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Ethical Challenges of AI-Generated Political Content in Digital Political Communication

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Abstract: *Over the last few years, AI tools have been extensively employed to generate political content, such as videos, texts and audio files, for online use. Social media facilitates quick dissemination of content, allowing AI-generated political content to reach thousands of regular citizens in minutes. But, with the advanced deepfake technology, the false political information could be created and it brings hidden troubles to local public opinion and national political order. This study mainly aims to find major ethical risks caused by AI-generated political content on Malaysian social platforms. It also attempts to understand the current knowledge gaps in research related to existing literature. The social responsibility theory and utilitarianism are used as the two basic theories in this paper. The entire study examines four major ethical issues – the rapid proliferation of misinformation, realistic deepfake videos, the absence of production labels to alert readers to AI support in content creation, and the lack of clear, designated responsibility holders. Having fully engaged in the discussion, this paper puts forward practical suggestions for online platforms, local governments, technology companies, universities and general internet users. The final result reveals that AI has a huge capability in enhancing political information communication efficiency, while unregulated AI political content violates the fundamental principle of media ethics. It takes all parties to work together to mitigate and mitigate the negative influences and create a safe digital political communication landscape.*

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Political Communication, Media Ethics, Digital Media, Social Responsibility, AI-generated Content.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

Digital social media has become one of the main communication channels for political parties and candidates to communicate with local citizens in Malaysia. The majority of political parties use the internet, short videos, and live streaming to propagate policy concepts and create public images. It is clear that modern artificial intelligence (AI) tools can also save content creators money and time when producing political content, enabling them to create campaign materials more efficiently (UNESCO, 2023; Diakopoulos, 2023). But it's simple enough for ordinary social media users to receive and share political content on apps like TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. Although digital communication makes information transmission easier in politics, it also affords opportunities for unethical actors to disseminate fake or manipulated political information. Nowadays, AI technologies can produce fake speeches, edited interviews and realistic political videos that are hard for any average viewer to tell apart from the originals (Chesney & Citron, 2019; OECD, 2024). With the advent of AI-generated political content growing more prevalent, user confidence in online political information could slowly erode. This can have significant ethical implications for the truthfulness, transparency and accountability of digital political communication, and media ethics is a growing field of study (Ward, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

B. Problem Statement

The fast-paced evolution of AI has raised fresh ethical issues in digital political communication. The production and dissemination of misinformation is one of the most important issues. AI tools enable users to rapidly and cost-effectively produce vast quantities of political disinformation. AI-generated fake news is typically harder to spot by the general public than traditional fake news, as it often is more fluent and realistic (Chesney & Citron, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

The other big issue is the rising use of deepfake technology. AI can alter politicians' facial expressions, voices and body language; making the fake videos look real. This can shape public sentiment, haunt the reputations of politicians and erode people's confidence in political information (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; OECD, 2024).

Further transparency is an ethical topic. There is a lack of identifiable source markers for many AI-generated political materials created, making it hard to distinguish whether the content was produced by a human or AI. This opacity can have an impact on informed political decisions by people (UNESCO 2023).

Lastly, there is uncertainty over who will be responsible for harmful political content created by AI. Various actors and players are involved in the communication process, including content creators, AI developers, social media platforms, and government regulators. But there are times when current law and platform policies are not unambiguous when it comes to determining to whom to hold AI-generated political content accountable if it results in social detriment or public misunderstandings (European Commission, 2024). These ethical dilemmas therefore need to be explored and more responsible ways of dealing with the political communication produced by AI needs to be considered.

C. Research Gap

There are several studies that have been conducted on how AI can be developed to create content, but they are mostly technical in nature. Some of the researchers talk about fake news in general in social media, others about the political communication in digital times, in general. But few studies have considered these research areas together from a media ethics perspective, particularly when it comes to AI-generated political content (Diakopoulos, 2023).

