



# AI & Society 2024: promises and perils in the next EU mandate

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## Context

This report reflects statements and questions made during an event hosted by Friends of Europe in Brussels on 26 September 2024.

In an era in which technological advancements are reshaping every facet of life, the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and society presents both profound opportunities and significant challenges. The AI & Society 2024 Forum aimed to foster a better understanding of how to navigate these changes together, in a way that the AI revolution benefits all members of society, as part of the new European mandate.

Participants considered questions including:

- How can organisations use AI technology to drive skills-based employment practices?
- Considering the increasing role of AI in electoral processes, what are the expected challenges for cooperation in implementing regulations to safeguard democratic elections?
- What potential effects could the outcomes of the 2024 EU and US elections have on the development and enforcement of AI regulations, and how might these changes influence the integrity of democratic processes?
- How can policymakers, enterprises and educational institutions collaborate to address the current gaps in digital skills and adoption of AI and prepare the workforce for an AI-driven future?
- How can employers empower their employees to upskill and reskill and bring underrepresented groups into the workforce?

## Recommendations:

- Ensure that civil society interventions are included in AI policy making from an early stage
- Focus on building trust in AI at all levels, from workers to corporations and governments
- Limit exposure to AI and screentime in the classroom
- Consider how the EU can integrate AI regulation into new portfolios and priorities
- Close the skills gap in AI training, particularly for women, marginalised groups and regions
- Streamline access to EU funds for AI start-ups, where possible
- Account for privacy and autonomy concerns in online tuition and training
- Learn from the COVID-19 pandemic experience on how AI can work for us and streamline daily activities
- Maintain or increase resources for traditional media and on the teaching profession
- Hold accountable those responsible for fake news and for the demise of traditional media
- Build reskilling and upskilling AI training programmes for older workers
- Adapt old workplace and classroom communication styles to a new AI reality

## Event Summary

### European Lessons

In this new world of AI and human interaction, the EU and its new team of European Commissioners have a leading role to play. EU policy makers have already stepped up to make sure AI is developed responsibly, under the EU AI Act. “Companies innovating have a responsibility to innovate based on ethical principles,” said **Jens-Henrik Jeppesen**, Senior Director for Corporate Affairs, EMEA & APJ at Workday. There is now a need to build trust among employees who do not feel confident that AI will be used in their interests.

Closing the skills gap, a priority for European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, is particularly relevant. As former President of the European Central

Bank **Mario Draghi** said in his recent report, Europe needs to boost economic competitiveness and prosperity. This includes providing citizens with the best advanced technologies, such as AI.

The EU is at a major disadvantage when it comes to allocating funding for AI and other skills training or start-ups. One event participant said he was already thinking of moving to the US for funding a social contract start up. He said, “In Europe people do not get it. They do not understand velocity.” In the EU we are losing the ability to foster innovation and regulation is not helping.”

## “ *Companies innovating have a responsibility to innovate based on ethical principles* ”

**Jens-Henrik Jeppesen**, Senior Director for Corporate Affairs, EMEA & APJ at Workday

There are also fears that governments are not ready for all the jobs that will be eliminated by AI, instead clinging on to outdated workflows. The new college of commissioners may not clearly reflect this, with too many overlapping portfolios and questions about whether the EU should focus on or integrate AI in the new dossiers.

Audience members felt that creating a European AI commissioner was not necessarily a good idea because most technologies today are US and Chinese owned. Europe would be talking about regulating something it has no access to.

It was also acknowledged that there has not yet been a single model for AI regulation around the world. Singapore, for instance, while good on the technology side is less positive on social aspects.

Concerns about a possible second Donald Trump presidency next year following this November’s US elections led to praise of the EU’s handling of Google, where anti-trust cases showed a monopoly should be held accountable under the law. Trump himself has been very unclear on Big Tech and AI.

The responsibility for deciding what is real online should not be foisted on the public. Instead, regulation should require transparency and the EU AI Act has good requirements, which must now be implemented.

