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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY:
THE ROLE OF AUTHORITARIAN STATES AND BIG TECH CORPORATIONS IN
INFLUENCING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

SOPHIE-LUISA KATJA UDER

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Nova SBE Supervisor: Prof. Jose Albuquerque Tavares
UNDP Supervisor: Tasneem Mirza

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping the public and private sectors alike. This thesis examines AI's profound impact on democratic principles, focusing on Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations as key actors. Through surveillance, disinformation, and data exploitation, these entities challenge civil liberties, transparency, accountability, participation, and electoral integrity in distinct yet interconnected ways. A comparative analysis highlights how Authoritarian States weaponize AI for political control, while Big Tech corporations prioritize profit, often compromising democratic accountability. The findings stress the urgent need for robust AI governance to align technological advancements with democratic resilience and human development.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Democracy, Authoritarian States, Big Tech Corporations, Public Governance, Democratic Processes

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1. Introduction: AI and Democracy

1.1. Introduction to the Subject

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping governance, public discourse, and societal structures worldwide. While AI offers significant opportunities such as fostering more informed decision-making through data-driven insights, enhancing citizen engagement and improving accessibility to public services, it also introduces profound risks particularly when exercised by authoritarian regimes or Big Tech corporations. These entities deploy AI for diverse purposes—Authoritarian States to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and extend geopolitical influence; and Big Tech corporations to maximize profits, expand market control, and shape societal behaviors. This thesis examines the complex interplay between AI and democracy, with a particular focus on how Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations utilize AI to influence democratic processes. By analyzing their motivations and goals, this thesis explores how both actors alter democratic principles such as civil liberties, transparency, and public participation. Through a comparative analysis, this work identifies key similarities and differences in their approaches to AI deployment, providing a nuanced understanding of the societal implications.

1.2. Research Questions / Hypothesis

This research explores the complex relationship between AI and democracy by examining two key questions. The *first question* explores how the deployment of AI by Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations influences core democratic principles, specifically focusing on civil liberties, transparency, participation, and electoral integrity. The *second question* examines what similarities and differences exist between the approaches of Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations in leveraging AI. The *corresponding hypothesis for Authoritarian States* proposes that AI is leveraged to suppress civil liberties, control information, and limit public participation, prioritizing political control and geopolitical influence while systematically

undermining core democratic principles. The *equivalent hypothesis for Big Tech corporations* proposes that AI is deployed to exploit data, shape public opinion, and reduce transparency, prioritizing profit maximization and market dominance while indirectly eroding core democratic principles.

1.3. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis examines the complex relationship between AI and democracy, analyzing AI's influence on core democratic principles such as transparency, public participation, and electoral integrity. The structure is designed to first establish a conceptual foundation, beginning with a literature review that discusses democratic principles and introduces AI and relevant applications for this thesis. Furthermore, recent research on opportunities and challenges of AI in democracies are examined. Afterwards, AI deployment is analyzed in the context of Authoritarian states and Big Tech corporations. Building on this theoretical framework, the thesis incorporates a comparative analysis, drawing on insights from reports and academia, to evaluate the motivations and goals in leveraging AI by Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations. The differences and similarities between the two actors are then analyzed and contextualized in terms of their impact on core democratic principles. Finally, the key findings are synthesized, followed by policy recommendations to harness AI's potential for strengthening democracy and an outline of future research directions.

2. Literature Review on Democracy and AI

2.1. Democratic Principles

For the Greeks, especially the Athenians, democracy (*demokratia*) meant "rule by the people," with *demos* meaning "people" and *kratos* meaning "power" or "rule. In historical works the foundational democratic principles emphasize direct participation, where all free male citizens could engage in the decision-making processes, as well as values of political equality, civic engagement, and collective governance (Dahl 1989). It is argued that a democratic society

requires direct participation from its citizens, ensuring they have equal opportunities to influence decisions (Dahl 1989). Modern definitions of democracy emphasize not only the procedural aspects of governance, such as free and fair elections and voting equality but also substantive elements like the protection of civil liberties, informed understanding, agenda control, the rule of law, and active and inclusive citizen participation (Diamond 2015; Dahl 2015). Democracy is viewed as a system where governmental power is derived from the consent of the governed, and institutions are designed to be transparent, accountable, and inclusive (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). These values serve as a basis for democratic theory and underscore the importance of both individual rights and collective decision-making in a democratic society. Based on the criteria and definitions identified in the section above, I have identified the following four fundamental tasks of democracy: *protecting civil liberties; ensuring transparency and accountability; promoting free and fair elections; and fostering pluralism, inclusion, and public participation*. By focusing on these core functions, I aim to explore how AI technologies intersect with and impact these essential aspects of democratic governance.

