Standardizing Democracy: AI and the Transformation of Agonistic Politics

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Abstract

AI reorganizes the conditions under which democratic life becomes possible. But democracy is an inherently conflictual, plural, and open-ended political order, while AI-driven infrastructural ordering pushes in the opposite direction: it standardizes the infrastructures and mechanisms through which democratic life is organized and enacted. It also subjects democracy to the accelerated temporality of AI development and market deployment, compressing a political process that is slow precisely because it depends on deliberation and negotiation. In doing so, AI transforms democracy from a space of political contestation into an increasingly prepared, configured, and governable environment, where some political pathways become structurally privileged, others foreclosed, and certain forms of behavior, expression, or participation are actively filtered, moderated, or excluded altogether. Yet forms of contestation continue to emerge within and against these infrastructures, as citizens, activists, and communities seek to reopen spaces for democratic plurality and political agency. Drawing on critical data studies and radical democratic theory, this essay argues that AI transforms democracy not simply by introducing new technologies into democratic systems, but at a more fundamental level: it reorganizes democratic life itself according to logics of legibility, interoperability, prediction, and optimization, narrowing the space for democratic contestation and agonistic politics.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining infrastructure of contemporary societies, reshaping the socio-technical conditions under which democratic life unfolds. Consider algorithmic resource allocation, social media content generation and curation, and facial recognition technologies for automated identity verification: from welfare provision to political preference formation to the policing of public space, AI systems are increasingly embedded within the institutional and communicative environments that structure democratic interaction and civic life (Crawford, 2021). Accompanied by powerful narratives of technological progress and promises of efficiency, prediction, and control (Nowotny, 2021), AI applications are diffusing across institutional domains and policy imaginaries, legitimizing new forms of automation, optimization, and infrastructural transformation across public and private life. By AI, I refer to a class of computational systems and infrastructures capable of automating forms of knowledge-making, classification, prediction, recommendation, and coordination. While these systems are often justified through promises of innovation, responsiveness, and "smarter" forms of governance (Halpern & Mitchell, 2023), this chapter argues that AI transforms democracy at a more fundamental level.

Specifically, AI promotes a process of infrastructural ordering through which democratic practices and forms of participation become increasingly standardized, interoperable, legible, and governable. Infrastructural ordering refers to the capacity of infrastructures

to shape how social and political relations are organized, coordinated, and managed (Bakonyi & Darwich, 2025).

Instead of focusing on a single domain among the many now encountering AI, this chapter examines **how AI reorganizes the conditions of democratic participation and political contestation**. It argues that AI reshapes and narrows democratic imaginaries (that is, how democratic life itself is imagined and practiced), thereby reconfiguring the possibilities and limits of political action in contemporary societies. To analyze these transformations, the chapter mobilizes the notion of agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2000), foregrounding democracy as a space of plurality, disagreement, and ongoing contestation rather than merely consensus or technocratic coordination.

At stake, therefore, is not only the adoption of new technologies within democratic societies, but the gradual standardization of democracy itself, whereby civic life, democratic participation, and political contestation are reorganized according to the standardization logics embedded within AI-driven infrastructures. In other words, the real antagonist is not AI as such, but **the translation and reduction of democratic life into computationally governable forms**.

To explore this argument, this conceptual chapter draws on critical data studies and radical democratic theory. Critical data studies allow us to zoom in on the infrastructural and material dimensions of AI systems, revealing how data, computational architectures, design practices, and standards shape social relations, institutional practices, and forms of governance (see Kitchin, 2025). Rather than treating AI systems as neutral technological tools, critical data studies emphasize how power becomes embedded within infrastructures, classifications, and systems of visibility, often in ways that remain opaque or difficult to contest democratically. As recent scholarship on AI governance has emphasized, AI systems should not be understood as isolated technical tools, but as socio-technical arrangements increasingly embedded within institutional, regulatory, and infrastructural environments that shape public communication, governance, and democratic life (Pierson et al., 2023). In a critical data studies perspective, the political challenge posed by AI therefore extends beyond the regulation of individual systems toward the governance of the broader infrastructures through which computational rationalities become normalized within public institutions and everyday life.

