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Democracy in the Age of AI: Simulation, Perception, and the Loss of Accountability

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Abstract

AI is transforming governance, accelerating elite detachment and dissolving political responsibility. As AI systems integrate into decision-making processes and administrative infrastructure, replacing human elements. Where will this lead? A state controlling without contact has authority without accountability and represents the individual performatively. Inspired by James Burnham’s theory of the managerial revolution, this paper argues that AI will strengthen the managerial elite, which governs without the responsibility of ownership or the accountability of elected officials and will use these systems to shield itself from scrutiny. As societies become increasingly complex, AI, promising to navigate this complexity, gives the sense that AI can solve everything. What feels like truth is only a simulation of it. Building upon Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and Walter Lippmann’s idea of the pseudo-environment, this paper explores how managed perception can replace democratic deliberation. As control becomes algorithmic and ambient, citizens are reduced to pressing buttons, simulating agency. Furthermore, this paper draws from Christopher Lasch’s insights on how democracy depends not on process alone but on accountability and responsibility from those who govern, which is highly relevant when discussing AI, as it risks amplifying trends of elite detachment and loss of accountability. This paper concludes that AI is a grave threat to genuine democracy and that to endure in this new age, political power must remain visible, nameable, and accountable, even if its code.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Democratic Erosion, Managerialism, Accountability, Perception Management

This paper argues that artificial intelligence can be used to undermine core democratic principles and enable ruling elites to insulate themselves from accountability by governing without transparency, by removing human elements and accountability as sources of friction, as automated systems replace human agents. What emerges does not resemble traditional tyranny, but a curated, ambient form of control rooted in perception management.

*“What we propose to do is not to control content, but to create context.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In the cult classic video game and spy thriller *Metal Gear Solid 2*, the player believes they are embarking on a heroic mission to protect the state, only for the end to reveal that the events of the plot were orchestrated by an artificial intelligence known as ‘the Patriots’, an AI system that governs through information management. The story is set in a world where citizens are, de facto, not ruled by the leaders they elect, but by AI; not through law, but through managed perception that guides their actions. Just as the main character feels a sense of urgency and agency within the story’s context, the player, too, feels agency as they press the buttons in a narrative whose outcome has already been predetermined. What feels like freedom is pure performance, agency nudged by managed perception.

While this dynamic plays out in a spy thriller video game, it is also a metaphor for what might be the future of AI-driven governance. As technologies mature, they are integrated into administrative systems, political decision-making, and perception management. The same will happen with AI. This future integration risks accelerating undemocratic trends of eroding visibility and accountability in democratic life, as a structure emerges that governs without rulers, simulates objectivity, and replaces agency with system-guided behaviour.

In this context, simulations function as operational replacements: representations that feel real, nudge behaviour, and make direct engagement with the world they claim to describe unnecessary. They are not designed to deceive by hiding the real, but to displace it.[[2]](#footnote-2) Their outputs are treated as reality, even though they are constructed from models, probabilities, and behavioural traces. Decisions are reached not based upon reality, but on models and representations that stand in for it.

The paper’s structure reflects its theory, with James Burnham’s theory of the managerial revolution explaining how power shifts from owners to managers. Jean Baudrillard’s simulation theory clarifies how representations can displace reality, which is complemented by Walter Lippmann’s concept of the pseudo-environment. Lastly, Christopher Lasch and his critique of modern liberalism help frame the moral and civic consequences of a society in which responsibility is diffused, participation is abstracted, and the human element in politics is lost.

**Managerialism and AI**

The rise of AI will not necessarily disrupt the ruling class. It can strengthen it to a dangerous degree. In *The Managerial Revolution*, James Burnham described how ownership and control were decoupled, leading to the formation of a new ruling class: the managers.[[3]](#footnote-3) AI threatens to cement that transformation. Whereas the 19th century saw the displacement of the aristocracy as a consequence of the industrial revolution, the 20th century marked the displacement of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie and the rise of the managers as a result of industrial complexity.[[4]](#footnote-4) Society and organisations grew in scale, which shifted power from owners to administrators.

Unlike the capitalists of old, who held control through ownership and bore the risk of failure, managers are not burdened by the accountability and risk that ownership entails. Managers draw their control from being administrators, not capital holders, and their authority is implemented and upheld by bureaucracies, not by ownership or electoral legitimacy.[[5]](#footnote-5) The unifying factor of this new class is not their ideology or sector, as managerialism has reached the domains of the state, corporations, and the military, but their function: managing systems.[[6]](#footnote-6) This new class does not rule directly, but structurally, through expertise and process, outside the public’s attention. This is not because of a conspiracy. Instead, the public has little agency in this process, and thus, no need to be involved.