2.1.1. Protecting Civil Liberties

The concept that individuals possess inherent, unalienable rights forms the basis of liberal democracies (Rawls 1971). Liberal democratic institutions are distinguished by their commitment to protecting civil liberties. These liberties encompass the right to self-determination, freedom of movement, privacy protections, a free press, and the right to peaceful assembly (United Nations (General Assembly) 1966). However, these civil liberties can be subject of restriction during e.g. times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments introduced mask mandates, limiting personal freedoms to safeguard public health, illustrating how civil liberties may be temporarily restricted for the greater good (Garus-Pakowska and Pakowski 2023). Furthermore, public willingness to trade certain civil liberties for perceived security can increase as individuals prioritize immediate safety over long-term freedoms, a

trend influenced by emotions like fear and levels of governmental trust (Alsan et al. 2023a; Vasilopoulos et al. 2023). This shift poses a risk that emergency restrictions may outlast the crisis itself, potentially eroding foundational democratic rights and altering the balance between individual liberties and state authority (Alsan et al. 2023b). As crises get larger and more frequent, maintaining civil liberties appears to become increasingly crucial in safeguarding liberal democracies.

2.1.2. Ensuring Transparency and Accountability

Transparency plays a crucial role in supporting democratic stability, as it not only improves electoral processes but also increases public satisfaction with democracy (Hu et al. 2020; Grossman, Michelitch, and Prato 2024). It can help preventing democratic collapse by building public trust and reducing challenges to democratic governance (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2019). Transparency mechanisms also contribute to reducing government corruption, reinforcing accountability and fostering a governance environment that upholds democratic values (Can Chen and Ganapati 2023). Furthermore, transparency can lessen corruption even in nations with poor institutions if corruption is prominent, information is widely disseminated, and sanctions are anticipated, although its efficacy depends on adherence to transparency regulations and the long-term systemic implications (Schnell 2023). Accountability mechanisms further strengthen democratic resilience by maintaining institutional integrity and ensuring that democratic checks and balances effectively safeguard citizens' rights (Laebens and Lührmann 2023).

2.1.3. Promoting Free and Fair Elections

The promotion of free and fair elections is fundamental to the health of liberal democracies. They are not only a prerequisite but are often considered synonymous with democracy itself (Qualter 1991). Elections provide a platform for civil society to engage with the state and make political claims and ensure that governments are truly representative of their citizens' will

(Plattner 1998). However, the presence of elections alone does not guarantee democratic governance; without constitutional protections and checks on power, elected leaders may exploit their authority and erode democratic institutions (Zakaria 1997). Furthermore, individual perceptions of electoral integrity can weaken democratic institutions and stability if trust in election fairness is declining (Daniller and Mutz 2019). Therefore, free and fair elections and public empowerment is essential to democracy, grounding the legitimacy of the state in the consent of the governed.

2.1.4. Fostering Pluralism, Inclusion, and Public Participation

Pluralism plays a crucial role in fostering diversity and inclusion, which are fundamental to the functioning of modern democratic societies (Conn 1973). Democratic systems that engage citizens through participatory processes and equitable decision-making enhance a sense of belonging and legitimacy, encouraging voluntary cooperation and strengthening democratic stability (Gonzalez and Tyler 2008). Research underscores how such systems can open avenues for minority groups while addressing barriers, highlighting the importance of inclusive political structures that reflect the demographic makeup of society (Janssen 2022). Public deliberation further strengthens pluralistic democracies by facilitating agreement and cooperation, even amidst growing pluralism, inequality, and societal complexity (Bohman 1996). Additionally, innovative forms of civic engagement, enabled by technological advancements, empower citizens to participate actively in shaping political decisions that affect their lives (McCord and Becker 2023). Through these principles of pluralism, inclusion, and participation, democracies can better respond to contemporary challenges, creating a more resilient and inclusive society.

2.2. Introduction to AI and Relevant Concepts

AI systems are defined differently across various disciplines and lifecycle phases, such as research, design, development, deployment, and utilization (UNESCO 2022). The following

section presents key definitions of AI to establish a clear and comprehensive understanding of the concept.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) AI systems are "technological systems which have the capacity to process information in a way that resembles intelligent behavior [...] often involving reasoning, learning, perception, prediction, planning, or control". The European Commission defines AI as "systems that display intelligent behavior by analyzing their environment and taking actions—with some degree of autonomy—to achieve specific goals" (High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence 2018). The development of AI is also described as "the science and engineering of making intelligent machines" (McCarthy 2004). In other words, AI is the ability of machines or computer systems to simulate and perform tasks typically associated with human intelligence (Chowdhary 2020; Janiesch, Zschech, and Heinrich 2021). As AI advances, it is expected to evolve with greater autonomy, improved decision-making capabilities, and enhanced emotional intelligence and may eventually surpass human intelligence in logical reasoning and emotional understanding (Zhang and Lu 2021). Possible applications for AI are very diverse and include the private sector, the public sector, healthcare, education, and more (Russell and Norvig 2021). For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on AI applications within large corporations and the public sector, particularly with regard to public governance and democracy. This focus is pertinent because the interplay between AI and democratic processes is most evident in how corporations and governments deploy AI technologies to influence, enhance, or sometimes undermine democratic values and institutions (Taddeo and Floridi 2018). In the following, I will focus on two specific AI technologies: Machine Learning (ML) and Natural Language Processing (NLP). These technologies are particularly relevant for this thesis due to their widespread use in data analysis, automated decision-making, and communication interfaces—all of which have significant impacts on democratic processes (Marwala 2023). AI leverages