Radical democratic theory represents a compelling complement to the perspective of critical data studies, by inviting observers of technological innovation to anchor the analysis on a thorough understanding of state power. Specifically, this approach emphasizes a procedural and conflictual understanding of democracy, whereby democracy is not merely a mechanism for administration or consensus-building, but an open-ended political process grounded in plurality, disagreement, and the continuous renegotiation of collective life (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).. It allows us to move beyond a mere critique of technology to see technology in operation, vis-à-vis existing arrangements within the state, and, most importantly, to put technology to the test of democratic norms and principles.

The essay makes an intervention that is simultaneously infrastructural and political-theoretical: democracy is being reformatted through infrastructures optimized for coordination, prediction, and administrative legibility. This argument builds on but also moves beyond i) classic "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019) and "data colonialism" (Mejias & Couldry, 2024) critiques, with their market focus, ii) platform governance literature, which is by nature centered on platforms (Gillespie, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018), and iii) deliberative democracy critiques of misinformation, which are speech-centered (Benkler et al., 2018; cf., Habermas, 1989). Instead, it foregrounds the infrastructural conditions through which democratic life itself becomes increasingly standardized, interoperable, and governable.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 explores how AI-driven infrastructural ordering contributes to the standardization of democratic life. Here, standardization is understood both as a set of socio-technical processes through which social and political life becomes translated into interoperable and computationally manageable forms, and as a broader political rationality that reorganizes democratic participation around logics of coordination, prediction, optimization, and legibility. Section 3 turns to radical democratic theory to exame how AI-driven infrastructures reshape agonistic politics and computationally reorganize the conditions under which democratic participation, visibility, and contestation become possibile. Section 4 explores how political contestation itself changes under conditions of infrastructural ordering, showing how individuals and collectives resist the standardization of democratic life through infrastructural, epistemic, and anticipatory forms of resistance, as well as through efforts to build alternative democratic infrastructures. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the possibility of democratic infrastructures beyond standardization and asks what forms of AI governance might preserve plurality, disagreement, and democratic openness under increasingly computational conditions.

2. Infrastructural Ordering and the Standardization of Democratic Life

Today, we observe a broader turn toward *governance by data infrastructure*: a profound structural transformation of contemporary governance in which political power is increasingly exercised not only through laws, policies, and formal institutions, but through data systems and the infrastructures that sustain them (Milan, 2024b). In this emerging configuration, data infrastructures (from data centers and cloud architectures to platforms, interoperable databases, and algorithmic systems) do not merely constrain; they actively produce social orders and forms of political coordination. This concern with governance matters because, while data infrastructures are commonly imagined as neutral technical backbones that simply support social and institutional life, they shape the conditions under which action, including contestation, becomes possible (e.g., Winner, 1999; ten Oever, 2020).

The advance of intelligent systems throughout society intensifies this dynamic. AI systems are embedded within broader data infrastructures that enable the collection, circulation, and processing of data across institutional and technical domains. These data infrastructures make AI possible while simultaneously amplifying its governing capacities by enabling interoperability, automation, prediction, and coordination at scale. Rather than merely processing information, AI systems increasingly partake in

the organization of social, political, and institutional life itself (Amoore & Piotukh, 2016; Aradau & Blanke, 2022; Bellanova & de Goede, 2020). Recommendation systems shape visibility and attention; navigation systems reorganize mobility patterns; predictive systems classify individuals according to probabilistic assessments of risk, relevance, or legitimacy (Bechmann & Bowker, 2019; Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Data infrastructures therefore do not simply mediate democratic life; they actively produce the environments within which democratic participation unfolds (Amoore, 2022). This shift is particularly significant because **data infrastructures govern differently from traditional democratic institutions.**

Data infrastructures govern through design. Design decisions determine how information circulates, what becomes visible, which forms of behavior are encouraged or discouraged, and how users are expected to interact with institutions and infrastructures (Akrich, 1992; Seaver, 2017). This chapter argues that AI-driven infrastructural ordering operates through *standardization logics* that render social and political life computable, interoperable, and governable.

