

The Ethical Implications of Political Deepfakes: A Deontological Perspective on Democratic Communication

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Abstract

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The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has enabled the creation of political deepfakes, raising significant concerns about the integrity of democratic communication. While existing scholarship has primarily focused on technological detection, misinformation, and regulatory responses, limited attention has been given to the ethical implications of political deepfakes from a deontological perspective. This study examined how political deepfakes challenge the principles of truthfulness, honesty, and moral responsibility that underpin democratic communication. Employing a qualitative conceptual approach, the study drew upon media ethics literature, deontological ethical theory, and contemporary research on political deepfakes to analyze the ethical consequences of AI-generated synthetic media in political contexts. The findings indicated that political deepfakes constitute deliberate forms of deception that violate the deontological duty of truthfulness and contribute to the erosion of public trust by generating uncertainty regarding the authenticity of political communication. The analysis further demonstrated that ethical responsibility extends beyond content creators to include political actors, digital platforms, and other stakeholders involved in dissemination. Moreover, the study argued that the broader ethical risk of political deepfakes lies in their capacity to generate an epistemic crisis in which citizens become increasingly uncertain about the reliability of public information. This study contributes to the growing body of literature by extending existing discussions beyond technological and regulatory concerns toward a normative ethical analysis grounded in deontological principles, highlighting the importance of truthfulness, accountability, and moral responsibility in preserving democratic communication in the age of artificial intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed contemporary communication environments. In particular, recent developments in generative AI have enabled the creation of highly realistic synthetic content, including text, images, audio recordings, and videos that can closely imitate authentic human communication (Balasubramaniam et al., 2024). Among these developments, deepfake technology has emerged as one of the most controversial applications of AI due to its ability to generate convincing yet fabricated representations of individuals and events (Islam et al., 2024; Nasiri & Hashemzadeh, 2025; Singh, 2023). Although deepfake technology offers potential benefits in areas such as entertainment, education, and digital media production, its increasing use in political communication has raised growing ethical concerns regarding truth, authenticity, and public trust (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020)

Political communication depends on citizens' access to reliable information. In democratic societies, individuals rely on information disseminated through various media channels to evaluate political actors, participate in public discourse, and make informed electoral decisions (Perloff, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Wolfsfeld, 2022). However, the emergence of AI-generated political deepfakes has complicated this process by enabling the creation of deceptive content that appears authentic despite being entirely fabricated (Farouk & Fahmi, 2024; Sophia, 2025). Unlike traditional misinformation, deepfakes exploit the persuasive power of visual and audio evidence, making them particularly effective tools for manipulation and deception. Consequently, scholars have raised concerns about the potential of political deepfakes to distort political discourse, undermine public trust, and weaken democratic institutions (Ranka et al., 2024).

The risks associated with political deepfakes are no longer merely theoretical. A notable example occurred during the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2022, when a manipulated video depicting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy calling on Ukrainian troops to surrender circulated online. Although the video was quickly identified as a deepfake and removed from major platforms, the incident demonstrated how synthetic media can be weaponized to influence public perception during periods of political instability and conflict (Balogun et al., 2025; Folorunsho & Boamah, 2025). More importantly, the case highlighted a broader challenge facing democratic societies: the erosion of confidence in the authenticity of information. Even when deepfakes are exposed, their existence can create uncertainty about what is real and what is fabricated, thereby contributing to declining trust in media and public communication (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Existing scholarship has extensively examined political deepfakes from technological, legal, regulatory, and misinformation perspectives. Researchers have investigated deepfake detection mechanisms, platform governance, election security, disinformation campaigns, and the implications of synthetic media for democratic processes (Walker et al., 2024; Ranka et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies have documented the growing prevalence of political deepfakes and their potential impact on electoral integrity, political polarization, and public trust. These contributions have significantly enhanced understanding of deepfakes as both a technological and political phenomenon and have provided valuable insights into the challenges posed by AI-generated content.

