15.

35 Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 23.

36 Guilherme Giantini, “The Sophistry of the Neutral Tool. Weaponizing Artificial Intelligence and Big Data into Threats toward Social Exclusion,” *AI and Ethics* 3(2023): 1052, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-023-00311-7>.

ernmental spheres...”³⁷ Technologies that were previously implemented under the guise of public safety and social order have since developed into a corporate market. If surveillance capitalism has become so embedded in the life of the individual, it is a result of the largely unregulated technologies that were allowed to saturate the private lives of people.

AI, Power, and Democracy

Agamben emphasizes power’s infringement on private life because of its profound implications for political life. For Agamben, “every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city.”³⁸ Life itself becomes an issue of the State, and in an unregulated surveillance capitalist system, an issue of large tech companies that conduct this surveillance. The individual citizen is reduced to bare life, to being a docile body that generates data which can be extracted for corporate profit. In its current form, Artificial intelligence is not and can never be a beneficial, neutral tool for a democratically aligned society if only it were “used correctly” because it is functioning as intended; AI is designed to see people as mere objects among objects, without any of the individual autonomy necessary for productive discourse.

Many thinkers have been taking up the mantle of envisioning a democratic way forward under these systems of power and control. Ashish Makanadar expands on surveillance capitalism as a framework, proposing a reclaiming of data sovereignty by “empowering everyday citizens with user-friendly tools for encrypting communications, obfuscating data trails, and revoking data ownership claims by corporations,”³⁹ alongside legal reform from scholars “... building legal regimes for algorithmic due process and machine rights.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Jingduo Hu advocates for communist digital communities with “...online spaces organized and governed collectively with shared ownership and participatory decision making rather than profit driven imperatives.”⁴¹ Joseph Jones emphasizes the need for a care-based democracy, one that is “...concerned with everyday life, not just the official institutions of power.”⁴² Life itself must be reclaimed as something valuable rather than merely a means to a profitable end if a democratic future is to be a possibility.

Sylvie Delacroix suggests the use of AI to create conversational spaces for democracy, a claim that could be potentially questioned if a complete refusal of AI as it stands is necessary in moving forward. As has been discussed, artificial intelligence is not a neutral tool that is being used for the wrong ends—it is developed with a certain view of the world in mind. As it stands, it is not possible to utilize current AI technologies in a “correct” way that will benefit democratic forms of governance and a sense of civic virtue. This is precisely because AI

37 Giantini, “The Sophistry of the Neutral Tool,” 1052.

38 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

39 Ashish Makanadar, “Digital Surveillance Capitalism and Cities: Data, Democracy and Activism,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03941-2>.

40 Makanadar, “Digital Surveillance Capitalism and Cities,” 3.

41 Jingduo Hu, “The Digitization of Life: The Biopolitics in the Era of Digital Capitalism.” *World Futures* 81, no. 7 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.2025.2563492>.

42 Joseph Jones, “Don’t Fear Artificial Intelligence, Question the Business Model: How Surveillance Capitalists Use Media to Invade Privacy, Disrupt Moral Autonomy, and Harm Democracy,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 49, no. 1 (2024): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599241235209>.

technologies are fundamentally immersed and grown against the backdrop of the biopolitical and capitalist power structures that define them. However, as Delacroix notes, “democratic contexts require technological systems that can sustain hermeneutic uncertainty as a productive condition rather than treating all uncertainty as a technical deficit to be eliminated.”⁴³ The current technologies in use, our current apparatuses, are not designed democratically, so we must invent structures that are. Technology that is designed to manipulate and shape human behavior, to impair human decision-making, fundamentally goes against a democracy that values informed choices and collective deliberation. At the very least, people should be clearly informed about how their data is used and have alternative choices in technology without it impeding their ability to function in society.

Democracy is not something that can be flippantly left in the hands of capitalists. One need only look towards these new technologies and the kinds of goals and purposes they serve. As Shannon Vallor describes, “today’s AI systems trained on human thought and behavior are not minds. They are their own new kind of thing—something like a mirror. They don’t produce thoughts or feelings any more than mirrors produce bodies. What they produce is a new kind of reflection.”⁴⁴ Vallor’s mirror metaphor is productive in grounding artificial intelligence as a distinctly *human* technology. It is not some transcendent tool that will reveal a completely objective reality of the world, or some kind of universal *truth*. Instead, AI technologies are a series of highly complex algorithms used in a multitude of apparatuses that are built on the production of raw data *by humans*.

Mark Ryan evaluates three separate accounts of trust and determines that AI only meets the rational account, which is essentially a form of reliance.⁴⁵ The rational account of trust involves trust based on rationality, where “trust is simply a matter of prediction by the trustor, rather than being concerned about the trustee’s motivation.”⁴⁶ AI is similar, though more problematic, to something like a car; it is a technology that can be used and be potentially helpful for certain tasks, but in which no legitimate trust can be placed, because true trust involves the motivations of the trustee. As Ryan writes, “referring to AI as trustworthy would inappropriately elevate AI, while disavowing the responsibility of those developing and implementing it...Companies should be held responsible for impacts of their AI and should instil measures to avert harmful impacts...Responsibility should also lie with governments, industry leaders, research institutions and AI practitioners.”⁴⁷ By critically grounding artificial intelligence as a tool created by powerful actors and with a certain *view of the future* in mind, responsibility should correctly be placed on the shoulders of those who implement it in public life.

The fragility of the surveillance capitalist model lies in its reliance on isolation, which enables it to create individualized, distorted conceptions of reality. The user must be convinced that their digital environment is preferable to the vibrancy of the tangible world around them and the people in it. While Zuboff notes that “there can be no exit from processes that

43 Sylvie Delacroix, “Designing with Uncertainty: LLM Interfaces as Transitional Spaces for Democratic Revival,” *Minds and Machines* 35, no. 4 (2025): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-025-09736-x>.

44 Shannon Vallor, *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 39.

45 Mark Ryan, “In AI We Trust: Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, and Reliability,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26, no. 5 (2020): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-020-00228-y>.

46 Ryan, “In AI We Trust,” 4.

47 Ryan, “In AI We Trust,” 14.

are intentionally designed to bypass individual awareness and on which we must depend for effective daily life,”⁴⁸ it is also the case that a great deal of effort and manipulation must go into convincing the populace of the necessity of these processes. By revitalizing democracy and placing the burden of responsibility back on the government and the companies implementing AI technologies, there is the potential to overcome the surveillance capitalist model that life has become so entrenched in.

Democracy amounts to a committed way of interacting with people and a dedication to forming a society as such. According to John Dewey:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.⁴⁹

Democracy necessitates direct communication and association with others in a way that is directly antithetical to the resigned mode of existence demanded by surveillance capitalism. Artificial intelligence can only distort reality and relegate the individual to bare life so long as the physical spaces of democratic discourse are abandoned. If technology is to be a tool of democracy, it must originate from a physical space of discourse and deliberation.

If, as Postman says, “...embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another,”⁵⁰ then the technologies integrated into collective society must be reshaped through discourse in intentionally *real-world* spaces. Through reviving physical spaces of democracy where individuals interact face-to-face with those who are different from them, there is the possibility of creating new technologies that have a decidedly different constructed world in mind than the ones the populace is currently relegated to. The tools we use hold power, but so too does the decision-making that goes behind those tools. By beginning squarely in a democratically aligned physical realm of debate, new technologies can be envisioned in place of the old, and surveillance capitalism can be undone.

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