Challenging student views on generative AI in politics

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What's this all about: a module in honors seminar taught at Al Akhawayn University in Fall 2024

- FOCUS: How generative AI is used in political discourse, especially through the creation of fake material, and how this contributes to the erosion of trust in the political process

- GOAL: Develop critical attitude towards the use of AI in politics and other contexts (e.g. personal use)

- FRAMEWORK of the course:

  - 3-week module (co-taught with another faculty member whose focus was the need for the regulation of AI technologies)

  - Broader context: three other modules on AI with different foci taught by other faculty

  - Honors program students — a small group of eight — coming from three majors (mostly computer science, business administration, and international relations)

Assessing pre-conditions: how students feel about/use AI

- On average, students are complacent about AI, with some variation in attitudes:

  - Some are ecstatic: AI will save the world

  - Some (well, one...) are appalled: AI will be the doom of humanity ("it makes us stupid")

  - Most are coy about how much they use AI for schoolwork

Setting the stage: doing some reading

- Students were asked to read two articles from recent news:
  - https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/03/botshit-generative-ai-imminent-threat-democracy
  - https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/19/ai-generated-disinformation-us-elections

- Students were asked to find one or two articles of their choice in the media

- We dicussed:

  - How we choose our sources:

    - Shortage of reliable sources <—> some students showed mistrust of news wholesale

  - Main points highlighted by various sources:

    - AI-generated "hallucinations" (plausible but untrue information)

    - AI-generated content used for political expediency (e.g. election campaigns)

    - Citizens /voters may make decisions based on AI-generated falsehoods

    - Citizens may become disillusioned in political discourse and therefore shun the political engagement

Fake news experiment: what I asked students to do (verbatim)

- Create a piece of fake news using AI tools (topic of the news is subject to my approval).

- Document the process of creation: questions considered, doubts, reflections. Tell a story!

- Attempt a careful and controlled dissemination: you are looking for reaction of the recipients. If you choose not to disseminate, provide a comprehensive reasoning behind your choice.

Note: Students worked in self-determined pairs

Fake news experiment: what students did

- Headlines chosen:

    - Return of Terminator Seeds Sparks Global Outrage and Fears of Agricultural Catastrophe

    - Morocco introduces visa requirements for Algerian citizens amid rising tensions

    - 20% of Moroccans are losing their jobs because of AI this year

    - ~~President Joe Biden Secretly Admitted to Being 'Too Tired' to Run for Re-Election, White House Insider Claims~~ Mandatory One-Year Rural Service for Medical Students

Terminator Seeds Return Sparks Global Alarm Over Food Security Risks

GMOs: A Necessary Tool or a Risky Gamble?

By Nathanael Johnson, Senior Reporter, Grist.

The debate over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has reached new heights as the world grapples with food security and climate change. Proponents argue that GMOs can help meet the demands of a growing global population by boosting crop yields, while critics raise concerns about the long-term environmental and health impacts.

Dr. Alison Van Eenennaam, a geneticist at the University of California, Davis, has been at the forefront of GMO research, advocating for their potential to solve some of the most pressing agricultural challenges. "We can make crops more resistant to drought, pests, and even disease," she says. "This is crucial in a world where climate change is threatening food production."

But organizations like Greenpeace and the Organic Consumers Association remain skeptical. They argue that while GMOs may provide short-term gains, they could pose risks to biodiversity and may lead to increased pesticide use over time.

A protester in Mexico City, 2024, opposing the reintroduction of 'terminator seeds' after decades of controversy surrounding their use in global agriculture. Photo: Carlos Fuentes/Associated Press

The Ethics of Patent-Protected Seeds: Innovation or Exploitation?

By Mark Lynas, Food Policy Writer and Author

The debate over patent-protected seeds has been reignited, particularly in the wake of Bayer-Monsanto's latest announcement about their new line of genetically engineered crops. These seeds, designed to be more resistant to pests and climate conditions, are also engineered to be non-replicable, forcing farmers to buy new seeds each season.

While companies like Bayer argue that patents on seeds are essential for innovation, critics worry that these technologies put too much control over the global food supply in the hands of a few corporations. Dr. Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist and advocate for farmers' rights, has long argued that such practices exploit small farmers and endanger biodiversity.

"We are witnessing the monopolization of our food systems," Dr. Shiva said in a recent speech at the UN. "Farmers are losing the right to save their seeds, which has been a practice for millennia. This is not just about seeds—it's about control."

Fake news experiment: what students did

- Problems encountered:

    - Good fake headlines are not easy to come by

    - ChatGPT is very compliant when prompted for fake news

    - Dissemination, even in very controlled conditions, can seem risky

Fake news experiment: what students found

- It's <u>easy</u>: You don't need much time or skill to create a decent quality piece of fake news

- People are highly <u>credulous</u>: Most people will believe any piece of information when it is appropriately packaged

- <u>Fact-checking is scarce</u>: Few people will question the veracity of the information presented in "news"

  - Though few, some recipients took pains to double-check some of the claims presented to them

Take-aways from this experience: what students learned

- Based on class discussion and final reflection write-ups, students have shown appreciation of the potential danger generative AI poses to the political process

- The ease with which students were able to produce believable fake news and the credulity that was nearly generally displayed by the recipients highlight the scale of the problem (in contrast to the old-school fake news)

- The ubiquity of fake news (or the perception thereof) erodes the trust of the public in the media coverage of politics and/or political process

- An associated danger is that even the news that are verifiable can be deliberately discounted on the ground of existence of fake news

Take-aways from this experience: what students didn't learn

- Based on the final reflection write-ups, I only saw at best minor shifts in attitudes towards AI in general from the students' 'before' views: students who held positive opinion about AI's potential held on to their positions, while those who were skeptical to start with, did the same.

  - Change in attitudes requires time and exposure, but the latter isn't guaranteed to take place given conflicting information available to students

- There seemed to be little effect of the 'danger of AI use in politics' discussion on the personal use of AI among students: in all three written assignments, there were some students using ChatGPT for their submissions (sometimes close to 100%).

  - My hopes of implicit learning were dashed!

Thank you for listening!

- If you have comments, questions, collab suggestions, contact me at a.khasanova@aui.ma