Despite these contributions, an important conceptual gap remains in the existing literature. Much of the current research frames political deepfakes primarily as technological, regulatory, or misinformation-related challenges. While these perspectives are valuable, they provide limited insight into how political deepfakes undermine truthfulness as a moral obligation and a foundational norm of democratic communication. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining political deepfakes through a deontological media ethics perspective, particularly regarding the ethical principles of honesty, truthfulness, and moral responsibility. As discussions surrounding deepfakes continue to expand, there remains a need for deeper ethical inquiry into whether the creation and dissemination of political deepfakes violate fundamental moral duties that sustain democratic discourse. This gap is particularly significant because democratic communication depends not only on effective regulation and technological safeguards but also on shared ethical commitments to truth and honesty in public life.

This research addressed this gap by examining political deepfakes through the lens of deontological media ethics. Specifically, the study investigated how AI-generated political deepfakes challenge the principles of truthfulness, honesty, and moral responsibility that underpin democratic communication. Using the Zelenskyy deepfake incident as an illustrative case study, the paper shifted attention from purely technological and regulatory concerns toward the ethical implications of synthetic political media. In doing so, the study contributed to the growing literature on political deepfakes by conceptualizing them not merely as technological threats but as manifestations of a broader crisis of truth in democratic communication. The study sought to answer the following research question: How do AI-generated political deepfakes challenge deontological principles of truthfulness and moral responsibility in democratic communication?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design to examine the ethical implications of political deepfakes in democratic communication. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study adopted a normative and analytical approach grounded in media ethics, focusing on how AI-generated political deepfakes challenge the ethical principles of truthfulness, honesty, and moral responsibility in democratic communication (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The qualitative conceptual design was considered appropriate because the study focused on ethical analysis rather than causal relationships or statistical patterns. Through critical examination of existing literature and documented cases, the study provided a deeper understanding of the ethical challenges posed by political deepfakes in contemporary communication environments.

Research Approach

The study utilizes deontological ethics as its primary analytical framework. Deontological ethics, most commonly associated with Immanuel Kant, evaluates actions according to moral duties and obligations rather than their consequences (Kant, 1785; Alexander & Moore, 2021). Within this framework, truthfulness and honesty are regarded as fundamental moral duties that should guide communication practices.

This approach is particularly relevant to political deepfakes because such content frequently involves intentional deception and manipulation. While many studies assess deepfakes in terms of their societal consequences, a deontological perspective focuses on whether the creation and dissemination of deceptive content violate moral obligations toward citizens and democratic institutions. Consequently, the framework enables a normative evaluation of political deepfakes based on principles of honesty, truthfulness, and moral responsibility.

Data Sources

This study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from academic journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, and documented case materials related to political deepfakes, media ethics, democratic communication, and deontological moral philosophy. Secondary data analysis is appropriate for conceptual studies that seek to synthesize and interpret existing knowledge rather than generate new empirical observations (Johnston, 2017).

Key sources include research on political deepfakes (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Walker et al., 2024), media ethics (Christians et al., 2020; Ward, 2018), and deontological ethics (Kant, 1785; Alexander & Moore, 2021). In addition, the study examines the widely documented 2022 Zelensky deepfake incident as an illustrative case study. This case was selected because it represents one of the most prominent examples of AI-generated political deception during an international conflict and demonstrates the potential impact of synthetic media on public communication.

Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis to identify, organize, and interpret recurring ethical themes within the selected literature and case materials. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method that enables researchers to examine patterns of meaning across different sources of data.

The analysis focuses on three central themes:

1. Truthfulness in democratic communication;
2. Honesty and deception in political messaging;
3. Moral responsibility in the creation and dissemination of deepfake content.

The selected literature and case study are analyzed through a deontological perspective to assess whether political deepfakes violate ethical duties associated with truthful communication. Findings are subsequently interpreted in relation to broader concerns regarding democratic discourse, public trust, and the integrity of information environments.