By standardization logics, I refer to the socio-technical rationalities through which heterogeneous social practices, identities, and forms of participation are translated into standardized categories, metrics, and data formats that can circulate across computational systems. In this sense, standardization is not merely a technical mechanism, but also a political process that privileges certain forms of visibility, participation, and knowledge while marginalizing or excluding others. Standards constitute a particularly powerful yet often invisible dimension of this infrastructural design (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). While standards are commonly understood as technical specifications intended to ensure compatibility, efficiency, and interoperability across systems, they also shape social reality by reducing ambiguity, contextuality, and difference in ways that allow data to circulate seamlessely across infrastructures (Higgings & Larner, 2010). For systems to work together, complex social realities must first become computationally legible: identities, behaviors, risks, preferences must translated into harmonized, machine-readable categories. Standardization therefore simplifies social reality through the embedding of particular assumptions about the social world (Lampland & Star, 2009), including implicit constructions of a "standard human" that stands in as a proxy for the many (Milan, 2020). Standards are therefore never just technical descriptors, but part of a broader "moral-technical project of standardization of both people and things" (Busch, 2011) emerging out of power struggles (ten Oever & Milan, 2022).

What's more, contemporary data infrastrutures rarely operate in isolation. Their power emerges precisely from their ambition, if not the actual capacity, to communicate seamlessly across institutional and technical domains, exchanging and processing information through interoperability. Like standardization itself, interoperability is the outcome of contested political and technical practices with cascading effects across social life (Bellanova et al., 2026).

These developments become particularly consequential in democratic societies because democracy depends on plurality, disagreement, ambiguity, and the

coexistence of heterogeneous experiences and identities. Democracy is not simply a system of coordination or administration, but a political order grounded in conflict and the open-ended negotiation of collective life (Mouffe, 2000). Democratic politics is also historically organized around relatively slow rhythms of negotiation, deliberation, and contestation (Rosa, 2013; Nowotny, 1994). As Innerarity (2024) argues, democratic institutions derive legitimacy not from speed or efficiency, but from their capacity to accommodate uncertainty, plurality, and collective judgment.The expansion of AI-driven standardization logics therefore introduces a fundamental tension between the indeterminacy and slower temporalities of democratic politics and the accelerated infrastructural logics of optimization, prediction, and governability. As a result, political plurality increasingly risks being transformed into and reduced to computational manageability.

The conditions of democratic participation and political contestation are transformed as a result. First, the ways people encounter information, form political preferences, negotiate values, and make sense of public issues are increasingly mediated through algorithmic systems oriented toward personalization, prediction, and behavioral nudging (Bucher, 2018; Yeung, 2017). Second, the accelerated temporality of AI development and deployment, together with growing pressure on policymakers to invest rapidly and relax regulation, is at odds with the slower rhythms of democratic deliberation, negotiation, and policymaking, often sidelining citizen voices and collective contestation in the name of innovation, efficiency, and competitiveness (Nowotny, 2021; see also Jasanoff, 2016). Third, as this chapter argues, political contestation itself increasingly risks being reorganized into forms that are more manageable, measurable, and governable, leaving less room for ambiguity, discretion, friction, and difference.

What, then, does this mean to standardize democracy? It does not imply the formal abolition of democratic institutions such as elections, parliaments, or public debate, nor their replacement by forms of agentic AI (that is, systems capable of acting autonomously across social and institutional environments rather than merely responding to prompts). Rather, standardizing democracy points to a more subtle transformation in the conditions through which democratic life is organized and practiced. The most important transformations here include the translation of political plurality into administratively manageable and machine-readable forms, and the transformation of citizens from political subjects characterized by ambiguity, disagreement, and open-ended agency into data points, behavioral profiles, risk categories, or measurable users within interconnected systems (Kitchin, 2021). The next section explores this claim.

3. Agonistic Politics in the Age of Computational Publics

There exist many models of democratic systems and even more understandings of democracy as a form of government. When it comes to theorizing the role of citizens within democratic life, however, radical democratic theory is particularly well suited to the concerns of this chapter, as it foregrounds democratic life as constituted through plural, heterogeneous, continuously negotiated political subjectivities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) rather than a singular public sphere oriented towards rational consensus

and common public reason (Habermas, 1989). Instead of treating democracy primarily as a procedural system for aggregating preferences and producing consensus, radical democratic theory understands it as an open-ended and conflictual political order grounded in plurality, disagreement, and contestation (Lefort, 1988).

Within this tradition, dissent is not a disruption of democratic order but one of its constitutive conditions. Democracy emerges precisely through moments in which those excluded from the established order challenge existing distributions of visibility, voice, and political legitimacy (Rancière, 1999). Agonistic politics therefore refers to a vision of democratic life in which **conflict and the contestation of power are understood not as failures of democracy, but as its constitutive conditions necessary to its vitality** (Mouffe, 2000). Democratic participation depends not on seamless coordination or the elimination of conflict, but on preserving and nurturing spaces for ambiguity, friction, dissent, and the expression of difference.

