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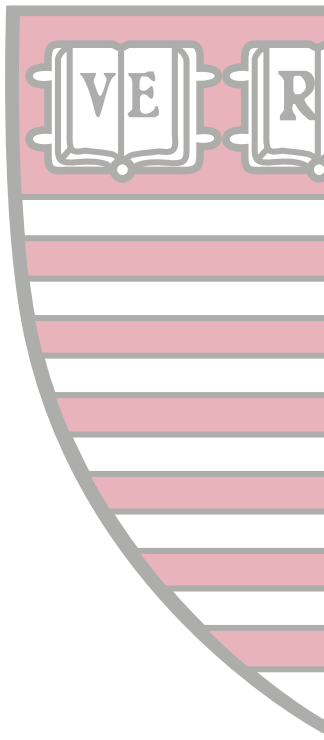

How AI Can Support Democracy Movements: Summary Report of a Research and Practice Workshop

Dr. Erica Chenoweth
Frank Stanton Professor of the First Amendment &
Director, Nonviolent Action Lab, Harvard Kennedy School

February 2025

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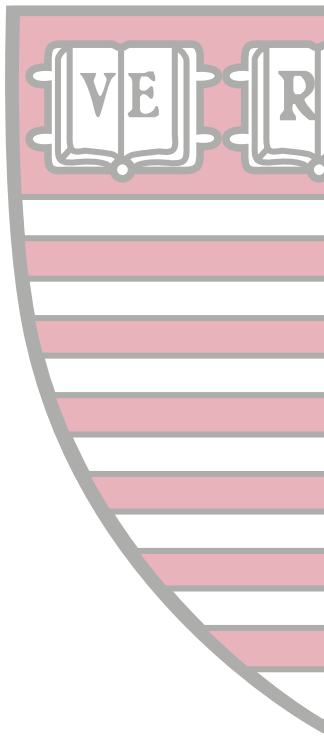

How AI Can Support Democracy Movements: Summary Report of a Research and Practice Workshop

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February 2025

Workshop Date and Location

December 13, 2024, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

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About the Ash Center

The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence and innovation in governance and public policy through research, education, and public discussion. By training the very best leaders, developing powerful new ideas, and disseminating innovative solutions and institutional reforms, the Center's goal is to meet the profound challenges facing the world's citizens. The Ford Foundation is a founding donor of the Center. Additional information about the Ash Center is available at ash.harvard.edu.

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Contents

Introduction: Why Artificial Intelligence Matters for Democracy Movements

In recent years, democracy movements have experienced a historic decline in their ability to challenge autocratic governments effectively.[1] This decline is due, at least in part, to the changing technology landscape, which has allowed autocratic governments to monopolize the advantages of breakthrough technologies to strengthen their power.[2] The relatively slow adoption of AI tools by democracy movements may be widening the gulf between these movements and their adversaries—a gap that may grow even larger if movements do not integrate these technologies now.

Like past disruptive innovations, AI as a technology has the potential to fundamentally transform societal norms, relationships, and governance. However, AI offers unique advantages in speed, scale, scope, and sophistication relative to preexisting technologies. With its capabilities evolving rapidly, those who do not adopt AI tools risk being left behind, further increasing power differentials between those who have embraced the technology and those who have avoided it.

Despite some exceptions, civil society groups have been slow to adopt sustained strategic thinking, planning, and training in using emerging technologies like AI to their benefit. Instead, those who work at the intersection of AI and social movements typically focus on:

1. Analyzing the dangers of governments' cynical co-optation of AI to damage and undermine movements and activists.[3]
2. Using AI, including large language models (LLMs), to support research on social movements by improving data collection, analysis, and data accessibility.[4]
3. Advocating for tech regulations and the ethical use of AI.[5]

While these are all worthy areas of focus, a large gap exists in social movements' ability to use AI tools for their own tactical, strategic, and organizational needs, particularly for difficult or costly tasks, such as background research, systematic power mapping, intelligence gathering, sentiment analysis, predictive modeling, and strategic coaching. Despite clear interest in such tools among some civil society actors,[6] questions remain about their short- and long-term impact on movement outcomes.

To explore these issues, we convened a workshop in December 2024. This report summarizes the proceedings and offers several recommendations based on the discussion.

The Workshop: Participants, Format, and Key Takeaways

This workshop convened democracy activists and organizers, social scientists, and tech specialists to explore promising developments in AI that could support pro-democratic social movements, with discussion focusing on how to evaluate the impacts of AI on

movement outcomes and the ethical trade-offs involved in embracing these technologies. Participants offered not-for-attribution comments and experiences.