ML algorithms and technologies to enable systems to autonomously or semi-autonomously perform tasks by adapting, optimizing, and applying cognitive-like capabilities (Radanliev and De Roure 2023). ML can be categorized based on its cognitive capacity (weak or narrow, strong or general and ultrastrong) (Michie 1988; Gunkel 2012) as well as based on its learning paradigms—supervised, unsupervised, semi-supervised, and reinforcement learning—each differing in how they process data and learn from it (Goodfellow, Bengio, and Courville 2016). ML algorithms process large datasets to identify patterns, make predictions and inform decisions and can be used for algorithmic-decision-making in governance (Xu 2024). On the other hand, NLP specializes with how computers and human language interact. It enables computers to comprehend, interpret, and produce natural language by fusing statistical, machine learning, and deep learning models with computational linguistics, also referred to as rule-based modelling of human language (Chowdhary 2020). Virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa, as well as language translation services like Google Translate, are common uses of NLP as well as large language models such as OpenAI's GPT-4, which can generate human-like text and are used in communication platforms (Shivahare et al. 2022; Meyer et al. 2023). This technology also enables the use of chatbots, sentiment analysis tools and content moderation systems that can be used in public decision-making and to improve democratic processes (Gongane, Munot, and Anuse 2022).

2.3. AI and Democracy

2.3.1. Opportunities and Challenges

The rapid advancement of AI has sparked significant interest in its potential to transform democratic processes, presenting both unprecedented opportunities to enhance governance and citizen engagement and critical challenges that threaten the foundational principles of democratic systems. In the following, I will examine the current research trends that highlight both the opportunities and challenges AI poses to democracies.

Opportunities

AI offers significant opportunities to strengthen democracy and enhance human development. One of the primary applications where AI can be beneficial is by empowering citizens to actively engage in democratic processes and scrutinize governmental actions. AI-powered platforms, such as chatbots and virtual assistants, can enable citizens to access information, voice concerns, and hold governments accountable (Androutsopoulou et al. 2019). Through technologies like sentiment analysis and virtual assistants, AI can automate and improve e-participation platforms, fostering citizen engagement in a bottom-up approach (Ahangama and Krishnan 2023; Mariani et al. 2025). These tools can disseminate information about policies, allow citizens to share feedback, influence decision-making, and contribute to a more inclusive democratic dialogue (Hassan and Hamari 2020). Moreover, AI can improve government transparency and accountability by analyzing large volumes of data to detect irregularities and inefficiencies in public administration (Gallego, Rivero, and Martínez 2021; Lyra et al. 2022). ML algorithms can identify patterns indicative of corruption, thereby enabling timely interventions and promoting trust in public institutions (Sousa et al. 2019). By automating oversight functions, AI helps ensure that governments remain accountable to their citizens. AI also holds promise in enhancing public service delivery and policymaking. Predictive analytics can assist governments in anticipating societal needs, allowing for more efficient resource allocation and improved service outcomes (Madan and Ashok 2023). For example, AI models can predict healthcare demands, enabling better planning and response to public health issues (Topol 2019). Combating misinformation is another critical area where AI can support democratic processes. Advanced algorithms can detect and flag disinformation on social media platforms, limiting the spread of false information that can distort public opinion and undermine democratic discourse (Zhou and Zafarani 2021; Canyu Chen and Shu 2024). By enhancing the integrity of information, AI contributes to a more informed electorate and healthier democratic

debates (Bontridder and Poulet 2021). Enhancing electoral processes is another domain where AI can offer significant benefits. AI technologies, such as Adversarial Machine Learning (AML), can enhance electoral processes by safeguarding voter privacy, countering manipulative profiling, and fostering a more deliberative and transparent democratic environment (Auliya et al. 2024). Furthermore, AI technologies can improve the security and efficiency of voting systems through biometric authentication and fraud detection mechanisms (Hossain Faruk et al. 2024; Aniche et al. 2021). Such advancements help ensure the integrity of elections, which is fundamental to the functioning of democracies. Lastly, the development of ethical AI and governance frameworks is essential for aligning AI deployment with democratic values. Establishing policies and standards for responsible AI use, grounded in principles such as justice, autonomy, explicability, and sovereignty, ensures that technological advancements contribute positively to society (Paraman and Anamalah 2023). International cooperation on AI governance can promote transparency, fairness, and respect for human rights in AI applications (Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena 2019).

Challenges

AI presents profound challenges that threaten to undermine democratic principles and disrupt human development. AI-driven technologies, such as disinformation campaigns and deepfakes, are increasingly used to manipulate public opinion and influence electoral outcomes (de Groot 2024; Ray 2021). Furthermore, AI has been used for cognitive influencing, e.g. AI-generated robocalls—where cloned voices impersonated officials to unlawfully disrupt elections (de Groot 2024). In these cases, AI-generated content can discredit political opponents and manipulate voter perceptions, undermining the democratic principle of free and fair elections (Simchon, Edwards, and Lewandowsky 2024). However, while deepfakes may not always successfully deceive people, they create significant uncertainty, therefore diminishing public confidence in social media (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020). This uncertainty can contribute to a