Ethical Considerations

This study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, including academic literature, published reports, and documented case materials. Consequently, no human participants were involved, and formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, ethical considerations remain important because the study examines issues related to misinformation, political communication, and the ethical implications of emerging artificial intelligence technologies.

To ensure academic integrity, all sources used in this study are acknowledged appropriately and interpreted within their original context. The analysis is conducted systematically and transparently to minimize researcher bias and avoid misrepresentation of existing scholarship. Furthermore, this study does not seek to promote, justify, or reproduce deceptive practices associated with deepfake technology. Instead, it critically evaluates the ethical implications of political deepfakes through a deontological framework emphasizing truthfulness, honesty, and moral responsibility. By maintaining accuracy in reporting and interpretation, the study aims to contribute responsibly to ongoing scholarly discussions concerning ethics, trust, and democratic communication in the age of artificial intelligence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Deepfakes and the Violation of Truthfulness

A recurring theme identified throughout the literature is the tension between political deepfakes and the ethical principle of truthfulness. Existing studies have largely examined deepfakes as forms of misinformation, disinformation, or digital manipulation (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the societal risks of synthetic media, the present study argues that the ethical significance

of political deepfakes extends beyond the circulation of false information. Instead, political deepfakes challenge one of the most fundamental moral obligations in communication: the duty to communicate truthfully.

From a deontological perspective, truthfulness is not merely an instrumental value that helps communication function effectively. Rather, it is a moral duty that reflects respect for individuals as rational agents capable of making autonomous decisions (Kant, 1785; Alexander & Moore, 2021). Citizens participating in democratic societies rely on truthful communication when evaluating political leaders, policies, and public issues. Consequently, communicators have an ethical obligation to avoid intentional deception.

Political deepfakes fundamentally contradict this obligation because they are intentionally designed to fabricate reality. Unlike ordinary misinformation, which may result from misunderstanding or inaccurate reporting, deepfakes involve deliberate manipulation of visual and audio evidence. Their persuasive power stems from their ability to imitate authentic human communication while concealing their artificial origins. This characteristic distinguishes deepfakes from many traditional forms of political deception and raises significant ethical concerns regarding honesty and authenticity.

The widely discussed Zelensky deepfake incident illustrates this issue. Although the manipulated video was quickly exposed as false, the case demonstrated how synthetic media can exploit the credibility traditionally associated with audiovisual evidence. The ethical problem therefore lies not only in the false message itself but also in the intentional creation of fabricated reality designed to influence public perception. From a deontological standpoint, such actions violate the moral obligation of truthfulness regardless of whether the deception ultimately succeeds.

This finding suggests that political deepfakes should not be viewed solely as technological artefacts or misinformation tools. Rather, they represent a direct challenge to the ethical foundations of democratic communication because they normalize practices that are fundamentally incompatible with truthful public discourse.

Deepfakes and the Erosion of Public Trust

Beyond the issue of truthfulness, the analysis indicates that political deepfakes have important implications for public trust. Trust has long been recognized as a fundamental condition for effective communication and democratic participation (Bok, 1978; Christians et al., 2020). Citizens depend upon the credibility of information sources when making political judgments, participating in public debate, and evaluating competing claims. Without a reasonable degree of trust, democratic communication becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Previous research has shown that the influence of deepfakes does not necessarily depend on audiences believing fabricated content. Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) argue that the greater danger may lie in the uncertainty generated by synthetic media. Even when citizens suspect manipulation, repeated exposure to deepfakes can create doubts regarding the authenticity of information more generally. As a result, the distinction between genuine and fabricated content becomes increasingly blurred.

This observation is particularly important from an ethical perspective. Democratic communication depends not only on the availability of accurate information but also on citizens' confidence that truth can be distinguished from falsehood. When individuals become

uncertain about the authenticity of political communication, trust in information systems may gradually deteriorate. Such deterioration affects not only political actors but also journalists, media institutions, and democratic processes themselves.

