

The Negative Impacts of AI on the 2024 US Presidential Elections

Carolina Gonçalves

English 103: Writing From Sources

Professor Mary Kay Seales

March 6, 2024

1. Introduction

After its release, in just one month, ChatGPT reached the mark of one million users, which compared to Netflix, the most popular streaming platform in the world, took three years to reach this mark (Kreps, S., & Kriner, D. 2023). Now, Artificial Intelligence is reaching another level. “Fake Joe Biden robocall tells New Hampshire Democrats not to vote Tuesday” (NBC News, 2024). The deepfakes – manipulation of fake audio or videos created by AI imitating real people, but without consent, creates concern in the year of the United States presidential elections after troubled times in 2016, when the country suffered from a huge wave of misinformation and fake news. Although political parties can benefit from the use of AI to increase the efficiency of campaign strategies in election times, this paper will argue that tool will have seriously negative impacts on the 2024 U.S. presidential elections due to the use of AI to spread of misinformation, for deepfake manipulation and influence of the algorithm on voters' preferences and votes, all of which will put the country's democracy at risk.

2. Misinformation Throughout History

The term “fake news” is really a ‘new’ term, it has gained notoriety in recent years, popularized by former President Donald Trump in 2016, but the story begins a long time ago. Even though, fake news is directly related to false journalistic news, in the past, this could be related to poorly told gossip that ends up becoming true. In the journalistic world, false information has always been there, being circulated in newspapers or radio even before television or the internet. For example, in 1835, the tabloid The Sun gained notoriety for the “Great Moon Hoax”, after claiming that there was an alien civilization on the Moon (Britannica). Thinking about it now, this clearly seems like fake news, who would believe it? But at the time, they believed it. However, what has not changed throughout history is the objective of fake news: to attract readers. In the past, newspaper editors used sensationalism to attract the public and published rumors as facts. Nowadays, this still happens, called also as “clickbait”. When gossip or news websites publish intriguing/shocking headlines to attract followers/attention, but which often distort the truth.

Fake news can have serious impacts, such as destroying a person's life/career and generating gratuitous hatred. In Brazil, one of the biggest cases of fake news, “The Escola Base Case”, involving pedophilia destroyed the life of a family and three decades later, the family still suffers the consequences of what happened. In 1994, the Base school, aimed at young children, located in the capital of São Paulo, had its owners accused of sexual abuse. The story had repercussions throughout the country, and the accusations were reported by the media as true, and before the investigations even took place, the school and the owners' homes were invaded and vandalized (Folha de S. Paulo, 2023). The lawyer for the alleged victims wanted to attract attention and without any evidence published untruths to the press, and the public believed them. In the end, the story was a lie, there was no sexual abuse, however, the school owners had already suffered the consequences from the press and the public and had their lives destroyed.

It has always been common to come across headlines and news about aliens or extremely exaggerated subjects. Sensationalism and desperation for attention cause this. The former US presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, had already had her image linked to fake news even before the 2016 elections (Figure 1). One of the newspapers best known for sensationalism in the United States is the Weekly World News, founded in 1979. Famous for printing giant headlines on its

cover with the most bizarre stories you can imagine, like “I was Bigfoot's love slave” or “Bat child found in cave”. You've probably noticed it while shopping at the market or coming across the covers of this newspaper circulating on the internet. For almost 30 years, the newspaper used the most inconvenient tactic a journalism tabloid can have and there are those who bought it. And even before being bombarded with fake news during her 2016 election campaign, Clinton had already graced the cover of Weekly World News with the headline “Hillary Clinton adopts alien baby”, in 1993 (The Atlantic, 2014).



Figure 1. The cover of Weekly World News: “Hillary Clinton adopts alien baby”, in 1993.



Figure 2. The picture shared during the Nepal earthquake.

As can be seen above, an image of Hillary Clinton holding an alien baby appeared on the cover of a newspaper in 1993, or as happened more recently, thousands of people believed the image that circulated on social media in 2023 of Pope Francis wearing a puffer coat white (CNN, 2023).