broader erosion of trust in democratic discourse, making it difficult for voters to discern fact from fiction (González et al. 2024). Furthermore, AI-powered microtargeting in elections is becoming more popular among political actors (Haenschen 2023). Using vast data sets and pattern recognition algorithms, AI can be used to tailor campaign messages to specific voter groups, influencing their decisions in ways that are invisible to the broader public (Thiel 2022). While microtargeting has been used in commercial advertising for years, its introduction into electoral politics raises concerns about the transparency and fairness of elections (Mikalef, Conboy, and Krogstie 2021; Kröger et al. 2024). When tailored to individuals' personality traits, political microtargeting significantly enhances the persuasive effect of political ads (Zarouali et al. 2022). Moreover, AI technologies are increasingly employed to influence public opinion and shape media narratives, which can impact democratic processes. Generative AI can create extensive disinformation campaigns, filling media spaces with misleading or false information (Kreps and Kriner 2023). These AI-generated narratives, particularly when circulated through social media, tend to reinforce existing biases and reduce opportunities for open democratic debate by creating echo chambers (Kreps and Kriner 2023). Additionally, when critical decisions are made by opaque algorithms, transparency and public trust may be undermined by reducing the role of human judgment and placing crucial decisions in the hands of systems that are not subject to democratic scrutiny (Thiel 2022). This can lead to AI-driven decision-making creating a "black box" effect where the public is unable to understand or scrutinize how critical decisions are made (de Fine Licht and de Fine Licht 2020). This reliance on algorithmic systems, often managed by technocratic elites, risks widening the divide between those with and without access to these technologies, raising concerns about fairness and inclusivity within democratic institutions (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017).

2.3.2. *AI in Authoritarian States*

While AI presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic systems, its deployment by Authoritarian States exemplifies how these technologies can be systemically leveraged to undermine democratic values.

Surveillance and Social Control

In some authoritarian contexts, AI technologies play a significant role in exacerbating social control and monitoring, with AI-powered surveillance, social credit systems, and predictive policing used to regulate public behavior and curtail opposition (Feldstein 2019a; Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright 2020). Research highlights how such systems leverage AI's vast data processing capabilities to track individuals on a large scale, employing tools like facial recognition and predictive algorithms that enable highly targeted scrutiny of specific groups (Zeng 2020; Ünver 2024). In other regions, AI technologies are further employed to enforce compliance with social norms, such as dress codes or other behavior regulations, through systems that monitor and control public actions, particularly among women, and impose penalties for non-compliance (Shamdasani 2023; Akbari 2021). These AI applications underscore the technology's capacity to strengthen centralized oversight, often intensifying regulatory reach in ways that were previously unfeasible through manual systems (Hörster 2021).

Censorship and Information Warfare

Some states leverage AI technologies to shape information control, with tools like censorship laws enabling extensive surveillance and censorship to monitor and restrict online discourse (Yücel 2024). AI-driven systems are used to track social media activity, block dissenting voices, and manage the digital narrative by identifying and suppressing anti-government content (Ünver 2024). Specialized regulatory bodies oversee these processes, employing advanced AI surveillance capabilities to compile data on individuals and target specific narratives for

censorship, facilitating more efficient regulation of the digital landscape (Aufrichtig et al. 2022). Beyond domestic applications, AI also plays a strategic role in enhancing military capabilities, where it supports cyber warfare, threat detection, and autonomous decision-making, contributing to a sophisticated approach to both information and conventional warfare (Thornton and Miron 2020). Through these mechanisms, AI strengthens centralized control over both information and defense, expanding the state's ability to influence and project power.

Data Manipulation and Political Stability

Some authoritarian regimes employ data manipulation in AI systems to reinforce political agendas and maintain social stability. By controlling AI training data, these governments can tailor outputs that align with state narratives, shaping public opinion and entrenching authority (Yang & Roberts, 2023). This approach often includes exporting AI technologies, enabling similar practices in other states and contributing to a global spread of AI tools geared toward social control (Gallagher 2019). Through these exports, AI technologies reinforce authoritarian governance structures beyond national borders, creating broader implications for democratic governance worldwide (Peterson and Hoffman 2022).

2.3.3. AI in Big Tech

While the use of AI by centralized state actors raises concerns for democratic integrity, the concentration of AI capabilities within Big Tech corporations presents comparable risks.

Surveillance Capitalism

Corporations primarily deploy AI to drive profit, focusing on data collection and analysis to enhance user engagement, personalize services, and optimize advertising (Zuboff 2019). This approach, often described as "surveillance capitalism," involves the large-scale harvesting of personal data by tech giants, who use AI-driven algorithms to track user behavior and predict consumer preferences, shaping choices to maximize revenue (Zuboff 2019). However, this model raises concerns over democratic values, as the concentration of personal data and

influence within a few corporations can challenge public accountability and transparency in AI use (Yang and Roberts 2023).

Microtargeting

In addition, AI-powered microtargeting tools have been used to influence social behavior and public opinion, for example by providing personalized content that manipulates users' political preferences and choices, influencing voting decisions and the spread of disinformation (Kröger et al. 2024; Yang and Roberts 2023). The dominance of a few corporations over AI technologies, often developed with limited regulatory oversight, can result in opaque systems that lack transparency, making it challenging for public entities to scrutinize AI-driven outcomes (Dignam 2020). This unchecked power can lead to the "black box" effect, where opaque algorithms and decision-making processes exacerbate social inequalities and foster governance structures that operate without transparency or democratic accountability (Pasquale 2015).

