AI and Democratic Equality:
How Computational Propaganda and Surveillance Capitalism Undermine Democracy

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In my paper, I consider how equal distributions of epistemic resources and free time are critical for democracy. Using Elizabeth Anderson's theory of democratic equality, which emphasizes the need for equal opportunities for political participation, I argue that computational propaganda and surveillance capitalism create unequal opportunities for political participation by creating unequal distributions of epistemic resources and free time. First, I argue that computational propaganda undermines democratic equality through the production of misinformation that is used to manipulate and distort one's social and political behavior. Computational propaganda can involve using AI bots on online platforms to generate false political support or bots that drown out dissenting views in order to manipulate public perception of political issues (e.g., how many people support a politician). In looking at the critical connection between epistemic resources (e.g., accurate information) and political agency, I argue that the unregulated use of AI for computational propaganda threatens democracy.

   Second, I consider how surveillance capitalism creates unequal distributions of free time. I build my argument from Julie Rose's position that citizens should have a democratic right to equal distributions of free time, as time is a necessary resource for exercising formal liberties and opportunities (e.g., having the time to vote). I expand on Rose's notion of free time and argue that democratic equality requires that free time includes time that is free from surveillance. Indeed, in *Private Government*, Elizabeth Anderson argues that many modern workplaces take the structural form of authoritarian governments through surveillance measures (e.g., more than half of Americans lack legal protection from being fired for political views expressed outside of work). Certainly, epistemically alienating those with specific views undermines opportunities for productive forms of political participation and can encourage the formation of epistemic bubbles or echo chambers.

   Though, while workplace surveillance can certainly pose a problem for democratic equality, this threat becomes pervasive and persistent with surveillance capitalism. Indeed, corporations like Google and Facebook have an unprecedented capacity to surveille and thus manipulate users through algorithms that are designed to collect extensive data and psychologically manipulate users. This capacity for surveillance results in a drastic disparity of epistemic resources (e.g., data) and thus political power (e.g., ability to manipulate). As I argue, this asymmetry of power between surveillance capitalists and average citizens stems in part from the unequal distribution of free time, which requires privacy. Indeed, while many tech corporations are protected by corporate privacy laws that prevent them from having to disclose what data is collected or how it is used, users retain very little privacy. Since equal distribution of free time is necessary for democratic equality and free time must include privacy from surveillance, I conclude that surveillance capitalism threatens democratic equality through the unregulated use of AI bots and algorithms that create unequal distributions of free time. Indeed, equal distributions of epistemic resources and free time are critical for democratic equality, but computational propaganda and surveillance capitalism create disparities in these resources and thereby threaten democracy.