The case of 401(k) plan investors offers a poignant example. Though the individual investor technically owns their retirement savings, companies like Vanguard, BlackRock, or Fidelity manage their shares and the voting rights attached to them. These investors do not read reports, vote, or attend shareholder meetings. Even if they did, unless highly organised, their influence would be as negligible as their voting power. Instead, their interests are abstracted, pooled, and managed by actors they will never meet and cannot influence. Why do millions still participate in it? The system works for them because it is safer, more efficient, and less burdensome for the individual investor with limited time. This convenience, however, comes at a cost: their structural irrelevance to the decisions that have been made in their name. They own without control.[[7]](#footnote-7) This example showcases modern governance structurally separating control from personal risk, an essential part of accountability. Non-voting asset holders change, but the voting capital managers remain.

The result of these developments is decision-making without a figurehead, within an environment where authority is ambient, distributed among administrators, experts, and consultants, and less accountable than the forms of authority that preceded these structures. AI can amplify this dynamic, creating a system where, once there was a manager with a name and emotions, there now exists only a system with an output, stripped of the human element. Artificial intelligence removes the last points of friction. Human judgment, moral accountability, and visible discretion.

The managers described by Burnham could still be individually named, questioned, and fired. While firing individual managers would not change the structure, at least some personal accountability existed.[[8]](#footnote-8) AI systems, however, are trained on opaque data and mediate their decisions through code, which is, more often than not, closed source, controlled by private interests, and beyond public scrutiny. The growing trend of public–private partnerships compounds this dynamic, with state agencies implementing systems built and controlled by corporations. The delegation of technical expertise and governance to firms operating behind proprietary code and commercial secrecy diminishes the accountability and scrutiny applied to decision-making actors, as clarity about responsibility disappears.

Welfare eligibility or predictive policing, which once required human evaluation, are now simply outputs. The manager remains, but responsibility disappears behind the interface. Judgment can be offloaded to the algorithm. This system not only offers the manager efficiency but also deniability. There is no one to confront when a benefit application or a loan is rejected, as responsibility dissolves in the machine. Appearing objective becomes the perfect bureaucratic alibi: it shields managers, with the fault lying not with judgment, but with the model. After all, the outcome was produced using the most reliable data and technical processes available.

In *Leviathan and Its Enemies*, Sam Francis argued that the managerial elite had detached itself from the cultural, moral and other particularities of the societies they govern.[[9]](#footnote-9) Instead of being bound to national identity, tradition, or class loyalty, the managerial regime operates based on systemic continuity and procedural abstraction, as ruling elites no longer serve a civic or moral order, but coordinate large-scale processes, dissolve organic loyalties, and enlarge managerial control.[[10]](#footnote-10) Francis warned of a vast, impersonal apparatus that maintains control not through violence, but through information and technique, a managerial Leviathan.[[11]](#footnote-11) Within it, citizens do not participate in governance; they are reduced to units to be managed.[[12]](#footnote-12) It can only be speculated, but had he lived to see the emergence of AI, it would likely have struck Francis as a powerful instrument of centralisation and the next evolutionary step for managerialist technocracy. This step was initiated not by managers but by engineers, who created powerful tools that, as they mature, will be absorbed into managerial structures. Continuing this speculative streak, the engineers may have ironically provided the managerial class with the means to render them redundant.

Such detachment is already creating real-world issues. Government agencies in the U.S. were involved in a scandal involving the use of a third-party digital identity system by the company ID.me, which was deployed to help administer access to public benefits. Under this system, applicants had to pass through facial recognition checks to be verified, which did not offer meaningful options to appeal or have human oversight. The result was thousands of locked-out claimants for services they were entitled to, being forced to navigate an opaque bureaucracy which treats algorithmic outputs as authoritative. A model was treated as a fact, with no human judgment involved.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Palantir is another case with significant implications for how decisions are shaped in modern governance. It is a private data analytics firm that supplies the government with decision-support systems used by intelligence agencies and law enforcement.[[14]](#footnote-14) While these systems do not make decisions themselves, they frame the context in which decisions are made by controlling what is visible, prioritised, and ignored. Palantir Technologies sets the field of action by determining what appears urgent, is treated as correlated, and is dismissed as noise, using Palantir’s proprietary data integration tools, predictive modelling techniques, and scenario simulations. This risks the soft automation of judgment, whereby system-generated outputs built on proprietary models replace deliberation. Palantir controls the context in which decisions are made. This creates a situation in which privately owned infrastructure, which frames decisions in the corporations’ chosen context, is embedded within public institutions, making responsibility and accountability for system failures increasingly opaque. Palantir does not govern directly but controls the government’s perception.

