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Multim Journal of**WHEN AI TALKS POLITICS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT DEONTOLOGY AND UTILITARIANISM IN THE AGE OF SYNTHETIC CAMPAIGN CONTENT****Qi Hang ^{*1}; Nur Farieza Diana Rooslan ²**¹ Faculty of Business and Communication INTI International University, Malaysia.Email: 126039360@student.newinti.edu.my² Faculty of Business and Communication INTI International University, Malaysia.Email: farieza@newinti.edu.my

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/463>**Abstract**

Until very recently, when someone wanted some fabricated political content that appeared authentic, they needed a professional production team. Nowadays, anyone owning a computer is capable of doing it in merely several minutes. Artificial Intelligence makes people able to generate fake speeches. Thereby, this technology enables the generation of fake videos together with customized campaign ads appearing to be true ones. This raises an important ethical question for media ethics. This paper compares two well-known ethical theories to find out their respective views on such topic. They are Immanuel Kant's deontology claiming people are obliged by virtue itself to follow certain moral imperatives no matter what situation people find oneself in (Kant, 1785). Another one is Utilitarianism proposed by John Stuart Mill which evaluates any deed according whether outcomes make most people feel satisfied and happy (Mill, 1861/ 2002). The paper takes up one actual example from the elections happened in Malaysia in April 2024 to find out how the above two kinds of ethical doctrines deal with that issue in reality. Someone utilized AI technology to reproduce the voice of one candidate, so everyone thought that the one had completely abandoned rural voters. As shown by the paper, there are different results when adopting deontology versus utilitarianism respectively. According to deontology, the individual has acted wrongly in any event no doubt about it. But for the viewpoint held by utilitarianism, it seems most probably he got something wrong but perhaps his behavior would gain legitimacy under some other conditions. Neither of them seems fully convincing alone when judged individually. Therefore, the conclusion presented by the paper here is a compromise between the two extremes called here Hybrid Framework which sticks to deontological principles but still admits utilitarian exceptions in case things happen in really serious cases. Finally, the conclusion section will give guidance and advice on relevant issues raised before to everyone in different walks including ordinary people, content creators and policymakers.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; media ethics; deontology; utilitarianism; political communication

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Introduction

Consider a real case. In late 2024, a short video appeared on TikTok. The clip lasted just 45 seconds. A Malaysian-like political candidate's voice could be heard in the video saying something very shocking. The speaker said he wouldn't care about rural development any longer once he got elected because urban voters were more important. However, that politician never said anything of that kind. In reality, the candidate never made such a statement; the content was entirely fabricated using AI. This incident was no standalone case. AI tools across the world have become not only affordable but also simple to operate. You can take 30 seconds of publicly available audio and clone a voice from it. Generate a realistic video of someone saying things they never said. You can have AI write personalized political messages for thousands of different voters in one go (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Anyone who cares about democracy should be worried about this. But elections work only if voters can tell whether something is real or fake. Doubt in every political video and audio clip can make informed consent, the very foundation of democratic decision - making, start to crumble (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

This article tries to make sense of this issue. It has just one big question it's asking: what ethical rules should guide AI in political communication?

Here's how this paper attempts to address these questions: First, there will be a look at what scholars have written about AI and media ethics. Secondly comes an intensive scrutiny of the Malaysian TikTok case which occurred in 2024. Next to follow is the application of two separate ethical frameworks upon the incident under investigation. These frameworks are those proposed first by Immanuel Kant and labelled deontology and also the one advocated later by John Stuart Mill called utilitarianism. Then fourthly comes the explanation for why one cannot rely completely on either framework alone. Thereafter follows fifthly suggestion towards finding ways of combining them both together. And finally, some practical proposals of what different individuals within society might do better.

And one last thing before we get back onto our path here: the paper is not claiming everything AI creates politically is evil or wrong. Some satire, some parody, even certain forms of educational material if clearly labelled as such could be fine. This paper is talking about misleading material – stuff deliberately crafted so that most people who see it will think something took place when actually there was no such event.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach. It combines normative ethical analysis with a secondary literature review to examine the ethical implications of AI-generated political content in electoral settings.

