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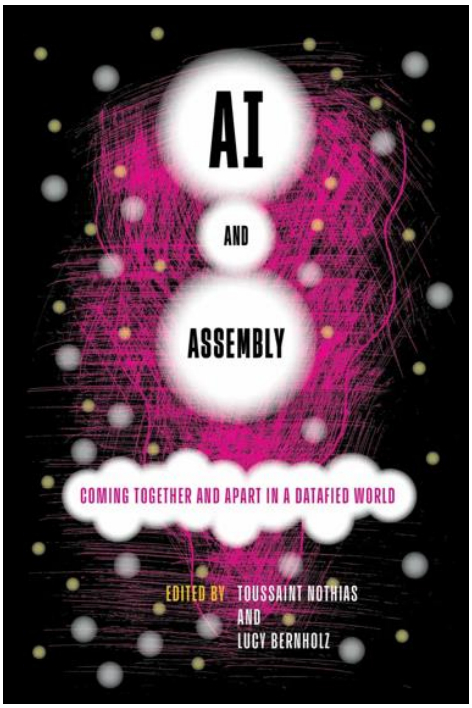
Toussaint Nothias and Lucy Bernholz (Eds.), **AI and Assembly: Coming Together and Apart in a Datafied World,** Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025, 218 pp., $35.00 (paperback).



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We have a right to gather with others. What happens to this right under conditions of near-constant surveillance, geolocation, and data retention and analysis by states and corporations? How does the impact of new technologies on our propensity to assemble play out in different contexts? These are the central animating questions behind the edited volume ***AI and Assembly: Coming Together and Apart in a Datafied World*****,** edited by Toussaint Nothias and Lucy Bernholz.

Nothias and Bernholz see the focus on assembly as a critical corrective to the overemphasis in scholarship and public discourse on technological threats to free expression and privacy, especially in the United States. Political phenomena like anti-ICE activism in Minneapolis (which took place after the volume's publication but proves the authors' point) are arguably much more about the way communities and neighborhoods are coming together in various networked formations (enabled or hindered by technological tools) than about a collection of atomized individuals choosing to make their voices heard. Hence the need for sharper conceptual tools—and more scholarship—to help us think through how community and collective aspects of organizing are affected by new technologies, especially given the extent to which algorithms structure and steer how we come together.

The concept of assembly, which is distinct in human rights law from association, implies people coming together temporarily for a specific purpose, such as a protest, while association is about forming more longstanding groups and organizations. Assembly, being temporary in nature, therefore implies being able to disperse. But as Bernholz pointed out when she spoke at NYU about the book in November 2025, the very possibility of assembly in this sense may be disappearing in the era of big data surveillance technologies bucketed under the term "artificial intelligence," which is used in the book as an expansive conceptual category that comes as an extension of critical scholarly concerns with datafication, platformization, and data extraction.

While we should not see these boundaries as rigid, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered technologies shape assembly in both physical and online spaces, affecting democratic participation not only in political activities but also in unions, religious communities, and educational institutions. Like other scholars (e.g., Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany, 2021), many of the volume's authors are concerned with understanding how the

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digital world alters foundational political concepts in key ways. In one of the book's chapters most focused on concepts and definitions, legal scholar Michael Hamilton argues that AI can facilitate forms of affective, social, and relational manipulation and change the choices that participants make about assembly. As disinformation distorts information environments, so can astroturfing distort online gatherings through the participation of inauthentic actors (Chan, 2022). This is a phenomenon we are only beginning to observe and study empirically.

The authors' concerns are not simply theoretical. A recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly demonstrates that digital surveillance is having significant chilling effects on the work of activists the world over. An Argentinian lawyer told the Rapporteur's team: "legal uncertainty kills freedom of assembly and association" (Romero et al., 2026, p. 32), while according to a Pakistani civil society organization "activists . . . hesitate to associate with particular organizations or individuals due to concerns about guilt by association or increased surveillance targeting" (p. 42). Nothias and Bernholz's volume too unpacks numerous examples of the harms inflicted by predictive, generative, and surveillance technologies powered by AI. Importantly, it centers the experiences of people in the Global South. For example, in a chapter contributing to the theorizing of algorithmic violence, Ashley Lee discusses Facebook's news feed experiment in six countries, including Cambodia, in 2017, which coincided with a tense preelection period in the country and had a severe impact on independent news outlets at a moment when people needed them most. In another chapter, focusing on the use of facial recognition technologies across African contexts, Garbe, Mwesigwa, and Nothias remind us of the implications of these technologies in authoritarian and repressive regimes, such as when the Ugandan government used CCTV data coupled with facial recognition to arrest hundreds in 2020 antigovernment protests. Scholars who conduct algorithmic audits or study technologically embedded bias will be particularly interested in Metexa and Raji's chapter, which offers a critical reflection on audits of different kinds of AI systems and the realities of how political debates around research findings unfold. Their chapter raises the question of whether algorithmic audits could be considered a new form of protest or collective action by independent researchers vying to counter unintended (or negligent) harmful consequences of AI technologies.

Several of the book's authors suggest that corporations have an easier time experimenting with their technologies in countries on the global periphery or on marginalized people, seeing them as testing grounds for new, unregulated technologies. But such a strategy of assuming less pushback or attention in Global South contexts can backfire, as in the case of the French company IDEMIA, which was forced by a French court to provide stronger safeguards for the use of its hardware in Kenya's national biometric ID system. Such examples are important to excavate in order to refute a prevalent sense of resignation about the supposed inevitability of unaccountable technological expansion into more areas of life.

Such wins for accountability, powered by transnational civil society efforts, demonstrate that there is another way assembly and AI intersect: in showing how individuals, communities, and organizations come together to shape and resist AI. This lens, of people's agency in relation to AI systems, is particularly important to Nothias and Bernholz, whose collaboration on the book started at Stanford's Digital Civil Society Lab. And indeed, a key contribution of their volume is in collecting global examples of advocacy efforts related to AI and in centering the perspectives of civil society, whether the strategies proposed push government regulation, algorithmic audits, design justice, or various kinds of oversight.

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Nothias and Bernholz suggest that more scholarship on such efforts is needed, and with their compact volume they are pointing the way toward more concerted efforts around the emerging interdisciplinary field of technology advocacy, or "the targeted study of how individuals and groups come together to shape how we engage with technologies" (pp. 14–15). This is a sensible progression at the intersection of critical data studies and social movement and activism scholarship, from documenting the harms of various AI technologies to considering algorithmic imaginaries and forms of resistance toward AI as an object of political organizing. Ultimately, in their book, Nothias and Bernholz suggest that scholars ought not only to study technology advocacy but also in various ways to practice it and intervene in it.

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