Transcript

Live from Toronto Tech Week: Democracy and AI

[00:00:00] **Sabreena Delhon:** Okay, I'm going to start with a bit of a personal question before we dig into the, you know, more challenging things. And maybe this is challenging too actually. In one word, what's your gut feeling about AI right now? Just give me one emotion.

[00:14:07] **Ana Brandusescu:** Skeptical and tired. I'm just gonna do two.

[00:00:20] **Beatrice Wayne:** I'm gonna say curious. When you say gut feeling, that curiosity is sort of tempered by the feeling that the rhetoric around AI brings me, which is a feeling of stress.

[00:00:33] **Anatoliy Gruzd:** You know, AI has that dual nature, dual purpose, and I too have these two words. So excited was the first one that came to mind because I like to play with data. I'm a data geek, so AI tools really help me to do that better and faster. But I'm also concerned for democracy and we'll, I'm sure get, we'll get into that too because on the research side, we're looking at dis and misinformation and how generative AI is being used to create and spread some of that malicious content, and I'm concerned how bad actors can weaponize that.

[00:01:17] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hi, I'm Sabreena Delhon. Welcome to Group Chat, where we make sense of what's happening in our democracy with a few friends

[00:01:24] **Anatoliy Gruzd (Clip):** ...and broader implications. So I think, yeah, we have to step back and say what AI we're actually talking about. Yesterday at Toronto Metropolitan we had this similar discussion about...

[00:01:34] **Sabreena Delhon:** Last month, the Samara Centre for Democracy hosted our first Toronto Tech Week event. We brought together a group of experts to tackle one of the biggest questions of our time: How is AI affecting our democracy? As you heard off the top, there are no simple answers, and there are conflicting feelings all around.

[00:01:56] Our conversation touches on power, privacy, labor, misinformation, and the trade-offs we're already making, whether we realize it or not. We talk about how democracy is meant to be messy and what's lost when AI is designed to make everything frictionless. Our panel included Ana Brandusescu, a PhD candidate from McGill University who examines the scale of AI governance.

[00:02:27] Our very own Beatrice Wayne, Director of Research and Policy at the Samara Centre, and Anatoliy Gruzd, a professor at Toronto Metropolitan University's Ted Rogers School of Management and Director of Research at TMU's Social Media Lab. Here's our conversation:

[00:02:51] **Sabreena Delhon:** So discussions about AI are often about what's going to happen in the future, but AI is shaping our democratic culture right now. So what do we need to be talking about in this moment when it comes to AI and democracy? Ana, do you want to start us off?

[00:03:08] **Ana Brandusescu:** Yeah, sure. So I have, I think, three points I'd want to make. First, I'm concerned about what happens across scales simultaneously with AI. So we just published a research on geographical scale, in AI governance that looks at supernational, national, and subnational scales, specifically at resources. You know, where do more resources for AI governance go?

[00:03:34] Usually at the international global levels, national levels. What does it mean for participation, and what does it mean for accountability, which I really think is key for a strong democracy. And then two, I really think an important part of what we should look at right now and what I'm skeptical and concerned and tired about are the dependence on companies over our personal and professional lives.

[00:03:58] So we see this proliferate with OpenAI and ChatGPT over the last three years, but also with Microsoft and Copilot, which we talk less about. And then I think this is a good segue to the third concern: the shift from governance of AI to governance by AI. So with companies like Microsoft and others, we've moved from machine learning and other, you know, classic forms of AI to generative AI.

[00:04:27] And with that has come, we're not just using ChatGPT for personal endeavors, but Copilot across all of our different tasks that we do in our daily jobs. And that would mean that, you know, at the very worst case scenario, we no longer think for ourselves. We're not going to make vital policy decisions. We're just gonna run everything through a large language model. And slowly our thoughts and ideas will, you know, be replaced by anodyne impersonal solutions. And it will be such a subtle, slow shift that we would not even notice.

[00:05:01] **Sabreena Delhon:**Beatrice?

