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Increasing Implementation of Artificial Intelligence Leads to Concerns Regarding the Spread of Disinformation

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Sam Altman (1985–), cofounder of OpenAI; CEO of OpenAI, 2019–present.

Greg Brockman (1987–), cofounder of OpenAI; president of OpenAI, 2022–present.

Elon Musk (1971–), cofounder of OpenAI; owner of Twitter/X, 2023–present.

Michal Šime ka (1984–), Slovakian politician, member of European Parliament, 2019–23.

The Beginnings of AI

The possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI) and the horrors that it might provoke have been a standard trope in science fiction novels for some time, but AI has only been a legitimate possibility in the twenty-first century. Before that point, computers were not advanced enough that AI could be a substitute for human intelligence. A computer chess program called Deep Blue was developed in the late twentieth century that could defeat even the best human chess players, but no one saw that as artificial intelligence.

One of the first public displays of something that might be called artificial intelligence was the IBM Watson software that was developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was designed to answer questions on the game show *Jeopardy!*, and it combined information retrieval, natural language processing, and machine learning technologies. It was not able to carry on a conversation, but it was powerful enough that it beat two of the best *Jeopardy!* players of all time, Ken Jennings and Brad Rutter, in 2011.

By 2015, technology CEOs were more and more concerned by the direction that AI technology was taking and the lack of safeguards to prevent it from becoming destructive. That year, Elon Musk, Sam Altman, Greg Brockman, and others formed OpenAI, Inc. It was a nonprofit company that would develop open-source AI software tools. Because it was open-source, outsiders could theoretically see how the software was functioning and raise an alarm if it was developing in harmful ways. OpenAI was designed to be a more responsible competitor to companies like Google and Facebook, which were developing their own AI tools and software but behind closed doors.

OpenAI changed its business model in 2019 when it realized it would need significantly more computing power if its technology was to keep pace with other companies. As Brockman told the *Financial Times*, "We think the most benefits will go to whoever has the biggest computer." OpenAI signed an agreement with Microsoft and has since become a more secretive company as it develops increasingly more powerful AI tools.

The possibilities of AI broke into the public consciousness in late 2022 when OpenAI released a new version of its ChatGPT chatbot and, for a number of months, allowed people to use it and experiment with it. The fact that ChatGPT could seem to be carrying on a conversation astounded many observers, and many students and educators alike were impressed at how ChatGPT could create fully formed essays and papers based on simple prompts. A closer look at some of those papers as well as images and videos created by AI revealed that AI still had limitations, but clearly the technology was advancing at a rapid pace. Politicians and technology gurus openly worried that AI could soon be a threat to the very structure of society.

When people talk about AI destroying civilization or when Musk called it "the greatest threat to humanity," their fear is that AI computers could go rogue, so to speak, and take over critical infrastructure or nuclear weapons and use them against people. They imagine a global equivalent of what happened in the novel and movie *2001* when a computer believes that, to fulfill its mission, it has to kill the spaceship's human crew. Certainly, preventing that possibility is vital if AI is going to be integrated more and more into our computer systems, but that possibility is still highly theoretical at this stage. What is not theoretical, however, is that AI could amplify disinformation efforts, which could undermine the fabric of society. In some cases, that is happening already.

AI and Disinformation

Disinformation is the spread of false information to manipulate groups of people to convince them to think or act in a particular way. Disinformation can be used by individuals, groups, or countries for economic, political, military, or social ends. Disinformation is related to the concept of propaganda. The difference is that propaganda can be based on facts or have elements of truth but which are biased in some way. Disinformation is deliberately false information.

Disinformation is hardly new, but it has become much more common and powerful in the age of the internet, as it can be spread so much more easily. That is particularly true with social media, where people share videos and articles without checking to see if they are true. Furthermore, setting up fake or bot accounts on social media sites is also relatively easy, so disinformation can be spread quickly and widely, and its ubiquity makes it seem more truthful. It is commonly believed that Russia used bot Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread disinformation during the 2020 U.S. presidential election to convince people that Hilary Clinton, who was seen as antagonistic to Russia, was guilty of criminal behavior.

One of the most effective kinds of disinformation is called the deepfake. This is a fake image, audio recording, or video recording that makes it appear as if a known figure—a politician or celebrity, for example—has done or said something that they have not. As with many things on the internet, deepfakes first became popular in pornography, to make a celebrity look like they were having sex or were posing nude. With disinformation, deepfakes can make politicians or government officials seem like they have said something scandalous or have been involved in compromising behavior. Again, deepfakes are not new, but in the past only people sophisticated with Photoshop or other kinds of editing software could make a deepfake that could convince even a small percentage of people.

