TechScape: Cybercrime, AI supremacy and the metaverse – the tech stories that will dominate 2024

Partway through 2023, I caught up with a respected, high-ranking tech writer at another publication. We gossiped and nattered, and, a bit exasperated, empathised with each other: we were run ragged. The last two years have raised the stakes for what tech journalists do from serving a small niche community to covering stories that have an impact on the wider world. In part, that's due to the increasing importance of technology in our day-to-day lives. It's also down to the characters involved and what's at stake. Tech journalists have lived on fast-forward since Elon Musk first lodged his bid to take over Twitter – now X – in April 2022. We've been forced to drop everything and respond whenever he posted. And just when things were at their craziest, another paradigm-shifting technology arrived: ChatGPT. Plenty has happened since then. Like Musk, who planned to ride high with X but almost collapsed it, so too has OpenAI gone from top of the world to near-non-existence. (I recently presented a BBC Radio 4 documentary on 106 hours of chaos at OpenAI.) The world in January 2024 feels totally unlike the one we welcomed in January 2023 as the clock struck midnight. Could you have forecast on 1 January 2023 that OpenAI would depose its CEO, then bring him back after almost all of its employees threatened to quit? It's foolish, then, to offer predictions about what 2024 will bring. But if I can offer guidance to what could be big stories in the year to come, it would be these … X v Threads gets a lot more interesting In July 2023, Meta quickly launched Threads, its purported X killer, in an attempt to capitalise on a weakness X faced at the time – little did we know then it would be one of many. However, the launch wasn't wholly successful: so quickly did the Instagram parent company roll out its text-based social network, that it couldn't offer the service to European consumers because it feared it would be in breach of EU rules. Shorn of nearly 400 million potential users, Threads looked like a damp squib. Five months later, Threads finally launched in Europe. The week after – and just seven days before Christmas – the EU launched an investigation into X, for allegedly breaching its laws on hate speech and disinformation. The potential outcome is a ban from operating in Europe. If the tables turn, it could be the decisive blow for Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg's battle for supremacy. Big tech deals will get unwound – or won't happen Mega-mergers were in vogue in the tech sector for a period in 2022 and 2023. But now they're out of fashion, and that could affect the industry in 2024. Just before Christmas, Figma and Adobe abandoned their proposed merger after 15 months of trying to persuade regulators it should go ahead because … they weren't convinced they could ever win the argument. Not everyone gives up, however: in October, Microsoft and Activision Blizzard succeeded in appeasing UK regulators the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Their $69bn merger will now go ahead. The big deal to look at in 2024 is the partnership between Microsoft and OpenAI, which the CMA said it was investigating for potentially being

anti-competitive. We won't have long to wait: the deadline for comments on the partnership falls tomorrow, and we can expect an announcement on whether the CMA wants to take it further shortly. Cyber-attacks will continue to alarm Cybercrime costs UK companies £21bn a year, according to a government analysis. And while there haven't been many blockbuster incidents that have bled into the mainstream – perhaps the most notable is the ongoing British Library outage, which is believed to be due to a ransomware attack – it's likely that 2024 will see more high-profile and pernicious incidents occur. Who'll win the AI race? The long year of 2023 was dominated by the multifarious impacts of AI on our lives, and 2024 looks likely to be equally AI-centric. From Google releasing Gemini, its latest state of the art AI model just under a month ago, to the excitement some had when ChatGPT started hallucinating that it has received an upgrade to the ballyhooed GPT-4.5 turbo model just before Christmas, it's clear that the race is still on for AI supremacy. OpenAI's stumbles in November – when, lest we forget, it went through three CEOs in a matter of days – have made it less certain that we're all going to live by ChatGPT in the years to come. And there are a raft of exciting open-source models coming up on the rail. Get used to more excitement. The metaverse renaissance If you believed Mark Zuckerberg, 2022 was meant to be the year of the metaverse – remember, he renamed Facebook to Meta in October 2021, so enamoured was he by the potential of the virtual- and augmented-reality future. Of course, that didn't happen, and the metaverse was eclipsed by AI in 2023. But in 2024, it could re-enter the public consciousness: Apple will be releasing its $3,500 Vision Pro headset some time this year, after announcing it midway through 2023. The smart money is that it will do for the metaverse what the iPhone did for smartphones, and the iPad did for portable tablet computing. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday.