JDSR 6(4) (2024) 1-12

JOURNAL OF DIGITAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

(Un)stable diffusions

The publics, publicities, and publicizations of generative AI

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Abstract

Generative AI is a uniquely public technology. The large language models behind ChatGPT and other tools that generate text and images is a major develop in publicity as much as technology. Without public data and public participation, these large models could not be trained. Without the attention, hype, and hope around these technologies, the big AI firms probably could not afford the computational costs to train these models. Our special issue questions how Critical AI Studies can attend to the publics, publicities, and publicizations of generative AI. We situate AI's publicity as mode of publicity – hype, scandals, silences, and inevitability – as well as a mode of participation seen in the grown importance of technology demonstrations. Within this situation our contributions offer four different research paths: (1) situating the legacy media as an enduring process of legitimation; (2) looking at the ways that AI has a private life in public; (3) questioning the post-democratic future of public participation; and, (4) developing new prototypes of public participation through research creation.

Keywords: AI; generative AI; publicity; public theory; media and communication

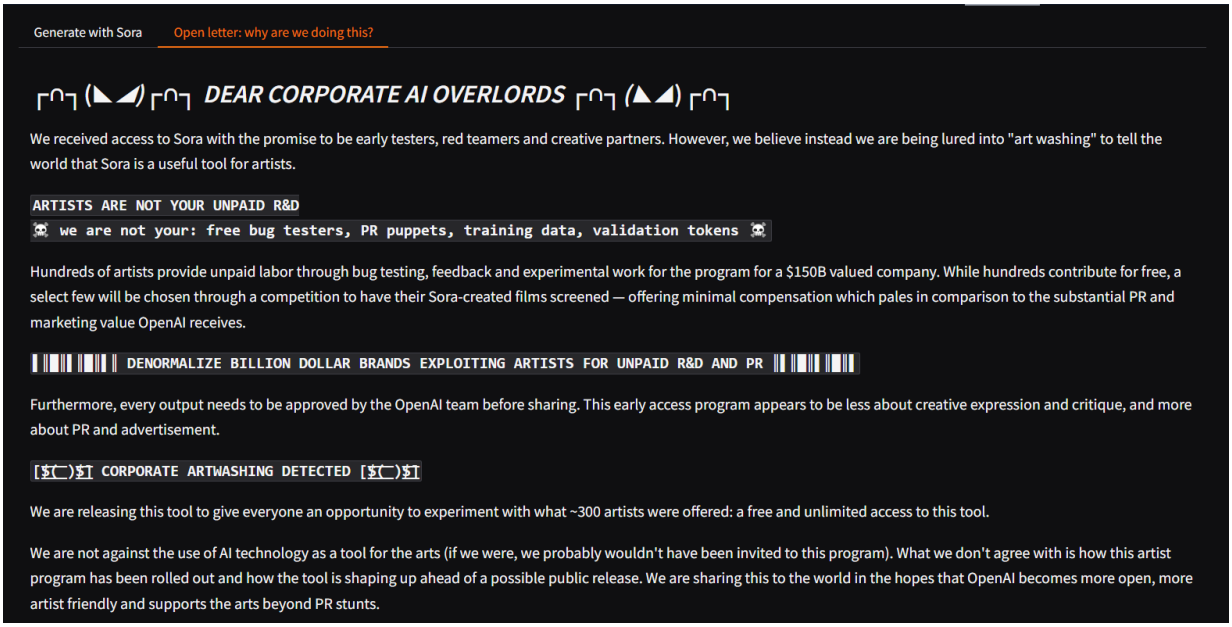

Figure 1. https://x.com/legit_rumors/status/1861431113408794898/photo/1 from https://huggingface.co/spaces/PR-Puppets/PR-Puppet-Sora

The revolt of the beta testers?

The message appeared on Hugging Face, a popular AI development site, in late November of 2024 along with a link to access OpenAI's unreleased model, Sora. The message was simultaneously a leak, a warning, and a conundrum. The post provided access to a new AI model in beta testing. The beta-testers, presumably artists, warned against "corporate artwashing" and undermining "creative expression." Laudable goals, but merely sharing a link that could be shut down easily (and quickly was)? Past hacktivism might have released unredacted documents, source code, or software, moving private or proprietary material into the public domain. What might have been the logic behind the leak?

