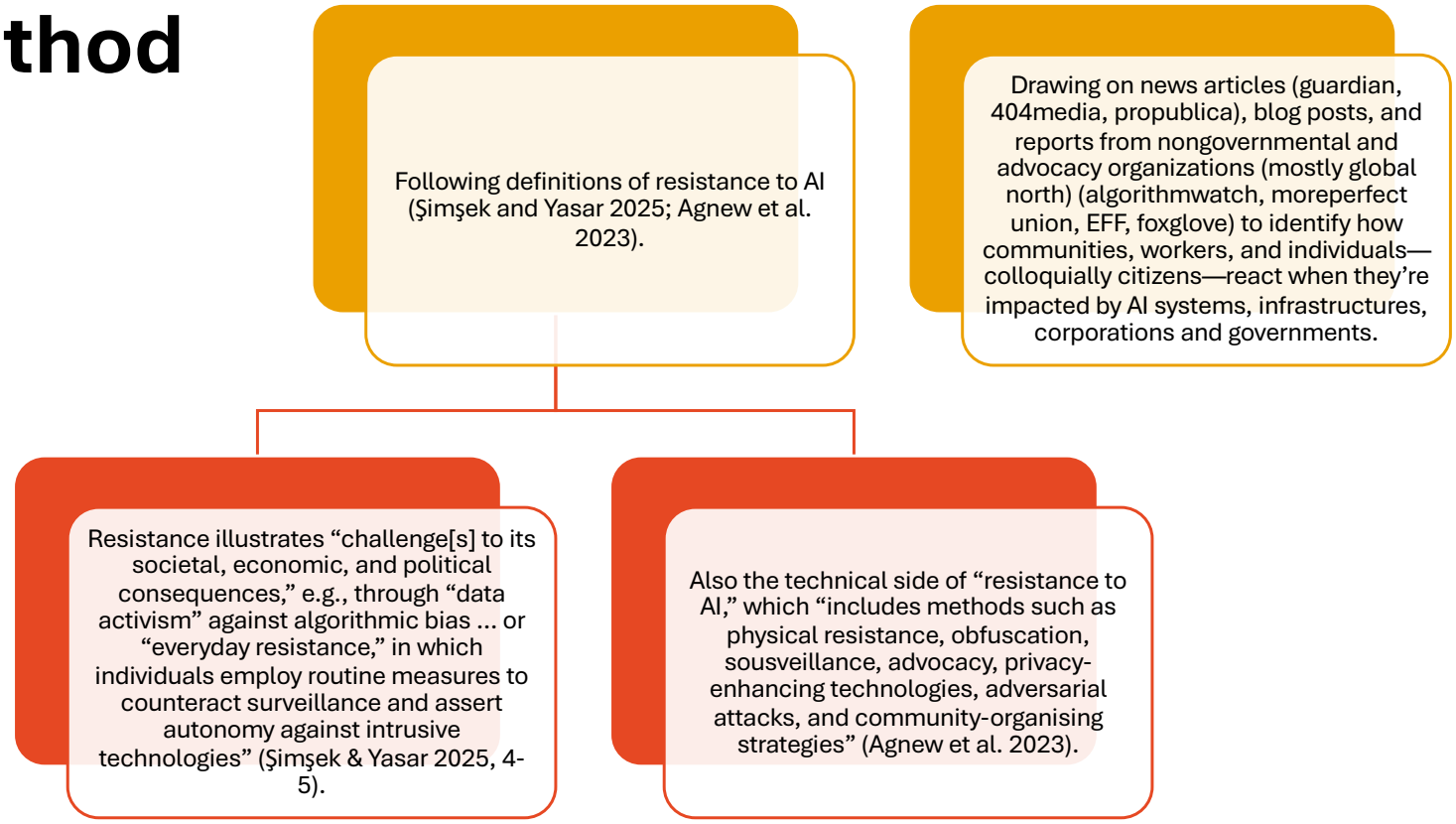
Citizen Resistance to AI

Renée Sieber and Roberta Du

McGill

Justification

Method


Following definitions of resistance to AI (Şimşek and Yasar 2025; Agnew et al. 2023).
Drawing on news articles (guardian, 404media, propublica), blog posts, and reports from nongovernmental and advocacy organizations (mostly global north) (algorithmwatch, moreperfect union, EFF, foxglove) to identify how communities, workers, and individuals—colloquially citizens—react when they're impacted by AI systems, infrastructures, corporations and governments.
Resistance illustrates "challenge[s] to its societal, economic, and political consequences," e.g., through "data activism" against algorithmic bias … or "everyday resistance," in which individuals employ routine measures to counteract surveillance and assert autonomy against intrusive technologies" (Şimşek & Yasar 2025, 4-5).
Also the technical side of "resistance to AI," which "includes methods such as physical resistance, obfuscation, sousveillance, advocacy, privacy-enhancing technologies, adversarial attacks, and community-organising strategies" (Agnew et al. 2023).

