

What does AI mean for Australian democracy? And what can we do about it?

May 30 2024, by Zoe Jay Hawkins



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Last week, the head of Australia's election regulator [warned](#) the organization "does not possess the legislative tools or internal technical capability to deter, detect or adequately deal with false AI-generated content concerning the election process."

This remark, made to a [senate committee](#) on [adopting artificial intelligence](#) (AI), is not an isolated comment. The relationship between AI and democracy is the topic of many, increasingly urgent conversations taking place around the world.

[More than 60 countries](#) will head to the polls in 2024, in what has been [dubbed](#) "the biggest [election](#) year in history." Australia is expecting to hold elections in the Northern Territory and Queensland this year, with a federal election due by May 2025.

At the same time, the explosion of generative AI tools for text, images, audio and video is dramatically shifting the way Australians create and engage with information. How can we maintain the integrity and trust of elections in the age of generative AI?

Deepfakes and disinformation

The most obvious risk AI poses to democracy is via [synthetic content](#) (or "deepfakes"), which could be used to misinform voters. A [World Economic Forum survey](#) conducted last year found experts ranked "misinformation and disinformation" and "societal polarization" as the first and third most severe global risks over the next two years.

These risks are already manifesting. In the United States, a political

consultant, who used the synthetic voice of US President Joe Biden in robocalls, faces fines of [several million dollars](#). In India, [AI-generated videos](#) have become increasingly common in this year's election campaign.

But deepfakes and misinformation are far from the only risks. AI also presents new opportunities. In the evidence [I gave to the senate committee](#), and in a [submission](#) from me and my colleagues at the Tech Policy Design Center, we argue a fuller national conversation on this topic is essential.

A broad view of healthy democracy

A comprehensive policy will not focus purely on deepfakes swaying votes but the health of democracy more broadly. Free and fair elections are one characteristic of democracy (albeit an incredibly important one), but there are many others.

Informed civic engagement, tolerance and political pluralism are other important ingredients of a thriving democratic system. The system also needs to identify and respond to the needs of the electorate, and government must be transparent and accountable.

So when we think about the relationship between AI and democracy, we need to think about perennial concerns such as political representation, public interest journalism, media literacy and social cohesion.

Risks—but also opportunities

A balanced policy should recognize AI technologies present opportunities for democracy, as well as risks.

For example, it is absolutely reasonable to worry informed [civic engagement](#) may suffer due to the tendency of generative AI models to "[hallucinate](#)" and produce misinformation.

However, the very same technology can also engage more voters in civic discourse: it can convert complex policy concepts into relatable content, or create automatic translations into many languages.

Learning from the past

Some elements of the challenges we face are not as new or certain as they seem.

AI, and the generative AI boom in particular, certainly injects some unprecedented elements into the democratic ecosystem. But there are still lessons we can learn from the past.

Anxieties about technologies that make novel forms of communication widely accessible are not new. Nor are efforts to regulate and control who can influence public flows of information.

In the 15th century the invention of Gutenberg's printing press [stoked fears](#) over what we might now call "fake news." There are plenty more recent examples, including what we have learned from the rise of social media (which is in turn shaping the story of AI and democracy).

We need to be discerning about the elements of generative AI that are fundamentally new. At the same time, we can look for applicable policy tools and lessons from previous information technology revolutions.

What now for Australia?

Australia is standing at an interesting crossroads. Up to a year out from our next federal election, several interlocking branches of [policy](#) are in development.

The department of industry is working on a response to last year's Safe and Responsible AI [consultation](#). This will include considering rules for compulsory watermarks in AI-generated content.

The department of communications is also [reworking](#) proposals for new powers for the Australian Communications and Media Authority. These will help to combat misinformation and disinformation, and may include AI-specific measures.

At the same time, the Online Safety Act 2021 is being [reviewed](#). This may result in powers to address online abuse of public figures, which again may involve AI.

I propose four key actions the Australian government should take.

First, it should develop a coordinated national approach to the relationship between AI and democracy. My colleagues at the Tech Policy Design Center have offered [more detailed recommendations](#) on how to coordinate the development of national tech policies.

Second, the government should pay close attention to the [dozens of national elections](#) around the world this year. We can monitor the success or failure of different policies in different contexts to learn from the experiences of others.

Third, we can learn from [South Korea](#) by requiring politicians to disclose and watermark any deepfakes or other AI-produced content used in election materials. South Korea has barred politicians from using AI-generated materials in their campaigns completely. However, the lower

bar of requiring Australian politicians to be transparent may be less controversial and easier to implement.

And fourth, the government needs to make sure the Australian Electoral Commission and the Australian Communication and Media Authority have the staff and resources they need. Their task of tackling emerging challenges, including those posed by AI, and equipping Australians to engage with a complex information landscape in the year ahead will not be an easy one.

These steps should be just the beginning of a comprehensive, balanced and informed national conversation about how we can support Australia's democracy to flourish in the age of AI.

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