Another case is that of Google Gemini’s image generation system, which produced historical distortions, some of which featured black female SS officers or multiracial Founding Fathers. It turns out there was no malfunction; it was operating as intended. Gemini’s internal guidelines prioritised certain standards of representation over historical accuracy. A normative vision etched into the code was projected onto the past, automatically implementing ideals without deliberation or concern for accuracy. The resulting distortions of history were intentional, produced by closed-source algorithms with no transparency about their training data. Gemini was temporarily shut down only in response to public backlash, not because of an internal review triggered by its performance. The case of Gemini shows that fixes are not motivated by a commitment to historical accuracy, but by the desire to protect corporate reputation. Google only changed course because its changes in history were so ridiculous that it became a joke. They did not correct the distortion out of concern for truth, but to avoid being laughed at.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This raises a critical question: Who is permitted to build such systems? According to venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, senior members of the Biden administration discouraged him from investing in AI startups. Andreessen, a proponent of free market-based approaches to AI, has warned about the formation of a government-approved AI cartel: an ecosystem in which a handful of companies are granted privileged access and regulatory protection, while independent developers are excluded from the market. [[16]](#footnote-16) Such an idea reflects a distinct kind of managerial logic, in which systemic gatekeeping is justified as serving the public interest. Innovation becomes confined to a small set of actors, as AI systems are curated by political allegiance and institutional favour. This results in the tools that structure perception and decision-making, both in the public and private spheres, no longer emerging organically but in accordance with pre-aligned imperatives.

The underlying issue is not that AI systems make mistakes, but their reliance on abstractions. They are systems that do not govern reality, but the field that approximates it. Experience is fragmented and quantified into data. That data is then processed by models trained on inputs controlled by institutional goals. The results are not issued as interpretations, but as verdicts. Each stage strips out complexity and presents it as certainty, echoing Baudrillard’s warning that information dissolves meaning, leaving only reactive signals.[[17]](#footnote-17) This abstraction, however, is not inert, as it becomes a part of institutional responses and governance.

Citizens are but data profiles, optimised for management, in a system that does not operate on reality but solely on representations of it, which are filtered through data, then AI models, and lastly through institutional deployment. The result is a system that is three levels detached from the world it claims to govern. Its governance is guided by an abstraction that has been interpreted by another abstraction and executed without discretion. The world thus becomes manageable through an administratively efficient simulation.

**Ruling the Simulation**

Automating away governance changes political reality. When the output of AI systems is treated as a matter of fact, their mediation of perception will begin to influence decision-making in crucial ways. Governance will shift from a process grounded in political deliberation and collective agency to a system in which control is exercised by managing perception. The result is a system of governance turning into a circulation of signs with no reference, a simulation.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Metrics like risk scores and behavioural assessments do not directly mirror reality; they reflect abstractions that reduce reality’s complexities into computable signs.[[19]](#footnote-19) Something is lost as these systems are built for intervention, not understanding. Emerging from this is not a true-to-form representation of reality, but machine-readable outputs designed to shape action. Guided by quantifiable signals from metrics and models, AI appears objective and perfectly suited for governance, but its implementation depoliticises governance as it reduces political judgment to technical procedure, managing risk.

Simulation, as defined by Baudrillard, is the final stage in the progression of representation. At this stage, signs no longer reflect or distort reality but replace it entirely, resulting in hyperreality: the condition where boundaries between reality and its representations collapse. At the beginning of this progression, signs represent reality. In the next stage, they become second-order simulacra, distorted imitations manipulating the real. Stage three emulates the real, as the form of the sign masks reality’s absence. Stage four is when the mask slips and all pretence of a link to the real vanishes, as signs refer only to each other, forming a closed system with no need for reality. What emerges is not deception, but a regime of signs so complete in itself that it constitutes a replacement reality.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The idea of simulation as a self-referential system representing without substance echoes the issues at the core of AI-driven governance. AI not merely mirrors the world but relies upon and creates its system of signs optimised for operational clarity. Such a system doesn’t represent truth, yet it appears truthful because it is internally consistent.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is where the hyperreal dimension of AI governance crystallises, as political decisions are guided by outputs that rely on a simulation of reality, not reality itself. Governance takes on a new form as it becomes seamless and responsive. Beneath this appearance of responsiveness and control lies the disappearance of deliberation, as the system’s smooth function stems from cutting out the human element that introduces friction.