Broad Targets of Pushback

AI TECHNOLOGY ITSELF

INFRASTRUCTURE

INSTITUTIONS DEPLOYING THE AI

PRIVATE TECHNOLOGY CORPORATIONS

GOVERNANCE OR STRUCTURES

Motivations driving Citizen Resistance

Lack of transparency: Citizens expressing frustrations over “black box” algorithms producing opaque decision-making processes and not disclosing partnerships.

Right of appeal/legal regime: No clear mechanism to content decisions made by AI systems affecting people's livelihoods. Even when individuals tried, they were sometimes met by pushback.

Lack of collaboration: AI systems were often deployed without any collaborative efforts with those who the systems were intended to work on.

Privacy: Unauthorized data collection and location-data tracking individuals, especially in communities that were already under heightened monitoring.

Environmental concerns: mostly around AI infrastructure, resource-intensive data centres necessary to sustain AI raises many environmental and local health concerns.

Citizen health and wellbeing: negative psychological effects on citizens, from facing AI based decisions, increased surveillance, pollution, job security, or harmful advice given by chatbots.

Biases and social inequity: reinforcement of historical patterns of discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, which systematically and disproportionately harms historically marginalized groups.

Creative rights and compensation: use of creatives work for training AI models without the necessary consent and compensation.

Misinformation and harmful content: deepfakes, or AI generated news undermines public trust in journalism and governance.

Militarization: use of AI for military and policing purposes without sufficient oversight and regulations.

Workers rights: Increasing automation and AI-driven workplace monitoring generates resistance from workers who are worried about job security and labour conditions.

Unnecessary AI deployment: Is there a need for certain AI systems, especially without the necessary safeguards in place.

Taxo-nomy

Method of Resistance	Description	Examples	Key Concerns	Type of AI Targeted
1. Physical Protests	Citizens gather in public spaces to voice opposition to AI	Picketting Palantir outside headquarters; UK students “ditching” the Ofqual algorithm	Militarization, environmental impacts, job security, unjust algorithms	Military AI, data centres, predictive analytics
2. Policy Demands	Collective petitions, letters, and town hall meetings to change regulations regarding AI	San Diegans writing letters to terminate city’s Flock ALPR contract	Privacy, consent, accountability	Automated decision systems and algorithms, surveillance AI
3. Legal Actions	Lawsuits challenging AI	Creatives’ copyright claims, Character.ai lawsuit	IP, consent, compensation, wrongful death	Generative AI, deepfakes
4. Internet Activism	Digital campaigns, voicing concerns on social media	Twitter hashtag campaign #Robodebt; calling out Duolingo on social media	Collective awareness, mobilization	Algorithmic decisions, AI automation
5. Fighting AI with AI	Development and usage of counter-AI tools	Algorithm-free social media; turning facial recognition on police	Autonomy, privacy	Surveillance AI, social media algorithms
6. Mobilization of Advocacy Groups	Creation or refocus of organizations to address harms of AI	Civil liberties groups such as EFF, ACLU of Southern California	Civil rights, digital rights, wellbeing of citizens	Broad range of AI
7. Surveillance Evasion	Individual or collective strategies to avoid surveillance	Invisibility cloaks, umbrellas used a protests, makeup to change lighting on face	Privacy, autonomy	Surveillance AI
8. Boycotting and Divesting	Refusal to engage with companies deploying harmful AI	Divestment campaigns, staying off certain platforms	Ethics, consumer power	Military AI, Generative AI
9. Citizen Science & Awareness	Documenting and publishing harms of AI to spread awareness	Community monitoring of pollution linked to AI infrastructure	Health and wellbeing of citizens, transparency	AI infrastructure, decision algorithms
10. Withholding Labour & Challenging Working Conditions	Worker resistance to adopt AI	Gig workers refusing unfair algorithmic contracts	Labour rights	Gig economy AI, workplace surveillance
11. Joy & comedy (Creatives’ resistance)	Use by artists of irony, sarcasm to oppose AI	Savethe.ai, making ironic stickers, posters; VR game from National Film Board that allows non-experts to envision the trolley problem	Art, mental well-being, laugh to keep from crying	Broad range of AI, data centres