The workshop opened with a group reflection in which participants shared the primary challenges facing movements today. They then used an AI tool to aggregate these challenges into five main categories. Next, participants convened for a plenary presentation on the current AI landscape, followed by breakout sessions in which participants explored how movements might apply or integrate AI tools to address some of their current challenges. Three panels offered further insights, with the first examining how movements are already using AI, the second focusing on how social scientists might use AI, and the third addressing the ethical considerations of AI adoption. Participants had several opportunities to synthesize their learnings and insights, culminating in a closing session that built consensus around key priorities going forward.

To document the workshop, attendees alternated taking notes for each session and presentation. Additionally, an AI tool developed at Harvard Kennedy School, PingPong, was then used to synthesize and summarize the proceedings as a reference for this report.

Overall, workshop participants concluded that while various AI tools have the potential to assist movements and promote democratic engagement, doing so requires public demand, trust, and care.[7] AI can identify and simplify complex information, but overreliance on such tools risks bypassing or short-circuiting the messy, important deliberative and discursive processes that animate movements for transformative change. Moreover, as many have acknowledged, bias in AI tools like LLMs may impose significant limits on their usefulness for democracy movements.[8]

Ultimately, participants identified four key priorities in advancing the responsible use of AI to support democratic movements:

1. Establishing a consortium like Coders Without Borders to connect AI developers with democracy movements.
2. Developing and supporting early and systematic training efforts to ensure democracy activists and organizations understand how to use AI effectively and responsibly.
3. Launching an intentional and collaborative research agenda that both employs AI tools and evaluates their impact on movement outcomes.
4. Creating and socializing a Code of Conduct for integrating AI tools into democracy movement work.

We describe and elaborate on these insights below.

AI-Driven Solutions for Contemporary Movement Challenges

Movements pushing for democracy face numerous challenges today, reflected in both a persistent global democratic recession as well as a sudden and steep decline in the

success rates of pro-democracy movements worldwide.[9] Workshop participants organized these contemporary challenges into five main categories: repression and threats, organizational and leadership gaps, misinformation and media control, technological and resource limitations, and understanding and countering adversaries.

Countering Repression

In the 2020s, political activism in general—and resistance to authoritarianism in particular—faces steep challenges from sophisticated and targeted forms of repression that blend traditional state violence with new digital surveillance technologies.[10] What's more, the challenges movements face from their own governments are compounded by transnational collaborations among authoritarian regimes and, in some cases, powerful corporations that use tools like spying and extradition to stifle dissent across international borders.[11] The resulting spread of security threats, disinformation, and smear campaigns undermines trust among activists, making organizing even more difficult.

Workshop attendees identified several ways that emerging technologies might help ameliorate or overcome these challenges. Some noted that AI could be used before, during, and after protest events and other contentious actions to monitor and analyze police and government responses, supporting organizers in planning and adapting logistical aspects, such as timing and escape routes. AI tools could even help track the location and tactical movements of allies and adversaries in real time. While repressive forces often use bots to undermine social movements, there's potential for movements to apply similar techniques to infiltrate regimes or deplete their resources. Some participants saw the potential of predictive AI to help identify infiltrators, provocateurs, and other spoilers before they take actions that harm movements. Finally, AI-driven support systems could help maintain activists' motivation and mental health by monitoring stress levels and providing personalized guidance or resources.

Addressing Organizational and Leadership Gaps

Workshop participants also recognized that contemporary movements face a host of challenges related to organizing, planning, and developing and sustaining leadership. Many movements today rely heavily on reactive efforts centered on specific tactics instead of proactive planning around strategic visions, contributing to protest fatigue, apathy, and a sense of futility that can diminish momentum and participation. Movement organizations also often struggle with internal organization, coalition-building, and conflict resolution, leading to tensions and missed opportunities among allies. This can cause individual organizations and even civil society as a whole to fragment, impeding unified efforts toward common goals. Transnational movements may also face coordination gaps between diaspora groups and domestic activists, which can impede resource mobilization.

Moreover, workshop participants noted that a dependency on online organizing can make movements acutely susceptible to digital surveillance and disruptions, such as internet shutdowns or cyberattacks. Finally, many movements lack access to training in

media engagement, resource mobilization, and the physical techniques of strategic nonviolent resistance. This can negatively affect morale within the movement.