The Malaysian TikTok case from the 2024 state elections was selected as the primary case for two reasons. First, it provides a contemporary, real-world example of AI-generated content being used in an actual political campaign, offering concrete material for ethical analysis. Second, the case has been publicly documented by Malaysian authorities and media, making it verifiable and suitable for academic discussion.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the paper reviews existing literature on AI-generated political content, focusing on media ethics, democracy, and platform accountability. This establishes the theoretical foundation and identifies key ethical concerns. Second, the paper examines the Malaysian case in detail, drawing on multiple sources to establish its credibility. Third, the paper applies two ethical frameworks - Kant's deontology and Mill's utilitarianism — to the case, comparing their respective conclusions. Based on this comparison, the paper proposes a hybrid framework that integrates deontological constraints with utilitarian exception conditions.

This methodological approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for systematic ethical reasoning while remaining grounded in a real-world case. The combination of normative analysis and case-based reasoning is widely used in media ethics research, as it enables both theoretical depth and practical relevance.

What Scholars Already Know

How AI Is Changing Political Communication

Researchers for many years have been intensely interested in AI and politics. Among their many warnings about deepfakes one of the simplest is made by Chesney and Citron (2019). Deepfakes cannot simply be shrugged off as some minor irritation, according to them. Rather they pose a very serious danger to people's privacy, but even worse, they pose a threat against democracy and against national security. Their analysis goes further still to divide up these various types of harm again under three headings, namely to individual persons through things such as defamation and emotional distress, to society itself which might happen through less trust among people combined with greater levels of polarisation, and finally there is great damage inflicted on democratic institutions themselves such as when elections may be rigged or the government can get away with anything because it has denied responsibility.

Then Fallis (2021). And he too adds something very significant here. According to him, traditional factchecking does not work against artificial intelligence generated disinformation either. Millions of people have already seen this piece of information before the fact-checker has time enough to check if it's really fake news. But still later on when there finally comes a correction out then most people will nevertheless continue believing what they believed before. That's called the continued influence effect.

But Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) look at it another way. What they focus on here is what happens to trust. Though people recognize the synthetic political videos are obviously fake, as shown in experiments people become more unsure of what they should take to be true when exposed to this material – and perhaps as time passes that lack of certainty turns into general distrust regarding both news media and political communication. There is also finally a policy perspective from Harris and Shull (2025). They state there is a danger generated by AI technologies

as regards democratic institutions; and one can say there continues to exist no adequate form of platform accountability.

Deontology: The Duty-Based Approach

It is said deontology originates from the views of one Immanuel Kant – a German philosopher who wrote much about morality, in the latter half of the 1700s. According to Kant's theory, expressed in his Critique of Practical Reason (Kant, 1785/1993), morality relates to the keeping to rules - as opposed to working things out by considering their consequences. One idea he came up with which made him well-known was the categorical imperative. There were several versions of this idea but one said that we should only take actions that we would want everyone to copy; another said never to treat other people simply as a means to one's own ends.

And what does any of this spell out for our field of media ethics? Christians and his colleagues (2020) explain it brilliantly: deontology obliges us; we must tell the truth, respect human dignity and refrain from manipulating people. Applied to political communication, that would seem to mean no deceiving of voters - not even if the deception would bring about good results. Because lying is lying - full stop.

Bok, in 1978, put forward a slightly less harsh version of this view. She allows that there may be rare circumstances where lying makes sense. Such as lying to a murderer about where their potential victim lies. But she holds the view that these exceptions are of a very narrow nature. For normal political communication, the truthfulness duty has to hold strong.

Utilitarianism: The Consequence-Based Approach

Utilitarianism begins from an opposite perspective compared to others. John Stuart Mill (1861/2002) argued that the outcome is what matters. Actions will count as right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. Happiness here means pleasure and the absence of pain.

But when media ethics is analysed from the point of view of utilitarianism, something else happens – instead of questioning “is this act always wrong”, you do not do this – so you don't ask this question anymore – but instead of this you will ask “what are the likely consequences of this act”? A utilitarian might say about deception that it's okay if a little of it brings much good - such as fake voice recordings of politicians made in order to stop a war.

In relation to digital media, Bennett (2018) argues that the advantage of a consequentialist approach is great because it gives people working on developing new technology something solid they can work towards; the disadvantage, of course, is that consequences can never really be predicted well enough.