Figure 7. Pope Francis wearing a puffer coat white.

Misinformation and false news have always existed, as mentioned above, however, it was in 2016 that the term gained notoriety and began to be taken seriously by everyone in the world. Although people began to give importance to this news during the electoral campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, in 2015, there were already signs that fake news would take on unexpected proportions because that year many photos and videos went viral, unfortunately, for the wrong reasons. False information or misleading images and videos circulated overwhelmingly on social media. For example, the image of two children in “Nepal” after an earthquake in the country (Figure 2), but the photograph was taken of two children in Vietnam, in 2007. (BBC News, 2015).

The fine line between sensationalism/fiction and journalism is not something exclusive to WWN, several news sites nowadays use the tactic to attract readers. According to former editor-in-chief of WWN and author of the book “Weekly World News”, Neil McGinness, there are three types of tabloid readers, “those who believe, those who don't believe and those who want to believe but aren't sure”. And this classification relates perfectly to the public exposed to fake news during election campaigns. However, unlike the headlines published by WWN that did not interfere disastrously in anyone's life, believing in fake news can directly compromise democracy and affect the results of an election.

3. The Impact of Social Media on the 2016 US Presidential Elections

The explosive growth of social medias has become a great facilitator for the rapid sharing of misunderstanding, and this was confirmed in research carried out in 2016 to investigate the connection between social networks and the receipt of information. According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of North American adults reported accessing information through social media that election year (Figure 3). Reddit (70%), Facebook (66%) and Twitter (59%) were the most cited platforms among those interviewed in relation to the first access of the news. Furthermore, the research reveals that 64% of respondents access the news on just one website, that is, checking the veracity of the information does not happen as it is accessed only once.

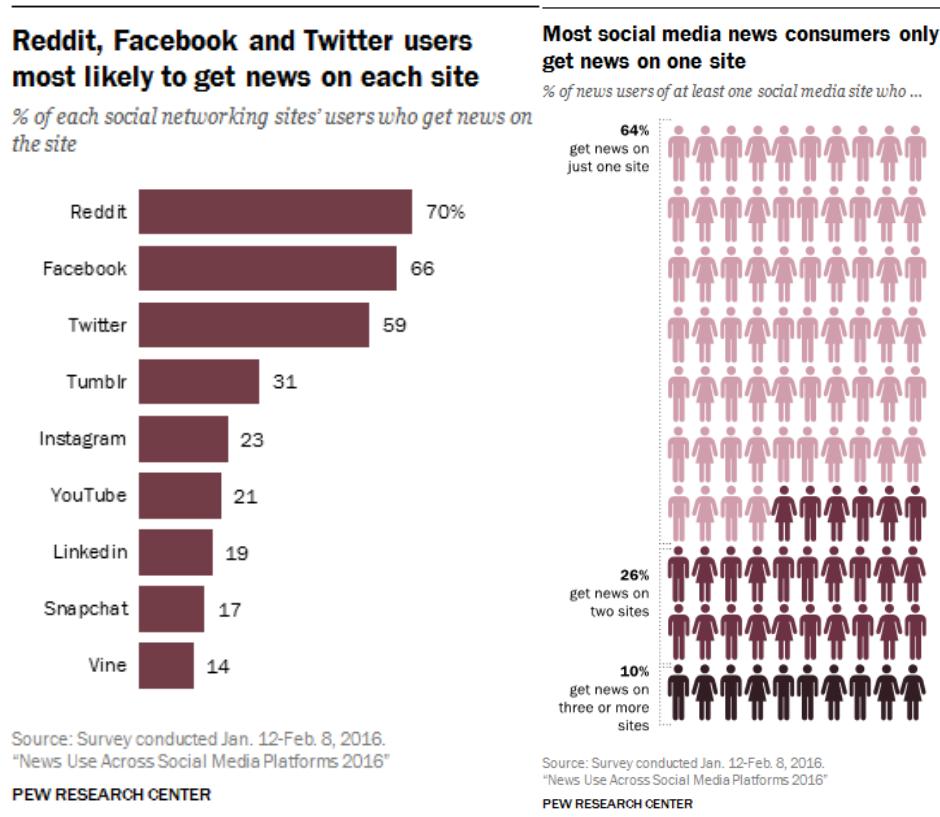
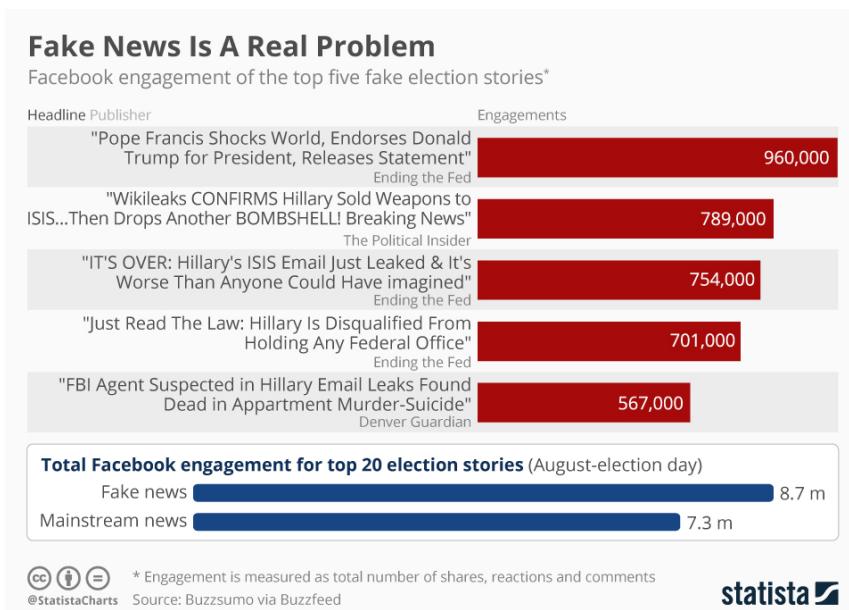


