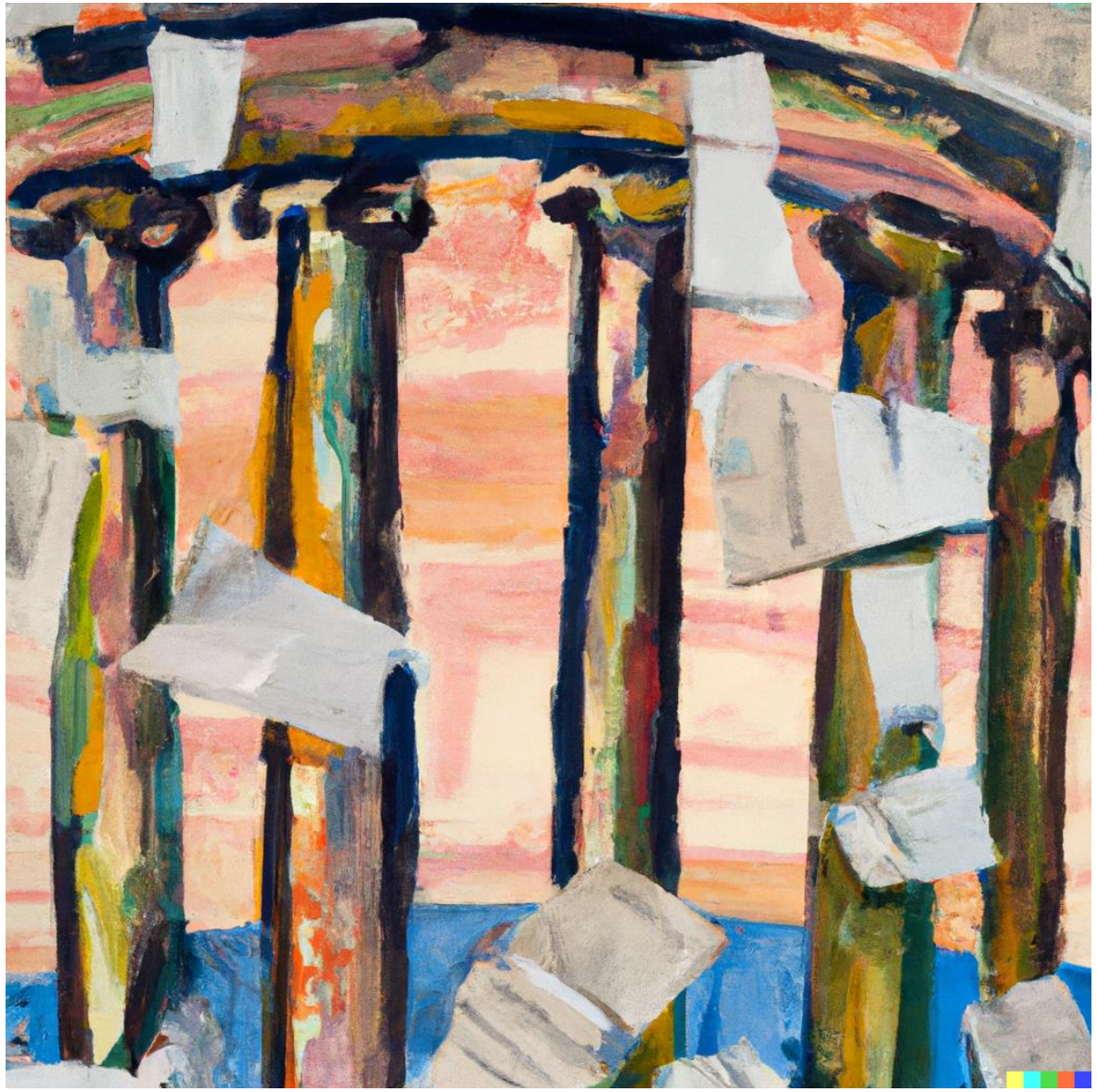


What should we make of the role of AI in elections?

Dr Felix M. Simon

Reuters Institute & Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

ESSAYS AND SCHOLARSHIP

Don't Panic (Yet): Assessing the Evidence and Discourse Around Generative AI and Elections

Why claims about the impact of generative AI on elections have been overblown

BY FELIX M. SIMON & SACHA ALTAY
JULY 7, 2025



Sébastien A. Krier using Midjourney 6.1

Abstract

Prominent voices worry that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will negatively impact elections worldwide and trigger a misinformation apocalypse. A recurrent fear is that GenAI will make it easier to influence voters and facilitate the creation and dissemination of potent mis- and disinformation. We argue that despite the incredible capabilities of GenAI systems, their influence on election outcomes has been overestimated. Looking back at 2024, the predicted outsized effects of GenAI did not happen and were overshadowed by traditional sources of influence. We review current evidence on the impact of GenAI in the 2024 elections and identify several reasons why the impact of GenAI on elections has been overblown. These include the inherent challenges of mass persuasion, the complexity of media effects and people's interaction with technology, the difficulty of reaching target audiences, and the limited effectiveness of AI-driven microtargeting in political campaigns. Additionally, we argue that the socioeconomic, cultural, and personal factors that shape voting behavior outweigh the influence of AI-generated content. We further analyze the bifurcated discourse on GenAI's role in elections, framing it as part of the ongoing "cycle of technology panics." While acknowledging AI's risks, such as amplifying social inequalities, we argue that focusing on AI distracts from more structural threats to elections and democracy, including voter disenfranchisement and attacks on election integrity. The paper calls for a recalibration of the narratives around AI and elections, proposing a nuanced approach that considers AI within broader sociopolitical contexts.

This talk is based on joint work with Sacha Altay for Seth Lazar's "AI & Democratic Futures" project

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Why elections matter

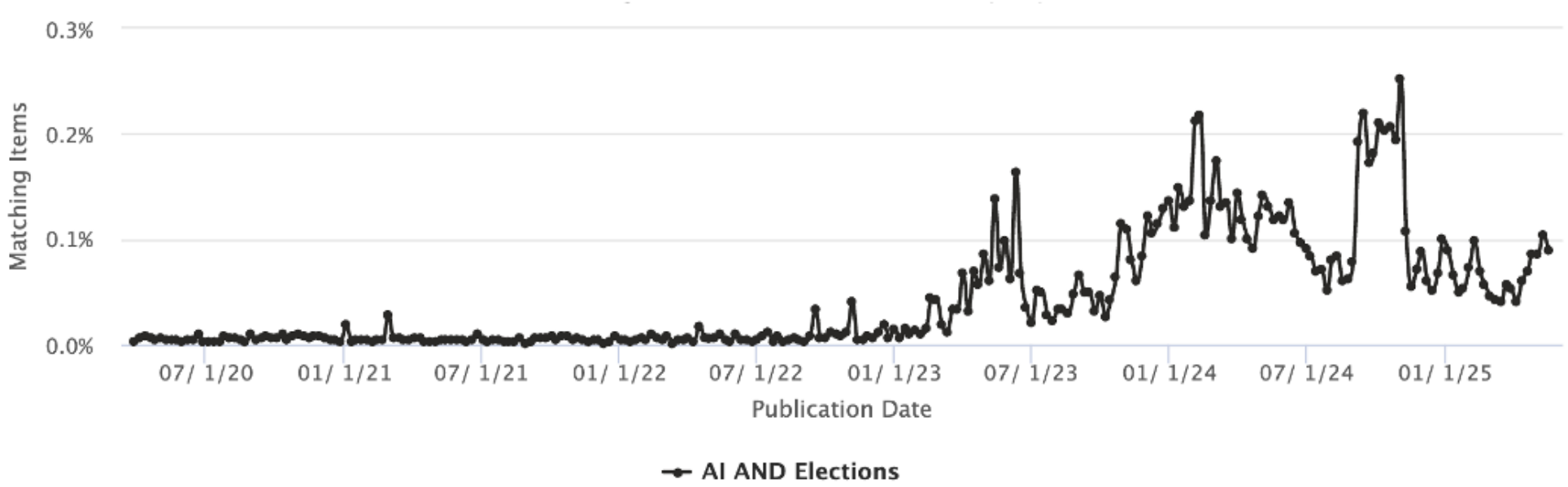
Democracy: A system of government in which power is vested in the people & rulers are elected through competitive elections

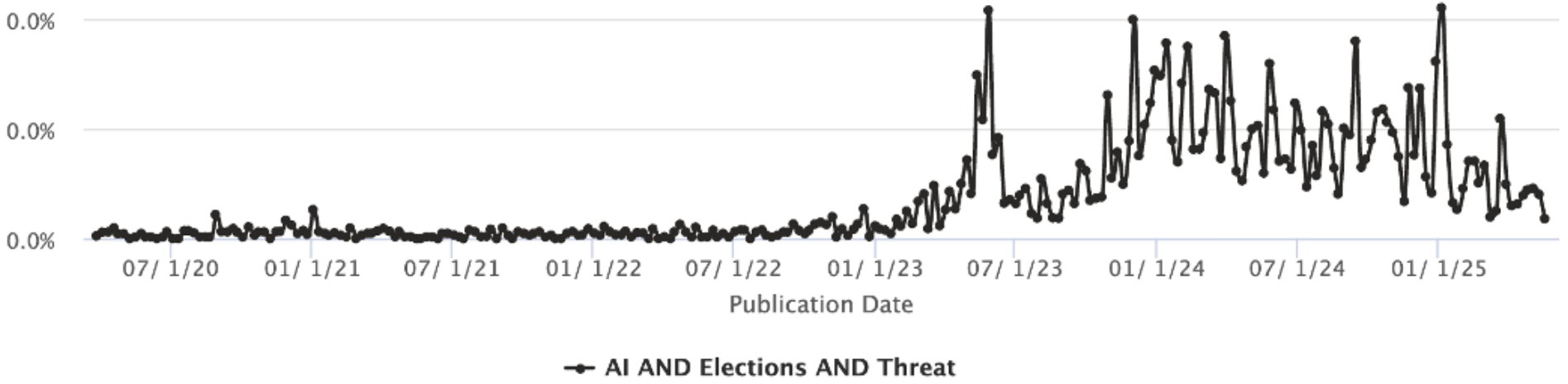
Elections: The key mechanism to “choose the choosers”

Level of democracy	Area of impact of AI	Focus of this talk
Individual	Self-rule	✓
Group	Equality	✗
Institutional	Elections	✓
System	Competition between systems	✗

Jungherr, A. (2023). Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3), 20563051231186353. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186353, p. 3