Literature on the ethical issues of AI political content production is limited, and it has not (as yet) been systematically analyzed using well-known media ethics theories. Furthermore, there is a lack of research specifically on Malaysia, and on the role of digital platforms, universities and government agencies in the management of AI-generated political content (OECD, 2024).

Thus, this study tries to bridge this gap in the literature by analysing AI-generated political contents from the lenses of Social Responsibility Theory and Utilitarianism and offering more practical insights applicable to the Malaysian digital political communication terrain.

D. Research Purpose & Research Questions

The primary purpose of this paper is to sort out typical ethical challenges brought by AI political content creation and online circulation. It applies two traditional theories for the assessment of harms and hidden risks. In this study also practical solutions for each stakeholder group are provided.

Two key research questions:

- 1) What are the key ethical issues with AI-generated political content in digital political communication?
- 2) What are effective measures to mitigate adverse impacts of AI fake political content for each of the following parties?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. AI Application in Modern Political Communication

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has slowly revolutionized numerous facets of contemporary political communication. AI tools have been leveraged to study public opinion, gauge voters' preferences, and to produce political content in an efficient manner. In a multicultural country like Malaysia, AI translation and data analysis tools are also beneficial for political organisations to communicate with various populations. These have enhanced the speed and efficiency of political communication (Diakopoulos, 2023; OECD, 2024). AI also helps to implement personalised political communication with the use of recommendation algorithms. Political organisations can leverage social media to reach their target audiences more effectively, as the platforms automatically provide them with political content based on their interests and online behaviour.

The majority of the research to date has focused on these benefits of AI, such as better communication, reduced production costs and expanded public participation. In the initial phase of AI development, however, less effort has been made to consider the ethical dangers of content created by AI for political purposes (UNESCO 2023).

B. Development of AI-generated Political Content

The first appearance of simple AI-generated political content was through written articles. Simple machine writing software could be used to produce comment articles and introduction of policies based on the keyword settings. In recent years, AI technology has advanced significantly, enabling content creators to generate increasingly lifelike political content. AI technology has improved in the last several years making it possible to create more realistic political content than ever before (Diakopoulos, 2023).

Visual AI has come a long way in the last 5 years. Face swapping, voice copying and reconstructing the scenes has become quite popular now with the introduction of AI. But now, any Internet user can download free mobile apps to edit realistic political video clips without the need for professional skills. These technological advancements have significantly reduced the costs and access to producing political content and made it more accessible to the general public (OECD, 2024).

AI-generated content has become a valuable arsenal for many official political organisations as they strive to communicate more effectively and reach a wider audience. Meanwhile, anonymous users of the internet also produce AI-generated political content for amusement, self-serving or political purposes. As AI tools and capabilities evolve, the bar for creating fake political content continues to drop (UNESCO, 2023).

The development of AI content generation technologies is fast and has been pointed out by most of the published literature. But there is limited research that discusses the ethical issues that AI-generated political contents pose, especially with regard to digital political communication. This restriction also underscores the importance of a greater amount of study based on the media ethics point of view.

C. Existing Ethical Issues Found in Previous Studies

A few ethical issues associated with AI-generated political content have been identified in previous studies. A major topic of discussion is misinformation. False political information can affect the public opinion, the decision of the voters and cause the unnecessary public confusion. Compared to text-based fake news, deepfake visual content can be more challenging to detect, and thus more difficult to deal with in the context of digital political communication (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Transparency was also an important ethical factor to emerge from past research. Many researchers believe that this secret AI generated content undermines the freedom of the public to know the source of political information. Audiences might be led to think that AI-generated content is real and that it was created by a real person, making informed decision-making difficult (UNESCO, 2023). Algorithmic bias is also mentioned in several studies in relation to AI systems. AI models can be biased by political, cultural or social factors, since they are based on existing data sets. Consequently, AI-generated political content can unintentionally benefit or over represent specific groups or perspectives, and users are unlikely to realize this (OECD, 2024). The issue of accountability is also a significant ethical concern. There can be divergent opinions on who is to blame for problematic AI-generated political content between AI developers, content creators and social media platforms. Past research indicates a need for more clear rules and ethical guidelines to ensure greater transparency and accountability in digital political communication (European Commission, 2024).

