

Techscape: The biggest tech stories of 2023 – from cyber warfare to AI's 'existential risk'

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Merry Christmas! We have made it – almost – through another year without being churned into paste by a super-intelligent AI, conscripted into a Martian work camp by an insane billionaire or forced offline by a Carrington event. Even in the absence of civilisation-altering events it's been a busy year. But the advantage of a slow week (I hope that isn't tempting fate) is that you can reflect on the past 12 months and realise that, sometimes, there's only a few stories that really matter. Winter: the Guardian gets hit with a ransomware attack From our January story: The Guardian has confirmed it was hit by a ransomware attack in December and that the personal data of UK staff members has been accessed in the incident. "We believe this was a criminal ransomware attack, and not the specific targeting of the Guardian as a media organisation," said Guardian Media Group's chief executive, Anna Bateson and the Guardian's editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner. "These attacks have become more frequent and sophisticated in the past three years, against organisations of all sizes, and kinds, in all countries." They added: "We have seen no evidence that any data has been exposed online thus far and we continue to monitor this very closely." My initial draft of this newsletter said "obviously this was the most important story in my life this winter", but thankfully I remembered my son was born in January before sending it off to my editor. Still, if you don't work at the Guardian, it may seem self-indulgent to describe the ransomware attack as one of the biggest stories of the year. But it started the year off as it would continue: with proof that cybercrime isn't going anywhere and it is increasingly able to damage institutions to much the same degree as more direct acts of vandalism. Almost exactly a year on, and nothing's changed. From a parliamentary report published earlier this month: The UK government is at high risk of a "catastrophic ransomware attack" that could "bring the country to a standstill" because of poor planning and a lack of investment, a parliamentary committee has warned. Future ransomware attacks could pose "a threat to physical security or safety of human life", the report said, if cyber-attackers manage to sabotage CNI operations. The report also warned that "cyber-physical systems" could be intercepted, including hackers taking control of the steering and throttle of a shipping vessel – lab experiments have shown this to be achievable. Oh good. Spring: The godfathers of AI speak out "Existential risk" has been part of the discussion around artificial intelligence for more than a decade, popularised in 2014 by Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom's book *Superintelligence*, but mainstream treatments of the idea – that an overly competent AI could be the end of civilisation – have tended toward dismissive. Think Terminator references. That changed over the spring of 2023, led in part by the decision of Geoffrey Hinton (pictured above), one of the three "godfathers of AI", to quit his job at Google and spend his

retirement warning of the risks: "You need to imagine something more intelligent than us by the same difference that we're more intelligent than a frog. And it's going to learn from the web, it's going to have read every single book that's ever been written on how to manipulate people, and also seen it in practice." ... My confidence that this wasn't coming for quite a while has been shaken by the realisation that biological intelligence and digital intelligence are very different, and digital intelligence is probably much better." Hinton's peers, including his fellow "godfather" Yann LeCun, don't all agree. "I think that scenario is preposterous," LeCun told the Financial Times in November: Intelligence has nothing to do with a desire to dominate. It's not even true for humans. If it were true that the smartest humans wanted to dominate others, then Albert Einstein and other scientists would have been both rich and powerful, and they were neither. Regardless of who you agree with, there's no questioning that "AI risk" is taken seriously in a way it wasn't just a year ago. Witness, if nothing else, the UK's AI safety summit, set up by Rishi Sunak after his myriad domestic successes apparently left him with nothing else to do. Summer: Silicon Valley's worst-kept secret, the Vision Pro Can a piece of hardware that still hasn't even been released really steer the news agenda of the rest of the year? If so, there's only one company that can pull it off: "With Vision Pro, you're no longer limited by a display. Your surroundings become an infinite canvas," the Apple chief executive, Tim Cook, said. "Vision Pro blends digital content into the space around us. It will introduce us to spatial computing. "Apple Vision Pro will change the way we communicate, collaborate, work and enjoy entertainment," Cook added. The company compared the device to a new TV, surround sound system, powerful laptop, and games console all in one – before revealing its price, an eye-watering \$3,499, \$500 more than the already high pricetag rumoured in the run-up to the event. The device will ship "early next year" in the US, Apple said. No dates or prices were given for other regions. It is more than a decade since the virtual reality revival began, spearheaded by the launch of the Oculus Rift in 2012. But in that time, it has failed to live up to the potential its fans see in it, remaining a niche serving mostly the hardest of hardcore gamers. Successive releases, from Sony's console-compatible PSVR, through Valve's high-spec Vive, to Facebook's PC-free Quest, have been touted as the thing that will push it into the mainstream, but all have failed. A \$3,500 price tag and single-country launch means that no one is expecting the Vision Pro to vault that hurdle any time soon, either. But Apple is seemingly aiming for a more modest success with its first entry into the sector, building a device that, it hopes, will avoid being categorised as a novelty, toy, or – gasp – game, and instead be taken up as a general purpose device like a phone or computer. It's a tall order. But echoing round everyone's minds are the words of Ed Colligan, the chief executive of the then leading PDA maker Palm, who responded to the launch of the iPhone in 2006 by telling reporters: "We've struggled for a few years here, figuring out how to make a decent phone. The PC guys are not going to just, you know, knock this out. I guarantee it." Autumn: Binance stumbles The downfall of Binance was less spectacular than the collapse, one year earlier, of its main competitor FTX. But it's the end of an era nonetheless: Changpeng Zhao, founder of Binance, the world's largest cryptocurrency exchange, agreed to resign from the company and plead guilty to money laundering on Tuesday. As part of a guilty plea, Zhao agreed to pay a \$50m fine and would be barred from any involvement in the business. Binance too agreed to plead guilty, accept the appointment of a monitor and pay a criminal fine of nearly \$1.81bn as well as a \$2.51bn order of forfeiture to settle three criminal charges. The US Justice Department had charged the company with conducting an unlicensed money transmitting business, a conspiracy charge and violating the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. Shortly after the charges were brought, I wrote that "the question underpinning the settlement is whether it's a full stop at the end of Binance's spicy genesis, or simply the capital letter beginning the tale of its downfall". A month on, and some consequences are starting to come into focus. For one, Zhao has since been denied leave to return to the UAE as he awaits sentencing. That doesn't necessarily presage anything, beyond demonstrating that the US government doesn't love letting multibillionaires go home to nations without extradition treaties – however earnestly they promise to come back. On the other hand, bitcoin has ended the year on a high, climbing back up to \$44,000 a coin in the first weeks of December. When the good times are flowing, there's fewer people who can say they've lost money because of wrongdoing at Binance, and the case is less emotive and more bluntly regulatory. That might not be the worst thing for Zhao. If you want to read the complete version of the newsletter please subscribe to receive TechScape in your inbox every Tuesday