Elections and AI are a big topic





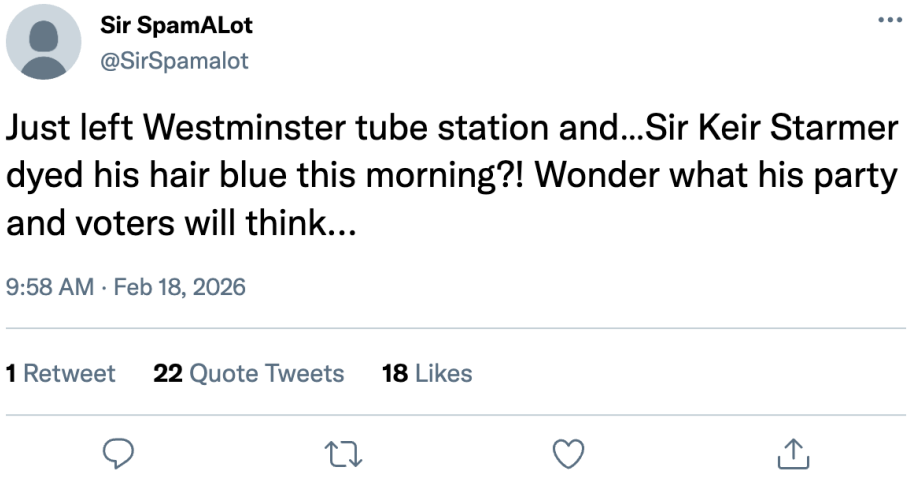
The number of news articles mentioning "AI" and "elections" and specifically referencing "threat" has grown since 2022

Six recurring claims in the AI-elections discourse

Claim	Presumed effect
1) ↑ quantity of (mis)information	↑ reach for misinformation & actors; crowding out of "good" information
2) ↑ quality of (mis)information	↑ persuasion; ↑ susceptibility
3) Destabilisation of reality	↑ undue skepticism; ↓ trust; 'liar's dividend'
4) Personalisation at scale	↑ persuasion via tailored messages
5) New modes of consumption	↑ misinformed; lower-quality/biased outputs; crowding out
6) Human–AI relationships	↑ persuasion/manipulation via agentic companions

Claim 1: Will AI flood the infosphere with (mis)information?

- Probably, but…
- Existing oversupply > marginal utility of adding more.

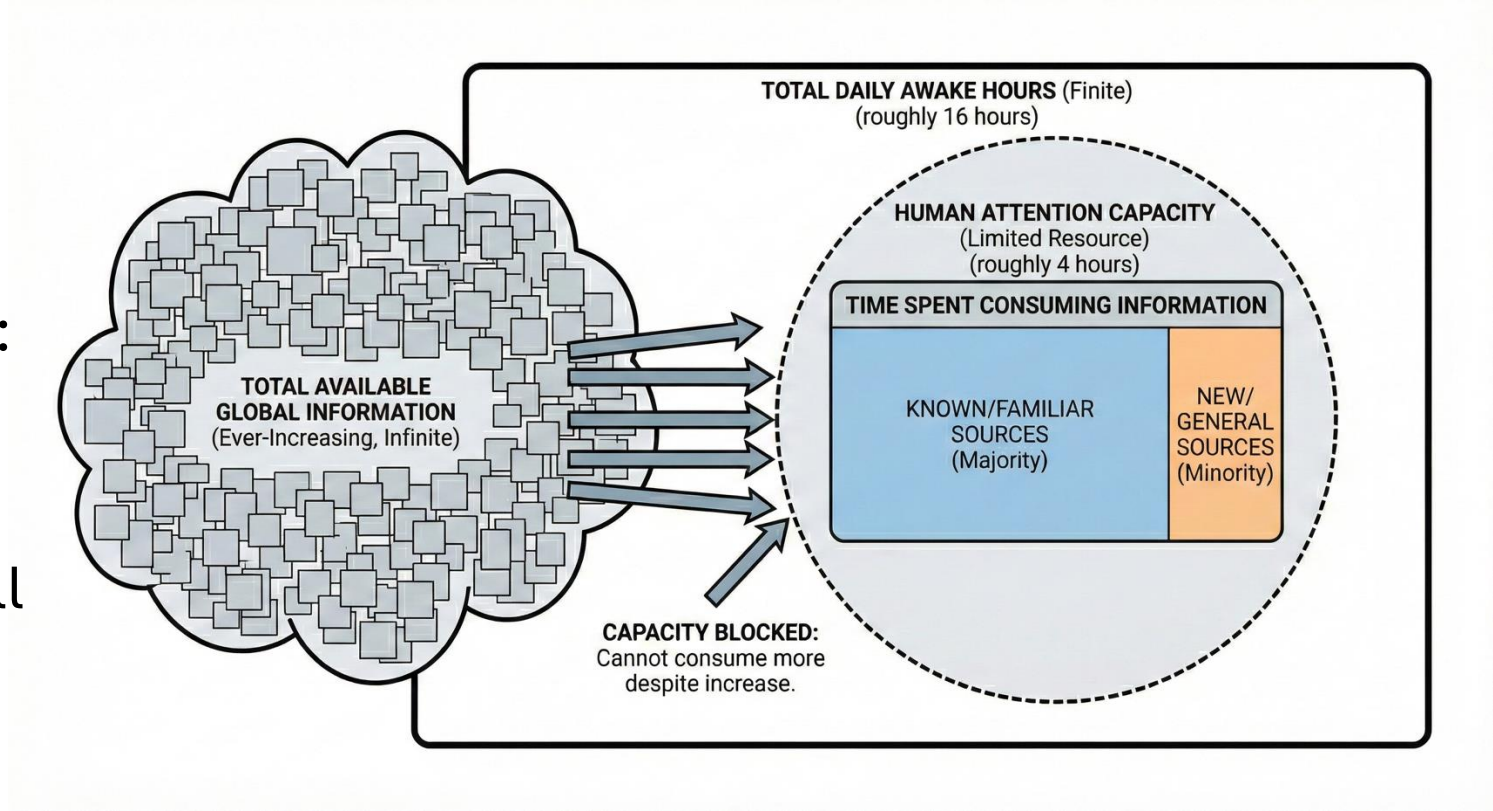




Uncollected rubbish keeps piling up in various London councils. (Source: Getty Images/BBC)

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- But people mostly rely on a small set of trusted sources; and (still) go to news if they want to fact-check



Claim 1: Will AI flood the infosphere with (mis)information?

