OPINION

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Will Generative AI Transform Political Campaigns?

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Several Republicans have already thrown their hat into the ring to garner the GOP nomination for the presidency. The tumultuous Republican primaries during the 2016 campaign were fueled by the large number of candidates and the "styles" that they employed, such as the inordinate use of social media, like Twitter, to promulgate their messages. The 2024 campaign leading up to Election Day could be even more chaotic, given the growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and how it may impact campaign information.

Generative AI systems can produce audios, images, videos and text that can appear to come from almost anyone, at any time, under any circumstances.
When OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, everyone got a glimpse of AI chatbot capabilities to create written messages, answer questions and engage in conversations on just about any topic.

Generative AI is certain to be used by the presidential candidates in the lead-up to the November 2024 election, as evidenced by the generative AI images released by the DeSantis campaign misrepresenting the relationship between former President Donald Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci, former chief medical advisor to the president.

The volume of messages that such tools can create and then be disseminated using social media could make the primaries a literal "Wild West" of fake audio, videos, images and texts. Once one candidate oversteps some line of decency, every other candidate may be tempted to enter the seedy fray to neutralize misinformation that could derail their campaign.

YouTube recently ditched its policy on election misinformation, noting, "with 2024 campaigns well underway, we will stop removing content that advances false claims that widespread fraud, errors, or glitches occurred in the 2020 and other past US Presidential elections," starting on June 2 out of concern of unintentionally "curtailing political speech without meaningfully reducing the risk of violence or other real-world harm." Given such a change, there is no limit as to how far generative AI output can be taken by campaigns leading up to Election Day. Of course, when blatant misinformation gets posted, as was the case with a vaccine video featuring an interview of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., YouTube removed the video, even though Kennedy has launched a bid for the Democratic nomination for president.

One consequence of this type of policy shift is that it will be more challenging to separate fact from fiction. However, if voters get disgusted by the volume of generative AI material, the ploy to sway them may backfire.

Controlling generative AI is futile. The Biden administration proposed a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights. Technology leaders have warned of the dangers posed by AI. Such proposals and efforts are well-intentioned but will likely yield minimal headwinds to AI system advances. AI technology will continue to grow its capabilities simply because it can — and the potential economic benefits are significant.

What some fear is that AI systems may be used to sway the outcome of the 2024 election. This may be the case if people believe every political ad, statement and message that they hear. How people interpret campaign propaganda is outside anyone's control. People will believe what they want to, no matter the source.

What the growth of generative AI systems provides is the opportunity to reopen and expand discussions on campaign finance reform.

To date, campaign finance reform efforts have focused on sources of money received. The goal is to limit the influence of wealthy donors or foreign operatives, taking the results of elections away from voters.

The majority of campaign funds are spent on media. In essence, money buys messages and exposure. Research shows that those who spend the most money are more likely to win elections. This means that money buys media content, which indirectly buys votes that lead to victories at the ballot box.

Since media material requires content, generative AI may turn that logic on its head.

Generative AI can produce large amounts of campaign ads and information that can be funneled through social media, inundating people with messages designed to sway their votes.

Generative AI can also take negative ads to a whole new level. Fake audios, images and videos can be produced by one candidate that may seem to show their opponent saying and doing things that may have only been hearsay — but through AI are transformed into what appears to be reality.

This means that generative AI makes campaigning more efficient, which places less focus on money in campaign reform and more focus on content and volume.

How can such activities be overseen?

Much like how REAL IDs are designed to provide a more secure level of identity than ordinary driver's licenses, a similar verification process may be needed. Campaigns would then be best served to seek such verification with their campaign ads, similar to how Twitter originally

validated its users with a blue checkmark, or watermarks are used on paper documents to confirm their authenticity.

Generative AI has the potential to upset campaign finances and create a new financial model for political campaigns. Tech-savvy staff will become key personnel in every candidate's arsenal of human-capital weaponry in preparing for and winning elections.

Of course, there is nothing stopping foreign operatives or rogue, fringe and extremist groups from using generative AI to contribute to the political cacophony. Indeed, this may be the biggest threat to election manipulation.

The good news is that the element of surprise has been neutralized with generative AI. Candidates and most voters are now aware of this new type of communication warfare. How voters react and ultimately act at the ballot box is anyone's guess. Until then, generative AI is certain to play a role in the 2024 election cycle.

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