Some workshop participants argued that AI holds significant potential to transform how movements formulate and execute strategic visions by aggregating preferences and providing context-specific solutions based on curated digital libraries of relevant historical examples. While there is a risk of generating generic answers, tailored AI models could adapt to different environments, offering organizers a range of strategic options to consider. Other participants suggested that chatbots could be used to help mediate disputes and build consensus within movements, fostering civic engagement and helping activists connect with potential allies.

Participants also discussed how AI-facilitated digital assemblies could enhance collaboration among activists by aligning goals and predicting creative outcomes of potential partnerships. Such platforms may improve decision-making and coordination by simulating scenarios and offering strategic coaching. AI—sometimes coupled with virtual reality (VR) tools—could also help generate and expand access to information about techniques of nonviolent resistance, lowering the time and costs of vital training.

In terms of morale and logistics, AI could document incremental victories, boosting morale among activists. Some participants noted how the advent of wearable technologies, such as touch-responsive wristbands, could enhance connections among movement participants across large physical distances. Moreover, lessons from current military uses of AI, such as sticking to plans under pressure and utilizing VR for training, could offer activists new methodologies in resilience and adaptability. However, while blending AI with spatial computing opens up new possibilities, participants acknowledged that these tools could also be adopted by regime forces, which remains a strategic consideration.

Addressing Misinformation and Media Control

Misinformation, disinformation, and smear campaigns pervade the contemporary information environment, undermining social trust and diminishing the quality of public discourse.[12] In authoritarian contexts, these problems are often exacerbated by media companies and social media platforms cooperating with repressive governments to restrict the flow of information and surveil political rivals and activists.[13] Furthermore, powerful actors push political narratives that present authoritarianism and chauvinism as effective alternatives to liberalism and social change, appealing to those disillusioned with democratic processes.[14] Meanwhile, social movements aiming to challenge these regimes often lack the financial and technological resources to counter these narratives effectively.

Workshop participants saw various ways in which AI tools could help social movements narrow this gap. First, activists can use AI to detect trolls, bots, and deepfakes, helping them identify and counter disinformation and defend targeted individuals. For instance, Russian activists used AI tools during the 2018 elections to scan millions

of hours of CCTV footage from polling stations.[15] An algorithm tracked the number of people entering, voting, and exiting the polling stations, detecting abnormal movements by those near ballot boxes. Using the footage, an activist group identified likely cases of voter fraud, including stuffing ballot boxes. The participant who described this application also noted that the Russian government suspended public release of election footage following these revelations.

Organizers can also use LLMs and other AI tools to enhance messaging efficiency, including crafting their own messaging and counter-messaging. AI can tailor messaging and communications to different audiences, making it more compelling and effective while helping organizations remain dynamic in a constantly changing environment. Additionally, technologies like small language models and distributed computing, which allow AI to function independently of the internet, ensure users can work around restrictions while maintaining access to vital information resources. This strategic use of AI for information management and narrative control could prove crucial in leveling the playing field for democratic actors against more resource-rich adversaries.

Overcoming Technological and Resource Limitations

Many organizers and activists lack cybersecurity expertise and knowledge about digital tools that can be used offensively or defensively in today's environment. Even when they are aware of existing tools, the resource-intensive nature of AI and tech development often limits access, further concentrating power in the hands of a privileged few.[16] Participants also acknowledged challenges in adopting these technologies, particularly among individuals in regions prone to internet shutdowns or those struggling to access or deploy these tools. Even in relatively open societies, activists may resist adoption due to issues such as access barriers, pervasive technological skepticism, environmental concerns, and the alignment of interests between tech companies and anti-democratic forces. Additionally, the unavailability or dysfunctionality of these tools for users who speak less common languages can impose significant hurdles.

In the post-truth era marked by decentralized communication platforms, AI is already contributing to a "volume war," where the sheer quantity of content overwhelms traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and, in many cases, the targeted audiences.[17] There is an urgent need for civil society to adapt to these changes, particularly advocacy groups navigating an evolving political landscape. Doing so demands strategic foresight in dealing with emerging technologies like quantum computing, which could profoundly impact movements if left unchecked. Movements must devise strategies to stay ahead of technological developments that could redefine resistance dynamics while accounting for continuously emerging technologies, including VR and drones, which have not yet achieved widespread adoption despite their potential. Understanding and integrating these technologies could enhance the effectiveness of civil resistance movements in mounting asymmetric struggles against more powerful adversaries.