“How democracy has acted on this side of the Atlantic is relevant,” said **Paul Nemitz**, Principal Adviser on Digital Transition in the Directorate General on Justice and Consumer Policies in the European Commission. In the US and elsewhere, the attitude of technology industries is deeply disrespectful of the law, with an apparent assumption that the best approach for companies like Google and Apple is to appeal on every instance and pay the lawyers, for decades if necessary.

“EU laws are the first generation of trying to apply democracy to technology,” Mr Nemitz said. “We need an ethics in industry where the first point is that we will comply with the law.”

## Preparing the next generation

The future of AI may be unpredictable, but children growing up today will certainly need very different skills than their parents or grandparents. This is not just a result of AI. The digital revolution, alongside the Green Transition and an ageing population, will disrupt most worker skills.

It is difficult to predict what career paths would be most common among youth. Not long ago, it was widely assumed that coding would be an essential skill for successful workers today.

In addition to the green and digital transitions, the COVID-19 pandemic created new problems for young people, largely driven by AI and screen time. The rise in mental health problems among young people, at least in part due to online activity and social media is well documented. After months or years in which most education and socialising switched online, young men in particular often struggle to read the room, understand body language and manage office life.

“Young people are used to a very particular tone of communication online,” said **El Iza Mohamedou**, Head of the OECD’s Centre for Skills. “AI tools like ChatGPT typically use a submissive, courteous,” tone she explained, in contrast with the tone of many workplaces.

Education in most regions is not geared up for this change. As well as adapting communication styles in line with new norms and expectations, education institutions have to be wary of privacy concerns raised by the move to online tutoring, which students may be watched through a camera almost always. There is a need for people to feel safe and secure using AI technology.

The resilience of democratic institutions to change was raised by audience members, with questions about whether the style of schools and classrooms in place since the Second World War are fit for purpose in an AI-dominated world.

At the same time, it is important to ensure AI does not simply overtake existing education practices. “Even at primary school level, many children today use ChatGPT to do their homework,” said an event participant. This means missing out on writing as a way to develop critical thinking and to tell fact from fiction.

Although it is now impossible to take AI completely out of the classroom, there is a need to be cautious and not leave children alone with it. Offline friends and relationships are very valuable. “Moves to ban or limit the use of mobile phones in the classroom have been made in secondary schools in the UK. A bit late in secondary school, but it’s a symbolic move,” mentioned **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe.

This shift can mean a change in the way homework is set and the type of homework given. But it also means investing differently into teachers. Governments and institutions need to build up trust that they can manage a changing world of education, in the interest of children, parents and teachers.

“To build up and understand information on skills development and skills needs, AI should not be treated as an isolated, standalone aspect of technology. AI itself will be an important tool to help us understand the future of skills and of work, as part of a broader approach to education and training,” said **Hugues Moussy**, Head of the Intelligence Unit at the European Training Foundation (ETF).

Digital literacy is, however, not just a question for schoolchildren. It is also important for older people, as well as for women and other vulnerable groups. Women, for instance, tend to be very underrepresented among programmers. There is a need to design education infrastructure programmes that integrate digital skills and an understanding of AI across all groups.

## Links between fake news and AI

Rethinking education and regulation infrastructure in response to emerging AI trends is challenging because AI itself has made people question evidence and information they might once have automatically trusted.

“AI arrives in a very precarious information environment, where you can’t believe your own eyes and ears,” said **Lindsay Gorman**, Managing Director & Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States’ Technology Program.

This was evidenced in the recent US election campaign, with deepfake AI used in an attempt to sway voters with lies. Deepfakes in the US recently aimed to prove that Taylor Swift supports Donald Trump. **Lindsay Gorman** explained, “Trump shared an AI generated image of Taylor Swift with the Uncle Sam hat, as if she were endorsing Trump.” A lesser known case took place in Slovakia, where a deepfake audio recording claimed to show candidates in favour of increasing the price of beer.

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**Lindsay Gorman**, Managing Director & Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States’ Technology Program

Social media and AI can at times seem to offer “a festival of disinformation,” agreed **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe.

