Why 2024’s presidential race will be the first ‘AI election’

As recent fake images of Donald Trump and Mike Pence show, there are fears computer-generated scams will swing the polls.
In 450 days, polls will open in the US for the next election — and after at least three previous contests being touted as “the first social media election”, 2024 promises to be the first AI one.

We have already seen glimpses of how artificial intelligence could shape voters’ perceptions in the months to come. In March, images purporting to show the arrest of ex-president Donald Trump in Manhattan went viral on social media — but they were created by Midjourney, a popular AI text-to-image tool. And last week, an AI-generated image of former vice-president Mike Pence wearing a rainbow shirt and waving a Pride flag caused consternation in Republican circles, but again proved to be a fake.

The threat of AI making a difference to the views of voters has election experts seriously worried.

“The risk of AI negatively impacting upcoming elections is enormous,” said Noah Giansiracusa, a data science professor at Bentley University in Massachusetts.

The creators of AI tools such as ChatGPT, which has captured the world’s imagination in the past year, are also growing anxious.

This month, Sam Altman, chief executive of OpenAI, ChatGPT’s developer, tweeted that he was “nervous about the impact AI is going to have on future elections (at least until everyone gets used to it)”. He added: “Personalised 1:1 persuasion combined with high-quality generated media is going to be a powerful force.”

Altman admitted that he did not have a solution, but said “raising awareness of it is better than nothing”.

Better than nothing is a low bar for some. “It doesn’t take much imagination to see these risks, so Altman and other AI leaders were surely aware of them when they released their products,” said Giansiracusa, who believes Altman’s tweets belie the seriousness of the risk that AI presents. “Saying he’s ‘curious’ to hear ideas is just ... too little, too late,” he said. “You released this ticking time bomb into society and then say you’re nervous and curious how others think we can protect ourselves.”

Giansiracusa added that OpenAI’s attitude is a tech tradition: “It’s the same old Silicon Valley mantra of move fast and break things — release AI products that obviously could harm democracy, then, after the fact, try to figure out how to clean up the mess.”

OpenAI recently listed a role for an elections lead in its public policy team who “will help support [our] commitment to security and integrity for democratic elections, including shaping usage policies for our cutting-edge generative AI tools”.

It is not just the American presidential election at threat. “We can’t overlook that there are more than 160 democratic elections happening around the globe in the next year,” said Eddie
Perez, a former elections lead at Twitter. “In all of them, new AI tools can potentially be used to deceive voters across many types of media. It’s no longer just social media; the threat landscape for democracy has changed.”

Images that seemed to show Donald Trump, the ex-president being arrested in Manhattan were created by Midjourney, a popular AI text-to-image tool

The content that could sway voters runs the gamut of formats — and can also be spread through AI, believes the former executive director of America’s Disinformation Governance Board. “We should be worried not only about compelling deep fakes but about text-based disinformation,” said Nina Jankowicz, author of How to Lose the Information War and vice president at the Centre for Information Resilience.

Jankowicz pointed out that ChatGPT’s ability to create convincing essays under people’s names, or a persuasive attempt at mimicking someone’s writing style, means it is manna from heaven for state-sponsored trolls wanting to sow discord.

“It’s fairly easy to get programs like ChatGPT to generate convincing content at scale,” she said. “This is now the democratisation of disinformation. You don’t have to be a coder, you don’t have to be a nation state.”
The rise of AI comes at a time when Big Tech is laying off staff, potentially harming the ability to respond to the new wave of threats. Nearly a quarter of a million staff have been culled so far this year.

Governments are waking up to the problem — last week, deputy prime minister Oliver Dowden said deep fakes would “accentuate and proliferate” the risk to elections — and questioning how to regulate AI: the UK is consulting on how to shape rules that will “build trust” in the tech. But it will take a team effort to rise to the challenge, according to Perez.

“It’s imperative that AI developers also learn to build partnerships with civil society organisations and election officials to understand the landscape and mitigate harms as early as possible.”