D. Confirmed Research Gap

From what I read, there are two key areas of research that have not been addressed. First, the research and study on how an AI can generate political communication is largely limited to the Western political context, with very few studies examining the ability of AI to generate political communication in multicultural countries like Malaysia. Thus, many of the previous findings are not directly applicable in the context of political communication in Malaysia (OECD, 2024).

Second, several previous studies have focused on AI technology, misinformation and political communication without making a connection between the three. But, there are relatively few studies that examine these issues within the context of each other using well-known media ethics theories, such as Social Responsibility Theory and Utilitarianism. Due to this, there remains a limited amount of research that offers in-depth ethical analysis of AI-generated political content in Malaysia (Diakopoulos, 2023).

Thus, this study sets out to fill these research gaps, focusing on two existing models of media ethics to analyze the ethical issues pertaining to AI-generated political content. It also offers concrete suggestions for the digital platforms, government bodies, educational institutions, AI developers, and the public to foster a more responsible approach to digital political communication in Malaysia.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. *Social Responsibility Theory of Mass Media*

As one of the classical theories of press, Social Responsibility Theory was first put forward. It claims that the media organisations and content producers should not be given unlimited freedom to publish information. Media organisations rather, have a duty to give accurate, balanced and fair information and serve the public interest (Siebert et al. , 1956; McQuail, 2010).

This theory suggests that media organisations should confirm information prior to publication and reduce the dissemination of harmful or misleading information. Media organizations and content producers have an ethical duty to correct misinformation and give the public accurate information when it has a detrimental impact on society, according to McQuail (2010).

Today's digital media landscape means that the Social Responsibility Theory is not solely applicable to the traditional news organisation. It also extends to social media, AI companies, and single content producers publishing or sharing political information online. Thus, this theory is suitable for assessing the extent to which AI political content aligns with the ethical obligations in digital political communication.

B. *Utilitarianism Ethical Theory*

One of the most influential theories of ethics, developed by philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. According to theory, the moral goodness of an action should be measured by that action's total effect. That is, an action is morally right if it yields the "largest ratio of good to harm" (Mill, 1863). AI generation technology has numerous practical benefits when it comes to digital political communication. It ensures that the production of the content is more efficient, that communication costs are reduced and that political information can reach larger audiences faster. These are all signs of a greater ease for citizens to access information about politics and a stronger public engagement (OECD, 2024).

But when used incorrectly, AI technologies can have negative effects. AI generated political misinformation, political content manipulated by deepfake videos, or any political videos can mislead the public, losing trust in democratic communication and creating social confusion. A utilitarian argument could be that where the social disadvantage resulting from AI-generated political content outweighs the social benefit, more robust ethical codes and regulations should be put in place (UNESCO, 2023).

C. *Reason for Choosing Two Combined Theories*

While these two theories offer diverging but complementary viewpoints to analyse the ethical issues of AI produced political content, both are relevant. The Social Responsibility Theory is concerned with the ethical responsibilities of the media organisations, digital platforms, content creators, and AI developers. It considers the question of whether these stakeholders do their duty in offering information to the public that is accurate, fair and trusted (McQuail, 2010). However, utilitarianism centers on the totality of effects of AI created political communication. It allows to consider whether the social value of AI technology is greater than its potential negative effects, for example misinformation, deep fake content and a loss of public trust. From this theory, a wider spectrum could be considered for the long-term effect of political content created by AI on society (Mill, 1863).