3. Comparative Analysis of the Role of Authoritarian States and Big Tech in Shaping Democratic Processes

3.1. Methodology

This thesis aims to explore how the motivations and goals of Authoritarian States and Big Tech corporations in deploying AI impact democratic principles. To address this question, a comparative analysis was conducted, focusing on selected authoritarian regions and major technology corporations.

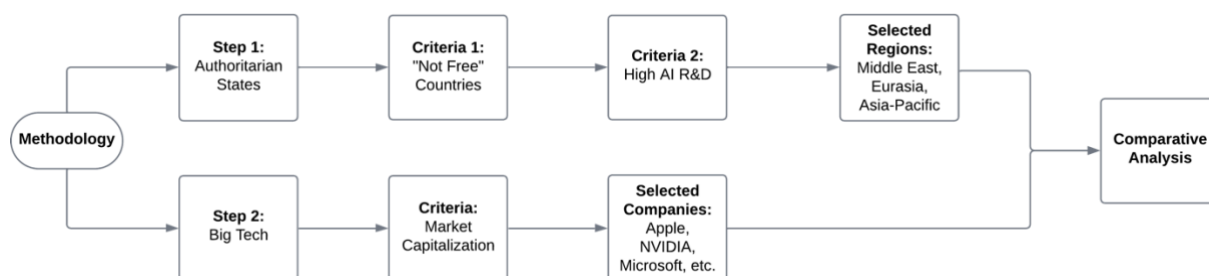


Figure 1: Methodology Flowchart

In the *first step*, Authoritarian States were identified to investigate AI practices in regions with significant governance and societal implications. The Freedom in the World Report (2024)

served as the primary tool for identifying authoritarian regimes categorized as “not free”. The classification is based on the political rights and civil liberties, assessed using 25 indicators across categories such as electoral processes, freedom of expression, and rule of law. Countries in this category score low, reflecting restrictions on democratic governance, individual freedoms, and political pluralism. Additional criteria included regions with significant AI research and development (R&D), measured by the number of notable ML models developed by geographic area (Maslej et al. 2024) . The selected criteria were: (1) Regions classified as “not free” (2) high levels of AI research R&D. This led to the selection of the *Middle East, Eurasia and Asia-Pacific*—regions that demonstrate significant AI adoption and authoritarian practices. These are referred to as Authoritarian States if not further specified. In the *second step*, Big Tech corporations were selected based on their global influence in AI development. Using market capitalization as a metric, the ten largest technology companies in 2024 were identified through Statista (2024). These companies—Apple, NVIDIA, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Meta (Facebook), Tesla, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), Broadcom, and Oracle—are global leaders in AI innovation, shaping technological trends and corporate governance. Their societal impact makes them central to understanding corporate motivations in AI deployment. These are referred to as Big Tech if not further specified.

3.2. Findings

The subsequent analysis examines the motivations and goals of Authoritarian States and Big Tech in the deployment of AI.

3.2.1. Motivations and Goals

Authoritarian States aim to enhance their authority by implementing pervasive surveillance systems that monitor and regulate the populace. AI-powered technologies, such as facial recognition and behavior analysis, are deployed to track individuals in real time, ensuring

compliance with state-imposed norms. It is estimated that Authoritarian States, specifically in Asia-Pacific have deployed millions of surveillance cameras equipped with AI capabilities such as predictive policing tools to monitor public spaces and automatically detect acts of dissent (Human Rights Watch 2023). Countries such as India and China have been named to be the most surveilled countries in the world, with 1,439.3 million people in China and 1,380 million people in India affected (SurfShark 2023). Such applications deter opposition and enable regimes to preemptively address challenges to their authority. The underlying motivation can be defined as *desire for absolute control over society*.

Coupled with the desire for control is the *fear of opposition*, where dissenting voices or organized resistance pose direct threats to regime stability. Authoritarian States deploy AI-powered NLP tools to intercept and analyze encrypted communications, identifying potentially subversive messages, while state-sponsored AI systems collaborate with tech platforms to automatically flag and remove content critical of the government, further restricting digital freedoms (Funk, Shahbaz, and Vesteinsson 2023). Moreover, other Authoritarian States use AI to censor subversive content, block protest platforms, and conduct disinformation campaigns to suppress dissent and amplify pro-regime narratives (Ünver 2024). Some states even deploy AI-generated deepfake videos and synthetic media to spread propaganda and discredit dissenting voices (Reuters 2024; Lautman 2024; World Economic Forum 2024).

The ambition for global standing drives these regimes to leverage AI both domestically and internationally. Authoritarian States use AI to project power and influence in neighboring regions, for example through the export of surveillance technologies. Reports indicate that such regimes have exported AI surveillance tools to numerous countries, promoting similar methods of control and expanding their geopolitical influence (Gallagher 2019). Furthermore, exports have been increasing in the last years, adding up to 63 countries globally being supplied AI surveillance technology by countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Feldstein 2019b). Additionally,

China ranked second globally in private investment in AI research in 2023, with \$7.8 billion invested (Maslej et al. 2024). This strategy establishes economic and technological ties with other states and promotes their governance models on the global stage.