[00:05:03] **Beatrice Wayne:** So, I'll come at this question from the democracy angle. At the Samara Centre for Democracy, we really take the position that an informed citizenry is crucial to a healthy democracy, and that trust in institutions are also crucial to a healthy democracy.

[00:05:21] And the issue right now, when we're talking about current issues with artificial intelligence technologies in Canada, is that we have a deeply polluted information ecosystem. And right now, generative AI technologies are facilitating that. So existing harms are now being spread further, faster, wider through generative AI technologies because they're so easy to use and implement.

[00:05:44] And so we know bad actors are using that to spread disinformation at scale. We've tracked and looked at disinformation on YouTube, these sort of faceless AI-narrated videos that spread election denial election fraud stories, separatist content in Alberta, which has also been documented by other organizations and the CBC.

[00:06:08] We've seen that YouTube has been completely ineffective at squashing this content. It gets hundreds of thousands of views and continues to spread disinformation. We've also seen, back in 2023, we had a project called SAMbot, where we tracked online abuse directed at candidates across levels of government. So municipal elections as well as federal elections at a very, like, local scale and at the highest levels of office.

[00:06:33] And we saw online abuse was endemic across all of these levels. But we also saw in 2023, in the Alberta provincial election, signs of astroturfing and bot activity, and we know that that has only become far easier with the more readily available technology that is only getting more sophisticated day by day.

[00:06:52] And so we really have to grapple with what that means for having a shared reality across Canada. What it means for our information ecosystem. What it means for our institutions. It's also a concern that our elected officials are looking online, seeing this, and then adapting their policy positions based on inauthentic engagement. That's a really big concern for our democracy, and that is something that current AI technologies is facilitating.

[00:07:21] **Anatoliy Gruzd:** So maybe I'll start with just some data points based on a recent survey we did with Canadians coast to coast. And so we asked 1,500 Canadians, “Have you tried, have you experimented with gen AI tools?”

[00:07:34] And two-thirds of our population said yes. It's quite a large number if you think about new technology. Usually you think about, like, early adapters may be one-third of people. But, to Ana's point earlier, what we discovered is that half of people who tried it, they use it for study, for work, for entertainment.

[00:07:52] So it's not, technology is not used for one task, but across all of the tasks. And so I'm also concerned in the context of organizational use or adoption of these technologies because whatever the tools organization uses will most likely, be based on our data, will be used for looking up health related, you know, questions, personal entertainment questions.

[00:08:13] So essentially, the concern would be data privacy in this particular regard, and the policy is not really accounting for this multi-use of this technology. So that would be something for us to consider going forward.

[00:08:26] **Sabreena Delhon:** So, Anatoliy, I wanna pick up on how people are using this technology for such a wide range of tasks and, you know, we hear that, you know, there's so many technologies that fall under the term AI. It covers such a vast range. So we perceive them as, or regard them publicly as one tool. So there's Grok, ChatGPT, wearable tech. Does it help or does it harm public understanding of AI to talk about it under such a large umbrella?

[00:08:56] **Anatoliy Gruzd:** Well, it helps the industry for sure. It's a buzzword. It's like that big data. It helps to sell products. It doesn't help us to understand what this product is about and broader implications. So I think we have to step back and say what AI we're actually talking about. Yesterday at Toronto Metropolitan we had a similar discussion about what is trustworthy AI, and we had a set of speakers that came from different areas. One was talking about AI in medicine. Another person was talking about AI and demographic studies. And so we have to kind of clarify every time we are answered each question saying, "Well, I'm actually coming from social media research, and when I say AI, I was mostly thinking about generative AI."

[00:09:37] So, I think the first thing somebody talks to you about AI, ask them what kind of AI are you talking about. Are you talking about more traditional predictive models? So the models that are kind of trained on previous observations and they, you know, predict certain outcomes, like predict whether the stock market will go up or down. Predicts, or assigns a likelihood how likely a particular email is a spam, or looking at the images will tell you how likely the, those images represents cancerous cells.