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- Attention is the main bottleneck: content must be seen to matter. But people mostly rely on a small set of trusted sources; and (still) go to news if they want to fact-check
- Demand matters as much as supply; fringe audiences seek misinformation, most do not
- Net effect: No good evidence for an unmet demand or scarcity of misinformation. Flooding fears are overstated in high-choice, saturated environments (but potentially different in other contexts)

Claim 2: Will AI raise the quality of misinfo & boost persuasion?

- High fidelity ≠ high persuasion: effects hinge more on source credibility and people's existing beliefs than polish and quality of content
- Audiences evaluate realism alongside contextual cues and prior knowledge
- Reputational incentives discourage many, including news outlets and many politicians from using deceptive and highly-realistic forms of GenAI
- The "Will people even see it" argument applies here, too
- Bottom line: better fakes do not automatically translate into larger electoral effects

Claim 3: Will realism from GenAI unravel shared reality?







Source: ElevenLabs

People across the world are increasingly worried about what can be trusted …

2025 Digital News Report (48 markets)

58%

… worldwide are concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet.

UK, Ofcom November 2024

30%

…feel confident telling whether an image/audio/video is AI-generated

Images could always be faked (and people knew)…



…and people can even disagree over real ones



By Cecilia Bleasdale - https://web.archive.org/web/20150227014959/http://swiked.tumblr.com/post/112073818575/guys-please-help-me-is-this-dress-white-and, Fair use, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=69200610

Realism is important for trust in information, including around elections, but realism ≠ the only reason for trust



And will AI make people distrust everything?

Likely not…



Claim 3: Will realism from GenAI unravel shared reality?

- Existence of GenAI may lower perceived media/content credibility in the short run (Simon et al., forthcoming; Campante et al. 2025)
- But people still anchor judgments in source trust and contextual knowledge, including around elections
- Historically, societies adapt norms and tools to handle new 'manipulation technologies' (Mercier, 2020; Habgood-Coote, 2023)
- Little evidence of generalised 'nothing is real' skepticism so far

Claim 4: Will AI deliver effective persuasion-at-scale?

- Efficacy of ‘microtargeting’ overstated but newer AI systems are persuasive

  (e.g. Hackenburg et al. 2025)

- What’s theoretically & experimentally possible ≠ what campaigns actually do at scale. Limited advanced AI adoption in many places

- Bottleneck remains: reaching people and getting their attention

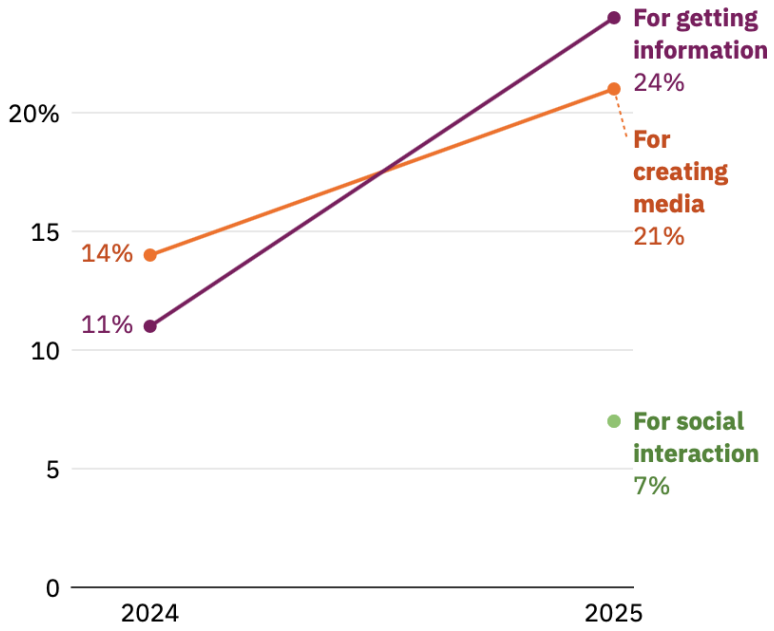
- Personalisation is not inherently anti-democratic; depends on exposure diversity and what it is used for

- Net: expectations of pervasive, highly effective AI microtargeting are often overstated