From this perspective, certain political conflicts cannot be fully resolved through rational deliberation, making a fully inclusive rational consensus ultimately unattainable (Mouffe, 2005). According to Rancière, consensus itself often functions as an expression of hegemony and inequality and is therefore "not the aim but rather the non-existence of politics" (Rancière, 1999, p. 43). Every political order necessarily rests upon exclusions and suppressed alternatives that continuously seek to re-emerge politically. Democratic politics thus persists through the ongoing contestation of existing arrangements and the possibility that marginalized voices, demands, and subjectivities can re-enter the political sphere.

Democracy can therefore never fully eliminate conflict or achieve definitive closure, but remains constitutively contingent, conflictual, and open to contestation. Echoing Wolin's (1994) notion of "fugitive democracy", democratic life emerges through episodic moments in which citizens challenge established arrangements of power, visibility, and authority. These democratic practices unfold through relatively slow rhythms of deliberation, negotiation, and situated political engagement (Nowotny, 1994; Volk, 2021), temporalities that resist closure, acceleration, and definitive settlement while preserving the openness and indeterminacy upon which democratic politics depends.

Under this conception of democracy, citizens are not merely voters or consumers of information, nor standardized identities whose behaviors and risk profiles can be computationally measured, classified, predicted, and managed once and for all. Rather, they have political agency, that is to say the ability to act politically in the world (cf., Couldry, 2014; Milan, 2018). In other words, they are political actors who continuously negotiate, challenge, and redefine the terms of collective coexistence. Democratic politics therefore cannot be reduced to the aggregation of preferences, behavioral prediction, or administrative coordination and process optimization, as AI-driven forms of governance increasingly suggest. Instead, it depends on preserving the openness, indeterminacy, and contestability through which citizens actively participate in shaping democratic life.

AI-driven infrastructures, however, operate according to a political rationality that is fundamentally at odds with agonistic democracy. While democracy depends upon plurality, indeterminacy, disruption, and relatively slow rhythms of deliberation and contestation, AI-driven infrastructures operate through logics of standardization, interoperability, prediction, and acceleration. Three tensions emerge when this conception of democracy encounters AI-driven infrastructural ordering: openness versus computational closure; plurality versus governability; and democratic temporality versus infrastructural acceleration.

I. **Democratic openness versus computational closure.** First, as noted, whereas democratic politics depends on indeterminacy and the ongoing possibility of contestation, AI systems rely on prediction, optimization, and standardization in ways that seek to reduce uncertainty and render social life computationally manageable and governable. For example, predictive systems used in domains such as welfare administration (van Schie et al., 2025) and policing (Andrejevic et al., 2020) translate complex social realities into probabilistic assessments of risk. Rather than responding to citizens as political subjects whose actions, needs, and claims remain open to interpretation and contestation, these systems anticipate future behaviours and classify individuals according to their predicted likelihood of risk, non-compliance, fraud, or criminality (for a example from the Netherlands, see Public Interest Litigation Project, 2022). Governance consequently shifts from engaging citizens as autonomous political actors capable of surprising, challenging, or contesting institutional expectations toward managing populations through predictive categories and risk scores (cf., Dencik et al., 2018). Uncertainty is no longer treated as an inherent feature of democratic life but as a problem to be managed, and the democratic subject is encountered not as a bearer of claims and rights, but as a potential future outcome to be anticipated and governed.

II. **Plurality versus governability.** While democratic politics depends on heterogeneous and contingent forms of participation and political subjectivity, data infrastructures tend to translate social complexity into standardized, machine-readable categories that can circulate across institutional and technical domains. Migration data infrastructures are a case in point. Through registration procedures, biometric identifiers, and database interoperability, complex biographies, trajectories, and claims are translated into standardized categories that enable administrative coordination and decision-making across institutional settings (Pelizza, 2020). Along similar lines, digital identity systems turn individuals into standardized data attributes and verifiable credentials that can circulate across databases and institutional settings. This transliteration is never neutral and shapes visibility, eligibility, and access to services (Masiero & Bailur, 2021). They privilege identities that can be standardized and made interoperable, creating tensions between the plurality of social life and the infrastructural imperative to render individuals legible and governable (Scott, 1998). The democratic concern is not merely exclusion, but the reconfiguration of political subjectivity itself: individuals increasingly appear to institutions not as complex and contested subjects, but as data subjects whose legitimacy depends on their successful translation into interoperable categories.