Figure 3

Figure 4

It is evident that the rise of social medias and the consumption of information through apps and not through credible news portals contributed to the explosion of fake news during the election campaign between Clinton x Trump in 2016. That year, Hillary Clinton suffered excessively from fake news generated exclusively to attack her credibility and ruin her electoral campaign. Among the five most shared false electoral news on Facebook, four were linked to the former candidate, such as “Wikileaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS...Then Drops Another BOMBSHELL! Breaking News” and “FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Appartment Murder-Suicide”. The most shared news story that year on the social network created by Mark Zuckerberg directly favored former president Donald Trump, falsely stating that Pope Francis supported the presidential candidate (Statista, 2016).



After the 2016 elections, many things changed, especially with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the development of the vaccine, which had its credibility affected by fake news around the world. People's relationship with social media has also changed over the years, especially in relation to false information shared on social media. Since the pandemic, people are now paying more attention to the credibility of information. Despite this greater attention, today, half of North American adults (Figure 5) still access information through social networks, such as

Facebook and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2023). Among those interviewed, 30% claim to regularly receive news via Facebook, followed by YouTube (26%) and Instagram (16%) (Figure 6).

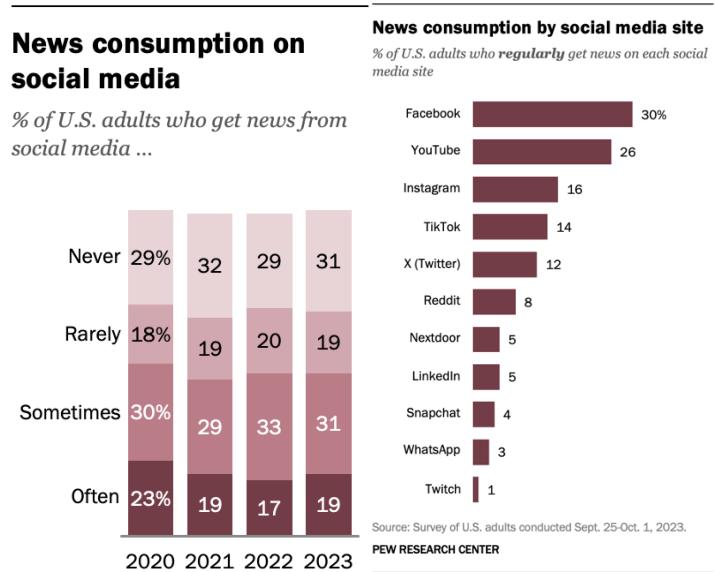


Figure 5.

