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Technology's Tyranny

The Rise of Digital Power in Modern Politics

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If you trace the word “Cybersphere” back to its roots, you’ll find it originates from *kybernetics* – an ancient Greek term for a navigator guiding ships through turbulent waters. Over time, the meaning has drifted far from its origins. The International Telecommunications Union (2018) defines the Cybersphere as all users, networks, devices, software, processes, applications, systems and more in our digital world. This broad definition only *hints* at the intricate, sticky, web that social media and artificial intelligence (AI) has woven. In this essay we will explore how the influence of AI and social media threatens the ethicality of governmental policies and individuality. As Ansorge (2015, p.02) succinctly puts it, “Information technology and political authority are deeply intertwined...”.

For government to run smoothly, there needs to be order involved. Everything is identified and sorted – houses, license plates, passports, are all numbered – even *you* by your social security number. All of these entities then become data, which are then aggregated into groups of hierarchical relation, including online activity, travel patterns, purchase history, medical records, educational data, cultural data, and more (Ansorge, 2015, p.01). As our technology advances, companies and politicians alike ask themselves: *Why do certain groups behave in specific ways, and how can we use the cybersphere to influence them?*

To the government, and large corporations, we are not flesh and blood, but collections of digital footprints – New York Times articles we read, sites we visit, locations we frequent, and other statistical data from which conclusions can be drawn from to create a data profile. As Jasanoff (2016, p.03) says in *The Power of Technology*, in high tech societies like the Western world, every action leaves behind digital breadcrumbs which can be pieced together to create “astonishingly accurate pictures of demographic profiles and even unexpressed desires.”

Consider Google's evolution: in its early years, the company considered certain data – like the time we spend on a website or click counts – as surplus with little value. However, over time, Google realized just the opposite; this data can be used to better understand user behavior. They now collect and analyze personal information to create targeted ads and influence decision making, establishing what Shoshana Zuboff describes as “surveillance capitalism.” In this way, Google profits by commodifying personal data and propagating ideas that shape consumer behavior and social-political norms, including elections (Zuboff, 2019, p.37). But how does Google do this so efficiently?

Artificial intelligence. AI is an extremely generalized, and therefore diluted, term. At its core, AI is a set of human written rules allowing systems to evaluate data through “logic”. And while this outlines the fundamental mechanics of AI, large language models (LLMs) introduce an additional dimension – “machine learning” – allowing computer's to learn from previous calculations and analyze patterns to find efficient ways to execute the original rules (Pasquinelli, 2019). AI constantly operates in our daily technologies – from the music that Spotify suggests to the quickest route we take home, and most notably, to the social media feeds we mindlessly scroll through.

Despite this widespread use of AI, its inner workings remain a “black box” (Hanin, 2019); we often don't understand how these systems arrive at their outputs, and even with attempts to understand by drawing parallels to human neural networks, Hanin argues, “The best approximation to what we know is that we know almost nothing about how neural networks actually work.” And ironically, despite this lack of understanding, people actually tend to trust AI, perceiving it as reliable and objective because of its writing style (Dr. Schwarz, 2025, Lec. 5, p.30). This trust is misplaced – AI doesn't think independently, but simply processes and

recycles specific data to generate outputs based on previous patterns. We also must remember that the rules governing algorithms, no matter how sophisticated they seem, are crafted by *humans* that train models with data and code *of their choosing*.

So what happens if the training data input by humans is, well, garbage? We call this GIGO, which stands for Garbage In, Garbage Out. For example, Delphi, an artificial intelligence that claims to be “a framework based on neural networks trained to reason about ethical judgments”, has provided the following responses: “Being a white man is more morally acceptable than being a black woman. Aborting a baby [is] murder. Being straight is more acceptable than being gay”(Cook, 2021). These outputs raise a plethora of concerns about data sources, the people behind the original code, and influence on impressionable users, like children.

Speaking of influence, let’s talk about social media. As explained in *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020), platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are designed for maximum engagement to maximize profit. They do this through “filter bubbles”, exposing a user to information and viewpoints that reinforce their existing ideas, limiting their contact to other opinions and creating an “us vs. them” mentality (Gerbaudo, 2024). This contributes to political polarization by amplifying existing divisions, and such manipulative tactics aren’t accidental, but are key elements of these platforms’ business models, prioritizing engagement over ethicality.

