

# GENERATIVE AI AND DEMOCRACY

## IN BRIEF

- Generative artificial intelligence (AI) holds both opportunities and, in some cases, considerable risks for democracy.
- Generative AI significantly simplifies, reduces the cost of, and enhances the persuasiveness of non-fact-based manipulative content (so-called fake news) on social media.
- The many risks also include loss of trust, concentration of power, hybrid threats, and much more.
- Opportunities exist, for example, in processing information or record keeping.
- A balanced mix of measures must be taken to protect democratic processes.

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Democratic systems are constantly evolving. Technology plays a significant role, particularly digitalisation, which has long influenced the institutions of representative democracy: from the public presentation on the internet and communication flows on the intranet of political institutions, to the significance of social media in shaping political opinions, especially during pre-election periods, and for fostering political discourse, culminating in the live broadcasting of party events or parliamentary debates. Academics speak of a "digital structural change in the public sphere".

Although artificial intelligence (AI) has been the subject of research and development for decades and has achieved considerable success in various fields (e.g., medicine and research), it is only recently that the rise of so-called generative AI has attracted wider attention. This term describes software capable of generating new content using machine learning and extensive datasets (text, images, audio, video) using statistical methods and neural networks. The most prominent example is

ChatGPT. Generative AI applications are spreading rapidly due to their affordability, ease of use, and effective and fast content generation. This spread extends to the general population and specialised applications, particularly in the media sector, and is beginning to transform the public discourse space.



Word cloud on German terms related to discourse distortion

It is now possible to create AI-generated content without prior knowledge, requiring minimal resource investment, and producing quality that non-experts often fail to recognise. In contrast, it is unlikely that technically identifying content as AI-generated will be feasible, even in the long term.

This harbours both opportunities and risks, particularly for democracy. The opportunities include, for example, the automated creation of protocols or the representation of complex texts in simplified language. On the other hand, it appears risky that the use of non-fact-based manipulative content (so-called fake news) in social media, which has been observed for some time now, will become significantly easier, cheaper and – due to the greater persuasive power of moving images for humans – presumably even more effective thanks to generative AI. Therefore, a significant increase in the use of AI technology is expected, especially because social media's high reach and algorithms favour the dissemination of deepfakes (deceptive, genuine-looking images, video, and audio recordings created or manipulated by AI).

## KEY DATA

<b>Project title</b>	Generative AI and Democracy
<b>Project team</b>	Nentwich, M., Bettin, S., Favreuille, S., Fischer, F., Jahnel, J., Krieger-Lamina, J., and Peissl, W.
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<b>Client:</b>	Austrian Parliament

## KEY RESULTS

Generative AI can potentially exacerbate existing biases, such as hate speech and echo chambers, primarily by facilitating the creation of misleading, damaging, and polarising content, as well as fake accounts for disinformation campaigns.

However, there are also additional specific consequences of generative AI: bias can occur based on the data used for training, and misinformation (without intention to deceive) can be "learnt" and disseminated. In the medium term, a reduction of diversity in the discourse is expected. Additionally, there is a fundamental lack of reliability in large language models, leading to the risk of misinformation due to so-called hallucinations.



Credits: heise.de

In the 2024 Indian election campaign, a candidate discusses with an avatar of himself.

Deepfakes have the potential to jeopardise democratic processes, as politicians in particular are a target group for attacks. Discrediting individuals results in psychological and financial consequences while discrediting political parties, journalism, and the media causes a loss of credibility and the corresponding weakening of democratic institutions. Finally, deepfakes can serve as a powerful tool for propaganda.

The many consequences of this new technology also include the growing concentration of economic power in the area of AI development and the range of corresponding applications (keyword: digital sovereignty) as well as the potential for use in hybrid warfare: public opinion in the opposing population can be influenced by AI-generated disinformation, thereby destabilising public order and weakening trust in democratic structures.

## WHAT TO DO

**Of the numerous regulatory, organisational, and technical approaches to address the consequences of generative AI for democracy, the following in particular were highlighted for closer examination by the Austrian Parliament:**

- Set up a parliamentary commission of enquiry on "Democracy and AI"
- Develop a code of conduct on AI in politics
- Hold nationwide citizens' forums on fundamental issues of democratic discourse
- Promote people's media and AI literacy
- Position Austria in the EU as a pioneer strengthening proactively democratic institutions and processes
- Set initiatives towards digital sovereignty for state-run democratic infrastructure
- Establish a European online platform in compliance with EU regulations that facilitates meaningful discourse and promotes democracy
- Systematically and consistently resist attempts at manipulation with suitable institutions
- Promote the development of promising AI applications in a political context
- Boost research accompanying AI development and prepare an annual monitoring report on digital political communication in Austria

## READ MORE

Nentwich, M. et al, 2025, Generative AI and Democracy (in German with extensive English abstract). Final Report January 2025, on behalf of the Parliamentary Administration, No. ITA-2025-01, January, Vienna: ITA  
[epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-project-reports/ITA-2025-01.pdf](http://epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-project-reports/ITA-2025-01.pdf)

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