Figure 6

With the overwhelming growth of fake news in recent years, the main social networks have also created a “fact check” in recent years to alert their users about the veracity of the information shared. For example, X (formerly Twitter) created strict rules to combat misinformation on the platform, such as deleting posts and flagging false information in certain posts. In a survey carried out by the Non-Governmental Organization Global Witness, in partnership with New York University, YouTube proved to be the most efficient platform in the fight against fake news. On the other hand, TikTok approved 90% of the misleading content posted, and Facebook was not far behind, approving a significant number of false content (Global Witness, 2022). The study consisted of analyzing how the three platforms reacted against misleading content and inaccurate information posted on social media. TikTok banned political ads, but inaccurate content, such as information that the elections would be extended. The fact that Facebook does not take a strict stance against fake news is clearly dangerous for the election campaign period, because, as analyzed above, Facebook is the platform most used by North American adults to access news

4. The Negatives Impacts of AI

4.1 Spread of Misinformation

With the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) along with social media, it is even easier to create fake news, sharing false information has made the situation even more dangerous, mainly because it now no longer depends solely on the media. Anyone anywhere in the world can create false information/false image and share it on their social networks. Therefore, although Artificial Intelligence can bring benefits in the electoral sphere, such as increasing the efficiency of campaign strategies, the negative impacts caused by AI can have serious consequences for the results of the 2024 United States presidential elections and directly impact the democracy in the country in an even more overwhelming way than what happened in 2016.

First, the negative impact of AI-driven spread of misunderstandings on this year's presidential elections is one of the reasons for public and governmental concern around the political campaign period, and not just in the United States, but across the world. In the electoral sphere, fake news is used for a single purpose: to discredit a candidate and ruin his/her electoral campaign. According to the New York Times article "Elections and Disinformation Are Colliding Like Never Before in 2024", the year of 2024 includes at least 83 elections globally. Some more important than others, such as the presidential elections in the United States, Mexico, and Russia. The concern about the dissemination of fake news continues to be valid, mainly due to the consequences of 2016.

There are those who believe that the false information published against Clinton influenced the election results, and thus calls into question the legitimacy of Trump's victory. These claims were confirmed by a study carried out by researchers at Ohio State University who concluded that fake news played a significant role in Clinton's loss of supporters (The Washington Post, 2018). However, the study does not prove that the spread of misunderstandings was crucial to the former president's victory, but the concern about the sharing of false news at high levels created a public and governmental alert for the post-2016 elections. And this year, for example, current president Joe Biden's campaign has lawyers and experts focused on a leader with false information, such as videos and images, which can be generated by AI during your election campaign.

4.2 Deepfake Manipulation

The second negative impact that is expected to affect the 2024 US presidential elections caused by AI is the growth of deepfakes. The direct relationship between the increase in deepfakes and the absurd speed of information sharing on social medias worries not only the population of the United States, but also political parties:

“Generative artificial intelligence and deepfake technology – a type of artificial intelligence used to create convincing images, audio and video hoaxes – is evolving very rapidly. Every day, it seems, new and increasingly convincing deepfake audio and video clips are disseminated, including, for example, an audio fake of President Biden, a video fake of the actor Morgan Freeman and an audio fake of the actress Emma Watson reading Mein Kampf” (SSRN Electronic Journal, 2023)

The creation of fake videos by Artificial Intelligence allows people to manipulate information and content through audio and images. As we can see on the quote above a manipulated audio with the voice of current President Joe Biden was sent in 2024 to voters, in addition to other cases involving actors and famous figures. The growth of deepfakes worries the government and the risk of interference during election times.