This leak helps to introduce AI's unstable diffusions in the public sphere and our intent to encourage scholarship that disrupts the status quo approach to AI's social shaping (cf. Ananny, 2024; Gourlet et al., 2024; McQuillan, 2022). These upset beta-testers exploited OpenAI's carefully controlled spectacle of product launch "shipmas" in December (cf. Galloway & Thacker, 2007). OpenAI's marketing strategy exemplifies the problem Jodi Dean identified when warning against "the conviction that the solution to any problem is publicity" (Dean, 2001, p. 625). In releasing ChatGPT, OpenAI broke rank with a technocratic consensus around AI safety in favor of a public media blitz (For more behind its launch, see: Metz, 2023). OpenAI's success, like most tech firms, involves orchestrating product launches as strategic spectacles that give publics a chance to interact and play with new technologies. The novelty of playing with ChatGPT for the first time paid off handsomely, after all. Launches, however, are anything but a participatory public conversation. Instead, OpenAI accelerated technoscientific capitalism's fantasy of participation without power, whereby a product launch is merely a public invitation to occupy a future developed in a closed research lab (Dean, 2008; Jones & McKelvey, 2024; Palmås & Surber, 2022).

The revolt is a reminder of the ubiquity of communicative capitalism and the discursive power of publicity. If OpenAI exemplifies a certain mode of publicity, the revolt is a critical publication, a refusal to stay silent before yet another much-hyped launch. But in seeking publicity of their own, the revolt of the beta-testers also shows how important publicity is as a media tactic for resistance. The leak, if nothing else, shows that AI's publicity remains a point of contention and struggle.

Inspired by ChatGPT's launch and public ferment around generative AI more generally, our special issue turns to the concepts of publics, publication, and publicity as key concepts for the future of critical AI studies (Bode & Goodlad, 2023; Lindgren, 2023; Raley & Rhee, 2023; Roberge & Castelle, 2021). Our core motivation for this special issue has been to understand the social shaping of AI through its various modes of being brought to public attention (Barney, 2014; Marres, 2005). Historically, technologies have been important "material things" that serve as "crucial tools or props for the performance of public involvement in an issue" (Marres, 2010, p. 179). Generative AI today is precisely a shift in the "material and infrastructural conditions that give rise to publics and sustain their dynamics" (Ananny, 2024, p. 92).

What distinguishes AI studies now from pre-generative AI is mostly a matter of publicity. Generative AI is a uniquely public technology (McKelvey, 2022; McKelvey & Hunt, 2023). Technologies include OpenAI's GPT as well as numerous text-to-image generation software programs such as DALL-E and Stable Diffusion. All these tools have been released to the public for free use, or at least until their commercial equivalents are launched (Fingas, 2023). Three key traits unite GenAI:

1. a reliance on massive data sets largely collected from public data sources (e.g., the entire Internet) under dubious interpretations of fair dealing and fair use (Ferrari et al., 2023);
2. open feature sets that mimic common sense and human judgement (Natale, 2021); and
3. ease of access and use or public availability (Widder et al., 2024).

AI, in short, has been greenlit, and so it's here where we find ourselves: in public.

Generative AI, however, challenges our theories of publics and publicity. Historically, these relations have been mediated by the press (Schudson, 2008), but GenAI's arrival coincides with a destabilized media industry (Callison & Young, 2020; Curran, 2019), increasingly bypassed by mass-personal relations as in the case of ChatGPT's public launch (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Gehl & Lawson, 2022). These relations are increasingly called into question as the scholarship reconciles with its overemphasis on active participation (e.g., posting or reacting) at the expense of more passive forms like listening, which are harder to measure (Ruess et al., 2021, p. 1507). Dean's warning seems ever more prescient:

> The fantasy of abundance covers over the way facts and opinions, images and reactions circulate in a massive stream of content, losing their specificity and merging with and into the data flow. Any given message is thus a contribution to this ever-circulating content. (Dean, 2008, p. 58)

At a time when people are falling in love with chatbots (Rambukkana, 2021), the Internet has zombified into its own simulacra (Koebler, 2024), and there is a growing expectation to always be posting (Marwick, 2013), why does publicity even matter (cf. Couldry, 2022)?