III. **Democratic temporality versus infrastructural acceleration.** Policymaking and resource allocation have historically unfolded through procedural and often protracted processes of negotiation, deliberation, and institutional accountability, whereas AI-driven governance privileges real-time responsiveness, anticipatory intervention, and continuous optimization. Democratic institutions are structurally slower because they must accommodate plural perspectives, uncertainty, and collective judgment rather than merely optimize decision-making (Innerarity, 2024).The pace of AI development and commercialization is historically unprecedented, generating strong pressures for rapid implementation, regulatory adaptation, and large-scale public investment. These dynamics are justified through narratives of competitiveness and technological urgency that outpace slower democratic processes of deliberation and accountability. The EU AI competitiveness agenda exemplifies this shift. Faced with growing geopolitical competition from the United States and China, European policymakers increasingly frame AI adoption, investment, and regulatory reform as matters of strategic urgency (European Commission, 2025). Similar dynamics are visible in the EU Digital Omnibus package, where efforts to simplify regulatory requirements and accelerate innovation under the pressure of tech companies (Soares, 2026), have promped concerns among civil society organizations about the curtailment of impact assessments, public scrutiny, and democratic debate. Criticizing the use of accelerated legislative procedures, 470 civil society organizations argued that the package leaves "no space for a democratic debate in the European Parliament" and that, by "taking shortcuts", the Commission risks silencing critical voices and reopening compromises that had already emerged from democratic processes (Our Protection Is Being Sold for Profit, 2025). In such contexts, urgency itself becomes a governing rationale, narrowing the temporal space available for democratic deliberation, contestation, and accountability.

These tensions are not merely institutional or technological, but deeply political because they reshape the conditions under which democratic life becomes imaginable and actionable. This argument is not technologically deterministic. AI systems do not mechanically determine political outcomes, but reorganize the infrastructural conditions under which democratic participation, visibility, and contestation become possible. AI-driven infrastructural ordering does not simply introduce new tools into existing democratic arrangements; it reorganizes how political agency, participation, visibility, and collective action are understood, enacted, and governed. In this sense, AI reshapes democratic imaginaries, namely the assumptions, expectations, and material conditions through which political participation and collective life become possible and meaningful in contemporary societies (cf. Kuchler & Stigson, 2024).

The COVID-19 digital certificate offers a useful illustration of how data infrastructures can reshape democratic imaginaries. More than a temporary public health tool, it normalized the idea that participation in social life, mobility, and access to services could be mediated through interoperable digital credentials. In this sense, vaccine certification was not merely a technical response to a public health emergency but a performative intervention that helped make new forms of data-driven verification

appear legitimate, necessary, and even desirable (Milan et al., 2021). The significance of such systems therefore lies not only in their immediate effects, but in how they reshape assumptions about the relationship between citizenship, participation, and data-driven forms of verification, thereby redefining the conditions under which participation, belonging, and collective life become possible.

The democratic significance of AI therefore lies not only in the content it generates or the decisions it informs, but in its capacity to reshape the infrastructural conditions under which democratic life is enacted. Existing scholarship has extensively examined misinformation, fragmentation, and polarization (see, for example, Altay et al., 2023; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Farooq & de Vreese, 2026; Törnberg, 2022); this chapter instead focuses on how AI reorganizes the infrastructural conditions under which democratic life becomes possible.

As computational systems become increasingly embedded within the environments through which citizens encounter information, interact with institutions, and engage in political life, publics themselves are progressively reorganized through infrastructural mechanisms of classification, recommendation, prediction, moderation, and behavioral coordination. **Democratic sites of contestation are therefore no longer merely mediated, but increasingly computationally organized**. Building on scholarship on algorithmic governance (Amoore, 2022; Rouvroy & Berns, 2013), platform societies (Bucher, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018), computational politics (Bratton, 2016; Chun, 2011), and digital participation (Margetts et al., 2016)I use the term computational publics to refer to publics whose conditions of visibility, participation, interaction, and political legibility are increasingly structured through AI-driven infrastructures. Crucially, these infrastructures are often privately designed, operated, and governed in unprecedented constellations of concentrated corporate and infrastructural power (Myers West, 2024; Srnicek, 2016), shifting significant influence over visibility, participation, and political coordination toward actors that remain only partially accountable to democratic publics. Under these conditions, political differences are not necessarily eliminated, but increasingly rendered governable through infrastructures designed to reduce uncertainty, automate coordination, and optimize social life. For example, recommender systems and content moderation architectures do not determine what citizens can think or say, but shape which forms of political expression become visible, amplified, suppressed, or actionable within computational environments (cf., Whittaker et al., 2021). Infrastructural ordering does not simply regulate participation from the outside, but gradually shapes the forms of agency, visibility, and political expression that become recognizable and actionable within democratic life.