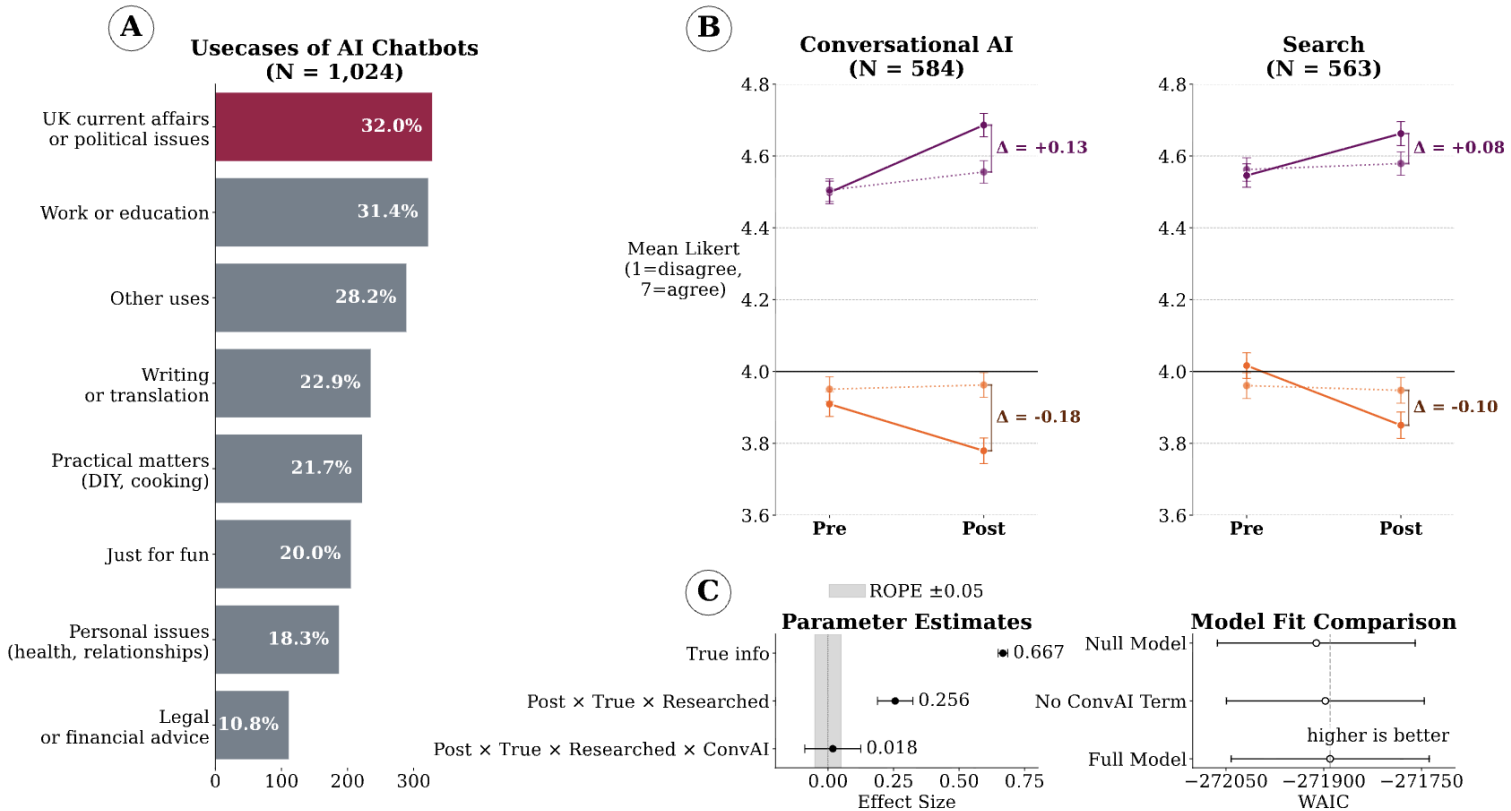
Claim 5: Do AI-enabled consumption formats misinform people or crowd out news?

- GenAI is being integrated into search and platforms and used for information;

  adoption for news remains modest so far (Newman et al., 2025, Simon et al., 2025)



AI_outputs. Which, if any, of the following have you tried to use it for in the last week (even if it didn't work)? *Base: Total sample across Argentina, Denmark, France, Japan, UK, USA in each year ≈ 12,000.*



"Using generative AI for getting information is now the most widespread use of the technology, overtaking using it for creating media such as text, images, video, and code, though the latter also increased, up 7 percentage points to 21% in 2025" (Simon et al., 2025)

"[…] in the week before the 2024 election as many as 32% of chatbot users – and 13% of eligible UK voters – have used conversational AI to seek political information relevant to their electoral choice.

Second, in a series of randomised controlled trials (N = 2,858 total) we find […] conversations with AI increase political knowledge (increase belief in true information and decrease belief in misinformation) to the same extent as self-directed internet search." (Luettgau et al., 2025)

Claim 5: Do AI-enabled consumption formats misinform people or crowd out news?

- GenAI is being integrated into search and platforms and used for information; adoption for news remains modest so far (Newman et al., 2025, Simon et al., 2025)
- Chatbots can deliver plausible but inaccurate information, but again heuristics & audiences not less well-informed (Luettgau et al., 2025) + people receive information from a variety of sources, especially in high-choice media environments
- Potential second-order risks: crowding out authoritative providers; weakening news economics; lack of plurality (Jungherr, 2023; Altay, 2024)

Claim 6: Will AI companions enable seamless manipulation?