Even though Artificial Intelligence is created with the best intention for society, for example, facilitating functions within companies with virtual assistants, when used in a negative way, AI can cause severe impacts on the future of a nation, as is the case with case of deepfakes. The practice grew in mid-2017 and is frightening to think of everything that can be created and manipulated by AI, especially because image manipulation is not new today.

If manipulated images of the Pope wearing a white puffer coat or former President Donald Trump being arrested in 2023 deceived a large part of the American population, how far can videos and audio manipulated by Artificial Intelligence reach? And how much can they affect voters' decisions during the election campaign period? If during the 2016 elections, Clinton had to

carefully deal with false news, but until then written, how will the candidates for the 2024 elections prevent deepfakes from negatively affecting their political campaign? At a time when technology is an integral part of our lives, and the advancement of Artificial Intelligence can create unimaginable content, it is difficult not to worry about the negative side of the tool used to, for example, deceive readers and discredit candidates.

Politicians fear that deepfakes and the presence of AI could weaken the population's trust in information. According to the Senior Director of the Elections and Government Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, Lawrence Norden, Artificial Intelligence could imitate large amounts of materials from election offices and disseminate them widely, generating an unexpected risk to elections. "All the things that have been threats to our democracy for some times are potentially made worse by AI" (New York Times, 2024). Concern about the consequences caused by deepfakes grew even more after a [fake voice message](#) claiming to be the current President of the United States, Joe Biden, was sent to voters in the state of New Hampshire advising them not to vote in the state's presidential primary elections. (The Journalist's Resource, 2024). The voice that appeared to be real but generated by AI scared the country. "Voting this Tuesday only enables the Republicans in their quest to elect Donald Trump again. Your vote makes a difference in November, not this Tuesday. Save your vote for the election November", said the automatic message.

Deepfakes are not only found in the electoral context, but manipulated content can be created by AI with the intention of destroying anyone, as was the scandalous case of fake pornographic images of Taylor Swift spread across the social network X in early 2024 (The Guardian, 2024). Even though he is one of the most prominent people in the world today, the platform did not remove the content instantly and generated 47 million views before the images went offline. Unfortunately, an anonymous person is not as lucky in having their images, whether real or manipulated, removed from social media in the short term. The process can take months, years and even never happen.

A survey carried out in December 2020 showed that 26.8% of content found online was manipulated, i.e., deepfake content, altered images and videos, exceeding the percentage of false information (19.3%) found online (Statista, 2023). Since the platforms themselves do not create strict rules to combat misinformation, it is up to the population, the government and

communication professionals to unmask false content. Lawmakers in different states have already introduced bills to combat AI-generated misinformation related to elections (The Journalist's Resource). However, the implementation of projects can be challenged based on freedom of expression, for example.

4.3 Influence of the Algorithm

Lastly, the third negative impact generated by AI is the influence of the algorithm on voters' preferences. Artificial Intelligence is capable to collect users' preferences in their social medias. For example, scroll through the TikTok timeline until stop to watch a cute video of a kitten. The platform will capture this information and start playing another 10 cute kitten videos on the users' timelines because the algorithm understands that this is what the user likes to watch. This may seem harmless, but during elections times repeatedly videos in your timeline from some candidate can be dangerous. The potential voter watches a video of former President Donald Trump and then the social network feed will have other publications from the future candidate, creating opportunities to more easily influence the voter to believe that content. However, algorithms can perpetuate racial, economic, and social prejudices, in addition to influencing consumers towards specific types of content, distorting information and shaping people's ideals. This influence generated by algorithms perpetuates a lot within marketing. Who has never, after seeing several advertisements on their Instagram feed, bought a product? However, the influence generated by algorithms can have negative impacts on voters' decisions, this added to the fact that this generated content can be fake news or deepfake. Algorithms can, intentionally or unintentionally, favor or disfavor candidates, political ideologies and manipulate preferences.