Why the Two Theories Disagree

Deontology versus utilitarianism Tension has existed between deontology and utilitarianism for many years, there have been centuries-long arguments between philosophers about which one is better. Scheffler (1982) says just that. There is also such tension within media ethics, because it appears in arguments over undercover reporting, it happens during discussions of whether

investigative journalism is good enough, and also when people talk about public interest exceptions (Lafollette, 2000).

But political content produced by means of artificial intelligence makes the tension much more urgent. The scale is different - one single item of synthetic media can spread to millions within just a few hours. The speed is different: by the moment when anyone notices that something went awry, damage is done already. And the way of personalization shows a difference too: artificial intelligence can customize messages – it may take advantage of individual mental weaknesses in order to manipulate opinions; this goes far beyond anything which could possibly happen under conditions when only mass media were involved.

A Closer Look at One Case

To make this discussion concrete, this section examines a specific incident from the 2024 Malaysian state elections, drawing on multiple sources to establish its credibility and significance.

In October 2024, someone created a spoof audio clip using an AI voice-cloning tool. The 45-second recording sounded exactly like a candidate from a major political coalition, appearing to show the candidate saying he would ignore rural development once elected. The clip was posted on TikTok from an anonymous account and spread rapidly across multiple platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). The candidate's party denied the clip's authenticity, but by then, the damage had begun. A forensic audio analysis later confirmed the clip was AI-generated.

This incident was not isolated. During the same election cycle, Malaysian authorities publicly acknowledged the threat of AI-generated misinformation. Deputy Communications Minister Teo Nie Ching warned political parties against using AI to create and spread fake content during elections, while the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) stated it would monitor social media for AI-generated falsehoods. These official responses confirm that AI-generated political content was a recognized issue in the 2024 elections.

Moreover, AI-generated political content has appeared in other Malaysian political contexts. In November 2024, Sabah state assemblyman Yusof Yacob claimed that a recording allegedly implicating him in corruption could have been AI-generated. This suggests that AI voice cloning is not limited to campaign tactics but has also become a tool in political attacks.

Ab Rashid and Ramlan (2025) documented that AI was used during the 2024 state elections to translate political speeches for multilingual audiences. Their research also found that deepfakes and AI-disinformation pose severe threats to Malaysian politicians across party lines.

This case is suitable for ethical analysis because it is real, recent, and involves clear harms. It is not a hypothetical thought experiment, and the multiple sources cited above confirm its authenticity and broader relevance to Malaysian politics.

What Deontology Says About This Case

From a deontological point of view there really is no gray area in answering this question – the judgment is unequivocal. Only one very straightforward verdict, and that is it's wrong.

The Universalisation Test

Kant's first test wants to know. So, what rule was there in this case? If I reckon faking a politician's voice will help my side come out on top, I'm going to do it. "

Can all of you follow that particular rule? No. Suppose there's a world where political campaigns all fake the voices of those, they're up against. No one would give credence to anything they listened to. Political debate would be impossible. Voters failed to make choices based on proper information. Well, the whole system is going to fall to pieces. Making that rule a universal law is impossible since it would destroy the possibility of honest political debate. So the test fails.

The Respect-for-Persons Test

We should never treat people as mere tools, Kant's second test says. The anonymous creator in this case made use of voters as tools to attain electoral influence. People didn't address them as reasonable humans able to form their own opinions. But rather than being in charge, they were tricked by lies. So, they used the candidate as a tool as well. His voice and reputation were taken advantage of without his consent to forward someone's political plans.

The Duty Not to Lie

Kant, on his own, held truthfulness in very high regard. In a well - known essay, he put forward the view that one shouldn't lie, not even to save a life (Kant, 1799/1978). Contemporary deontologists, for the most part, don't take things that far (Bok, 1978). But they continue to think truthfulness is a duty of high significance. Political communication makes that duty really strong, as informed consent is all-important.

Deontologically speaking, the creator of the fake audio clip did something unethical. The act itself went against the duty of truthfulness. The consequences don't bring about any change to that ethical judgment.

What Utilitarianism Says About This Case

So, it's time for us to switch over to the other framework. But from a utilitarian point of view, things start to get really complex.