Both theories alone are inadequate to address all the ethical issues involved in the creation of political content by AI. There are two primary theories for assessing social responsibility: Social Responsibility Theory, which looks primarily at the responsibilities of the various stakeholders, and Utilitarianism, which looks at the impact of technology on society. Hence, this fusion of both theories offers a more holistic explanation to study and analyse AI generated political content and facilitate the formation of concrete recommendations for enhancing digital political communication in Malaysia.

IV. ETHICAL CHALLENGES

A. *Mass Production and Fast Spread of AI Misinformation*

Political content can be generated in bulk with AI in a very short period. These tools allow for the creation, with very little effort, of false political statements, misleading policy information, and biased political comments, by unethical users. AI-generated fake news is typically harder to distinguish from regular news for the average reader, both in terms of its persuasiveness and fluency, compared to news produced by humans (UNESCO, 2023).

After the dissemination of misleading political information on social media, recommendation algorithms can quickly spread the information to a large number of users. The more it is liked, commented and shared, the more the false information is disseminated out there compared to the official information corrections. This could shape public perceptions of politics, public opinion and diminish confidence in political institutions (OECD, 2024).

According to the Social Responsibility Theory, the content creators and digital platforms are ethically responsible in minimizing the dissemination of misleading political information. Serious social consequences and a weak sense of responsible political communication could stem from a lack of verification of AI-generated political content before publication.

B. *High Realism Deepfake Political Video Risk*

One of the most serious ethical issues in digital political communication is the technology of deepfake. AI can swap out politicians' faces, alter their speech and tweak their movements to create films that look very realistic. The more AI technology advances, the harder it is for non-technical viewers to tell apart such videos from real ones (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Deepfake videos could be used to disseminate false political information or to defame political candidates during election campaigns or other political events. For many young Malaysians, short video platforms like TikTok and Facebook are where they find political information; it is a place where they feel they are more likely to trust visual information over written information. In fact, false information can change public opinion with the help of misleading deepfakes within moments, which is even more demonstrative after official corrections are made (UNESCO, 2023). Utilitarianism views that if AI technology is misused for digital politics by politicians to disseminate deepfake information, it can cause much more harm to society than public good. Hence, it is needed to have more robust moral norms and proper content regulation to minimize the harmful effect of deepfake politics communication.

C. *Low Transparency: Hidden AI Production Identity*

AI-generated political content goes out with little indication or identification. It is difficult for audiences to tell whether political content is produced by humans or AI, in many cases. Since there are no transparent AI labels, many users might believe that the content is authentic and trustworthy (UNESCO, 2023). The lack of transparency undermines public trust in its right to information about the production of political information. Lacking adequate cues to the source of political information, it may be harder for audiences to draw informed judgments. For some, content creators may deliberately suppress the fact that AI technology was used to boost the credibility or impact of the political message, particularly when it is used to generate content. Transparency is a key ethical duty of content creators and digital platforms, as per the Social Responsibility Theory. Clear AI labelling helps audiences to assess the credibility of political information and promotes responsible digital political communication. Thus, a greater transparency is crucial to build trust of the public in AI generated political content.

D. Unclear Accountability and Responsibility Vacuum

Several stakeholders are involved in the circulation of AI-generated political content, such as AI developers, content creators, social media platforms, and government regulators. What to do when harmful AI-generated political content fuels public confusion or social harm is often not clear, as is who should be held responsible in such situations (European Commission, 2024).

AI technology firms contend that their technology is only a tool, and that usage is the responsibility of content creators. Meanwhile, social media sites say it's tough to sift through the copious amounts of political information that are posted daily. Government agencies are also challenged as the current laws and regulations have not yet fully caught up with the rapid evolution of AI technologies (OECD, 2024). Social Responsibility Theory and Utilitarianism would agree that everybody has an ethical responsibility to minimize the damaging consequences of politically produced content by AI. In the absence of accountability, false political information can continue to be spread, which leads to a loss of trust in the public and raises ethical problems with online political communication. Thus, it is crucial to delineate clear responsibilities and establish robust regulations to foster responsible AI applications in the realm of political communication.