"One study found that during the 2016 election, people sixty-five and older were seven times more likely to share internet-based misinformation than younger people. And while debunking internet misinformation is already hard, it's going to get even harder in the coming years, with the rise of algorithmically generated text, realistic conversational AI,

and synthetic video (“deepfakes”) produced with the help of machine learning” (Roose K, Futureproof: 9 rules for humans in the age of automation, 2022).

In this way, generative AI content can become an amplifier for disinformation propaganda. This is because algorithms are responsible for moderating users' content and become a key player in determining what voters see. (The Brookings, 2024). Although studies have not notably detected the influence of algorithms on political decisions during election times, there are some studies that prove that algorithms influence what users believe. A project carried out in 2020, led by academics from U.S. colleges and universities in partnership with researchers at Meta, show that the social media algorithms used by Facebook and Instagram are extremely influential in shaping users' experiences (New York University, 2023). One of the results of the study was that 97% of fake political news, posted more than 100 times on Facebook, was seen more by conservatives than liberals. Another result showed that by changing the platforms' algorithm to access recent content first, the time users spent on the social medias contributed significantly. Additionally, the chronological feed increased access to content from friends and sources with ideologically mixed audiences. However, content from unreliable sources also increased when making the feed in chronological order, with a growth of 68.8% compared to Facebook and 22.1% on Instagram.

Therefore, as long as social media platforms continue to be responsible for manipulating the algorithm and do not seriously combat the publication of false information, the content accessed by users can influence their beliefs and consequently change political and social decisions.

5. Increase of Campaign Strategies in Elections

Although the negative impacts that could be caused by artificial intelligence during the 2024 United States presidential elections stand out, there are experts who support the development of the tool and praise the positive impact generated by AI in this field, such as improving campaign strategies. According to Kevin Pérez-Allen, director of communications for the nonpartisan health care advocacy organization United States of Care, political campaigns have evolved greatly with technology (CNBC, 2023). One of the examples given by the director is the use of ChatGPT to save time in campaigns and the production of draft speeches and marketing materials, as well as

the development of emails and texts that can be used in fundraising. Furthermore, the tool is the main piece in analyzing large amounts of data on voter behavior, preferences, and demographic data, for example. “Instead of just reading someone’s policy positions on their website, there would be an AI chatbot with the platform that gives you the answers and, backed by data, makes it feel like having a direct line to the campaign”. With AI-generated analytics, political parties can create personalized campaigns for voters, and identify trends, predict voter sentiments, and suggest effective communication channels. Social media monitoring is also one of the positive impacts that AI can have on this year’s presidential elections, offering real-time feedback from social media and other platforms.

6. Democracy at Risk

While it is essential to recognize and address the potential positive impacts generated by AI in the political scenario, the dissemination of false information, the manipulation of audio and images to target a candidate and the influence of biased algorithms on voters' final decisions must be considered and mainly, highlight that these negative impacts will inevitably put the country's democracy at risk. The three points in question have the potential to compromise the integrity of the elections, in addition to generating disinformation on a global level. For the legitimacy of the 2024 United States presidential elections to remain intact, proactive measures, such as transparency in the dissemination of information and strict rules to combat fake news and deepfakes from both social media platforms and the government, must be put into practice.

“Election integrity is such a behemoth effort that you really need a proactive strategy, a lot of people and brains and war rooms” (Alexandra Popken, VP of Trust and Safety)

7. Conclusion

We are in the year of presidential elections in the United States, and it is normal to bring tension, but also bring campaign tactics whose aim is to sway voters to a certain candidate. Political parties can benefit from the use of AI to increase the efficiency of campaign strategies in election times. However, as this paper has shown, there are seriously negative impacts caused by AI, such as deepfakes, that can put US democracy at risk. “The potential use of AI to manipulate voters is deeply disturbing” (Strategic Communications Consultant, Katie Dolan. 2024). Using AI to discourage voters from voting is an affront to democracy, furthermore, to opening new possibilities to discredit a candidate using the tool. While the government does not take efficient preventive measures to combat possible future damage, the population must be aware, and above all, not believe everything they have on the internet. In addition to checking whether the sources are reliable as algorithms can be persuasive.

