

Venezuela: The use of artificial intelligence to deceive voters

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Last week, Maduro's regime used one of its lackeys, Pedro Carreño, to spread an audio in which, supposedly, María Corina Machado admits that the opposition is a minority, and that's why there's low attendance at rallies in the country. They also want to make it seem like the candidate is convinced that the primary process should end because "funding has already happened", which benefits everyone.

Nicolás Maduro's regime resorted to cloning María Corina's voice using artificial intelligence (AI) technology. However, the AI model's pronunciation was not convincing to those who have carefully listened to the leader of Vente Venezuela.

The video intends to manipulate the tastes, problems, limitations, and needs of the followers of the "Bolivarian revolution", who have begun to identify with María Corina Machado's message of hope emotionally.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of digital communication in Venezuela, where approximately two-thirds of the population actively participate in social networks and consider them a reliable source of information. Notably, trust in these channels tends to be higher among individuals aligned with the opposition than those who support the official regime.

If we accept that everyone can express their opinions on any topic, we must also admit that only some have the legitimate right to construct their version of the facts. In the analog sphere, this statement was largely unquestionable. However, this principle faces significant challenges in the contemporary context of virtual reality and information technologies. Nowadays, the manipulation of "facts" can be carried out with such precision, efficiency, and economy that the notion of reality becomes a minefield of anomalies, uncertainties, intentional omissions, and ad hoc "truths".

The electoral campaign for the October 22 primary is distorted due to the persecution and propagation of disinformation concerning both the pre-candidates and the integrity of the electoral process orchestrated by the Venezuelan regime. In this sense, the determination to carry out the electoral campaign and the preservation of truthful information stands as a fundamental pillar for the sustainability of Venezuelan democracy, particularly in a context marked by escalating attacks against pre-candidates and accurate information.

Before the rise of advanced generative AI technologies, misinformation was already a problematic element in the functioning of contemporary democracies.

This phenomenon becomes sharper and particularly relevant in Venezuelan, where authoritarian and coercive tactics are not confined to the state institutional sphere alone. Indeed, the regime has extended its control strategy to social media platforms and the media. Through censorship and the dissemination of erroneous or false information, it seeks to perpetuate its hold on power.

According to the report published in 2020 by the University of Navarra in collaboration with Transparency Venezuela, titled “The phenomenon of digital misinformation [in Venezuela]”, traditional channels of information such as television and radio continue to occupy a predominant position in the information consumption of the majority of the population, closely followed by social networks. The study also highlights that individuals’ political self-identification significantly influences the media they prefer for information. Specifically, 51.4% of individuals aligned with Maduro’s regime opt to get their information through news programs or TV shows, in contrast to the 26.3% of citizens identified with the opposition who resort to these traditional sources.

Similarly, the report indicates that social media platforms are the main source of information for 39.0% of subjects identified with the political opposition, in stark contrast to the 14.7% of individuals who express support for Maduro’s regime. This data reveals a significant divergence in media preferences between both political forces.

The criminal-mafia state has strategically capitalized on these information consumption dynamics to implement differentiated information attacks aimed at specific audience segments. This strategy includes a combination of censorship tactics with intentionally disseminating erroneous or false information on each corresponding media platform.

Although the segment most susceptible to disinformation corresponds to individuals with lower educational levels, who primarily depend on analog information sources, there is a widespread desire for change within the Venezuelan population. Specifically, the transition from 21st-century socialism to that of a liberal state—“82% of Venezuelans believe that the economic crisis and poor quality of life are more relevant than the political crisis”.

The influence of disinformation and censorship on the electoral behavior of the Venezuelan population is declining. Factors such as the pressing need for family reunification, the search for prosperity through decently paid employment, and the aspiration for a social reunion that transcends political divisions are beginning to mobilize the Venezuelan electorate emotionally. This change points to a modification in the dynamics that have traditionally influenced citizens’ political preferences and behaviors.

In this context, the political campaign strategies implemented by Henrique Capriles and Carlos Prosperi, which incorporate elements of popular culture such as Super Mario and Pikachu (from the Pokémon franchise), as well as the use of artificial intelligence technologies to evoke the figure of Carlos Andrés Pérez, have not managed to catalyze a significant level of electoral support towards their respective pre-candidacies in the primaries. This phenomenon suggests a

disconnect between such campaign approaches and the electorate's primary motivations in the current electoral cycle.

In the past, the production of misinformation was predominantly a human activity. However, recent advances in the field of generative artificial intelligence—particularly in models capable of generating sophisticated writing and synthesizing highly realistic images from text inputs—have enabled the emergence of synthesized forms of propaganda. This technological development introduces new dimensions into the landscape of information manipulation.

In this context, using advanced algorithms to simulate María Corina's voice, the regime represents a questionable practice. It is crucial to recognize the disruptive potential of generative artificial intelligence in democracies. It is worth noting that even before the technological advances recorded in the last two years, Maduro's regime had already demonstrated its ability to disseminate a wide range of harmful and erroneous narratives concerning the restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

On the other hand, the presidential contest scheduled for 2024 will be overshadowed by disinformation practices that challenge both citizens' right to effect political change and the integrity of the electoral process itself. Contrary to what might be expected, the source of these disinformation practices will not be an emerging technology like ChatGPT but will come from "Superbigote". This scenario raises severe implications for the democratic quality and legitimacy of the electoral process in Venezuela.