The primary goal aligning with these motivations is *regime stability and longevity*. AI technologies, such as real-time surveillance and predictive analytics, are deployed to suppress dissent, preempt threats, and enforce societal compliance, ensuring the survival of authoritarian leadership and solidifying state authority. Another critical goal is achieving *information supremacy*, where Authoritarian States aim to control both the dissemination and content of information. AI tools filter and censor content that opposes state narratives and distribute disinformation campaigns, ensuring the population is exposed primarily to regime-approved messaging. Lastly, authoritarian regimes *pursue strategic geopolitical advancement* by using AI to expand their influence in global affairs. By exporting surveillance technologies to other states and making significant investments in research and development, these regimes position themselves as key players in the global AI market.

In contrast to Authoritarian States, Big Tech is primarily motivated by economic incentives. Their use of AI centers on maximizing profits, consolidating market positions, and influencing societal behaviors to align with corporate objectives. The *ambition for unrestricted growth* drives Big Tech to invest extensively in AI technologies. These companies aim to expand operations globally, ensuring their platforms and services dominate markets across regions. Microsoft reported a 5.3% increase in capital expenditures, reaching \$20 billion in its first fiscal quarter, with plans to further boost AI-related spending in the second quarter (Tong, Soni, and Sophia 2024). Additionally, Big Tech collectively invested over \$150 billion in capital expenditures for AI infrastructure in the past year, a figure projected to rise to \$200 billion by 2025 (Bloomberg Intelligence 2024; Kindig 2024). For instance, Google and Microsoft are participating in sandbox environments to refine AI tools like generative AI for widespread

adoption, underscoring their drive for expansion (Criddle 2024). Such efforts not only advance technological innovation but also set industry standards, allowing these companies to maintain a competitive edge.

Another key motivation is the *exploitation of data as capital*. AI systems enable the collection, analysis, and monetization of vast datasets, which refine algorithms and predict consumer behavior, for example in healthcare (Thomason 2021). According to CB Insights (2022), since the beginning of 2020, Big Tech has made investments in transactions totaling \$6.8 billion in the healthcare industry. This data-centric approach is critical for maintaining a competitive edge, as it allows corporations to optimize services and drive targeted advertising—a significant source of revenue (Vijayakumar 2023). Personalized marketing software’s revenues are expected to increase to \$11.6 billion by 2026 (Statista 2022).

Finally, Big Tech corporations are motivated by the *desire to shape consumer and societal behavior* to enhance profitability and influence. By leveraging AI algorithms for content curation and personalized advertisements, companies influence consumer choices, shape perceptions, and create echo chambers that reinforce preferences and raise concerns about manipulation and transparency (Du 2023). Additionally, this influence can extend to shaping public opinion and societal trends, potentially impacting political processes (Khanal, Zhang, and Taeihagh 2024). How the misuse of personal data can undermine privacy and democratic processes, is exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica scandal with Facebook, as millions of user profiles were harvested without consent to influence voter behavior during elections (Amnesty International 2019).

The overarching goal of Big Tech is *global market domination*. By integrating AI technologies across products and services, these companies aim to become indispensable providers within their industries. Strategies such as aggressive acquisitions and product integration help eliminate competition and establish dominant market positions. Another key goal is achieving

technological supremacy. Corporations strive to lead in innovation and set industry standards by continuously investing in AI research and development. This dominance consolidates market positions and allows them to dictate the direction of AI innovation globally. Lastly, Big Tech corporations pursue a *data monopoly to exert societal and political influence*. By controlling vast amounts of user data, they have the capacity to shape behaviors and policies. This grants these corporations significant power over societal trends and governance decisions, however, raising concerns about accountability and ethical oversight.

3.2.2. Similarities and Differences

Authoritarian States and Big Tech share several key similarities in their motivations and goals concerning the deployment of AI technologies. The following tables summarize the key findings from the previous section, highlighting the similarities and differences between these two actors in their deployment of AI.

Table 1: *Similarities between Motivations and Goals of Deployment of AI by Authoritarian States and Big Tech*

Similarities	Authoritarian States	Big Tech
1. Pursuit of Control and Influence over Populations	Utilize AI to monitor and regulate citizens to maintain regime stability and suppress dissent.	Employ AI algorithms to influence consumer behavior , shape preferences and increase user engagement.
2. Utilization of AI for Data Collection and Analysis	Collect vast amounts of data for surveillance, predictive policing and social control. Anticipate threats, suppress opposition, and enforce state policies.	Gather extensive user data to refine algorithms, personalized services, and deliver targeted advertisements. Valuable asset for predicting consumer behavior and maintaining a competitive advantage.
3. Ambition for Dominance	Seek geopolitical influence , control over information and leadership in AI technology to promote their governance models internationally. AI is a strategic tool to extend influence.	Strive for global market domination and technological supremacy. Aiming to become indispensable providers within their industry. Leverage AI to outpace competitors and control market dynamics.