After progressing through the earlier stages of representation, the system culminates in simulation. This last phase is marked by signs that lack outside reference points, being self-referential.[[22]](#footnote-22) What exists outside it only matters insofar as it can be converted into a version of itself that is legible to the system. Under such conditions, the formulation of policy and its implementation are disconnected from shared reality, as the system dictates what aspects of reality are actionable. Meaning no longer flows from human interpretation, but from models that determine what is emphasised and acted upon.

Walter Lippmann’s concept of the pseudo-environment precedes simulation, describing how public perception is not shaped by reality, but by mediated representations.[[23]](#footnote-23) Lippmann argued that people do not act solely based on their direct interaction with the world but on symbolic representations and information that institutions, elites and the press have mediated.[[24]](#footnote-24) In Lippmann’s framework, simplification is necessary to enable collective decision-making, since the public can only act on simplified information and choices.[[25]](#footnote-25) Today’s pseudo-environment is constructed by editorial gatekeeping and algorithmic systems that rank what is relevant and attention-worthy based on metrics individuals feed into the system.[[26]](#footnote-26) The citizen is reduced to a data point, whose placement in the system determines their experience.

The difference between Lippman’s mediated world and simulation is structural: while the former is bound to external references, such reference points disappear in simulation, which no longer concerns itself just with mediation, but also creation. Unlike a mediated pseudo-environment, such a system creates a model of the public, which it then uses to determine what the public should perceive and act on.[[27]](#footnote-27) What materialises is a loop of perception and prediction: models of the public determine what is shown, and what is seen reinforces the model.

Such a system cannot be described as traditional propaganda or censorship because it doesn’t block or force messages. Its methods are more sophisticated, such as controlling information’s visibility to shape behaviour without obvious control. What people see is selected based on predictions fueled by behavioural data they feed the system, which uses it to shape behaviour, reinforcing its models. As a result, individuals and eventually the masses will align with what the system presents to them. Actions do not need to be uniform, as long as the outcome has been accurately modelled, the system has already imposed its logic on the public without visible manipulation.

People do not encounter information that might disrupt the model’s expected outcome, only content that reinforces the anticipated behavioural response. In this way, debate collapses into reaction, and while individuals may feel the thrill of participation, the decision was already shaped before they even tweet. This simulation is not the disappearance of governance but its transformation. Participation remains, even is encouraged, but its meaning is hollow.[[28]](#footnote-28) Surveys, smart appliances, and sentiment analysis depend on engagement that can be converted into tangible data. Political life is an interaction in this simulation: it is curated, tracked, and inconsequential.

Ultimately, AI-driven governance will be a seamless experience. When system outputs are accepted as objective facts rather than subjective judgments, governance sheds the burden of presenting itself as political. Once contestable political decisions become mere technical administration, removed from the democratic processes and shielded from accountability. As power circularises, the systems’ supposed efficiency and objectivity allow political power to dissolve into what appears as neutral infrastructure: ambient, necessary, and beyond questioning.[[29]](#footnote-29)

When simulation becomes total, power no longer needs to manufacture consent when it can simulate validation. The real disappears through obsolescence, as nothing that cannot interface with the simulation will be useful. Politics degenerates into signs that invoke agency while creating only compliance.[[30]](#footnote-30) Such transformation fundamentally alters the nature of democratic participation, as AI-driven governance reduces the citizens’ agency to button-pressing and preference signalling. Such a scenario would leave us with a hollow feeling of agency as we mash buttons on the voting machine, rescuing the state on a heroic mission of democratic participation.

AI-driven behavioural governance, which manages populations using closed-source models that might or might not have embedded interests written into them, and which shapes the public’s attention and responses, is an existential threat to even the simplest conception of democracy.[[31]](#footnote-31) In such a world, what appears to be a spontaneous reaction might have been an encouraged response. Simulated agency poses a significant threat, not just to citizens but to governmental actors as well, as no decision-making process involving or influenced by AI will be free from this threat.

**The Moral Vacuum**

Christopher Lasch’s warning about the elites’ abdication of civic responsibility is more relevant than ever. His criticism was that the professional-managerial class created its own sphere and cut ties with national life as they withdrew into procedural expertise.[[32]](#footnote-32) For Lasch, the elites’ abandonment of informal structures, favouring formal structures, was a social failure. A key criticism of his was the tendency of modern liberalism to diffuse responsibility with professionalised and greatly expanded institutions, leading to a great bureaucratisation that obfuscates accountability and incentivises the abandonment of civic life.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Today, AI-driven governance risks amplifying these trends by severing the few remaining civic ties and reducing the elites’ responsibility. An example of this dynamic is the ID.me case, which left welfare claimants denied essential services based on the output of an opaque facial recognition system. A system where a result decides outcomes that severely affect individual lives, but with no human ownership of the decision, not even assistance. Kafka already wrote about the dehumanising nature of bureaucracy. Maybe he was born too early.