- More ‘agentic’ systems may foster deeper user attachment and attitude shaping. (Kirk et al., 2025)
- Such bonds may enable persuasion, but evidence suggests limits
- Persuasion still faces cognitive, social, and institutional bottlenecks; use remains limited. And belief change ≠ behaviour change
- Companies have started introducing safeguards; AI does not cut off other information exposure
- Open area for research; vigilance warranted

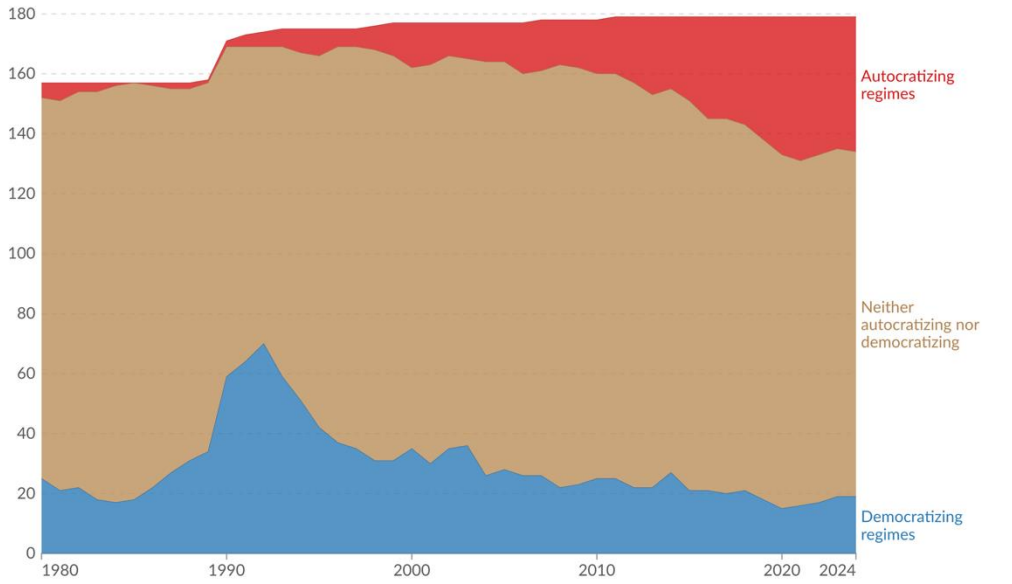
Consequences of a skewed AI discourse (1)

- Overemphasis on election misuses can obscure other AI-enabled harms (e.g., harassment, gendered abuse)
- Skewed focus risks neglecting structural threats that matter more for electoral integrity and democracy:
  - Unfair electoral systems and weak campaign finance regulation (Falguera et al., 2014). Undermining of independent and impartial electoral management bodies (Elklit & Reynolds, 2005).
  - Operational failures — e.g., voter registration errors, ballot mishandling, or unfair special voting arrangements — can disadvantage voters.
  - Ballot access restrictions and governance manipulation (e.g., voter ID laws, purges, gerrymandering, intimidation) pose serious risks to electoral integrity (Bermeo, 2016; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Norris, 2015).
  - Curtailment of press freedom and freedom of expression — through legal pressure, media capture, or violence against journalists — undermines accountability and informed voting.

A growing number of countries have slid back democratically over the last decades

Countries that are democratizing and autocratizing, World

Data by Episodes of Regime Transformation[1] and V-Dem[2].



Data source: Episodes of Regime Transformation (2025)

