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Benton County judicial candidates disagree about use of AI for mugshot image used with campaign mailer

One claims mugshot fake; the other says only enhanced

February 27, 2026 by Tracy Neal



BENTONVILLE -- A local circuit judge race is garnering attention after one candidate accused his opponent of using artificial intelligence to create a mugshot of his arrest for a mailer sent to voters.

AI may have been used to enhance the image, but the mugshot is real, the opponent says.

Ryan Blue and Tim McDonald are seeking the Division 8 circuit judge seat in the 19th West Judicial District, which consists of Benton County.

It is a new judgeship meant to help handle the increasing caseload in the growing county. The Legislature created the position through Act 220 of 2025.

The nonpartisan election is Tuesday.

The issue in the race arose the weekend before early voting started Feb. 17.

Blue said his concern is that McDonald sent out a mailer that was false and misleading in a judicial campaign. Blue said the mailer included a mugshot of him he believes was created by artificial intelligence.

"It included a mugshot that was not real because of a fake picture, AI-generated," Blue said. "Again, it's not a real picture. It's fake."

Blue said the tactic is an attempt to paint him in a bad light and leaves the impression he was found guilty of driving while intoxicated. However, he was found not guilty in that case, he said.

Blue said he was arrested on suspicion of driving while intoxicated, but noted McDonald's flyer did not state Bentonville District Judge Ray Bunch found police had no probable cause to pull him over and found him not guilty of the charge. Blue said the record was sealed.

A video posted online shows that exact same mugshot talking, Blue said.

"The face is moving, saying words, and there is an audible voice saying, I'm going to paraphrase, 'I tried to seal my records so the public couldn't find it,'" Blue said.

Artificial intelligence was used to create the video, Blue said, adding he believes his face was altered and that in the mugshot his height is not correct. Blue said he's 5 feet 10 inches tall, but the mugshot shows him to be 6 feet tall.

McDonald said the booking photograph exists and has existed since 2023. The mugshot is the one from the Benton County Sheriff's Office, he said, stressing that the mugshot did not come from anyone at the Sheriff's Office.

He said the mugshot is posted on a website and someone also sent it to him.

A Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reporter was able to find the supposed mugshot on a website at arkansas.arrests.org, part of the larger arrests.org, which is an online database that collects and publishes mugshots from agencies across the U.S.

McDonald said the image used in the mailer was taken from that mugshot, and the image was then enhanced, but he did not know how.

"What I will say is that I regret not knowing that the image had been altered before I approved the mailer," McDonald said. "That was my mistake, and I own that."

McDonald said he assumes artificial intelligence was used in the enhancement because the technology is used in almost everything.

The technology is used for campaign materials candidates put out, he said. AI is also used in photographs on flyers, he added.

"I don't think it's misleading," McDonald said. "I don't think it's unethical in the sense that I didn't create a police record or a mugshot. Those things existed."

McDonald said he regrets the mugshot was changed in any way because it has become a distraction in the race. He said he's been aware of Blue's arrest since 2023, adding the mugshot has been posted on Facebook and other sites.

McDonald said he's aware of the video, but denied having any role in creating it, adding he has his suspicions of who created the video, but did not elaborate.

EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Dr. Nitin Verma, a teaching assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said he studied "deepfakes" for his doctoral research.

A deepfake is a manipulated video or other digital representation produced by sophisticated machine learning techniques that yield seemingly realistic, but fabricated, images and sounds.

There are three key things that are tell-tale signs of the video being AI-generated, Verma said. There's a height difference in the actual mugshot and the video, and the scale at the back appears on both sides of the head in the video, he said. The lip movements are out of sync with the audio, and there's a moment when the smile or laugh lines on the face in the video vanish completely right after the word "sealed" is spoken, he added.

"This appears to be one of the less sophisticated deepfakes out there," Verma said.

However, without visual literacy skills, and when seen out of context and on a small screen, the video could stick in viewers' minds, he added.

It's getting extremely difficult to detect deepfakes, Verma said. There are tools available for detection, but the most sophisticated and the most accurate tools are also some of the most expensive ones.

"But usually what happens is these things are released on social media, and they travel far before any kind of fact checking or detection can catch up with it," Verma said.

Dr. Chau Tong is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and the MU Institute for Data Science & Informatics at the University of Missouri. Her research specializations are in political communication, digital media and public opinion.

Tong said artificial intelligence is not new, noting it was used in the 2024 election.

"It's now much more widely available and easy enough to use regardless of someone's technical skills," she said.

She agreed there's legitimate concern about using artificial intelligence in political campaigns.

She said there's more fact checking in national campaigns than local ones, so it's easier to exploit and influence with artificial intelligence locally.

Tong said technology to animate an image into video is now widely available. She said it's called synthetic animation.

She said the core issue isn't just whether the material -- mugshot or video -- is real or fake, but how technology now exists to potentially manufacture evidence that never happened.

"I think this is exactly why Arkansas is currently debating legalizing against the malicious use of AI in elections," Tong said.

'A NEW ERA'

"My concern is that this is now the dawning of a new era of negative campaigning," Blue said. "If we're going to give voters a choice of two candidates, it's not really a choice if the underlying facts being presented are a lie."

He said he thinks it should be "terrifying to every voter out there that they would receive a mailer from a judicial candidate" with faked or manipulated content.

Numerous local attorneys have come to Blue's defense and criticized McDonald for using the image.

"I think they have concerns about, you know, what decisions would my opponent make on the bench if he's going to make these kinds of decisions while he's campaigning," Blue said.

Judicial candidates should be held to the highest standards of integrity, and it's concerning a judicial candidate would send out a mailer that is false and misleading about their opponent, Blue said.

Blue admitted he was arrested on suspicion of driving while intoxicated, but McDonald shouldn't have made it sound like he was convicted just to revive all the information, he said.

McDonald, a former deputy prosecutor in Benton County, should know the difference between guilty and not guilty, Blue said, questioning if voters want someone with his temperament on the bench.

McDonald responded by saying, "I think if you're gonna say that judicial races should somehow be different than other races, then you need to look at what the voters in Arkansas have decided.

He said it's a public election and voters have the right to the information to help decide who they are going to vote for.

Blue is also critical of the timing -- the weekend before early voting -- because it created difficulties for him to respond to the mailer.

McDonald said he did not know when the mailer was sent out.

THREAT CLAIMS

While the mailer and video are recent developments, Blue said the campaign became uncomfortable long before early voting started.

He said McDonald asked to meet with him last year and urged him to run against John Pesek in the race to replace retiring Benton County Circuit Judge Xollie Duncan. Pesek is unopposed in that race.

Blue said McDonald told him if he didn't change races, McDonald would use the DWI arrest against him if he found any information about it.

McDonald said he did meet with Blue and asked him about the arrest, saying Blue did not provide him with any information.

"I told him that I thought his criminal history would be relevant if he was gonna be a judge in a criminal court," McDonald said.

McDonald said whoever wins the judge's race will handle some DWI cases. He said voters have a right to know the person they may elect to be a judge making those decisions is someone who has gotten pulled over on suspicion of a DWI.

Blue said he's been a licensed attorney in the state for 27 years and is running on his own merits.

"I will not run a negative campaign against my opponent," Blue said. "I will run on my own experience and my own wisdom."

McDonald said voters have a right to know about Blue's history, adding many voters believe the information is relevant. He said it's relevant to question a candidate's judgment, even his.

McDonald said he has the background as a criminal prosecutor, a criminal defense attorney and judge in the U.S. Army. He added he has the experience to be able to make a difference immediately.

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