Conclusion

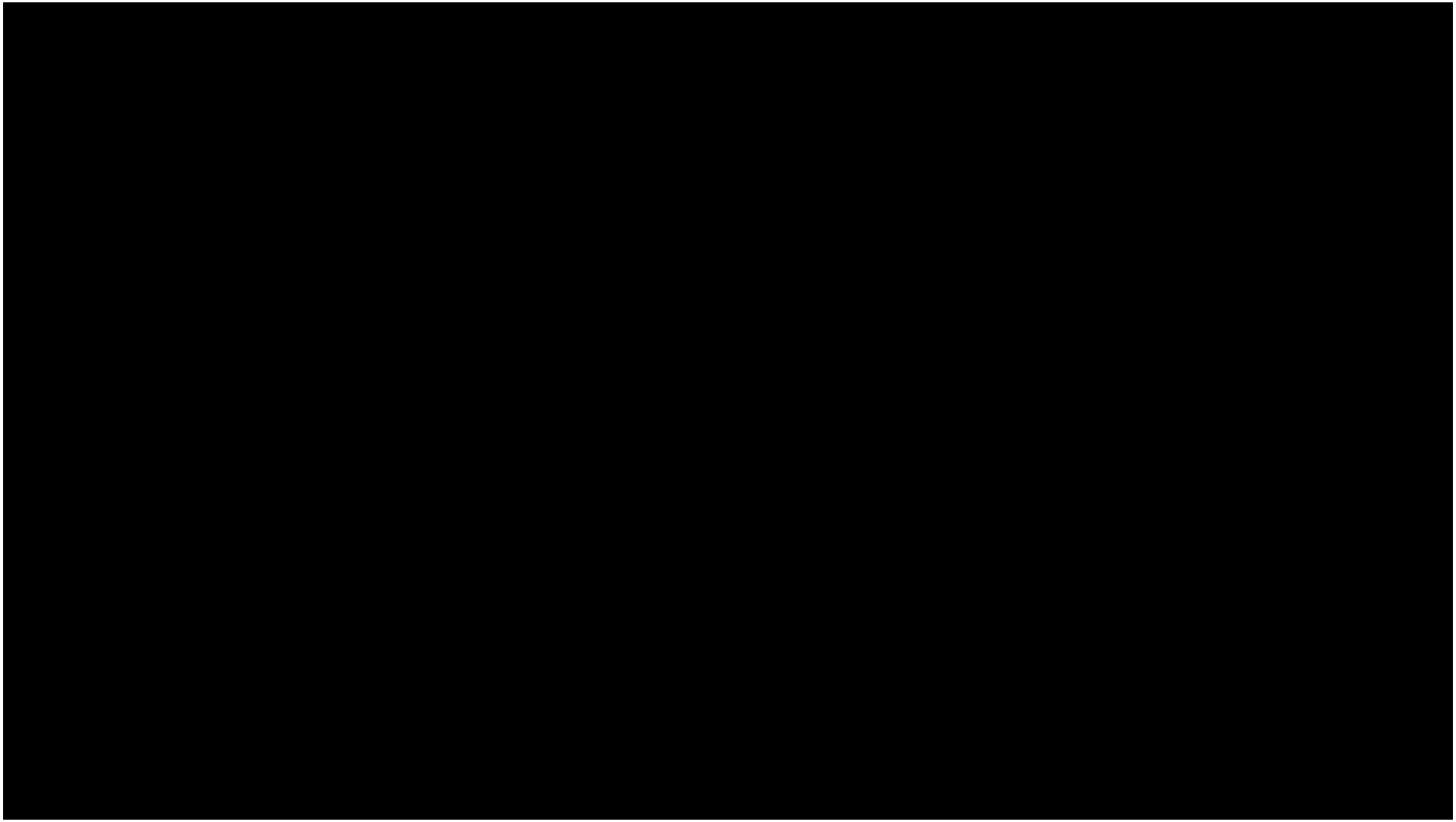
Citizens are not passive recipients of technology but rather actively and critically engage in how AI is being used and deployed

Civic resistance is not a uniform phenomenon but rather a dynamic process marked by overlapping methods, intersecting concerns, and varying outcomes

> A single actor (e.g., Uber) can raise multiple concerns (e.g., transparency, collaboration, privacy, workers rights, health, social equity). These concerns generate varied resistance strategies (e.g., physical protest, labour organizing, legal actions).

Recognizing the actions and voices of citizens is critical for understanding how AI is experienced (resisted) in practice and for realizing the gaps in resistance strategies that can build stronger systems of civic participation

CONTACT ME: renee.sieber@mcgill.ca




bills audits executive orders
guidelines REGULATION technical standards
AI registries procedural fairness
algorithmic impact assessments