The democratic problem, then, is not simply that AI systems may reproduce bias and inequality (Hart et al., 2025), or profoundly reshape how political participation is mediated, but that they progressively restructure the infrastructures through which democratic life becomes visible, actionable, and governable. Under these conditions, contestation itself risks being *reformatted* according to computational logics of prediction, coordination, and optimization. More broadly, computational publics contribute to a reconfiguration of democratic life in which participation becomes

increasingly organized through infrastructures of behavioral coordination, efficiency, and optimization, echoing Brown's (2015) argument that contemporary governing rationalities gradually erode democratic subjectivity by transforming citizens into governable actors. The next section therefore examines how citizens and collectives contest and resist these processes of infrastructural ordering and the gradual standardization of democracy.

4. Resisting the Standardization of Democracy

In this emerging configuration, democracy risks shifting away from a political order grounded in contestation, friction, and collective unpredictability toward one increasingly oriented around coordination, efficiency, and anticipatory governance. Political differences are not necessarily eliminated, but rendered more governable through infrastructures designed to reduce uncertainty, automate decision-making, and optimize social coordination. Participation itself becomes reorganized through standardized interfaces, metrics, recommendation systems, and governance protocols that shape the circulation of information, the distribution of visibility, and the boundaries of legitimate political expression. While these dynamics have been extensively documented in relation to platform governance (e.g., Gillespie, 2018; Suzor et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018), they increasingly extend into state infrastructures themselves. As observed by Mendonça and colleagues, AI-driven governance increasingly operates through algorithmic institutional arrangements that reshape citizen-state relations and the conditions under which public decisions are made, particularly where public institutions rely on data-driven systems and platformized interfaces to mediate participation, consultation, and access to public services (Mendonça et al., 2023).

Public consultation platforms, for example, increasingly organize civic participation through predefined categories, standardized forms of input, engagement metrics, and procedural interfaces that shape how political demands can be articulated, rendered legible, and incorporated into governance processes. Such platforms do not simply facilitate participation; they configure it. Through their interfaces, discussion formats, interaction mechanisms, and procedural architectures, they shape how citizens articulate concerns, interact with one another, and become visible to policymakers (see, e.g., Aragón et al., 2017; Christensen, 2021). Democratic contestation thus becomes increasingly mediated through computational infrastructures that reshape the fundamental conditions under which political life unfolds, including visibility, deliberation, recognition, legitimacy, participation, and collective attention.

Yet from the perspective of radical democratic theory, the standardization of democratic life can never be complete, even in the time of governance by data infrastructure at a large scale. Democracy is not reducible to institutional coordination or administrative order, but remains constitutively contingent, conflictual, and open-ended (Lefort, 1988; Mouffe, 2000). Precisely because democratic politics is grounded in plurality, disagreement, and the continual possibility of contestation, computational infrastructures can never fully stabilize or close political life. Attempts to render democratic participation fully legible, predictable, and governable necessarily generate new exclusions, frictions, and sites of political struggle, while political subjects

continuously re-emerge through acts of dissensus that disrupt established regimes of visibility and participation (Rancière, 1999). If we follow this line of reasoning, AI infrastructures should not be seen just as totalizing systems of control, but ultimately as contested terrains of political struggle. The closure imagined by AI-driven governance therefore remains necessarily partial and unstable.

From this perspective, political contestation and resistance should not be understood as external to computational infrastructures but as emerging within and against them. Yet both are transformed under conditions of AI-driven infrastructural ordering, as democratic struggle increasingly shifts toward contesting the systems, architectures, and protocols through which social and political life is rendered actionable, visible, and governable. As a result, political conflict extends beyond state institutions and corporations to the platforms, interfaces, data architectures, and algorithms that structure visibility, participation, and access, and, ultimately, condition what forms of collective life remain politically imaginable.