V. DISCUSSION

In the digital age, AI is playing a pivotal role in the production and dissemination of political content. AI-powered tools can help political parties create content more efficiently, engage with citizens faster, and reach a larger audience. All of these developments indicate that AI offers opportunities to enhance digital political communication (OECD, 2024). But, as indicated by the results detailed in this research, as AI has progressed quickly, it has also generated some ethical issues. The issues of misinformation, deepfake content, lack of transparency and unclear accountability are not separate, but are closely linked. After false political information is created, social media algorithms can spread the content in a flash, and the lack of transparency around the disclosure of AI and responsibility makes the correction of misinformation and restoration of public trust more challenging (UNESCO, 2023). According to Social Responsibility Theory, the role of all parties involved in the creation and dissemination of political information, including AI developers, content creators, digital platforms, and government bodies, is to minimise the spread of misleading political information. Utilitarianism also posits that when the social harm is greater than the social good resulting from AI technology, there is a need for greater ethical standards and effective governance (McQuail, 2010; Mill, 1863). Overall, the results indicate that AI itself should not be considered as the primary ethical issue. But it is the wrong use of artificial intelligence technologies and the lack of good governance that pose the biggest problems for digital political communication.

Thus, enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsible utilization of AI is pivotal to ensure the public's trust and facilitate ethical political communication in Malaysia.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

A. Social Media Operating Platforms

Social media platforms need to invest in their AI content management systems to reduce the possibility of these AI-generated pieces spreading politically. To support the identification of authentic and AI-generated political content, platforms can implement automatic AI detection technologies and make transparent the nature of the content generated by AI. Also, platforms can have quicker reporting and review mechanisms to curb the dissemination of false political information (UNESCO, 2023).

B. Local Government and Regulatory Departments

Government authorities need to establish more specific policies and legislation on political content created by AI. Greater specificity is warranted in the law to clarify the obligations of AI providers, social media platforms and content creators. There is also a need to enhance public education initiatives and raise citizens' awareness of AI-generated misinformation and responsible use of digital media (OECD, 2024).

C. Artificial Intelligence Technology Companies

AI technology firms should incorporate more ethical protection into their products. For instance, AI systems can have inbuilt detection functions, digital watermarking technologies and warning messages if a person tries to generate any political content. Businesses should also work with governments and social media platforms to enhance AI content identification and foster the responsible development of AI technologies.

D. University Education and General Public

Media literacy elective courses can be opened at INTI as well as local universities. Teachers can provide students with information about the limitations of AI-generated content and tell them about a few quick tips to flag deepfake information. Targeted education for young college students can decrease “blind” forwarding of content because they are big users of social media. They should make it their habit to first check official news channels before posting hot political content, for ordinary citizens. Be careful in sending doubtful videos and articles. To reduce spread chain of AI generated fake political content, enhance personal judgment.

VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, artificial intelligence greatly optimizes the production and circulation of political content in digital communication. It reduces barriers to creation, enhances the speed of information delivery and brings politicians in close contact with members of the community. In utilitarian terms, AI technology offers some benefits to Malaysia's online political communication system.

However, the use of AI creation tools, particularly in a widespread manner, does raise apparent media ethical issues. There are four fundamental challenges: mass AI misinformation, hyperrealistic deepfake political content, lack of transparency in AI content creation and the lack of transparency of accountability. The communication process participants have yet to fully adhere to the conditions of the theory of social responsibility of media. The technology is developing at a faster pace than people's awareness and official management systems.

The research examines current issues based on two classic theories and provides concrete recommendations for online platforms, government authorities, AI companies and universities as well as users of social media. In the future, continuous technological innovations, standardized official regulations, popular media education and self-discipline of content creators can collectively help to balance the benefits of AI and ethical concerns. Through collaboration, Malaysia can leverage AI political content tools and foster a strong, transparent, and healthy digital political communication ecosystem.

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