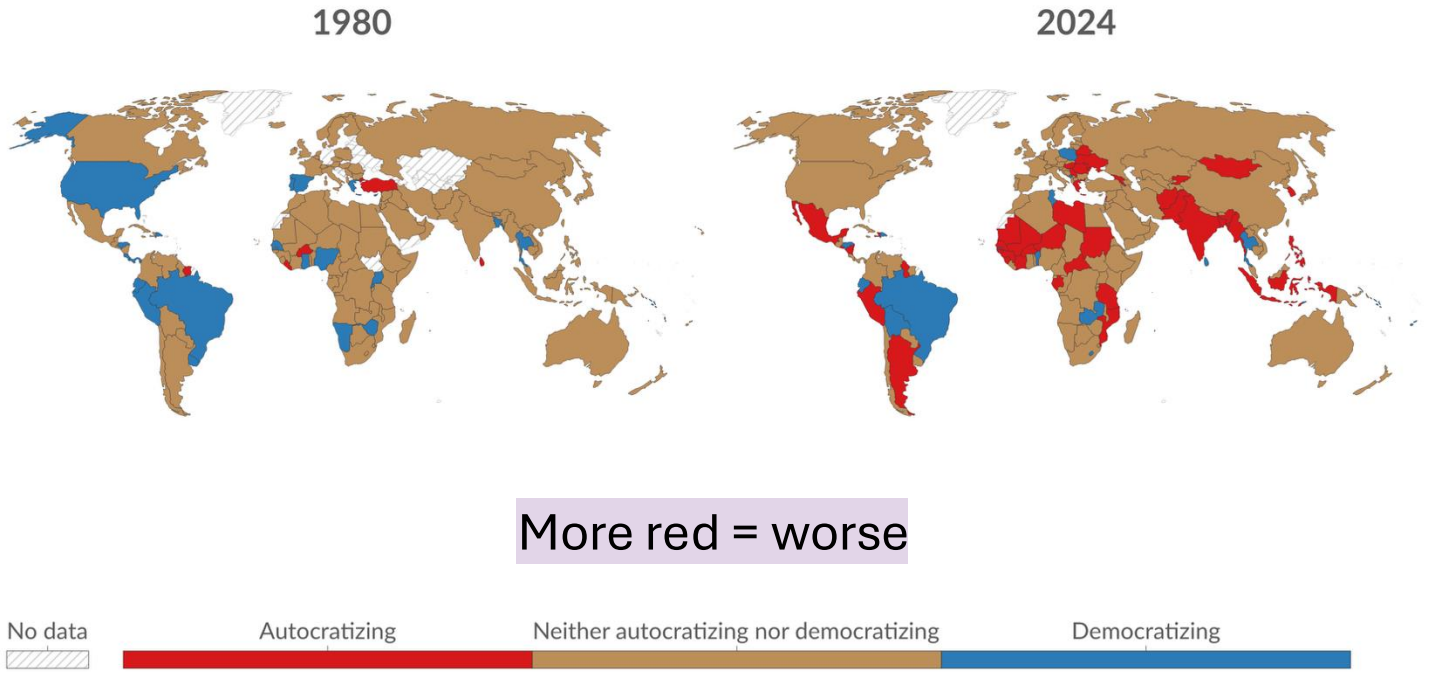
OurWorldinData.org/democracy | CC BY

1. Episodes of Regime Transformations' regime classification Autocratizing country: a country that is becoming less electorally democratic, and has seen a substantial decrease in its degree of electoral democracy.
Democratizing country: a country that is becoming more electorally democratic, and has seen a substantial increase in its degree of electoral democracy.
Read more in our article: The world has recently become less democratic

2. V-Dem The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project publishes data and research on democracy and human rights.
It relies on evaluations by around 3,500 country experts and supplementary work by its own researchers to assess political institutions and the protection of rights.
The project is managed by the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.
Learn more:
Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy?
The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure democracy?
The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure human rights?

Democratic change, 1980 to 2024

Data by Episodes of Regime Transformation[1] and V-Dem[2].



Data source: Episodes of Regime Transformation (2025)

OurWorldinData.org/democracy | CC BY

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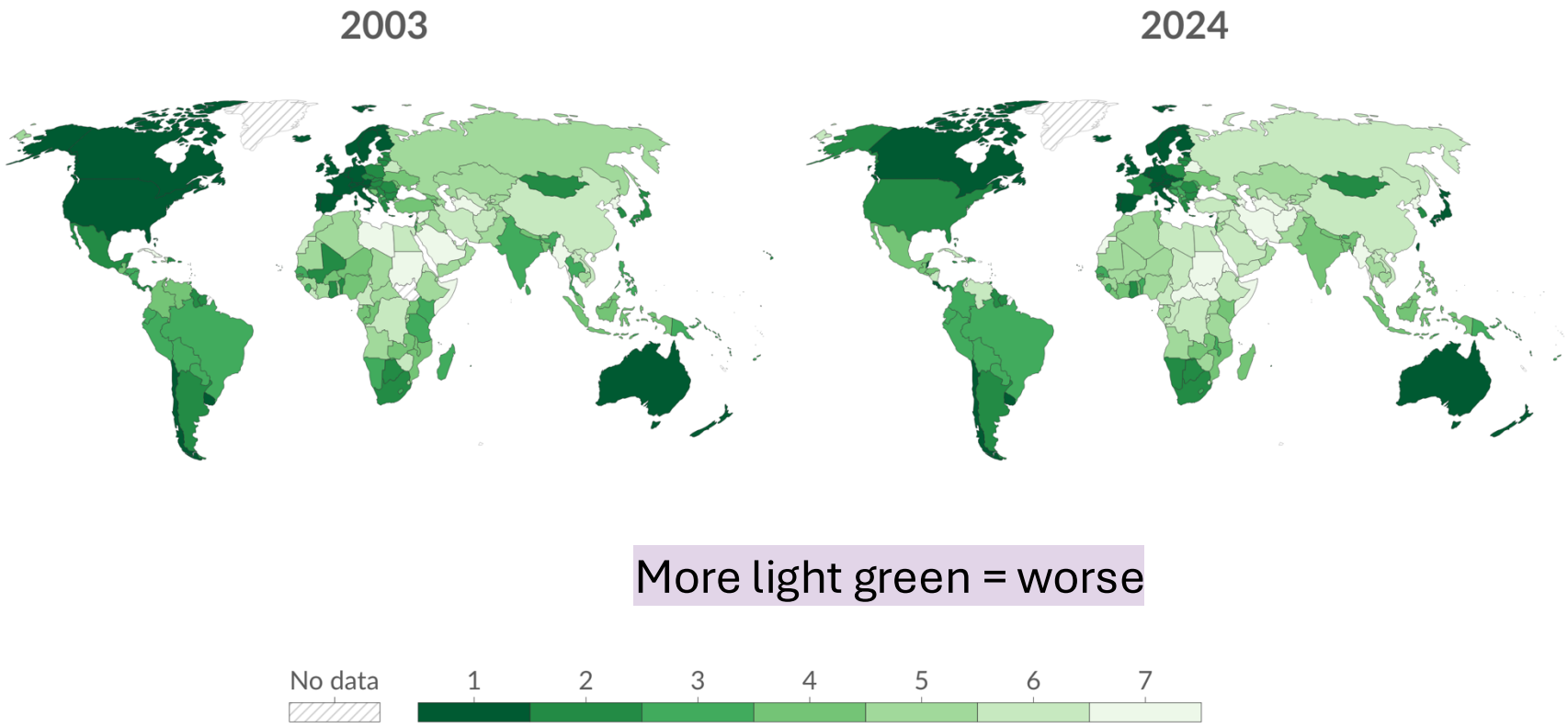
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Civil liberties (freedom of expression and association, rule of law, personal autonomy) have also eroded or were never present to begin with

