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Ethical Challenges of Political Campaign Communication on TikTok: A Media Ethics Perspective

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Abstract: *The rapid growth of digital media has transformed political communication, with TikTok emerging as an influential platform for political campaigns and public engagement. Although it encourages political participation and provides more information, there are also ethical problems such as the spread of fake news, algorithmic bias, AI-generated content and political polarisation.*

Examine the ethics of political campaign communication on TikTok from the perspective of media ethics in this paper. It will apply Social Responsibility Theory and support it with Deontological Ethics, Utilitarianism and the TARES Test to examine key ethical problems through literature review and case studies. Based on the above analysis, TikTok's algorithm-driven communication promotes the spread of emotionally stimulating content; therefore, there are heightened risks of misinformation, echo chambers, and a reduction in public trust. AI Technology and Influencer Participation Further Impair Transparency and Accountability.

Improve the openness of the algorithm, strengthen governance and fact-checking for AI, and promote media literacy to support more ethical and responsible digital political communication.

Keywords: *TikTok; Political Communication; Media Ethics; Social Responsibility Theory; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Misinformation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Development of Digital Media around the world has altered some aspects of political communication. Although political campaigns have always been conducted through television, newspapers, radio, and public meetings, with the spread of the Internet, mobile phones and social media platforms, many people now use new media to participate in political communication online. Among these platforms, TikTok has developed at a high speed and is now one of the most popular social media applications due to its short-video form, personalised algorithmic recommendations and high user engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As a result, political parties, candidates and public institutions have been using TikTok to connect with voters, especially young people, more and more often to increase their political influence. TikTok is convenient and popular, but there are also problems with media ethics. The algorithm-based recommendation system of the platform will prioritize engaging and emotionally resonant content, thus promoting the rapid spread of fake news, increasing political division and echo chambers. In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI), deepfake technology and influencer-driven political campaigns have increased in frequency, presenting new ethical problems concerning the accuracy of information, transparency, accountability and public trust (Floridi & Cows, 2019). With the above developments, new questions have arisen regarding the ethical responsibilities of digital platforms and political communicators in safeguarding democratic discourse. Theories of media ethics offer many ideas for addressing these new problems. Social Responsibility Theory is one such idea that proposes that, in the interest of the public, media institutions should be free to speak without fear of giving such a speech, but they must also fulfill the duty of distributing accurate and truthful information (McQuail, 2010). Deontological Ethics, Utilitarianism and the TARES Test will also be introduced in this study to conduct an all-around assessment of the ethical implications of political communication on TikTok

Although the previous studies have explored the effect of social media on political communication, most of them have concentrated on the effectiveness of communication, user engagement and algorithm performance. Comparatively speaking, fewer scholars have carried out a comprehensive ethical analysis integrating multiple theories of media ethics in the context of TikTok. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the ethical problems of political campaign communication on TikTok and consider how digital platforms, political organisations, content creators and citizens can promote more responsible and ethical political communication in the digital age.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCHERS GAP

With the development of digital media, the form of political communication has changed fundamentally and is now more interactive; thus, many have gathered in social media platforms. Among these platforms, TikTok has gradually gained attention for political communication and reached a younger audience more quickly due to its short-video form and algorithmic recommendation system (Chadwick, 2017). These attributes have lowered the threshold for political participation and increased the scope of political participation and campaign dissemination.

Although for the above reasons there are still certain ethical issues, TikTok has become popular. Existing studies generally examine the effect of communication on reaching more people online for political actors, as well as user interaction and the performance of algorithms. However, limited research has integrated multiple media ethics theories to examine TikTok political communication comprehensively, particularly in the context of AI-generated political content and influencer participation. Although some scholars have dealt with problems such as misinformation, algorithmic bias and political polarisation, there is still a lack of all-encompassing ethical assessment based on multiple media ethics theories (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Furthermore, the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence, deepfake technology and influencer-led political campaigns have introduced new ethical problems that go beyond traditional political communication (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). Currently, little has been done in recent years to address the dilemma of how digital platforms should reconcile the progress of technology, the pursuit of profit, freedom of expression and the construction of a democratic society in an increasingly complex digital age.