[00:10:05] So those are more traditional machine learning models, and those are AI. But nowadays, most people will think about AI as what they see online, on their computers, on their mobile devices, devices with generative AI. It generates, it learns from the data, but in a way that it learns mostly unstructured data, learns property of the data to generate something new.

[00:10:28] Could be new text, new image, new video, and audio. But what also is happening recently, it's kind of going full circle now, you have generative AI models generating programs, scripts, and apps, or just kind of some data modules that then relies on traditional machine learning to find an answer, and then traditional machine learning produces a likelihood of certain events happening, and then back to generative AI models that will summarize in natural language what that output is. And so it is interesting. So it does make it harder for us consumers of these products to say what actually we are talking about.

[00:11:06] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, and on the consumer experience, headlines and marketing of AI is often about how it's gonna liberate us from drudgery and give us so much free time. But there are also very serious concerns about its effect on Canadian jobs. So Ana, what are your thoughts about the relationship between AI, labor, and democracy?

[00:11:27] **Ana Brandusescu:** Yeah, thanks for that. I think, you know, I mean, I have many thoughts, and I've thought about this for a long time, and I'll start with a sort of very multi-year promise of AI freeing us from boring tasks, and so we can do more creative work.

[00:11:42] But the irony is that when generative AI proliferated, the creative industry were the ones who were affected the most. And they really did suffer. And they continue to suffer. And I think over the last three years, we have seen an evolution from calling it just generative AI to AI art to AI slop. And now other sectors have followed.

[00:12:04] I think you all know that Meta last week, laid off or is planning to lay off 8,000 workers. This is Toronto Tech Week, so you know, I can list you a few more statistics from Amazon last year have laid off 30,000 workers. Pinterest laid off 15% of their workforce to reallocate funds to AI initiatives.

[00:12:25] And I think what I really wanna bring in, which is beyond Canadian jobs, but it does affect Canadian jobs because AI is transjurisdictional, and the global supply chain is always going to be global, no matter how much we wanna talk about digital sovereignty, and maybe later in this panel we can talk about that a little bit.

[00:12:45] What we don't see or talk about often in these rooms at all is the toll that content moderators take for making AI better for the rest of us. And the story of how I got to know about this, you know, these harms of these workers who were moderating social media platforms back in 2017 and 2018 was when I was working at the Web Foundation, and my ex-colleague, Nanjira Sambuli, would point out the way that tech intermediaries from Silicon Valley, like Sama, it was called SamaSource then, would work with Facebook to underpay their workers.

[00:13:20] Over time, there were exposés that were made, in TIME magazine. You can read those by Billy Perrigo against Facebook, OpenAI, and TikTok. So a few years ago, when generative AI came out, I realized what LLMs are doing is that we're not just traumatizing workers with original images or words that we input in on these different social media platforms or just platforms now.

[00:13:48] But now anything that's generated that's synthetic data can also cause a kind of harm as all of these workers and really AI researchers sift through this data. And I wanna say AI researchers because sometimes they're just called moderator works, but they are improving this tech, and it also makes it real to us that AI is not just machines.

[00:14:12] It's really people that are making it better, and it's always kind of been people. And, I think the last part I wanna say to that is that last year, the Global Trade Union Alliance of Content Moderators was created for, you know, having workers organize more, and you have that globally, but also the Writers Guild of America has really showed a prominent example of how to push back against executives making decisions and deciding, you know, what kinda AI we want and what kinda AI we don't. And that was, you know, a successful heartwarming conclusion to some of these battles.

[00:14:52] **Beatrice Wayne:** Can I build off of that just really quickly? Just on the question of AI and labour and building off sort of good news stories, just recently the IT workers of the University of California system, which is an enormous university system across California, many, many different institutions, are unionizing and coming together and basically making the case that these, these are the people who understand the systems better than anyone else.

[00:15:18] They're on the ground doing the work, understand what these technologies can do, should do, and shouldn't do, and they should have a voice at the table in terms of AI governance. And I think that's a really interesting argument, and something that we could explore and look to the future.