We argue that publicity matters because the production of hype and its associated publicities *is* a strategy to maintain power and direct policy and political responses. As detailed by Clea Bourne, promotional culture is a central component of the AI value chain linking investment markets, consumer markets, and the state. This chain is facilitated by the

> tech sector's capture of global knowledge apparatuses and modes of publication. This capture now incorporates control over digital media infrastructure and over promotional culture which funds that infrastructure, on into investment markets where, currently, tech companies dominate private equity investment portfolios as well as many of the world's major stock exchanges. (2024, p. 765)

Now media participation is more what Eeva Luhtakallio and Taina Meriluoto call a fame-based public sphere where the "quest for maximum visibility overrides the civic virtues of debating between equals and placing the collective before the individual" (2024, p. 335). Chasing the next status update seems precisely the kind of hype that Silicon Valley firms cultivate in their colonization of technological fantasies (Frase, 2016; Roberts & Hogan, 2019). Hype, however, is just one way to consider power and publicities. Our special issue gathers an incisive set of scholars to question AI's publicities.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

Our introduction aims to situate the special issue's contributions as best as we can. We find inspiration from Mike Ananny who argues that generative AI is: "simultaneously (1) an object of public concern—a thing that demands collective oversight—and (2) an agent in public life—a semi-autonomous system with the power to mimic, engage, and structure the messages and rituals meant to care for collective life" (2024, p. 90). Our introduction takes on both sides, first looking at how AI has become, problematically, is an object of public concern and, second, at how AI's publicity offers specific scripts of public participation. These two default options situate our authors' contributions as ways of thinking through AI's many publicities.

Hype, scandal, inevitability, and silence: AI as an object of publicity

The discourse around AI is capacious enough to train its own large language model (for some examples, see: Bunz & Braghieri, 2022; Dandurand et al., 2023; Köstler & Ossewaarde, 2022; Nguyen & Hekman, 2022; Ulnicane et al., 2021). AI discourse, we argue, generally draws on four frames: hype, scandal, inevitability, or silence (Brennen, 2018, 2018; Sun et al., 2020), with the most prominent being hype (Ananny & Finn, 2020; Bourne, 2024; Roberge et al., 2020).

Hype is part of a long history of the technological sublime (Carey & Quirk, 1970; Mosco, 2004). AI builds on established ideas like the "fourth industrial revolution" and "disruption" that function as self-fulfilling prophecies. The economically fragile institution of journalism has largely fallen for this mode, due to the complexities of translating facts about these technologies to the public and the consolidation of newsrooms increasingly catering to business audiences (Dandurand et al., 2023). The consequence is that these technologies almost always arrive as good news in journalistic accounts. The launch of ChatGPT embodied the hype mode, fitting into a well-worn mode of a "normative framework of publicity [that is] drained of its critical value, and convert[ed] from a democratic asset to a democratic liability" (Barney, 2008, p. 92).

Hype, however, is not always positive. What STS scholar Lee Vinsel (2021) describes aptly as "criti-hype" pervades public discourse around generative AI. Past research on AI has shown how legacy media functions in the legitimation of technology futures, most evident in the turn toward AI doomsday theory in reaction to the 2023 Open Letter to Pause AI Experiments. The letter—a public demonstration of concerns—framed months of subsequent media coverage of AI (McKelvey, 2023). Criti-hype often lacks historicity, specifics, or critical analysis. We are of course not Pollyannas regarding the disruptive effects of generative AI tools. However, it is worthwhile to distinguish between forms and formats of AI criticism that inform, educate, and empower the public and those that obfuscate, handwave, or centre the speaker and not the problem at hand. Criti-hype has also enabled ouroboros-like circuits of claims and counter-claims regarding sensationalism, doomerism, and other prominent public affects around generative AI tools (Gebru & Torres, 2024; McKelvey & Roberge, 2023). Resistance to criti-hype does not mean acquiescence to the status quo. As Deleuze quipped, it's "not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons" (1992, p. 4).