Table 2 Differences between Motivations and Goals of Deployment of AI by Authoritarian States and Big Tech

Differences	Authoritarian States	Big Tech
1. Political vs. Economic Motivation	Political objectives , including maintaining political power, ensuring regime stability and controlling the populace. Focus is consolidating authority and suppressing dissent to prolong regimes longevity.	Economic incentives , driven by profit maximization, market expansion, and increasing shareholder value. Primary objectives are financial growth through expanding operations and enhancing revenue streams.
2. Methods of Control	Coercive measures , legal authority and mandatory enforcement to deploy AI.	Market mechanisms and innovation , enhancing consumer engagement and user agreements to influence consumers. Develop cutting-edge AI technologies and gain technological leadership.
3. Accountability and Transparency	Limited accountability , lack of transparency and not accountable to the public. AI systems operate with minimal oversight.	Subject to scrutiny and subject to market forces, public opinion and regulatory scrutiny.

Both Authoritarian States and Big Tech *pursue control and influence over populations*. Authoritarian States use AI to monitor and regulate citizens, maintaining regime stability and suppressing dissent through surveillance and censorship tools. Similarly, Big Tech employ AI algorithms to shape consumer behavior, increasing engagement and driving profits through personalized content and targeted advertising. Both *extensively collect and analyze data* using AI. Authoritarian States gather vast amounts of data for surveillance, predictive policing, and social control, using it to anticipate threats, suppress opposition, and enforce policies. Big Tech collect user data to refine algorithms, personalize services, and deliver targeted advertisements, maintaining a competitive edge. Both actors also aspire to *dominance in their spheres*. Authoritarian States seek geopolitical influence, control over information, and leadership in AI technology to extend their governance models globally. Likewise, Big Tech aim for global market domination and technological supremacy, leveraging AI to outpace competitors and shape market dynamics. Despite these similarities, their motivations and goals diverge. Authoritarian States are driven by *political objectives*, focusing on consolidating power, ensuring regime stability, and suppressing dissent to prolong their rule. In contrast, Big Tech

are motivated by *economic incentives*, prioritizing profit maximization, market expansion, and shareholder value. Their *methods of implementing control also differ*. Authoritarian States enforce control through coercive measures like legal authority and mandatory AI deployment without public consent. Big Tech, however, rely on market mechanisms, consumer engagement, and innovation to collect data and influence behavior. Lastly, *accountability and transparency vary*. Authoritarian States lack transparency and public accountability, operating AI systems with minimal oversight. Big Tech, while criticized for opacity, are subject to market forces, public opinion, and regulatory scrutiny, which can pressure them toward greater transparency and ethical practices, despite resistance to regulation.

3.3. Discussion of Findings

The motivations and goals of AI deployment by Authoritarian States and Big Tech has a significant impact on fundamental democratic principles.

Table 3 *Impact on Democratic Principles and their Severity by Authoritarian States and Big Tech*

Democratic Value	Authoritarian States	Risk	Big Tech	Risk
1. Civil Liberties	Suppress civil liberties through surveillance, censorship, suppression of dissent. Monitor citizens, restrict freedom of speech and infringe on privacy rights.	Severe	Collecting extensive personal data, potentially violating privacy. Can manipulate user behavior and limit autonomy through targeted content and advertising.	Medium
2. Transparency and Accountability	AI systems with minimal transparency. Lack mechanisms for public accountability/ oversight, making it difficult for citizens to understand/ challenge AI usage.	Severe	Opaque algorithms lack transparency in data practices. Subject to market pressures and regulatory scrutiny that can enforce some level of accountability.	Medium
3. Free and Fair Elections	Influence electoral processes through information control and disinformation campaigns. AI-generated content can influence public opinion and undermine free and fair elections.	Severe	Microtargeting and dissemination of biased content can influence elections. Algorithms may create echo chambers, impacting voter perceptions, but often a byproduct of profit motives.	Low to Medium

4. Pluralism, Inclusion and Participation	Control mechanisms discourage civic engagement and public discourse. May target certain groups disproportionately reducing inclusivity.	Severe	Algorithmic biases can marginalize certain communities limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Can enhance participation, connectivity and engagement.	Low
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Authoritarian States, driven by a desire for control and regime stability, intentionally use AI to *suppress civil liberties* through pervasive surveillance undermines the ability of citizens to engage in open dialogue and critique of government policies. In contrast, Big Tech’s impact on civil liberties arises from data exploitation and a lack of transparency, inadvertently *infringing on privacy* and autonomy. The extensive collection and monetization of personal data without informed consent raise serious privacy concerns, while personalized algorithms can manipulate user behavior. Both actors impact civil liberties, but to different degrees. Authoritarian States pose a greater threat through the deliberate suppression of rights to maintain power, while the impact of Big Tech, though significant, is due to business practices rather than deliberate suppression. Nonetheless, the misuse of personal data requires vigilant regulation to protect rights in democratic societies, as exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica Scandal.