The implications of this finding extend beyond individual cases of deception. If citizens begin to assume that any audiovisual content may be manipulated, public discourse risks becoming characterized by skepticism and distrust. Under such conditions, factual corrections may lose effectiveness because uncertainty itself becomes normalized. Consequently, the ethical harm associated with political deepfakes is broader than the spread of misinformation; it involves the weakening of trust that democratic communication requires to function effectively.

Moral Responsibility in the Age of Synthetic Media

Another important finding concerns the question of moral responsibility. Public discussions of deepfakes often focus on technological capabilities, detection systems, or regulatory responses. While these considerations are important, they can unintentionally obscure the human decisions that make political deepfakes possible. Technology itself does not possess moral agency; responsibility ultimately rests with individuals and institutions involved in creating, disseminating, and amplifying synthetic content.

From a deontological perspective, responsibility cannot be evaluated solely in terms of outcomes. Ethical evaluation must also consider whether actions respect moral duties toward others (Alexander & Moore, 2021). Individuals who intentionally create deceptive political content violate duties of honesty because they knowingly present fabricated information as authentic. Such actions fail to respect audiences as autonomous decision-makers entitled to accurate information.

Responsibility also extends beyond content creators. Political actors who exploit manipulated media for strategic purposes, online communities that knowingly circulate deceptive content, and digital platforms that facilitate dissemination all play roles within the broader communication ecosystem. Although their degrees of responsibility may differ, each actor contributes to the ethical consequences associated with political deepfakes.

This finding challenges narratives that frame deepfakes exclusively as technological problems. While technological innovation may enable synthetic media, the ethical concerns surrounding political deepfakes originate from human choices regarding deception, manipulation, and communication practices. Consequently, meaningful responses to deepfake-related challenges require not only technical solutions but also stronger commitments to ethical responsibility among all participants in digital communication environments.

Political Deepfakes and the Crisis of Truth

The findings further suggest that political deepfakes contribute to a broader crisis of truth within democratic communication. Existing literature has extensively documented the technological and political risks associated with synthetic media (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Walker et al., 2024). However, the present analysis indicates that the deeper concern involves the gradual destabilization of truth as a normative foundation of public discourse.

Democratic societies depend upon shared assumptions regarding the possibility of establishing factual reality. Citizens may disagree about values, policies, and political priorities, but democratic deliberation becomes difficult when there is no common basis for evaluating truth claims. The emergence of increasingly sophisticated deepfakes complicates

this process because visual and audio evidence, once regarded as relatively reliable, can now be artificially manufactured with remarkable realism.

From a deontological perspective, this development is ethically troubling because truthfulness is not optional. It is a moral requirement that enables individuals to engage with one another as rational and autonomous participants in public life. Political deepfakes undermine this requirement by introducing deliberate deception into spaces where truthful communication is essential.

Importantly, the ethical concern extends beyond individual acts of manipulation. The cumulative effect of repeated exposure to synthetic deception may contribute to an environment in which truth itself becomes contested. In such circumstances, citizens may become less confident in their ability to evaluate information, and public discourse may become increasingly fragmented. Therefore, political deepfakes should be understood not merely as isolated communication problems but as indicators of a broader crisis affecting the ethical foundations of democratic societies.

From Political Deception to an Epistemic Crisis

The most significant contribution of this study lies in its argument that political deepfakes should be understood as catalysts of an epistemic crisis in democratic communication. Existing scholarship has primarily examined deepfakes through technological, legal, regulatory, and misinformation-oriented perspectives. While these approaches remain valuable, they do not fully capture the deeper ethical implications of synthetic political media.

The analysis conducted in this study suggests that the central danger of political deepfakes is not simply their ability to deceive audiences. Rather, their broader impact lies in their capacity to undermine confidence in the possibility of distinguishing truth from fabrication. In other words, deepfakes transform deception from an isolated ethical violation into a systemic challenge affecting the conditions under which knowledge and trust are produced within democratic societies.