The power of AI, at least in the 2020s, is not that AI can create something on its own. Its power is that it makes it so much easier for people to create whatever they want. By 2023, AI audio tools had reached the point where someone could create an audio deepfake that made it sound as if Joe Biden or Donald Trump was saying anything its creator wanted them to. AI had access to enough audio files of those and many other public figures to create a seamless audio recording of them saying literally anything. Furthermore, those tools were cheap and easy to use.

It does not take much imagination to think of how this kind of tool could be used to upend a political campaign. In fact, a recent election in the European country of Slovakia might have been swayed by the use of AI-produced disinformation. Just two days before the Slovakian parliamentary election on September 30, 2023, audio deepfakes believed to have been created by Russia spread across Facebook. They portrayed Slovakian politician Michal Šime ka talking about rigging the election and raising the price of beer. It is unknown how many people believed the audio was legitimate, but the fact that it was unleashed so close to the election gave Šime ka's Progressive Slovakia party little time to respond. The election result was that Šime ka's opponent Robert Fico, a pro-Russian politician, became prime minister of Slovakia and immediately withdrew Slovakia's military support of Ukraine. Russia's apparent disinformation had the exact outcome it had hoped to provoke.

As of early 2024, AI-produced deepfake videos and images have not reached the level of sophistication that audio deepfakes have. AI-produced videos and images are often easy to spot, particularly if created by people who are using relatively simple AI tools. Experts believe, however, that disinformation produced with AI will soon encompass images and videos that will be difficult to distinguish from reality. As Darrell M. West wrote for the Brookings Institution, "We are going to face a Wild West of campaign claims and counter-claims, with limited ability to distinguish fake from real material and uncertainty regarding how these appeals will affect the election."

Examples of politicians and their campaigns using AI to produce fake audio, images, and video are already increasing in frequency. In the first half of 2023, a mayoral candidate in Toronto, Canada, released fake dystopian images of homeless camps to sway votes. A reactionary party in New Zealand released an Instagram image produced by AI of robbers busting into a jewelry store to convince voters that the more liberal party could not govern. In the United Kingdom, an audio deepfake was released of Keir Starmer, the leader of the more-liberal Labour Party, verbally abusing his aides. AI has not just been the province of more right-wing parties, however. In a Chicago mayoral race, a Twitter account posing as a news outlet featured AI-produced audio of the more conservative candidate sounding as if he condoned police brutality.

Attempts to Restrict AI

The challenges in corralling AI and protecting society from the harm it poses are significant. Some tech company CEOs, including OpenAI's Sam Altman, have called on politicians to draw up regulations that would help guide the tech industry, but most politicians freely acknowledge they do not have the experience or know-how to come up with those regulations on their own. On the other hand, the primary alternative—having the tech companies design the regulations—has obvious flaws. Critics of the technology industry argue that any industry-designed regulations would merely allow the companies who already have a lead in AI technology to solidify that advantage and hinder other companies without providing any real protection to the public.

In July 2023, four of the biggest AI tech companies—Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI—created the Frontier Model Forum to

develop practices that will both promote AI safety and to share information with politicians and government officials. This adoption of voluntary regulations was seen by some cynical observers, however, as a way to preempt stricter government regulations that could soon be enacted. Some of those cynics (others would call them realists) argued that the tech companies were highlighting far-off apocalyptic scenarios to distract from the problems already posed by AI.

In the United States, both national and state legislators have introduced bills that would attempt to prevent the use of AI-produced disinformation. Significantly, these bills have had bipartisan support, as both Republicans and Democrats fear how AI could accelerate the undermining of democracy that seems to be taking hold. One tool that Europe has is the Digital Services Act, which requires social media companies to combat misinformation that appears on their sites. If the companies do not delete such misinformation, the European Union can fine a company up to 6 percent of its global revenue, an enormous sum that is likely to force companies like Meta (the parent company of Facebook) and X (formerly Twitter) to at least take some steps to prevent disinformation.

Legislation that would ban the use of AI in creating deepfakes or other manipulated media will have to contend with how AI could also be used to create parodies, satires, or art. Most people believe those should be protected speech, but distinguishing between them and disinformation is not always easy. Trying to legislate the distinction could be difficult, but most media analysts believe governments must act quickly. As Daniel I. Weiner and Lawrence Norden wrote in an extensive report for the Brennan Center for Justice, "One of the strongest cases for regulating AI deepfakes and other manipulated media is to prevent, or at least mitigate, the harmful effects of deceptive campaign advertising and similar communications that are clearly designed to influence how voters cast their ballots."

For many observers, however, the greatest danger of AI-produced disinformation is not the impact that it could have on one or two elections. It is that there will be so much competing disinformation in politics as well as in the economy and other parts of society that people will feel like they have no way of determining what is true in any situation. If the very idea of truth becomes suspect, much of what holds society together could start to fall apart. Some Western experts fear that, for countries like Russia and China, undermining Western society as a whole is their primary objective, and AI-enhanced disinformation could be a powerful weapon to achieve it.

Further Reading

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