Scandals—or what we refer to as perceived proofs of social transgressions—are a pronounced feature of contemporary technological coverage (Lull & Hinerman, 1998; Trottier, 2017). Scandals are a driving force in modern technology governance (Bossetta, 2020). These moments of public outrage result from a mutually reinforcing relationship between newsrooms looking for easy, high-engagement stories and the affordances of social media, largely functioning as a distraction from other tasks (Blanchett et al., 2022; McKelvey et al., 2018). Scandals problematically depend on instinctive moral positions that accentuate Sun-Ha Hong's concept of techno-conservativism that projects the present into the future, and they do not necessarily involve opportunities for public engagement or democratic praxis (Hong, 2020). Without diminishing organized labour's success in raising AI as an issue in Hollywood, the reliance on machine learning as a theft of creative works is a scandalous frame that may eventually box in the movement or at least weaken its bargaining position to a matter of compensation for being included in training data sets.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

The result of these fractured and anemic modes of publicity is a growing sense of *inevitability*. AI discourses are dominated by technology firms, government representatives, AI investors, global management consultancies, and think tanks. Like hype, inevitability advances a political project that nullifies public engagement as unnecessary or public opinion as out of touch (Jones & McKelvey, 2024; Palmås & Surber, 2022). These voices advocate faith in data-driven systems to address social problems while also increasing efficiency and productivity (Amoore et al., 2024; Fourcade & Gordon, 2020). Such discourses are used to reinforce the idea that the increasing use of AI applications across all spheres of life is inevitable, while sidelining or ignoring meaningful engagement with the ways these applications cause harm (Walker 2022).

If not positive, AI coverage is marked by *silences* or, in effect, closures when aspects of AI remain too uncontroversial to report (Suchman, 2023). Some modes of publicity negate public attention, so-called cold controversies. (Callon, 1998; Venturini et al., 2015). Silences are a result of AI's cold controversiality where a presumed consensus prevents the publication of dissent and debate (Dandurand et al., 2023). National imaginaries of AI that presume the technologies' geopolitical and economic importance legitimate these silences becoming an unspoken inevitability (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2021).

These default modes of publicities undermine public agency and democracy, cultivating a permissive fear. The narrative of fear led to a stock market spike, with the "AI boom" being credited as fuelling the best first quarter world stocks had seen in five years (Steer et al. 2024). The investment boom was driven by industry players like Morgan Stanley positioning AI as having a "breakthrough moment" and stressing that investors had an opportunity to tap into a $6 trillion opportunity (Morgan Stanley, 2023). While the generative hype bubble may be deflating in the midst of talk that it may have been overvalued, the harmful effects of AI continue (Widder & Hicks, 2024). As argued by David Widder and Mar Hicks, we can already see the harmful effects of the latest AI information cycle. This can be seen in wages and salaries stagnating or decreasing in response to threats of being replaced by AI. Countries around the world are building new fossil fuel–based power plants and delaying the phasing out of coal to meet the anticipated needs of AI (Volcovici et al., 2024). Researchers are detailing the implications of GenAI for our information ecosystems, raising concerns about how content pollution will affect people and society (Mitra et al., 2024). Awareness of these concerns and many of the limits of generative AI pre-date the launch of Chat GPT (Bender et al., 2021), leading scholars to wonder:

> [W]hat if the hype was always meant to fail? What if the point was to hype things up, get in, make a profit, and entrench infrastructure dependencies before critique, or reality, had a chance to catch up? (Widder and Hicks 2024)

This proposition builds on recognition of the multifaceted ways that AI hype is embedded within tech sector business models and venture capital strategies and facilitated through global communicative infrastructure. To consider AI ethics, argues Bourne (2024), requires examining promotional ethics and critical investigation of "the processes used to drive hype cycles" so that we might develop better strategies to resist them (2024, p. 765).