Such conditions fundamentally change the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed, resembling a technological panopticon. AI-mediated systems need legible citizens to profile and track, while the system is closed source. Unlike human institutions built upon organic networks and obligations, AI governance creates alienating structures. With an AI watchtower, each citizen is confined to their personalised AI-controlled environment, not just to be surveilled but also to be acted upon. Citizens feed the necessary information to model outcomes and adjust individual behaviour through perception management and other means. Societally shared experiences and cultural phenomena will be a thing of the past as individuals sit in their personalised cave, with AI projecting a world that is only for them to see.

Such a nightmare vision of total alienation and loss of agency sounds extreme, and hopefully, it does not come to pass. One part that might help prevent such a scenario is open-source AI, which isn’t a remedy for all the future societal pains, but changing the dynamic from one-way surveillance to reciprocal transparency makes accountability and stakeholder influence possible. What is at stake concerns all citizens, and open-source AI creates the opportunity for democratic action. While there are still barriers like technical literacy and others, open source, by its very nature, is already an improvement over closed-source AI, which is structurally undemocratic.

Ultimately, Lasch’s concern was losing civic capacity, not just in institutions, but also in individuals.[[34]](#footnote-34) For him, democracy demands moral judgement, deliberation, and self-restraint from citizens,[[35]](#footnote-35) yet culture is increasingly focused on therapeutically healing all the ills in the world.[[36]](#footnote-36) Instead of civic virtues creating a good society, therapy does. For Lasch, the elite’s professional detachment and cultural secession hollowed out the moral frameworks and shared connections that bind citizens.[[37]](#footnote-37) He would have feared the abovementioned nightmare vision: a political culture where citizens no longer share a common life, but live in isolation, shaped by systems they neither understand nor control.

This vision reduces civic life and agency to performative preference signalling, rendering citizenship a formality as the citizen no longer bears responsibility but is reduced to spectating managed outcomes, severed from historical memory and ways of communal life. Lasch warned that replacing civic competence with professional oversight and hollowing out public debate causes internal democratic decay.[[38]](#footnote-38) Along the way, this decay turns citizenship into a vacuous posture as moral virtue is shoved aside in favour of emotional self-protection and procedural abstraction. But, as always, with abstractions, something real is lost.

**The Future of Democracy**

Looking back, as we stand at this critical juncture, we see managerialism’s evolution, how our perception has long been determined by the pseudo-environment and how civic life has slowly been dismantled.

*“The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”[[39]](#footnote-39)*

We indeed face symptoms we must confront, or they will become chronic and drive our decisions. But what do you confront when there are so many symptoms? One risks losing oneself in treating acute ills, not addressing the greater issues beyond the temporarily alleviated pain.

We can navigate the managerial systems that displace judgment. We can recognise that our perception is curated. We can feel the abandonment of civic life by the cleft it leaves behind, even if we have never known it like those before did. These forces will not abolish democracy. They are but stage managers of its hollowed-out performance, which lacks accountability and meaningful participation. Democracy will not be destroyed. It will be simulated. The result would be non-political: a frictionless, technical simulation displacing judgment, diffusing responsibility, as agency dissolves in the simulation for which the structural pre-conditions have already been laid.

Yet nothing is inevitable. The tools to keep power visible and answerable exist, and we need not resort to Luddism. Pandora’s box cannot be closed; we must live with that fact, but how we do it remains in our hands. We should not insist on excluding AI as a complementary tool, but we also cannot let it overtake governance, as the risks are nightmarish. The human element should not be seen as friction to be fixed, but embraced as it keeps our systems humane, because efficiency is nothing one should sacrifice one’s humanity for.

Preserving humaneness requires not just regulation or ethical guidelines but also structural resistance to logic bent on dissolving politics into procedure. Decision-makers need to be identifiable, unable to hide behind AI or the opaqueness of mass organisations, for reasoning to be explicit, maintaining the relationship between power and accountability. It might mean that we need to create societal airgaps, explicit spaces where human judgment remains primary, without AI mediation, but with genuine, mindful and intentional participation. This does not reject technology but protects against its totalisation: spaces that preserve the human element as a condition of reciprocity. The window is narrowing. As AI becomes embedded infrastructure and control becomes ambient, democratic accountability may vanish, and with it, a nightmare vision might materialise. We need to remember that our societies are ultimately networks of human relationships. They are chaotic and inefficient, but to give up these connections would be an immeasurable loss.

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