[00:15:32] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, it wasn't that long ago that the story of AI was a story of democratization. So Beatrice can you, you know, build on that and tell us a bit more about how the technical and the political are intertwined?

[00:15:48] **Beatrice Wayne:** It's interesting because I think a lot of the argument in terms of the pro-democracy side of AI has centered around capacity building. And with everything, like removing friction will allow you organizations to do more to support democracy.

[00:16:05] It will help with capacity. It will just make every - again, this drudgery argument - make everything easier. But something I've been really interested in for a long time, and has existed as a technology for a long time, is machine learning bridge-building algorithms that help support deliberative human processes.

[00:16:24] So Polis, which some of you may be familiar with, has existed since 2012. It's been open source since 2016, and it has been usefully incorporated into deliberative processes, most famously in Taiwan as a sort of crucial policymaking tool that helps, you know, source really great ideas through a platform that identifies consensus across people, good ideas that, you know, people who have different points of view, disagreements, but they can find areas of commonality, help bring those to the forefront, and then focus on those in terms of policy.

[00:17:02] This is an exciting use of machine learning that can really support human-centered decision-making. But it hasn't been, and it depends on the circles you're in, but I think mostly, it hasn't been widely embraced as this great potential of AI to help facilitate the sort of political decision-making I think because it is not lucrative. It's not money-making. It's open source. It's quite easy to adapt and we can use it in all sorts of exciting ways. It's endlessly adaptable. But when we talk about the potential for AI, these sort of platforms often fall out of the conversation, and it makes me wonder why.

[00:17:45] **Sabreena Delhon:** There's a bit of setup to this question. There's a bit of a story here that's very Canadian. So last fall, the government of Canada took 30 whole days to collect input from across the country to inform Canada's AI strategy, and many Canadians took issue with that consultation process, including us. The Samara Centre was among over 160 signatories on a joint letter to the Ministers of Industry, as well as Artificial Intelligence and Digital Innovation, so Mélanie Joly and Evan Solomon respectively. Ana, you were one of the signatories on this letter too. Why did you sign it?

[00:18:22] **Ana Brandusescu:** I was, and before I answer that question, I think I want to say this is where my word tired came from at the beginning. So I can answer that in full now. I signed it because I was disappointed. So to see this new launch without anyone's consultation, anyone deciding, and when I said anyone, it's just, you know, Innovation Science Economic Development Canada doing what ISED does best, which is just consulting its own network.

[00:18:50] And so, when that letter came out, it was just really a collective public disappointment for us to put into words about how, you know, they really should take their time with this consultation and not make it a sprint. I mean, it goes along with the let's move fast and break things, let's just do a 30-day sprint quickly.

[00:19:10] And, and the problem with the way that Ministry work started, they used LLMs, not just one but five to summarize the consultations that were done with the expert group, the AI task force that was done. They had over 1,000 responses from, you know, quote unquote Canadians. But they, again, just didn't take the time to read people's comments and thoughts.

[00:19:40] They just ran it through, again, five different LLMs. And so with that, I think it was really good to have the people's consultation on AI start by digital rights lawyer Cynthia Khoo. So that was you know, after she led some of the work around this letter, she decided to start, you know, a different version of this consultation. One that was slower.

[00:20:01] It took four months. We could take the time. There were micro-consultations that were done. I was in part of one, submitting a response with the Tech Workers Coalition of Canada and the Technologists for Democracy, where we looked at workplace surveillance, surveillance pricing, and all of these other aspects of, you know, where this technology is going well and where it isn't. And like, where the policy gaps, regulatory gaps are and what needs to be matched.

[00:20:30] And I think that kind of organizing and getting together are important, especially in this room. If there are a lot of tech workers here you know, I can connect you to Tech Workers Coalition Canada. They're doing some really great

work with people in industry. I'm not in the industry, but it was really great to see them organize and, and start talking about what union forming looks like.

[00:20:52] **Beatrice Wayne:** On the value of public consultation, I'm a member of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Open Government. So this is a group of civil society people that help advise the federal government on open government priorities, so transparency, accountability, participation. And they have this national action plan, which is where departments create commitments.