Workshop participants affirmed that AI tools hold significant promise for empowering resource-constrained groups, enabling them to scale operations and enhance communications with limited time and resources. For instance, participants learned about existing generative AI tools to help create and disseminate campaign communications based on user-selected examples and choices about audiences and tone. Strategies for sharing AI-focused resources, including tools, tips, and tricks, could serve as powerful coordination and empowerment points for organizers within and across national borders. The generative capacity of AI for content creation is remarkable, but content alone does not drive social movements. Environmental empowerment and strategic evaluation are key to overcoming accessibility challenges faced by local activists, particularly in regions prone to internet shutdowns or communication barriers.

Understanding and Countering Adversaries

Democracy movements are often hamstrung by a limited understanding of their adversaries, which may include not only governments and political parties but also irregular actors such as dark-money networks, cartels, paramilitaries, and foreign powers.[18] These groups create a complex landscape that is difficult to map and analyze, complicating efforts to effectively counter them. Movements also suffer from an insufficient understanding of global institutions and mechanisms that could be leveraged for advocacy.[19] The limited sharing of lessons learned from successful democratic movements worldwide inhibits the transfer of valuable insights and strategies that could prove beneficial in various contexts. In addition, there is a significant need to comprehend and respond to the complex role that democracies sometimes play in indirectly supporting authoritarian regimes, further complicating the struggle for democratic advancement.[20]

Considering these challenges, workshop participants argued that social movements may benefit from incorporating AI tools into "red team – blue team"[21] strategies and mapping pillars of support to anticipate and counteract their adversaries' responses. AI may also assist movements in rapidly assessing news to discern narrative tactics, negotiating, and providing informed perspectives during stakeholder discussions.

Ethical Trade-Offs and Cautionary Considerations

Integrating AI into social movements—or advocating for its use without appropriate caveats—brings both promise and peril, not just practically but also ethically. Workshop participants recalled the initial euphoria over the democratizing potential of the internet,[22] which now seems misplaced. The evolution of that technology raises critical concerns about how digital platforms, including AI, can be co-opted or repurposed by various actors whose interests do not align with civil resistors and how movements might respond to those developments. There is significant surveillance potential in the outputs of these tools—both due to the consolidation and hosting of the strategy and materials on platforms and because AI can assist authoritarians in consolidating surveillance data.

Efforts to address the misuse of AI tools in this regard have been underway for years, but they have not yet gained sufficient traction to rein in potential human rights abuses. Many U.S.-based tech companies resist regulations by citing concerns about international competitiveness, complicating accountability efforts.[23]

Attendees also considered the ethical implications of unequal access to AI tools. Disparities in access can arise for a host of reasons, including differences in funding, the availability of AI tools across languages, and fundamental issues like poor internet connectivity or frequent power outages.[24] These themes prompted participants to discuss which tools require connectivity and which can function independently, as well as how movements can build resilience into their planning to withstand disruptions.

Additionally, participants considered how AI has the potential to exacerbate rather than alleviate issues of concern to many civil resistance movements, such as social polarization, economic inequality, water scarcity, and climate change.

Participants also raised concerns about censorship of the underlying corpus of data upon which LLMs might depend. For instance, online content in the Russian language about the Russia-Ukraine War has a much different tone and uses different terminology than online content in Ukrainian. Censorship that leads to bias in the underlying data might create "authoritarian biases" in the output from AI tools, which users may not detect unless they compare results across multiple languages.

Finally, participants discussed ways to develop ethical guidelines for using AI in social movements that support activism without compromising moral integrity. They stressed the importance of maintaining robust organizational and leadership structures within movements, ensuring that technology complements rather than supplants grassroots efforts.

Toward a Research-Practice Architecture for Collaboration

The next steps emerging from the discussion involve several strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and resilience of democratic movements.

Practical Applications

Training. Existing AI tools already lend themselves to capacity-building workshops and training sessions for activists with internet connections worldwide. Participants expressed support for expanding these opportunities in number and scale, enabling organizers to learn and practice with these tools as soon as possible. Social scientists could also evaluate the impacts of AI adoption on movements' ability to address some of the challenges discussed above and provide feedback to help inform strategy and refine their approaches.

Hackathons. Participants proposed fostering creativity and innovation within movements through hackathons and other collaborations facilitated by third parties with expertise on

relevant data and tools. They also felt that there should be a concerted effort to adapt technological tools for movement use, drawing on the rich open-source culture prevalent in computer science and movement spaces.