Therefore, this paper will use multiple media ethics theories to provide a general assessment of the ethics of political communication on TikTok. Thus, the study will explore the ethical issues that arise from algorithmic recommendations, AI-generated political content and influencer participation, and put forward countermeasures to enhance the responsibility of digital political communication.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically, media ethics can be used to study the problems of morality in the media. Four different sets of values will be used to evaluate the results of the political campaigns on TikTok. The first is the social responsibility theory that will be applied in this paper. Although the media has freedom of speech, it should be used responsibly to inform the public in an accurate and fair way. Given that TikTok is now widely used, it has also become an important venue for the spread of information in recent years. According to the above theories, it will be determined whether TikTok has taken the initiative to strengthen the regulatory system for political information and promote the development of democracy. Deontological Ethics believes that morally right actions are those done out of a sense of duty. Therefore, the political communicators' duty is to present true and open information without pursuing political or economic interests. The above framework will be used to determine whether the behaviour of producing AI-generated political content, spreading false information and employing deceptive campaign tactics violates the ethical standards of truthfulness and respect for the people. Utilitarianism is a type of moral theory that favours the most benefit for the greatest number. A theory for this kind of digital political communication is needed to determine whether the political content spread on TikTok will be beneficial to the public; that is to say, whether it can motivate people to participate in politics without causing problems such as the spread of false information, division, a loss of public trust, etc. Therefore, it offers a reference for studying the entire social impact of platform-driven political communication.

TARES put forward the following five general conditions for the evaluation of the moral quality of persuasive communication in practice: truthfulness, genuineness, respect, fairness and social responsibility. The TARES Test will be used in this paper to determine whether the political campaign content posted on TikTok, including AI-generated materials, influencer endorsements and other persuasive political messages, meet the standards for ethics.

The four theoretical perspectives have been combined to present multiple types of moral judgments on the political communication of TikTok in this paper. The framework will carry out an all-round examination of algorithmic recommendation, AI-generated political content, and the increasing fusion of politics and influencer culture to put forward practical suggestions for building a more responsible and ethical system of digital political communication.

Together, these four theories provide complementary perspectives for evaluating the ethical responsibilities of digital platforms, political actors, and content creators in contemporary political communication.

IV. CRITICAL ETHICALLY ANALYSIS

A. *Algorithmic Recommendation and the Ethical Dilemma of Political Information Dissemination.*

The rise of TikTok has been due to a better-than-expected recommendation system. Facebook and Instagram are based on users' social networks; TikTok, however, distributes content through an algorithm for its "For You Page" (FYP). Based on the users' watch history, likes, comments, shares and other behaviors, the system will recommend new and interesting content for them. This recommendation system has increased the efficiency of political communication significantly and reached a wide audience for the political figure in a relatively short time.

Algorithm-driven communication in the media is also subject to many ethical issues. Since the main purpose of the algorithm is to maximise user interest and viewing time, it is prone to favouring emotionally stimulating or sensational political content over balanced and factual information with social value. As a result, algorithms are gradually determining how political issues will be presented and perceived by the public.

In recent years, studies have shown that politically polarising or emotionally stimulating videos have spread more widely than factual news during election campaigns around the world. Although it is not necessarily due to deliberate political bias by the platform, this may be a result of the commercial logic of recommendation algorithms that prioritise engagement over the quality of information. The above reasons may therefore inhibit rational public discussion and democracy.

Based on the Social Responsibility Theory, the platform should serve the public good and take more responsibility for society. Therefore, in addition to promoting the use of the recommendation system, we should explore the broader social value of TikTok for users and society. If the platform fails to take prompt action on the problem of algorithm spread for fake news, extreme opinions and hate speech, it will be deemed socially irresponsible.

According to the utilitarian theory, algorithms have been used to disseminate information about politics more broadly and conveniently for younger people to access. However, if these algorithms simultaneously increase political polarisation, promote the spread of fake news and damage the democratic system, the long-term harm to society may outweigh the short-term gains.

TARES test also has problems with the principles of fairness and social responsibility. If people only hear information that confirms what they already believe, they will have fewer opportunities to meet other people and learn new ideas in society, thus leading to a deterioration in the level of democracy.

B. *Misinformation, Disinformation and the Responsibility of Digital Platforms.*

Now, the spread of fake news and other harmful content on the Internet has become one of the most serious problems in the development of this system. Misinformation is incorrect information that people spread unknowingly, but disinformation is intentionally fabricated and spread falsehoods to manipulate the public. Both types of false information can affect the will of the people and elections.

TikTok's short-video form promotes the spread of information, and people often base their judgments on short titles, pictures and feelings without verifying the truth of that information. The communication mode has broadened the application area for releasing information, but it has also arisen from a problem with the spread of false political news.

During the 2024 Romanian presidential election, edited speeches, misleading video clips, and unverified political information have been spreading rapidly on TikTok and other social media, and by the time fact-checking groups respond, millions of people may have already seen them. Although the false information has been deleted, people may still believe it.