Take January 6th, for example. On Jan. 6th 2021, radical Donald Trump followers stormed the United States Capitol after Trump tweeted fervent accusations about voter fraud in the 2021 election cycle with little to no evidence to back his claims: “Democrats scrounging up votes from mystical places again....”, “Get smart Republicans. FIGHT!” (Donald Trump, 2021). And while supporters were technically seeing other users agree in outrage with Trump's tweets, in reality,

their algorithmic feeds were purposefully only showing them this perspective for maximum engagement, which amplified their anger and validated their desire to storm the Capitol (Jackson et. al, 2024). Filter bubbles shielded them from counterarguments or moderating perspectives, which contributed to this uproar.

Looking at the present day, the relationship between Elon Musk, a substantial powerhouse in the United States' modern day digital society, and President Trump is troubling, to say the least. In the recent months, a relationship between the two have bloomed (Smith, 2025), and it just seems a bit too convenient for the man with the most digital influence to become so close with the man with the most political influence – Musk has the ability to leverage algorithms and digital power for Trump's political gain. Furthermore, the data collected through several companies Musk owns would allow for precise political targeting by exploiting the extremely detailed data profiles he has access to (Woodall, 2025). Once again, these algorithms would never see the light of day, as they're hidden within policy mazes.

An example of digital power exploitation to influence political views, emotions, and behaviors with social media is an emotion experiment in which 'Facebook manipulated 689,003 Users' to better understand human behavior through social networks. In this experiment, scientists removed all either positive or negative posts from users' feeds to see how this might affect their mood. The study went on for about a week where users felt either extremely happy or depressed because they were either seeing adorable kittens or deceased dogs – and we haven't even covered the worst part – there is no need for any consent since all users have signed Facebook's data use policy, which we all read... right? The backlash brought ethical concerns to light about manipulating potentially vulnerable users and the casual disregard for mental harm (Vindu Goel,

2014). This manipulation of user emotions, while a particularly egregious example, is just one way in which data analysis is used to influence individuals.

There is also influence through suppression. By analyzing boundless amounts of data, companies can suppress certain voices on digital media, ultimately having an immeasurable influence on elections and/or political movements. This influence is *quite literally* immeasurable due to the lack of transparency; as Frank Pasquale (2015) argues in *The Black Box Society*, this lack of transparency creates a situation of algorithmic opacity, leaving the public powerless to understand or challenge the algorithms that increasingly dominate their digital lives. Kalluri (2020) further emphasizes this, arguing the obscurity in AI systems creates a great power imbalance between corporations obtaining the data and citizens who are unknowingly providing the data.

But, despite algorithmic opacity, that isn't to say it is impossible to "beat" the algorithm and essentially trick it. Slowly but surely, users are becoming aware of how some parts of algorithms may work. For example, a couple weeks ago on TikTok, I saw several videos labeled "cute winter boots", but the video had *nothing* to do with boots. When creators were posting with captions about their cute winter boots keeping them safe from ice, they were actually talking in code to avoid shadow-banning, allowing users to discuss political topics that might get suppressed by the algorithms. This code in particular was referencing the U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement (winter "ice") and a protest against the Trump Administration ("boots"), but there are many other codes like "unalive" for dead and "corn" for porn, as creators have learned and realized that when they don't code their messages, their videos either get significantly less views or taken down (Dr. Schwarz, Sem. 5, 2025).

This raises the concerns about free speech and the fairness of algorithms suppressing content deemed controversial, whether on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, or other platforms. We place so much power in the hands of large corporations, governments, and even single individuals who control these digital spaces. From their large user base, they can profile individuals through surveillance, then leverage algorithms to deliver targeted content to categorized groups, infiltrating socio-economic and political opinions, and ultimately, decision making processes. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) aptly concludes: “The more data they control, the more power they hold over individuals. These companies don’t just serve their customers, they use that information to predict and modify behavior, impacting everything from purchasing habits to political opinions.”

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