Capacity Support. Collective initiatives, like Computer Scientists Without Borders or Coders Without Borders, can provide technological support and infrastructure solutions, helping grassroots movements maintain operational capacity despite hurdles. By integrating technological expertise with local knowledge, such collaborations can empower activists to be more effective, even in the face of significant obstacles.

Research Applications

Data Collection. After talking about how democracy movements could use AI to advance their goals, workshop participants considered how scholars and practitioners might use AI to facilitate research on social movements and democratization, from analyzing individual protest events to mapping broader movement occurrence and outcomes. Several attendees highlighted AI's ability to make research more efficient or affordable by quickly processing large quantities of data, like video footage, photographs, or social media posts. Potential applications include counting crowd sizes, detecting behavioral patterns, classifying misinformation, identifying election interferences, mapping social networks, and more. At the macro level, participants considered ways that AI-assisted tools can efficiently identify and synthesize relevant research, datasets, and other materials.

For instance, the establishment of a repression case study library is a key priority, enabling movements to learn from historical instances of mobilization against authoritarian regimes and strategically apply these insights to counter repressive tactics. By organizing this knowledge on a digital platform, potentially a website, it could aid in the development of relevant operating guidelines. However, rather than offering prescriptive guidelines, participants emphasized the need to focus on posing critical questions that activists need to address and then surfacing carefully researched and succinctly described examples of past responses to similar challenges.

Analysis. While AI can efficiently surface relevant information, collate data, and draft text, human validation of AI output is crucial to ensuring research integrity and accuracy. The curation of data for LLMs and other AI tools is a crucial task, but it remains poorly understood. Participants noted that deeper involvement of social scientists and activists in curating AI datasets and training foundational AI models could be especially useful.

Theory and Meaning-Making. Participants also raised substantive research questions. For instance, do AI and quantum technology developments make private companies more powerful than any country in the world? And, if so, does that fundamentally change the nature of the relationship between state, society, and the private sector? The growing influence of corporations can be seen in places like Latin America, where corporate

actions have drastically altered local realities, with autocratic regimes inundating data spaces with misinformation. Some participants also discussed the relationship between online misinformation campaigns and on-the-ground ramifications for activists. Future research could examine physical coordination or smearing campaigns against activists.

Ethical Applications

Code of Conduct. Participants proposed creating operational guidelines for AI use by movements, focusing on augmentation rather than replacement. Maintaining ethical standards for activists, perhaps by incorporating a moral framework into their strategic approaches, could be productive—and even essential—for movements going forward.

Conclusion: Four Urgent Tasks

The workshop was rich in insight, examples, and motivation to build a more sustained collaboration between social scientists, technologists, and activists around the ethical integration of AI tools into democracy movements. While this report is a first step toward building such an architecture, much more work remains. In the meantime, we hope that the insights from this workshop can serve as a resource for activists, democracy-minded technologists, and researchers who want to create AI-augmented solutions or evaluate their impacts on movements. Given the intense and pressing challenges faced by democracy movements worldwide, participants agreed that an intentional and collaborative approach to AI integration is urgent, lest the gaps between movements and their adversaries widen even further.

Beyond specific AI applications, four broader structural efforts to support AI adoption in democracy movements received strong support in the workshop:

1. **Establishing a consortium like Coders without Borders** or a similar collaborative to connect AI developers with democracy movements.
2. **Developing and supporting early and systematic training efforts** to equip democracy activists and organizations with the skills to use AI effectively and responsibly.
3. **Launching an intentional and collaborative research agenda** to employ AI tools and evaluate their impact on movement outcomes.
4. **Creating and socializing a Code of Conduct** for integrating AI tools into democracy movement work.

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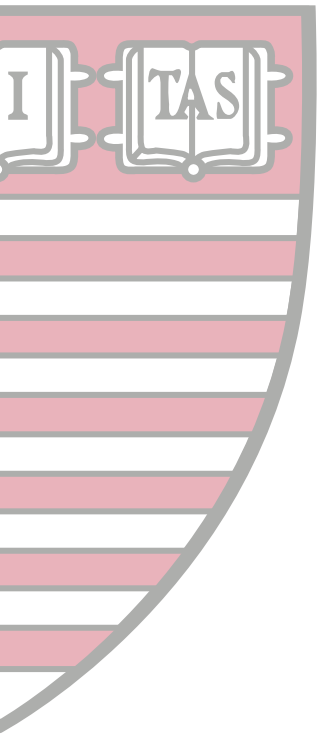

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