24101 How worried should you be about AI disrupting elections?

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Politics is supposed to be about persuasion; but it has always been stalked by propaganda. Campaigners transmit lies through whatever means are available. Antivaccine conspiracies were once propagated through pamphlets instead of podcasts. A century before covid-19, anti-maskers in the era of Spanish flu led a disinformation campaign. Because people are not angels, elections have never been free from falsehoods and mistaken beliefs.

But as the world contemplates a series of votes in 2024, something new is causing a lot of worry. In the past, disinformation has always been created by humans. Advances in generative artificial intelligence – with models that can spit out sophisticated essays and create realistic images from text prompts – make synthetic propaganda possible. The fear is that disinformation campaigns may be supercharged in 2024, just as countries with a collective population of some 4bn – including America, Britain, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Taiwan – prepare to vote.

What could large-language models change in 2024? One thing is the quantity of disinformation: if the volume of nonsense were multiplied by 1,000 or 100,000, it might persuade people to vote differently. A second concerns quality. Hyper-realistic deepfakes could sway voters before false audio, photos and videos could be debunked. A third is microtargeting. With AI, voters may be inundated with highly personalised propaganda at scale. Networks of propaganda bots could be made harder to detect than existing disinformation efforts are. Voters' trust in their fellow citizens, which in America has been declining for decades, may well suffer as people began to doubt everything.

This is worrying, but there are reasons to believe AI is not about to wreck humanity's 2,500-year-old experiment with democracy. Tools to produce believable fake images and text have existed for decades. New image-generation algorithms are impressive, but without tuning and human judgment they are still prone to produce pictures of people with six fingers on each hand, making the possibility of personalised deepfakes remote for the time being. Even if these AI-augmented tactics were to prove effective, they would soon be adopted by many interested parties: the cumulative effect of these influence operations would be to make social networks even more cacophonous and unusable. It is hard to prove that mistrust translates into a systematic advantage for one party over the other.

Although it is important to be mindful of the potential of generative AI to disrupt democracies, panic is unwarranted.

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