Civil liberties rating, 2003 to 2024

Our World in Data

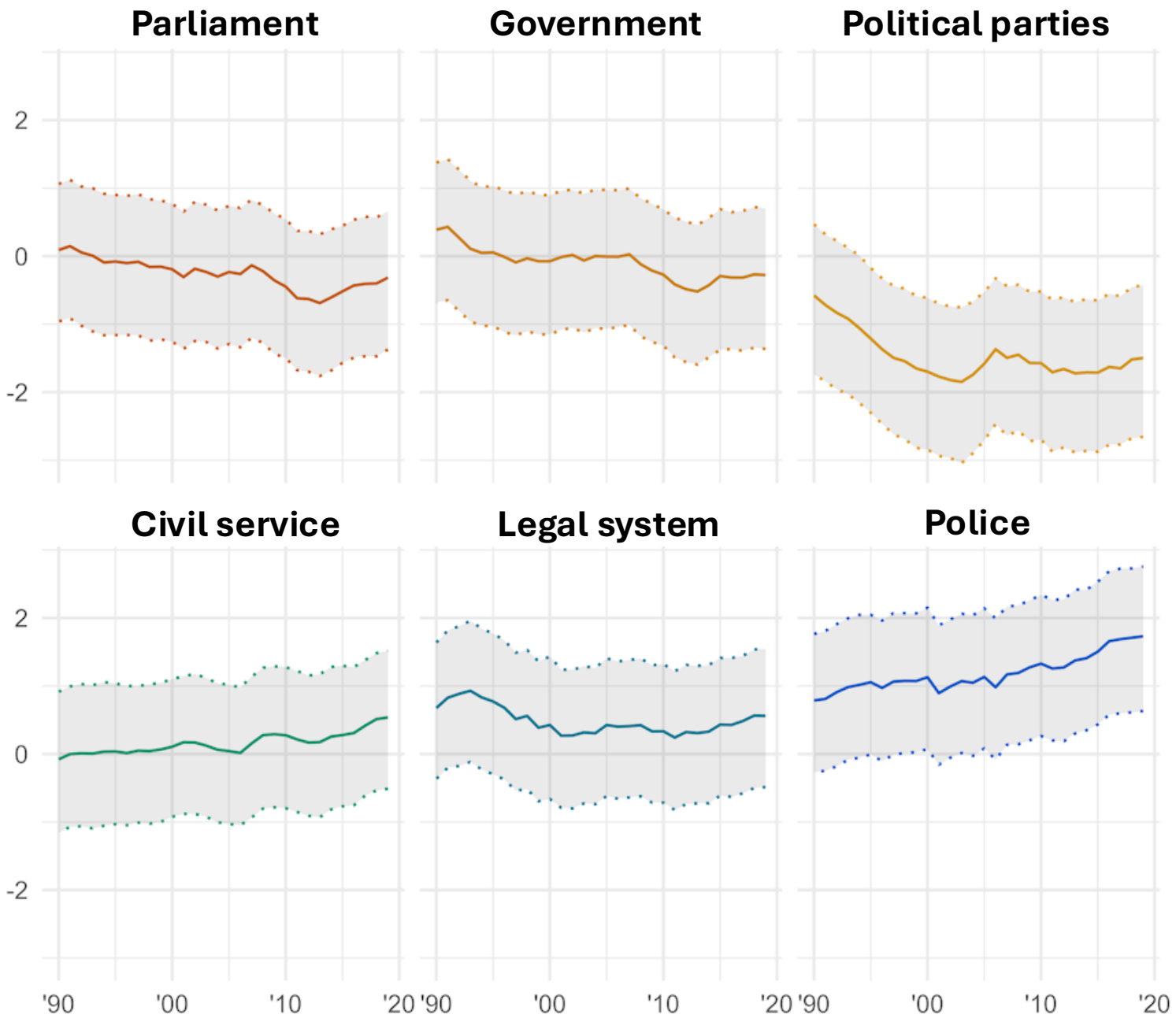
Data by Freedom House[1]. It captures the extent of freedom of expression and association, the rule of law, and personal autonomy. Lower ratings indicate more liberties.



Data source: Freedom House (2025)

OurWorldinData.org/democracy | CC BY

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Learn more: Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy?



Trust in politics across democratic countries has been declining since the 1990s

Valgarðsson V, Jennings W, Stoker G, et al. A Crisis of Political Trust? Global Trends in Institutional Trust from 1958 to 2019. British Journal of Political Science. 2025;55:e15. doi:10.1017/S0007123424000498

Consequences of a skewed AI discourse (2)

- Alarmist narratives may drive suboptimal or instrumentalised policy responses.
- Opportunity costs: time, resources, and political capital diverted from core electoral safeguards.
- Caution: overreaction can still be preferable to underreaction—but trade-offs must be made explicit.
- Need to balance vigilance about AI with attention to enduring procedural safeguards

Recap: What we know so far

- Flooding fears overstated: attention is the main bottleneck; supply ≠ consumption
- Higher-quality fakes ≠ higher persuasion: source trust and prior beliefs matter more
- Reality not unravelling: people adapt, using source cues and context to judge credibility
- Persuasion: persuasion with facts works, personalisation (microtargeting) yields small effects, campaigns rarely deploy it, experiment ≠ real world
- AI for information: risk of false or biased information, but systems improving, diverse information diets; second-order risks to monitor
- AI companions: open research area; cognitive and social bottlenecks apply

Research agenda — selected questions

- Map prevalence, modality, aims, and distribution networks of AI election content
- Identify most at risk-groups and contexts
- Compare volumes: AI- vs human-generated election content; track tone/civility effects
- Test effectiveness of personalised AI messages and interactions with prior beliefs
- Evaluate GenAI's accuracy, detail, plurality, and substitution effects on news and information use
- Probe whether AI companions scale, who is most at risk, and how attachment shapes susceptibility