Under conditions of AI-driven infrastructural ordering, three forms of democratic resistance become particularly salient (Milan, forthcoming): infrastructural resistance, epistemic resistance, and anticipatory resistance. **Infrastructural resistance** targets the data architectures (from platforms to facial recognition cameras) and associated processes, such as biometric surveillance, through which visibility, participation, and access are organized in everyday life. Examples include struggles against biometric surveillance, predictive policing, algorithmic classification, platform dependency, and forms of forced legibility imposed upon marginalized populations. For instance, resistance to the Dutch System Risk Indication (SyRI), a data infrastructure designed to integrate and analyze information from multiple public-sector databases to detect suspected welfare fraud, brought together activists, legal advocates, and civil society organizations to challenge algorithmic risk profiling in welfare governance (Vervloesem, 2020); the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy protests confronted pervasive biometric surveillance by dismantling smart lamppost equipped with facial recognition technology (Li & Whitworth, 2023). Infrastructural resistance also extends to the material infrastructures that sustain AI systems, including mobilizations against the construction of large-scale data centers driven by concerns over environmental sustainability, resource extraction, and democratic control over digital infrastructures (Rone, 2023). Such practices seek not merely policy reform, but the contestation of the infrastructures through which democratic life is organized and governed.

Epistemic resistance challenges how knowledge about the social world is generated and justified in the data-driven society. It questions the classificatory and machine learning logics through which computational systems define what counts as legitimate knowledge, credible participation, and actionable political claims. Citizens, activists, and affected communities increasingly contest dominant data categories, expose infrastructural opacity, develop counter-knowledge practices, and produce alternative forms of visibility capable of disrupting computational forms of authority and expertise. One expression of epistemic resistance is the challenge to the authority of computational systems themselves, including the datasets, classifications, and

evaluative criteria through which automated decisions are justified. The Gender Shades project, for example, exposed systematic racial and gender biases in commercial facial recognition systems, challenging the assumption that algorithmic outputs constitute objective and neutral forms of knowledge (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). By demonstrating how computational classifications systematically misrecognized women and people of color, the project transformed technical performance metrics into objects of public and political scrutiny.

Finally, **anticipatory resistance** emerges around the future-oriented character of AI governance itself. Because predictive systems increasingly operate through preemption, risk management, and anticipatory intervention, resistance also targets the futures being imagined, optimized, and foreclosed through computational infrastructures (Kazansky, 2021). For example, resistance to predictive risk-scoring systems in welfare, migration, and policing challenges the assumption that future behavior can be reliably inferred from historical data and acted upon in the present. Critics argue that these systems transform probabilistic forecasts into actionable interventions, effectively governing individuals according to projected futures rather than present actions (Amoore, 2013). Other forms of anticipatory resistance seek to disrupt prediction itself. Obfuscation tactics, for instance, deliberately generate misleading, excessive, or ambiguous data in order to undermine profiling, behavioral prediction, and algorithmic inference (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015). Democratic contestation therefore increasingly involves struggles over uncertainty, possibility, and the right to remain politically unpredictable.

These practices do not fully escape computational governance, nor do they necessarily overturn existing infrastructures. Yet they demonstrate that computational publics remain sites of ongoing political struggle rather than fully closed systems of algorithmic control. Political agency persists precisely through the capacity of citizens and collectives to contest, reinterpret, and reconfigure the infrastructural conditions under which political life becomes possible. In this sense, democratic resistance is not only defensive, but generative (Milan, 2024a): it keeps open the possibility that democratic life can still be collectively reimagined and reorganized beyond the logics of computational standardization.

Beyond contesting existing infrastructures, resistance may also take the form of building alternative socio-technical arrangements, although the complexity of the technology makes it a daunting prospect. Emerging proposals around community-controlled AI (Birhane et al., 2022), civic auditing (Geiger et al., 2024), data cooperatives (Micheli et al., 2020), and commons-based AI infrastructures (Kostakis & Tympas, 2025) suggest that democratic resistance need not be limited to refusal or disruption, but can also involve the collective design and governance of alternative computational systems oriented toward public value rather than optimization or profit. Such initiatives remain (very) limited in scale, yet they point toward the possibility of reimagining computational infrastructures as objects of democratic governance rather than merely instruments of governance (Jansen & Oever, 2026).