Although it is hard to quantify the impact of fake news, the “liar’s dividend” suggests that even a cheap fake puts doubt in people’s minds. This has serious implications for trust in democracy, at a time when voters are already inclined not to believe anything elected officials tell them. The implications for the legal system are substantial, as the presence of fake images and audio files undermines the reliability of security footage.

How to derive benefits from AI democratically is one of the biggest challenges we face in this context. Saving democracy in an age of AI depends partially on how impactful AI is over the next five years. We have already shifted from seeing AI as a tool to AI as an agent. There is a need to develop AI with public interest at its core, and this is not happening in the private sector by itself. This means taking a long-term view with civil society at its centre.

“Don’t put the public on the sidelines,” said **Max Reddel**, Advanced AI Director at the International Center for Future Generations. “They need to be in the room where AI decisions are made, in real time.”

We need to revitalise our democracies. In a world where centrist parties have seemed lazy and distant, voters are naturally driven to support extreme agendas. Stagnation and deindustrialisation in the EU, combined with the dominance of social media silos, makes people more vulnerable to believing AI-driven fake news, where this seems to offer an alternative to the current state of affairs.

Citizens may also be angry if they believe news outlets are controlled by millionaires. This can make them more likely to turn to alternative, unverified and – sometimes – untrue news sources.

## “ *Don’t put the public on the sidelines.* ”

**Max Reddel**, Advanced AI Director at the International Center for Future Generations

Focusing on AI may draw attention and accountability away from the very real decline of traditional media, which has created news deserts for many people and a threat to voter education.

We must therefore be sceptical of claims that people passively receive and believe fake news online. “Those who stoke fears about fake news need to reevaluate how they think elections and democracy work,” said **Sam Jeffers**, Executive Director, Who Targets Me and Co-Founder, Join Together. “AI is not a baddie taking over human minds.”

For instance, Cambridge Analytica, is often blamed for spreading misinformation back during the Brexit campaign, but the exact same technology was used by Barack Obama, suggesting there is not one tool that can be used to make voters vote in a certain way.

Experience suggests that much of what is said during a campaign falls on deaf ears, and people are quickly annoyed if they feel they are being targeted or tricked. Social media is very fragmented and no one is very good at crossing those boundaries.



## The importance of human voices in a tech-dominated narrative

The focus on AI and fake news risks overlooking the continued importance of human skills and the role of citizens. People want to be listened to. Voters who do not feel listened to by mainstream politicians today in Europe are turning to the Far Right for an audience. This shows the need to bring human feelings and concerns back into policy making. “Citizen-informed” debate can help close the gap at the top of the policy making process, bringing private and civil society into the loop.

This would include listening to how people want to live and then working out how AI would support them, rather than working the other way around and making civil society comply with AI.

“Innovation takes place in a democratic society, with humans in charge. Europeans developed the Covid vaccines,” said **Paul Nemitz**, Principal Adviser on Digital Transition in the Directorate General on Justice and Consumer Policies in the European Commission.

At the same time, human beings are rational and have a natural fear of disruption. People who have actually engaged with AI in a professional context say they enjoy their jobs more, but the new, disruptive technology also creates anxiety.

“There is a need for an experimental approach to governance, a collaborative architecture,” emphasised **Abigail Gilbert**, Co-Director at the Institute for the Future of Work. This joined up approach to regulation has begun in the UK already, and there is now a need for more stringent regulation to preserve autonomy and dignity for humans working with AI across different levels of the labour market.

Priorities include making training more relevant to workers, for instance, upskilling and reskilling, as well as attracting and retaining talent.

As pointed out by **Véronique Schaber**, Deputy Head of the Vocational Training Department at the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth of Luxembourg, “a [national skills strategy](#) published by Luxembourg in 2023 included lots of discussion with stakeholders from the start to make sure everyone was on board.”

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**Abigail Gilbert, Co-Director at the Institute for the Future of Work**

Employers today look for communication skills and teamwork in employees, as well as expecting some understanding of the digital world. The ability to adapt, to be resilient and to think critically are all real human skills that become even more important in the face of artificial intelligence. The more we look at machines, the more we need human skills.



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