In Deontological ethics, the moral duty of political communicators is to disseminate truthful and all-encompassing information. Intentional spread of false political content violates the principles of truthfulness and respect for the right to know of the people. Therefore, in addition to recommendation algorithms, all parties that bear the responsibility for elections and other activities should also be involved in promoting.

At the same time, work with professional news organisations and independent verification agencies to strengthen the system of fact-checking for TikTok. Strengthen the system of online content review and address problems promptly to promote an open government and regain the trust of the people.

The Development of generative AI has changed the way politics communicates. AI technology can generate campaign speeches, promotional pictures, synthetic voices and very realistic videos in minutes now. Although the above innovations have increased the efficiency of communication, they also present serious ethical problems of authenticity and public trust.

During the 2024 U.S. presidential election, AI-generated robocalls and manipulated political videos demonstrated the growing ethical risks associated with synthetic media. Even after it is later determined that the content is false, it may have already affected the public's perception and elections.

According to the TARES test, there must be a genuine desire for social harmony. Non-authentic political content should not be viewed as morally acceptable simply because it is popular or effective. Authenticity is also used to refer to the intention or inadvertent use of technology to mislead the public; otherwise, both the credibility of the media and democracy will be harmed.

In terms of the Social Responsibility Theory, a specific label should be added to AI-generated political content by the platform, and users should be informed that this is a synthetic product. The Political Organisation should build a system of ethics for the application of artificial intelligence in organising elections, and should not use artificial intelligence technology to spread false information or produce fake political materials.

Artificial intelligence is in fact not intrinsically evil. The ethics of the technology refer to its development, regulation and application. Promote good governance, openness, and responsibility in communication to help more people be willing to use artificial intelligence in their political life.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Increase the transparency of the recommendation algorithm for the user by revealing its primary drivers and providing users with more choices in tailored recommendations. Strengthen the accountability of the platform by restricting the dissemination of false political information, adding fact-checking labels, and providing explicit reasons for deletion. The above measures will strengthen public confidence and show social responsibility.

Given the ethical problems of generative AI, prominent indicators should be added to platforms for AI-generated political content, such as videos, pictures, and synthesized voices. Strengthen cooperation with professional fact-checking organisations, increase the fines for users repeatedly disseminating false political information, improve the reliability of information, and reduce the spread of misinformation.

The political organisation, the candidate or the influencer/content creator should be well-behaved and engage in political communication with integrity, openness and fairness. Designated individuals are required to explicitly indicate that a post has been paid for by a political organization and should state their personal opinion.

Governments should strengthen media literacy education at the governmental and institutional levels to help the public identify fake news, understand the operation of algorithms, and recognise AI-generated content. Before widely sharing it or posting about in an online discussion, users should verify the accuracy of the political content through official channels.

With the spread of cross-border digital political communication, governments, online platforms and international organisations all need to work together to build a general ethical norm, improve the governance of artificial intelligence, and strengthen cooperation in content verification and information sharing.

Ethical digital political communication needs to involve all parties involved in the digital sphere: platforms, governments, political organizations, content creators and the public. Through the above four measures, enhance the transparency of algorithms and build an ethical governance system; promote informed public participation in the operation of these platforms to safeguard the public interest.

VI. CONCLUSION

With the development of digital media, the role of politics in the public eye has changed, and TikTok is now a very popular site for political activities and information dissemination. TikTok has created a short-video, algorithm-driven recommendation and interactive environment that helps political actors spread information to more people and encourage more citizens, especially young people, to participate in politics. However, there are also serious ethical problems with the above advantages, such as algorithmic bias, the spread of misinformation, AI-generated political content, hidden political advertising, and the formation of echo chambers. The problems may affect the truthfulness of information and democracy.

This paper will take social responsibility theory as its main theoretical basis to study the ethics of political campaign communication on TikTok, and at the same time apply deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and the TARES test. Based on the above analysis, although TikTok has enhanced the accessibility and impact of political education for young people, the engagement-driven algorithm may unintentionally promote the spread of emotionally charged or incorrect political information. Therefore, users will have limited exposure to various views and are at higher risk of political polarisation, the spread of false information and a decline in public trust.

At the same time, many ethical problems of artificial intelligence have gradually emerged. Generative AI, voice cloning and deepfakes are now used to create new platforms for political communication; at the same time, they have also increased the risk of deception and manipulation. In recent years, with the spread of social media, more and more influencers have entered politics and worked for the parties, so questions about transparency and accountability have arisen.

