


AI-driven misinformation ‘biggest short-term threat to global economy’

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 In its global risks report, the World Economic Forum expresses concern about AI-driven misinformation influencing 2024 elections. Photograph: Dado Ruvic/Reuters

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A wave of artificial intelligence-driven misinformation and disinformation that could influence key looming elections poses the biggest short-term threat to the global economy, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has said.

In a deeply gloomy assessment, the body that convenes its annual meeting in Davos next week expressed concern that politics could be disrupted by the spread of false information, potentially leading to riots, strikes and crackdowns on dissent from governments.

The WEF's annual risks report – which canvasses the opinion of 1,400 experts – found 30% of respondents thought there was a high risk of a global catastrophe over the next two years, with two-thirds fearful of a disastrous event within the next decade.

The WEF said concerns over the persistent cost of living crisis and the intertwined risks of disinformation and polarised societies dominated the outlook for 2024.

Elections are taking place this year in countries that represent 60% of global GDP, including Britain, the US, the EU and India, and the WEF said the nexus between falsified information and societal unrest would take centre stage during campaigns.

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information, while disinformation is deliberately false content, which can be used to spread propaganda and sow fear and suspicion.

Looking ahead over a longer 10-year period, extreme weather events and climate change were named as the most pressing risks by the experts polled by the WEF, which holds its annual meeting in Davos, a Swiss ski resort.

“An unstable global order characterised by polarising narratives and insecurity, the worsening impacts of extreme weather and economic uncertainty are causing accelerating risks – including misinformation and disinformation – to propagate,” said Saadia Zahidi, a managing director of the WEF.

“World leaders must come together to address short-term crises as well as lay the groundwork for a more resilient, sustainable, inclusive future.”

The report – produced in partnership with Zurich Insurance and the professional services firm Marsh McLennan – ranks risks over a two-year and 10-year horizon.

In the short-term, the five biggest risks are perceived to be misinformation and disinformation; extreme weather events; societal polarisation; cyber insecurity and interstate armed conflict.

Carolina Klint, chief commercial officer in Europe for Marsh McLennan, said: “Artificial intelligence breakthroughs will radically disrupt the risk outlook for organisations with many struggling to react to threats arising from misinformation, disintermediation and strategic miscalculation.

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“It will take a relentless focus to build resilience at organisational, country and international levels – and greater cooperation between the public and private sectors – to navigate this rapidly evolving risk landscape.”

Klint said AI magnified the threat of widespread use of disinformation and misinformation, which could result in the legitimacy of elected governments being questioned. Voters were likely to be targeted by hostile states and domestic actors, she added.

In the longer term, the five top risks are identified as extreme weather events; critical change to earth systems; biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse; natural resource shortages; and misinformation and disinformation.

Two-thirds of those polled were worried about extreme weather events in 2024, but there were differing views on the urgency of the risks posed. The report said private sector respondents believed that most environmental risks would materialise over a longer timeframe than civil society or government, pointing to the growing risk of getting past a point of no return.

Zahidi said: “This is a very gloomy outlook but it is not a prediction of the future. The future is very much in our hands.”

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