

Beware the 'botshit': why generative AI is such a real and imminent threat to the way we live
By Andre Spicer, *The Guardian*, January 3rd, 2024

During 2023, the shape of politics to come appeared in a video. In it, Hillary Clinton – the former Democratic party presidential candidate and secretary of state – says: “You know, people might be surprised to hear me saying this, but I actually like Ron DeSantis a lot. Yeah, I know. I’d say he’s just the kind of guy this country needs.”

5 Further investigations found the video was produced using generative artificial intelligence (AI).

The Clinton video is only one small example of how generative AI could profoundly reshape politics in the near future. Experts have pointed out the consequences for elections. These include the possibility of false information being created at little or no cost and highly personalised advertising being produced to manipulate voters. The results could be so-called “October surprises” – ie a piece of news that breaks
10 just before the US elections in November, where misinformation is circulated and there is insufficient time to refute it – and the generation of misleading information about electoral administration, such as where polling stations are.

Concerns about the impact of generative AI on elections have become urgent as we enter a year in which billions of people across the planet will vote. During 2024, it is projected that there will be
15 elections in Taiwan, India, Russia, South Africa, Mexico, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, the European Union, the US and the UK. It is likely that each of these elections will be influenced by new generative AI technologies in the same way the elections of the 2010s were shaped by social media.

While politicians spent millions harnessing the power of social media to shape elections during the 2010s, generative AI effectively reduces the cost of producing empty and misleading information to
20 zero. This is particularly concerning because during the past decade, we have witnessed the role that so-called “bullshit” can play in politics. In a short book on the topic, the late Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt defined bullshit specifically as speech intended to persuade without regard to the truth. Throughout the 2010s this appeared to become an increasingly common practice among political leaders. With the rise of generative AI and technologies such as ChatGPT, we could see the rise of a
25 phenomenon my colleagues and I label “botshit”.

Humans might use untrue material created by generative AI in an uncritical and thoughtless way. And that could make it harder for people to know what is true and false in the world. If AI-produced hallucinations¹ are used to answer important but difficult to verify questions, such as the state of the economy or the war in Ukraine, there is a real danger it could create an environment where some people
30 start to make important voting decisions based on an entirely illusory universe of information. There is a danger that voters could end up living in generated online realities that are based on a toxic mixture of AI hallucinations and political expediency.

Although AI technologies pose dangers, there are measures that could be taken to limit them. Technology companies could continue to use watermarking, which allows users to easily identify AI-
35 generated content. They could also ensure AIs are trained on authoritative information sources. Journalists could take extra precautions to avoid covering AI-generated stories during an election cycle. Political parties could develop policies to prevent the use of deceptive AI-generated information. Most importantly, voters could exercise their critical judgment by reality-checking important pieces of information they are unsure about.

40 The rise of generative AI has already started to fundamentally change many professions and industries. Politics is likely to be at the forefront of this change.

1 - material that bears little relationship to reality though they seem superficially plausible