These modes of publicity emphasis the legacy media's role co-shaping AI's attending discourse, but what about the technology itself? How has GenAI been made available to the public? AI's publicity also involves how the technology is enrolled in acts of public participation like the spectacular failure of Microsoft's Tay AI (Neff & Nagy, 2016). These mistakes might diminish the power of firms to produce mass public technological demonstrations (Halpern et al., 2017; Rosental, 2021). Like Steve Jobs commanding public attention by pulling a laptop out of a manila envelope, now AI model-makers release new tools like Sora in the hopes of capturing users' attention and public interest. Returning to Ananny's argument that AI is also an agent in public life, we wish to emphasize the consequences of AI directly addressing (or one-step flow relations) publics. Far from an organic relationship, we wish to highlight how technology and technology firms engineer AI's publicities today.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

Engineering publics: Demonstration and direct public relations

Demonstrations are a novel thematic to explore ongoing issues of democratic legitimacy and backsliding associated with technological governance (Halpern & Mitchell, 2022; Rosental, 2021). A demonstration is both "reality and a fiction" that through "emotional work" aims to "control the audience interpretations" (Rosental, 2021, p. 17). Technological firms depend on demonstrations as critical public interventions that shape a global politics of expectations and futures-making. AI functions as what Morgan Ames calls a charismatic technology that "promises to transform its users' sociotechnical experience" (Ames, 2019, p. 11). Even talking about generative AI seems caught in its own charismatic future, and its precisely these kinds of engineered public relations that allow for publics to access AI that we wish to call attention to, the demonstration.

AI is marked by a faith in public demonstration. Consider the unicorn AI firm of the European Union, Mistral. To test its latest large language model, Mistral AI released it to the public, free and uncensored, just as all G7 members ranked disinformation as the top threat posed by GenAI. The firm, one of Europe's top AI start-ups, explained that the model "does not have any moderation mechanism. We're looking forward to engaging with the community on ways to make the model respect guardrails, allowing for deployment in environments requiring moderated outputs" (Maiberg, 2023). Mistral's "open source" approach, shared by many in the AI industry, is a profound shift in building trustworthy technology, indeed a shift in the production of trust itself.

Demonstrations have their own social power. Generative AI, in less than eight months, has prompted a wholesale re-evaluation of labour, education, and government, requiring rapid revision of AI legislation years in the making. Even OpenAI CEO Sam Altman admitted the risks of relying on demos to market AI. In a recent keynote, Altman explains: "One of the strange things about these technologies is that they are impressive but not robust . . . so you use them in the first demo; you have this [impressive reaction]. But [after a hundred times], you see the weaknesses" (Kahn, 2023). His admission encapsulates another of our issue's goals: to critically investigate the power of the demonstration as a matter of governance, media systems, and trust. Despite the global influence of demonstrations and charismatic technologies, traditional civic epistemologies struggle to counteract the bias and political economic pressures behind them. From OpenAI's ChatGPT to Apple's latest VR, large technology firms and consultancy firms are adept at demos and demoing that steers collective future-making whereas democratic institutions and publics increasingly lack similar capacities to demonstrate plausible, desirable futures.

New directions in critical studies of AI's publicities

Our special issue collects new directions in the study of AI's publicities. Across these pieces, the authors have made suggestions for various interventions or reflections on critical practices, such as community engagement and mobilization, futures literacy, or capacity building, in the cause of decentering the strategic futures-making by large technology firms. Our call asked for three broad themes:

- Critical and comparative studies of AI's publicities with regards to the launch and hype of AI. We particularly welcome papers that focus on cases outside the Global North;
- Ethnographic, discursive, or engaged research with AI's public such as AutoGPT, HustleGPT, or other publics forming around the use, misuse or resistance to GPAI;
- Interventions or reflections on critical practices, such as community engagement and mobilization, futures literacy, or capacity building, for better publicizations of AI de-centering the strategic futuring employed by large technology firms.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

From these broad openings, contributions clustered around four key themes:

1. situating the legacy media as an enduring process of legitimation;
2. looking at the ways that AI has a private life in public;
3. questioning the post-democratic future of public participation; and,
4. developing new prototypes of public participation through research creation.