At the same time, these forms of resistance remain unevenly distributed, as dependent as they are upon forms of expertise, access, and literacy that are not equally available across society. Struggles against computational governance are frequently carried forward by relatively privileged actors, including civil society organizations, technologists, legal advocates, researchers, and digitally skilled activists capable of navigating highly technical infrastructures and regulatory environments. The capacity to contest AI-driven infrastructural ordering and the resulting standardization of democracy is therefore itself unevenly distributed, raising democratic tensions of its own. In this sense, the politics of resistance risks reproducing some of the exclusions and asymmetries embedded within computational publics more broadly.

5. Conclusions

This chapter has identified a central political problem of contemporary governance by data infrastructure: AI systems increasingly reorganize the infrastructural conditions under which democratic life unfolds. It has traced the mechanisms through which this occurs, namely infrastructural ordering and standardization, understood not only as socio-technical processes embedded within system design, but also as broader political rationalities that reshape how democratic participation, visibility, and contestation are organized. The chapter has examined the political consequences of this transformation, particularly the gradual reconfiguration of agonistic democracy into computationally managed publics, alongside the forms of resistance and infrastructural struggle that emerge through the reassertion of plurality, contestation, and democratic unpredictability.

Standardizing democracy, as argued throughout this chapter, refers to the growing tendency for democratic life itself to be reorganized according to the standardization logics embedded within AI-driven infrastructures. As governance increasingly relies on interoperable data architectures, automated classification, prediction, and optimization techniques, democratic participation is progressively translated into and reduced to formats that are measurable, comparable, interoperable, and governable. Democracy is therefore not simply affected by AI technologies from the outside. Rather, its institutional rhythms, practices of participation, and conditions of political contestation are increasingly reorganized according to infrastructural logics of coordination, prediction, and control. These systems are now deeply embedded within the infrastructures of governance and public life, shaping domains such as policing, welfare provision, public consultation, resource allocation, and administrative decision-making. In doing so, governance increasingly shifts from rule through deliberation toward rule through design.

Yet democracy cannot be reduced to coordination, consensus, or administrative management alone. From the perspective of radical democratic theory, democracy remains a conflictual and open-ended process in which disagreement, plurality, and contestation are not pathologies to be eliminated, but necessary conditions of democratic life. Democracy is therefore to be understood as permanently incomplete, lacking a fixed center and continuously open to contestation, reinterpretation, and political rupture. Precisely because democratic politics remains contingent and indeterminate, infrastructural ordering can never fully eliminate ambiguity,

unpredictability, or the possibility of collective intervention. Even under conditions of computational governance, democratic subjects continue to contest, repurpose, resist, and reconfigure the socio-technical arrangements through which political life becomes organized.

A question nevertheless lingers behind these developments, as sociologist Helga Nowotny asks: “where is our shared purpose and our collective imaginary for a digitalized future?” (Nowotny, 2021, p. 100). As we have argued elsewhere, the challenge is not merely to protect democratic values once data flows and AI systems are already in operation, but to understand how values themselves become embedded, negotiated, and governed within the infrastructures through which digital societies are organized (Irion et al., 2021). Protecting democracy in the age of AI therefore requires moving beyond questions of technological performance toward questions of infrastructural design, political imagination, and collective governance.

Many experiments have emerged that point toward alternative trajectories, including proposals for democratic oversight, participatory AI, public-interest technologies, commons-based infrastructures, and decentralized alternatives. As Gürses and Balayn (Balayn & Gürses, 2024) argue, the democratic challenges associated with AI cannot be understood independently of the computational infrastructures, production environments, and institutional arrangements that make such systems possible and shape their effects. But these initiatives still leave a more fundamental democratic question unresolved: what would infrastructures designed for democratic plurality rather than optimization actually look like? Following Innerarity (2024) the challenge is not to eliminate uncertainty and complexity through increasingly sophisticated systems of prediction and control, but to develop institutions capable of governing them democratically. Democratic infrastructures would therefore be judged not by their capacity to reduce ambiguity, but by their ability to sustain contestation, plurality, and collective judgment in the face of it.

The democratic challenge posed by AI, then, is not simply one of regulating technological harms, but of collectively governing the infrastructures through which democratic life itself is increasingly organized. The future of a healthy democracy may ultimately depend on whether computational infrastructures remain primarily instruments of administrative ordering and optimization, or whether they can themselves become objects of democratic contestation, participation, and collective self-determination.

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