This interpretation extends current scholarship by connecting political deepfakes to broader concerns regarding epistemic integrity, democratic legitimacy, and moral responsibility. The issue is no longer limited to whether a specific video is authentic or manipulated. Instead, the challenge concerns whether citizens can continue to rely on communication systems as trustworthy mechanisms for understanding political reality.

Consequently, addressing political deepfakes requires more than technological detection tools or regulatory interventions. While such measures remain important, they cannot fully resolve the ethical challenges identified in this study. A sustainable response must also involve renewed commitments to truthfulness, honesty, accountability, and moral responsibility within public communication. Without these ethical foundations, technological solutions alone may prove insufficient to preserve democratic trust in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence.

Table 1. Summary of Main Findings

Theme	Main Finding	Ethical Implication
Truthfulness	Political deepfakes involve intentional fabrication of audiovisual content that misrepresents reality.	Violate the deontological duty of honesty and truthfulness.
Public Trust	Deepfakes create uncertainty regarding the authenticity of political information.	Contribute to the erosion of public trust in communication systems.

Moral Responsibility	Ethical responsibility extends beyond content creators to political actors, online communities, and digital platforms.	Highlights the importance of accountability in digital communication environments.
Crisis of Truth	The increasing sophistication of deepfakes weakens confidence in the reliability of information.	Challenges truth as a normative foundation of democratic communication.
Epistemic Crisis	Deepfakes undermine citizens' ability to distinguish authentic information from fabricated content.	Threaten the conditions necessary for informed democratic deliberation and participation.

Note. Developed by the author based on the findings of the study.

Source: Developed by the author based on the findings of the study

Table 1 summarizes the principal findings of this study. Collectively, the findings indicate that the ethical implications of political deepfakes extend beyond the dissemination of false information. From a deontological perspective, political deepfakes represent violations of truthfulness that contribute to declining public trust, weakened epistemic certainty, and broader challenges to democratic communication. These findings support the argument that political deepfakes should be understood not only as technological or regulatory concerns but also as ethical issues that require renewed attention to honesty, accountability, and moral responsibility in public communication.

CONCLUSION

Political deepfakes have emerged as significant ethical challenges in the age of artificial intelligence; however, existing discussions have largely focused on technological detection, misinformation management, and regulatory responses rather than normative ethical analysis. This study examined political deepfakes from a deontological perspective, exploring how they challenge the principles of truthfulness, honesty, and moral responsibility that underpin democratic communication.

The findings indicate that political deepfakes constitute deliberate acts of deception that violate the moral duty of truthfulness, extend beyond the dissemination of false information to involve intentional audience manipulation, and contribute to the erosion of public trust by creating uncertainty regarding authenticity. The analysis also highlights that moral responsibility extends beyond content creators to include political actors, digital platforms, and other stakeholders involved in the production and dissemination process. Overall, the study contributes to the literature by extending discussions beyond technological and regulatory concerns toward a normative ethical analysis grounded in deontological principles, conceptualizing political deepfakes as catalysts of an epistemic crisis in which citizens experience increasing uncertainty about the reliability of public information.

The findings carry important practical implications, suggesting that efforts to address political deepfakes should not rely exclusively on technological detection or legal regulation, as such measures may be insufficient without ethical considerations. Policymakers, media organizations, educational institutions, and digital platforms should promote ethical standards emphasizing truthfulness, transparency, accountability, and responsible communication. In addition, media literacy initiatives can help citizens critically evaluate digital content.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations, as it is a conceptual qualitative analysis based on existing literature and ethical theory rather than empirical data. Future research may build upon this work by employing empirical approaches such as surveys, interviews, experiments, or comparative case studies to investigate how citizens perceive and respond to political deepfakes across different sociopolitical contexts, as well as by examining the effectiveness of ethical guidelines, regulatory frameworks, and platform governance strategies in mitigating risks associated with AI-generated political content.

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