These themes and their contributions offer novel approaches to advance the relationship between AI and public theory in this special issue and hopefully for special issues to come.

First, AI's publicities can be attended to through a renewed interest in legacy media's legitimation function. Legitimation, in turn, concerns how coverage frames the situation, in effect, cocreating affected subjectivities as stories and emotion. Is an individual's perception of ChatGPT's outputs an exception to the norm? Journalism has an important function as a reflexive apparatus in the legitimation of publics and affects. The reflexive apparatus is increasingly important in technologically affected publics isolated by time and space from their peers (McKelvey, 2014, 2018). Turmoil in media systems offers a renewed opportunity to consider globally the place of the press in the controversies (or lack thereof) around generative AI. At first glance, generative AI has marked a moment of growing acknowledgement of AI's risks.

Lensa, the subject of Kate Miltner's contribution, offers a good example of how to study AI's publicities through thematic media analysis. Lensa was one of the earliest apps to integrate generative AI image functions, allowing its users to create new profile pictures. Given the biases in its underlying model (Stable Diffusion), the app was an important moment in how the press legitimated the model's functionalities as either structural biases or accidental hallucinations. Miltner finds that coverage presented the model's harms as another example of "just the way things are," nurturing a culture of political resignation around these technologies' social harms. These findings are not surprising; rather, they contribute to what Callison and Young (2020) call journalism's reckoning, where the field must better account for its functions and limits and, in this case, its responsibilities to its publics.

Studying the media's legitimation function for AI extends beyond AI as a tool. The *New York Times*, as well as most major news outlets in Canada, has broken with its peers and sued OpenAI rather than licensing its content. The legal case best encapsulates the existential challenge generative AI presents to journalism. More structurally, if journalism has been a tool to produce audiences for advertisers, then the ad-supported ecosystem seems largely indifferent to the content of the news, AI-generated or not (Braun & Eklund, 2019). Court cases punctuate the need to restate the value of news as something other than content for AI engines. Here the press, along with other creative industries, becomes one of the few places capable of contesting the economic narrative of AI as the foundation of a beneficent industrial revolution.

A second facet of AI's publicities attends to AI's mass-personal publicities beyond the demonstration. Noortje Marres (2010) highlighted how individual encounters with technology could become the basis for public awareness—an energy efficiency rating on an appliance becomes a potential link to an environmental movement. Without overstating that possibility, a second avenue considers how AI technology actively participates in its own sense making. Mike Ananny writes, "GenAI's distinct public quality comes from its capacity to participate in shaping the very conversations that might hold it accountable" (Ananny, 2024, p. 90). AI's hyperproduction becomes the possibility for its outputs to exceed the parameters set in a demonstration mode (Ferrari & McKelvey, 2022). Much of the work of firms like OpenAI is to manage such generative hyperproduction, channeling its excessive outputs into plausible corporate futures, or what Sun-Ha Hong (2021) calls a techno future of conservatism that preserves the present order into the future. Can we look, following Ananny (2023), for failures or other ways to think about how AI becomes public through less intentional means than the demo?

These moments have grown along with a demonstration society that has largely let publics experiment with their own limited AI futures. The challenge of the demo, as discussed above, remains the ways that

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v6i440453

its procedural rhetorics and charismatic functions frame the technological encounter. Etienne Grenier and Nicolas Chartier-Edwards in their contribution delve into perhaps the darkest of AI un-publicities, AI-powered hiring practices, to consider how a deeper political economy primes the early encounter with AI. Their attention to corporate storytelling and user experience helps render new publicities sought to be outdone by public relations. Scholarship here returns to Stuart Hall's "conjuncture" to describe the new public formations in process. Fabian Offert, by contrast, takes a more considered study of racialized encounters with Stable Diffusion's feature space, when immediate personal discomfort becomes a bug to be fixed rather than a moment to reckon with the "whiteness" of visual culture itself.