[00:21:12] "We're gonna do this to help increase transparency, to help increase participation." And they produce this open national action plan that the public can give feedback on. They recently published their most recent plan, and part of that is developing a government AI registry. Now, it is a little bit concerning that that doesn't already exist, but they have responded to public feedback and, in fact, civil society organizations trying to do this work to track where the government is using AI in the public service, and now they're creating their own registry.

[00:21:44] But in terms of why public consultation is so important, they created this commitment. Then, based on public consultation, they added in new things that they will be publishing as part of the registry, which includes how they account for bias in LLMs, how they have accountability measures built in, so they check on how the AI systems they're using are functioning, who will be accountable if they fail, other forms of monitoring and regulation.

[00:22:13] And this is based on public feedback. So we can really see how it is such a valuable and, in fact, increases efficiency to get this sort of public feedback because it makes these systems better.

[00:22:25] **Sabreena Delhon:** So where does digital media literacy come into all of this? So Anatoliy, how important is it as artificial intelligence technologies continue to evolve and shape our society? How much is public education around this really important?

[00:22:42] **Anatoliy Gruzd:** This example we just talked about how a committee used LLM to summarize public opinions is a great example why we need more digital literacy and now AI literacy. And I'll tell you that, you know, I'm a computational social scientist, and we do use data science to analyze large scale data, opinion data about, you know, public different aspects of it.

[00:23:06] And I would know that AI would essentially show you an average or, or prevalent themes. It will essentially erase margins, outliers. These are the people, opinions whom you actually wanna cater to because they are often overlooked. And so that's a concern for me when I'm hearing stories like this, where a committee would summarize public hearings and you know, letters in that way.

[00:23:31] And that tells me that there is a lack of literacy at this level. But we need to go back to start doing literacy early in schools. And we talk a lot about digital literacy, social media literacy, when we teach people how to use search engines, how to be careful and safe on social media.

[00:23:50] But now we have to move forward and talk about using AI, generative AI tools specifically. And that's a challenge because every time you turn around, there's a new tool, there's a new feature built in, and there's no real option for you to opt in or opt out anyway. You open your Microsoft, your other devices, it's all built in and integrated.

[00:24:11] And so it is a challenge for us as academics as a public organization, public interest organizations. But we need to do the work. We need to educate the public. At the social media lab, we are trying to do some of it. We have a website called deepfakestracker.org, and maybe, you know Beatrice, you can share with the group, where we put different tutorials, different tools, how you can equip yourself a little bit with the skills to recognize what's authentic online, what it's not.

[00:24:41] Essentially, we are at the point that you yourself may not be able to distinguish between a picture that is generated by AI versus authentic because it's so perfectly generated. But you can learn tools to apply a quick digital forensics, to add those browser extensions. You know, you don't need to be a computer scientist to use them, but you need to know that they exist.

[00:25:04] And at least they equip you a little bit better with this decision-making process when you see something next time, a sensational story about one of our politicians or industry, you can quickly check, "Oh, is that actually generated by AI? How likely is it?" There's other sources and I think we need to do more of it. And it cuts across not just, you know, the training, but also the developing the tools that help us to be more informed.

[00:25:31] **Sabreena Delhon:** So, you know, part of this is how the AI conversation is often presented as reducing friction, right? We've talked about how it's gonna free us from drudgery, or it's gonna make this process more easier, that process more easier.

[00:25:44] And it also is about how AI can help smooth the edges in terms of how we engage in our democracy. So when it comes to friction, AI, and democracy, Beatrice, what are your thoughts on that?

[00:25:56] **Beatrice Wayne:** Okay. I'm gonna be really grandiose in my response to this, but I think I am allowed to be because the thought leaders and public figures of AI are frequently grandiose in their discussion and rhetoric of this, so I feel empowered to do that.

[00:26:10] When I think of human technologies, I'm a big fan of friction. It is the basis of the first human technology, fire. And then fire is the basis of humans coming together and congregating and sitting around and discussing and coming to collective decision-making. I would argue that friction and fire is the basis for democracy.