Authoritarian States, pursuing information supremacy and lacking accountability mechanisms, operate AI systems covertly, leaving citizens unaware of surveillance or data use, which *erodes trust and accountability* to the people. This opacity prevents public scrutiny and undermines trust in governmental institutions. In contrast, Big Tech, while criticized for opaque algorithms and data practices, face market pressures, public opinion, and regulatory scrutiny that *enforce some degree of transparency* (Laebens and Lührmann 2023). External forces, such as data protection laws and consumer advocacy, compel companies to disclose data practices, as seen with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2016) and the Artificial Intelligence Act (EU AI Act) (2024), which require transparency and grant users control over their personal information. The severity of the impact on transparency and accountability is greater with

Authoritarian States due to their intentional concealment and lack of accountability mechanisms. Big Tech present moderate risks; although challenges exist, there are opportunities to enhance transparency and accountability through regulatory interventions and corporate responsibility initiatives.

Driven by regime stability and geopolitical goals, Authoritarian States *manipulate electoral processes* using AI, including disinformation campaigns and surveillance technologies that intimidate or silence political opponents, compromising electoral integrity. While Big Tech's primary aim is economic, their curation algorithms can inadvertently *impact voter behavior* by creating echo chambers. However, these platforms also facilitate political engagement and mobilization by enabling the dissemination of information. Comparatively, the threat to electoral integrity from Authoritarian States is severe due to intentional interference. Big Tech's impact is lower, as their influence is indirect and often unintentional. The risks associated with Big Tech can be mitigated through transparency in political advertising, ethical algorithm design, and regulatory measures that promote fairness and accountability in digital platforms.

In Authoritarian States, AI technologies *suppress pluralism and public participation* by silencing dissent, preventing protests, directly deterring civic engagement through surveillance. Marginalized groups are often disproportionately targeted, further reducing inclusivity and diverse representation. In contrast, Big Tech platforms provide spaces for dialogue, enabling users to share information, organize events, and mobilize support for causes. However, algorithms can create echo chambers and filter bubbles, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and shaping public discourse. Overall, the risk to pluralism and public participation posed by Authoritarian States is severe due to its intentional and direct nature. Big Tech present a lower risk; while challenges exist, the potential benefits of enhanced connectivity and engagement can be realized through conscious efforts to address algorithmic biases and promote inclusive practices.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of Key Findings

Democracy is under attack and its key principles—protecting civil liberties, ensuring transparency and accountability, promoting free and fair elections, and fostering pluralism, inclusion and participation—are threatened by major players that pursue own goals. Due to the increasing applicability of AI in the private sector and the public sector, in areas such as facial recognition and surveillance, manipulation of voter behavior and data analysis, those wielding AI are increasingly gaining power on an international level. While AI holds opportunities to improve transparency, resource allocation, and civic engagement, it also poses significant challenges, including its misuse for disinformation, mass surveillance, and reinforcing algorithmic biases that threaten democratic principles. Authoritarian States systematically leverage AI to suppress civil liberties, control information, and limit public participation, prioritizing political control and geopolitical influence. In contrast, Big Tech deploys AI primarily for profit maximization and market dominance, exploiting data and shaping public opinion. These findings confirm the initial hypotheses: Both actors impact democratic principles in profound ways, with Authoritarian States systematically undermining freedoms to consolidate power and Big Tech prioritizing profit-driven practices that erode privacy, transparency, and public trust. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can more effectively safeguard the democratic tasks at the core of liberal governance.

4.2. Policy Recommendations

To address these challenges without stifling innovation, policy measures should be both targeted and actionable. First, existing international frameworks (e.g., UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (2022)) should form the foundation of a global AI governance body under the UN auspices. This entity would enforce transparency standards, protect human rights, and penalize violations. Second, democratic states must strengthen

domestic regulations that mandate explainability in algorithms, reinforce data protection laws, and create independent oversight bodies empowered to audit AI systems. Third, incentivizing ethical AI research and development—through funding, public-private partnerships, and recognized benchmarks—can encourage innovation aligned with democratic values. Fourth, fostering coalitions of like-minded democracies and civil society organizations will help offer credible alternatives to authoritarian AI exports and reduce the appeal of repressive technologies. Finally, incremental, consensus-driven steps toward managing advanced AI, including Artificial General Intelligence should be pursued to prevent an AI arms race and maintain long-term democratic stability.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This thesis faces some limitations that may influence its scope and findings. Firstly, the selection of regions and corporations, based on metrics such as the Freedom in the World Report and market capitalization, narrows the focus and excludes smaller Authoritarian States or emerging tech companies that could play significant roles. Secondly, incorporating detailed regional examples could provide greater granularity, better illustrating how AI is deployed in diverse contexts. Thirdly, reliance on secondary data means the analysis depends on the quality and availability of existing research, which might overlook recent developments or hidden practices. Future research should address gaps in understanding how AI reshapes democracy, focusing on the roles of Authoritarian States and Big Tech. Collecting primary data on AI use in Authoritarian States is essential to uncover how these technologies undermine democratic principles. Equally important is examining Big Tech's political influence, including lobbying and control over public discourse. Lastly, exploring how AI can strengthen democracy—such as through e-voting mechanisms secured by blockchain—offers a way to balance innovation with ethics. Together, these directions can illuminate pathways to align AI's deployment with democratic resilience and societal progress.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AML	Adversarial Machine Learning
EU AI Act	European Union Artificial Intelligence Act
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ML	Machine Learning
NLP	Natural Language Processing
R&D	Research and Development
TSMC	Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization