

CNN Interview

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AI, Disinformation, and the 2024 Election

AMARA WALKER: Misused headlines and faked pictures have long been a problem in politics. But the widespread availability of photo and video editing apps, and the rise of A.I. tools are making the situation worse.

Combine that with a candidate who constantly spreads conspiracy theories, and we have an especially challenging campaign season. This week, the tech company X A.I. released Grok, a tool that lets users generate A.I. created photo realistic images from text prompts, then post them to X. Both companies are owned by Trump ally Elon Musk.

Now, for his part, former President Trump has claimed that the Harris campaign is using A.I. to fake images of crowds at her events. He appears to be spreading a far-right conspiracy theory that the vice president's campaign faked an image of a large crowd at her rally in Michigan last week.

Well, that's easily disproved by photos and videos taken by attendees and media, showing thousands of supporters at the rally.

The Harris campaign said there were 15,000 people there.

My next guest has been warning about disinformation and artificial intelligence for years. Darrell M. West is a senior fellow at the Center for Technology Innovation and the Douglas Dillon Chair in governmental studies at the Brookings Institution.

Darrell, thank you for your time. So, now, we're talking about Elon Musk's Grok. How does this A.I. tool differ from the others out there, and how does it work in terms of its ease of use?

DARRELL WEST, SENIOR FELLOW OF THE CENTER FOR TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION: Well, Amara, you are right. This is a huge problem. And in that particular tool, Twitter/X has not imposed very many human guardrails on the use of this. Some of the other large media platforms also have photo creation tools, but they already have put in place policies that you cannot manipulate the image of well-known figures such as Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, all these companies have policies that you can't use these tools to deceive people who see them and lead to harms for the election process.

But Twitter/X is not enforcing its very own policies, and Elon Musk has actually circulated a false information himself. So, he is actually part of the problem.

WALKER: Yes, he has absolutely circulated some of these conspiracy theories. Can you talk to us about the dangers that you have been warning people about, you know, regarding these A.I. generated images.

How are they being used today, and how do you see it impacting our upcoming presidential election?

WEST: Well, we have a new book out entitled, "Lies that Kill: A Citizen's Guide to Disinformation". And in this election, we're just seeing so many fake pictures and videos.

I've seen pictures of Kamala Harris in a swimming suit hugging convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. That picture never took place. There are images of Trump being dragged away by the police that never happened. There is false information about the voting process, where to vote, when to vote, and who can vote.

We are seeing disinformation on steroids this year, and it's very risky for our election process, and it's probably going to get worse as we get closer to election day. I think everybody is anticipating this will be a very close election. And the question is, if it comes down to 50,000 votes in two or three states, are people going to be making up their minds based on false narratives?

WALKER: Then, what can we as consumers do to make sure that we are getting real and not fake information or being swayed by fake pictures?

WEST: I mean, in our book, we present a lot of information about what citizens can do to protect themselves. There are simple things, like on these fake images, count the number of fingers. If they are six fingers, not five fingers, we know that's a problem. You can look at how the head is placed on the neck of the individual. There are particular problems facing female politicians. Oftentimes their heads are being placed on the naked bodies of other women, but doing so in a way to humiliate and shame them.

A lot of companies are starting to watermark images and videos so that the creator of that content is identified. And if there are any problems, we can go back and hold that individual accountable for problems that take place.

We also really need to keep track of the possible foreign influence campaigns. Like we've already seen, Iran, Russia, and China, engage in nefarious tactics, hacking e-mails, setting up fake news sites, and using that to circulate false information. So, there are lots of things people need to do to protect themselves in this election season.

WALKER: It's so scary because the very existence of this kind of technology allows people just to deny reality period. Darrell West, we're going to leave it there. Thank you.