

We Would Not Be Here: Reproduction, Scholarship, and the Rise of Techno-authoritarianism

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Abstract

In this essay, I seek to braid together several ideas related to democracy, academic methodologies, and information technologies, all of which are being used as capital by tech billionaires, and, in partnership with institutions and government, being wielded as means of control. Currently, our reproductive rights are being stripped from us, threatening our very participation in scholarly life, and our students are terrified of authoritarianism at their doorstep. Scholarship has repeatedly shown that technologies are political, and in our current moment of inequality and rising authoritarianism, we should be wary of any promises of technological liberation. The academy, both in its research and teaching, is a pillar of democracy, and it is being threatened on many fronts. Rather than seeking technological solutions, I argue that our research should democratize the production of ideas by bringing in more voices to do the research and telling real human stories that haven't yet been told.

Keywords: Democracy; scholarship; participation; ideas; women.

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First, I'd like to thank everyone for all of the amazing presentations that we've seen and the interesting conversation that we've had so far about democracy, academic methodologies, and information technologies. This essay is an attempt to braid them together, thereby making them all more visible, what American girls call a "Dutch braid". What I'm going to talk about today is related to my research on home pregnancy tests, and there are many here who have contributed a lot to my thinking around these topics. But I will organize this essay around three provocations.

My first provocation: Heterosexual women would not be here in this room if we were pregnant every one to two years since we were teenagers.

I am literally referring to the women in this room. We would not be here. What this means is that our ability to have access to birth control and abortion makes it possible for us to participate in scholarly life. Without control of our reproduction, we would quite literally not be here. If our participation matters to you, this should matter to you.

This actually also relates to my very first conversation with David, which has been a recurring topic. Several people here have talked about their first conversation with David and mine was somewhat similar, although, instead of him asking the question "What do you think about?", it was me asking the question.

It was on admitted students' visiting day, and David was the chair of the department at the time, and everyone started sitting down around the table for dinner. There was a seat to his left, and no one was sitting there, so I had to sit there.

Halfway into the dinner, I turned to him and asked, "What do you think about having children in graduate school?". At the time I was 30 years old, I was an attorney, and I was hoping to change careers and become a researcher. I had also been an excellent contraceptive. But it was an important question for me. Could I be pregnant, have children, and also be successful in this department?

He said, in his very measured David way, "I'll tell you what I tell all my graduate students". And then there was a long pause. "If you want to have children, you absolutely should have them in graduate school because it's much harder when you're an assistant professor". And this, to me, indicated that Columbia was the right choice for me for graduate school, because I knew I had support for my reproductive decisions.

My second provocation relates to my findings about home pregnancy tests and the title of this panel, "Observing Technologies of Observation". There is a role for self-control and self-surveillance, but these technologies can be co-opted and used by others for control. Indeed, they already have.

This week, women across America are stocking up on Plan B and medication abortion, but a lot of women have already lost these rights. My research shows that many women's reproduction has already been controlled in these ways. Poor women, disabled women, Black women, women at the border, young women, have already been surveilled and controlled at all levels of organization. And surveillance of their reproduction has already been used to criminalize and punish them (see, e.g., Robinson, 2020; Morris et al., 2023).

In my research on obstetricians and gynecologists, I have heard that doctors are recommending not to use period tracking apps, and there are some doctors who are not writing down the date of last menstrual period, which is basic medical information, because they're concerned about how it could be used in a criminal proceeding against them or their patients.

Many of you were there when I came to CODES and I did something of a breaching experiment. I brought an unused home pregnancy test, and I passed it around the room to see how everyone would react. It was interesting and hilarious watching everyone's faces as they

handled this test. David has always understood the more radical ideas related to my research, and he has always encouraged them.

I am not alone. He has both mentored numerous female scholars, but he has also been mentored by them. You might not know this, but David's graduate advisor was the eminent political scientist Theda Skocpol, a woman in the academy at a time when very few women were in the academy at all. If Theda Skocpol had been having children every one to two years since she was a teenager, she would not have been at Harvard. And David might not be here in this room, and we might also not be here in this room. So, if women's place in the academy matters to you, if our ideas matter to you, then our own control of our own reproduction should matter to you. We need access to contraception and abortion, and the other option is just abstinence, which is a real option. *Lysistrata* might be necessary, if women want to remain in the academy.

There's a real question about whether white women care. There are a number of white women in my extended family who did not vote the way I did. Professional women who are happy to be the breadwinners of their family, as my research with Greg Eirich (2016) has shown, are not happy doing the double shift. These are college-educated female breadwinners who are also expected to do the cooking, cleaning, and childcare, and that doesn't sit well with them.

The third provocation is something that David asked yesterday, "How can these new technologies be used in a politics of liberation?"

Gina, Pilar, and others have discussed the perilous state of higher education as well as the shift toward corporate control of our ideas and methods, for instance, social network analysis being fully institutionalized by billionaires, whose research we have no access to, and now they're doing the same with AI.

Well, we know what happens if only a few entities have control of the means of production. In this case, the world is shifting toward only a few entities having control of the means of production of *ideas*. If corporate entities have control of the means of production of *ideas*, then they control everything.

Our position is privileged, but it is also critically important. Speaking to our privilege in the academy, and our privilege to be here in this room today, we're very lucky to be here. I speak as a white American woman with no fear of deportation. On Wednesday, a student came to my office after class, and she said, "I'm so sorry that I wasn't paying attention today, and I was looking at my phone". I said, "It's fine, actually... I didn't even notice".

But then her lips started to quiver, and she said, "I was looking at my phone a lot because during class, I was receiving a lot of text messages from my family, terrified of being deported. Some members of my family have no documents, others have DACA, and others are waiting for their green cards. Everyone is terrified". Tears streamed down her face and she said, "I'm terrified, and it was hard for me to pay attention. I just wanted to apologize and say that I did not mean to be disrespectful to you or the class".

So we are very lucky to be here in this room, some of us American and others traversing borders without fear.

As academics, we are not going to be the first ones targeted. As the Europeans in the room know, first they came for the communists.¹ Here in the US, the first ones are likely to be immigrants. And we cannot stay silent while we are in our positions; we need to spend that privilege.

These corporate entities are threats to the academy, but also the constriction of rights is a threat to the academy. The right to learn, the right to think freely, the right to move freely, the

1. This is a reference to a poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller, "First They Came", available on the website of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/>.

right to control your own reproduction, these are all threats to the academy too.

Our research matters. The work we do, the ideas we work on together, can promote democracy by challenging the trend towards monopolization of the production of ideas. What our work should aim to do is *democratize the production of ideas*. Bring more voices in to do the research. Tell real human stories that haven't yet been told. I'm not sure who will be the last ones standing, us or the journalists, but it is our responsibility to do this work as long as we are able.

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