[00:26:35] And I think that, to build on that and be more explicit, people in disagreement with each other, people coming together to talk through disagreements, people coming together to embrace a common sense of humanity and collectivity and feeling empowered that they can make collective decisions, and those collective decisions, not everyone's going to agree on them, but we've agreed that we are agreeing on them, and we are making these decisions together.

[00:26:59] That's crucial, and when we rely on, say, LLMs, specifically chatbots, to remove any comfort with friction, if we become reliant on never encountering friction or disagreement or challenging ideas, then that erodes our ability to engage in democracy. It erodes our ability to come to collective decisions, to have uncomfortable conversations that then change your mind, that make you grow and think differently and come to appreciate your neighbors in new ways. I think friction is crucial for our democracy and that has to be sort of embedded in the way we adapt any AI tools to help support our work.

[00:27:43] **Sabreena Delhon:** So in our conversation today, we've touched on conflict. We've touched on privacy, labour. As we wrap up, what are some pro-democracy solutions that you each would like to see?

[00:27:55] **Ana Brandusescu:** I would really want an increase in public trust, and I think we can do that by building on the friction argument because I really think that friction is dissent, and dissent is a healthy part of a democracy. It really is like we need to get uncomfortable and we need to be able to be here. A part of democracy is me being able to critique politicians.

[00:28:17] I think that's essential and we can't forget it and I feel like in this shift in the US, elsewhere, but also in Canada, let's be honest, we're not seeing that kind of open dissent by people like me anymore, including academics. You know, being pro-democracy means having uncomfortable conversations openly that would lead to constructive solutions because we're addressing the elephants in the rooms that are not getting solved by just being quiet.

[00:28:45] I would argue that's really important and that seamlessness is anti-democracy because it removes people from having a say. It makes everything convenient for us and I've said it years ago, convenience will be the end of us. So we need to embrace the discomfort in the current moment and have this conversation with each other on where AI is going and where AI is now

[00:29:12] **Beatrice Wayne:** I would be excited to use deliberative technologies, which itself is a type of technology and finding ways that we can use AI machine learning technologies to help support deliberative processes to govern AI itself.

[00:29:27] So how can we use these sort of bridge-building algorithms that I mentioned earlier? How can we use digital platforms to help scale and gather more public input, more public consultation. Surface where the Canadian public is at in terms of AI governance, and then help use that to form our policy and really dig in to the sort of public consultations we were talking about earlier.

[00:29:51] **Anatoliy Gruzd:** I would like to see more kind of codification of the idea of where's the human in the loop. So we are deploying AI technology across the board, but I think one of the required questions should be, where's the human in this pipeline? And so let's say when I evaluate my students' work, I ask them to have a section nowadays to describe how they use…well, it used to be, "Have you used generative AI?" But it's no longer the question because I assume students would use generative AI. And so the point has shifted to "How did you use it?" I want to evaluate you properly. I want to evaluate how you're learning, the learning process. Tell me how you use that engagement with the technology, of course, within the constraints of the course.

[00:30:32] Same with the policymakers. When they adopt technology, I want to see where they're placing themself in the loop. Are they just summarizing public opinions and that's it, or do they reflect and find, try to locate biases in some of these answers they're finding from the LLMs?

[00:30:51] **Sabreena Delhon:** We're gonna leave it there for now, and I want to thank Ana, Beatrice, and Anatoliy for such an excellent conversation.

[00:30:57] And I want to thank our audience for coming out in person. This kind of democratic participation and engagement goes very far. And I want to thank our friends at Toronto Tech Week as well. So a round of applause.

[00:31:21] **Sabreena Delhon:** Group Chat is produced by the Samara Centre for Democracy, Canada's leading nonpartisan charity dedicated to strengthening and protecting our democracy. Visit samaracentre.ca to join our mailing list, learn more about our work, and to support it with a donation. Please follow, rate, and review to help spread the word about this show. Thanks for listening