References:

Matthias, M. (n.d.). *The Great Moon hoax of 1835 was sci-fi passed off as news*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/story/the-great-moon-hoax-of-1835-was-sci-fi-passed-off-as-news>

Ghetti, B. (2023). *Análise: Série “o caso escola base” impede o Público de Esquecer O Trauma*. Folha de S. Paulo. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2023/06/serie-o-caso-escola-base-impede-o-publico-de-esquecer-o-trauma.shtml>

Heller, S. (2014, October 16). *Bat Boy, Hillary Clinton’s Alien Baby, and a tabloid’s Glorious Legacy*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/10/the-ingenious-sensationalism-of-the-weekly-world-new/381525/>

Rusk, D. (2015, December 27). *How the internet misled you in 2015*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-35051618>

Hsu, T., Thompson, S.A. and Myers, S.L. (2024) *Elections and disinformation are colliding like never before in 2024*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/business/media/election-disinformation-2024.html>

Armstrong, M., & Richter, F. (2016, November 17). *Infographic: Fake news is a real problem*. Statista Daily Data. <https://www.statista.com/chart/6795/fake-news-is-a-real-problem/>

Blake, A. (2018, April 3). *A new study suggests fake news might have won Donald Trump the 2016 election*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/04/03/a-new-study-suggests-fake-news-might-have-won-donald-trump-the-2016-election/>

Gottfried, J. (2016, May 26). *News use across social media platforms 2016*. Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>

N.d. (2022, Oct 21). *Facebook and TikTok fail to block deceptive ads with blatant US midterms disinformation*. Global Witness. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/facebook-and-tiktok-fail-block-deceptive-ads-blatant-us-midterms-disinformation/>

Duffy, C. (2023, Apr 2). *Welcome to the era of viral AI generated “news” images* | CNN business. CNN Business. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/02/tech/ai-generated-images-social-media/index.html>

Hsu, T., Thompson, S. A., & Myers, S. L. (2024, January 9). *Elections and disinformation are colliding like never before in 2024*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/business/media/election-disinformation-2024.html>

Mirza, R. (2024, February 17). *How ai-generated deepfakes threaten the 2024 election*. The Journalist’s Resource. <https://journalistsresource.org/home/how-ai-deepfakes-threaten-the-2024-elections/>

Saner, E. (2024, January 31). *Inside the Taylor Swift deepfake scandal: “it’s men telling a powerful woman to get back in her box.”* The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/jan/31/inside-the-taylor-swift-deepfake-scandal-its-men-telling-a-powerful-woman-to-get-back-in-her-box>

Watson, A. (2023, March 21). *Types of fake news online* U.S. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1306373/fake-news-by-type-us/>

Painter, R.W. (2023). ‘*Deepfake 2024: Will Citizens United and Artificial Intelligence Together Destroy Representative Democracy?*’. SSRN Electronic Journal, pp. 1–27.

O’Sullivan, D. and Fung, B. (2023) *First on CNN: Biden campaign prepares legal fight against election deepfakes* | CNN politics, CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/30/politics/biden-campaign-prepares-against-deepfakes/index.html>

Kreps, S., & Kriner, D. (2023). *How AI threatens democracy*. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(4), 122–131. (Citation).

Roose, K. (2022). *Futureproof: 9 rules for humans in the age of automation*. John Murray.

Wirtschafter, V., Brandt, J., Nicol Turner Lee, R. C., Afzal, M., & Sambhi, N. (2024, February 20). *The impact of Generative AI in a global election year*. The Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-impact-of-generative-ai-in-a-global-election-year/>

Devitt, J. (2023, July 27). *2020 election studies reveal power of Facebook, Instagram algorithms—but show limited impact on attitudes*. NYU. <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2023/july/2020-election-studies-reveals-power-of-facebook--instagram-algor.html>