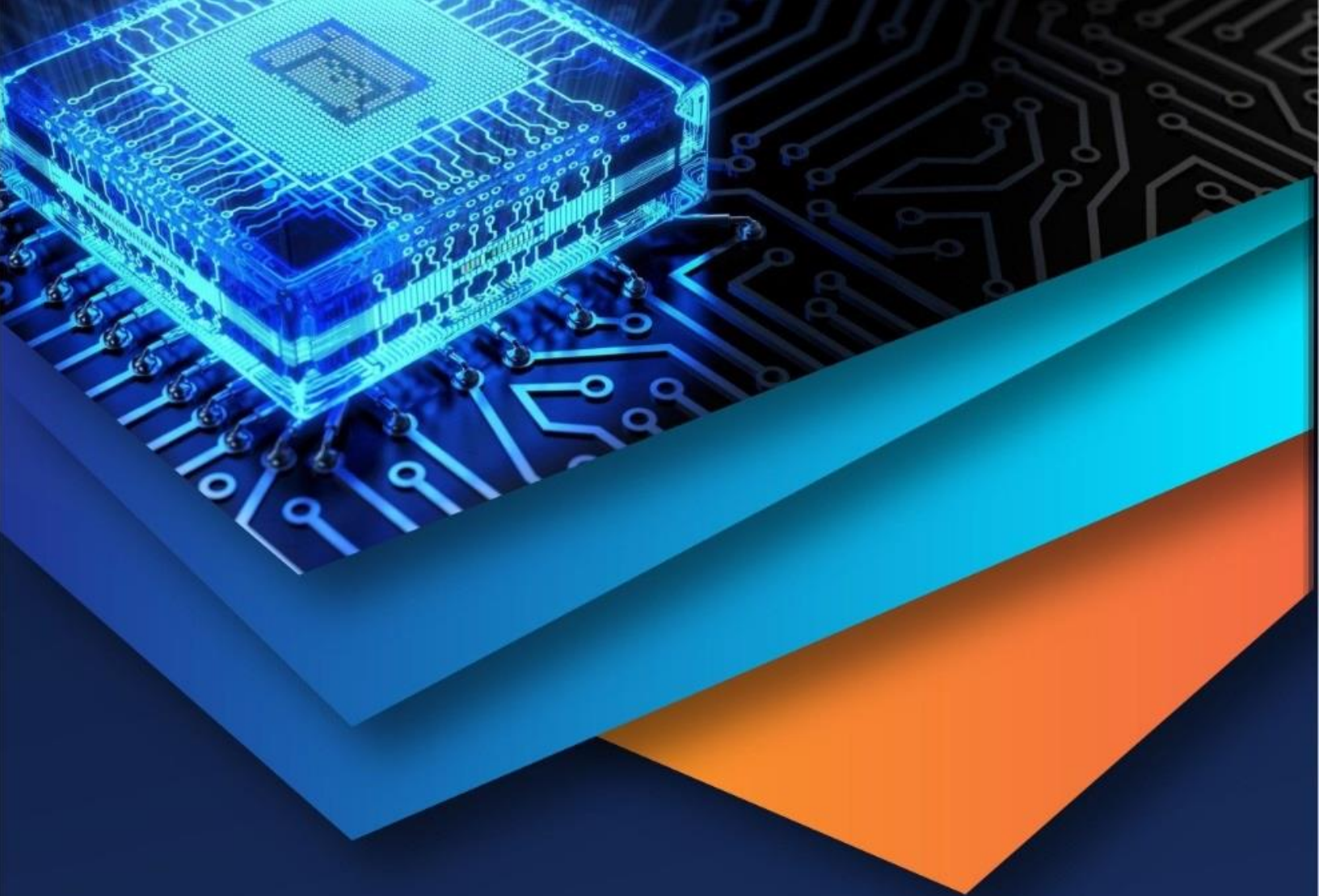
To address the above problems, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: enhance the transparency of algorithms, strengthen governance and fact-checking mechanisms for AI-generated content, set higher ethical standards for political organisations and content creators, improve the media literacy of the public, and promote greater international cooperation in the field of digital political governance. The above suggestions are to build an open, fair and credible digital platform for political communication.

The Media Ethics in this paper will be seen as a necessary basis for promoting a good digital political environment, not as barriers to technological progress. As artificial intelligence, algorithms and digital platforms continue to develop, the values of truthfulness, transparency, fairness and social responsibility in society will need to be upheld in order to protect democracy and the public's trust. However, this study is not perfect either. Based on a study of existing materials and relevant cases, it does not include data from surveys, interviews, or analysis of platform data. In the future, more research will be conducted to collect actual cases from various parts of the world for comparison. In recent years, new-generation technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and future models of digital political communication have been introduced to the general public, and some serious ethical questions have also arisen; therefore, future research should employ empirical methods, including surveys, interviews and comparative cross-national analyses, to further examine the ethical implications of political communication on emerging digital platforms.



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