Building on feminist standpoint theory's emphasis on the sites of marginalization, future studies could show how labour, particularly precarious labour, is an important moment in AI's publicities. These moments when AI is one's boss or coworker form a public encounter that has been cultivated to arrive as normal on arrival. Such an approach rejects what easily could be another largely consumer-oriented focus on AI's impacts—perhaps a legacy of past research into network neutrality that let consumer entitlement stand in for calls for a right to access a technology. Publics do form around these moments—like "Batterygate" when researchers and publics discovered that Apple slowed down older phones (Shi, 2018). These moments can almost feel nostalgic under the modern YouTube hustle aesthetic, where learning is part of a pyramid scheme to unlock passive income. Labour is perhaps a more productive site of study than questioning the publics tagged in the next #GPTHustle.

A third approach to AI's publicities could make the link more directly and question AI's role in post-democratic public participation. How does the rhetoric of participation indicate the ubiquity of information feudalism and a new courtly mode of politics for this new AI-generated spirit of laws? Our special issue is an artefact of a moment of uncertainty about publicity more broadly. Traditionally, media systems have been considered crucial to public participation, and yet artificial intelligence compounds an ongoing legitimacy crisis. Amidst widespread democratic backsliding, increasingly global success for right wing cryptopolitics, and the popularity of right-wing AI death cults, perhaps the time to look for the public sphere has passed. In its stead, we can turn toward how the speculation functions of generative AI enable new modes of dark participation—a kind of inverse Roko's basilisk where we look at how current society has oriented itself around the coming of an AI superintelligence. Though only adjacent to political communication, the problem of post-democratic public participation involves a similar suspension of traditional norms in publics theory to comprehend the productive fantasies of generative AI when "democracy itself" has become "a contested value" (Knüpfer et al., 2024, p. 1011).

Many of the articles in our special issue take up AI's publicities as public drama. In their contribution, Xerxes Minocher considers the drama in and among Go players in reaction to AI "solving" the famously complex game. The drama, which happened largely outside the mainstream press, entailed critical imagination of AI's use and a moment of reconstruction. Alison Powell and Fenwick McKelvey reflect on doing critical policy work now. Where the field of critical policy studies is turning to AI (Paul, 2022), at a time of widespread consultation theatre. Their efforts cut against the policy sciences tradition of evidence-based decision making to instead question the preconstituted roles to be played in the drama of AI governance. Sun-Ha Hong's contribution similarly considers the drama of GenAI that advances our earlier discussion of demonstrations and the engineered public relations. What Hong abduction "serves strategic objectives for shaping the terms of the AI conversation in favour of the incumbent tech elites," and, in so doing, calling into questions the assumptions about public debate as a means to democratic participation. Finally, Gwendolyn Blue and Mél Hogan interrogate how scientists act out their responsibilities through declarations of principles that maintain the self-regulation of AI by letting the symbolic role of principles ensure that only experts are empowered to participate. Drama, in its many forms, offers a third facet to investigate AI publicities by reformulating what counts as public participation.

A final mode of publicity draws on the research creation tradition to experiment with new prototypes for public participation with and through generative AI. Our contributions join growing calls for a

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renewed strategies of participation in an age of AI (Gourlet et al., 2024; Marres, 2024). Crystal Chokshi contributes exactly such a piece through the creation of an interface that presents its users with the climate impacts of generative AI. Here we can end on a more hopeful note. With ample evidence of the limitations of AI's publicities, how might scholarship endure as a site of experimentation, indeed, as a demonstration of the importance of the public to societies invested in rendering them as merely a surplus population?

These articles advance how critical AI studies must address the publicity inherent in generative AI. The challenge is two-fold, then, to not only diagnose the current modes of AI's publicities but to consider alternative and normative futures for our public media systems. To get *there*, however, we must first attend to AI today. These efforts are the beginning of a renewal of public theory around generative AI and the broader democratic downturn, a small turn in the opposite direction of this downward spiral undoing the demos (Brown, 2015).

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