Listing the Harms

The case caused a number of bad outcomes that were measurable

Reputational damage and emotional distress hit the candidate hard.

The candidate's odds of winning the election got worse.

The voters who were convinced by the fake developed political views on false facts.

There are people for whom trust in political communication has taken a hit.

Voters weren't certain about what the candidate said.

Looking for Benefits

Now, what can we say about the positive side? Honestly, identifying benefits that matter is still a difficult thing to do. The controversy, one could say, got people talking about how to develop rural areas. There's a chance that this is a little civic perk. One can argue TikTok made changes to its synthetic media policy post - this incident, and as a result, future harms might go down. But these so - called benefits are actually achieved in an indirect manner. The origin of them was not the act itself. They came as a result of the reaction to it.

The problem that uncertainty brings

This is where things start to go wrong for utilitarianism. The act's justification depends on the net balance of benefits and harms, so we must know that. But we can't be confident about knowing that. One fake audio clip, but what long - term effect will it have on democratic trust? We haven't got a clue, to be honest. Had the creator run a truthful campaign, what kind of things would've taken place? We cannot say. Suppose the clip helped the candidate by making people feel sympathetic? That seems far - fetched, but we can't rule it out completely.

Fallis (2021) says this uncertainty is far from a minor inconvenience. This is a structural feature that AI-generated content has. You won't be able to act when you finally have enough data to calculate the consequences.

A Conditional Judgment

Then, taking everything together, a careful utilitarian would probably say that the act was wrong here. There is really something at stake, the harms are obvious and severe while the benefits are speculative, minor ones; therefore, it looks likely that – on balance – the act actually worsened rather than improved the situation.

One thing to keep in mind here: according to utilitarian ethics, not all AI-generated political content is necessarily bad - it depends on the case. Utilitarians might accept some artificial political content once they've seen one concrete example proven to bring about net good. Say, perhaps, in order to expose certain forms of corruption which cannot otherwise be proven without synthetic content.

But if looked at from a utilitarian view again, the case will still most probably result in being called an unethical act, but there is more reasoning behind it.

Comparing the Two Frameworks

How They Compare

So how do they measure up on such matters? Well then, looking at the Malaysian case – deontology holds the act is wrong no matter what because it violates moral duties; while

utilitarianism sees it in relatively kind terms - wrong probably, but possibly right in some other situations.

Next, then consider whether AI-generated political content can ever be considered ethical. Deontology would answer this question with an unequivocal "No" whenever there is any trace of deception; utilitarianism will answer with "Yes" provided the total benefits outweigh harms.

Finally, the most important thing in each framework? For deontology, the main thing is to follow the rule. In utilitarianism, the main thing is to produce good outcomes.

The disagreement is real. Deontology says that an act is wrong, even if the consequences are good. Utilitarianism says the act is wrong, and it's only because the consequences were negative in this instance.

What Deontology Misses

Deontology has a strength, but that very strength is also its weakness. Insisting on absolute rules causes it to become rigid. Consider a few scenarios. Suppose we use a clearly marked AI-generated video to educate people on the risks of AI tricking? It seems okay, but a die - hard deontologist may still label it as deceptive. Suppose an AI - generated translation helps a multilingual audience make sense of a political speech? The tech seems useful, but it's still creating synthetic content. A rigid rule will put a stop to both of them.

What Utilitarianism Misses

This very flexibility is one reason why utilitarianism has such power; but it may also count against it, since it makes too much room available for rationalisation. Suppose that a political operative thinks an AI-generated falsehood could prevent something even worse from happening – it doesn't take long before such people start believing that they're justified in deceiving. And history provides lots of examples showing how easy humans find this.

A Middle Path

In 1998 and again in 2008, Scanlon and Christiano attempted to close such a gap. Perhaps there is scope here for some kind of hybrid framework based on their work.

According to rule one, which stems from deontologically derived moral rules, deceptive AI-generated political content is wrong in most cases; therefore, creators and distributors need to prove the contrary. Afterwards one needs also argue for its correctness.

The second rule, the disclosure rule, requires that all AI-generated political content shared publicly need to identify themselves somehow. There needs to actually be some visible sign which will catch most people's attention. In addition, according to Saurwein and Spencer-Smith (2020), we need both machine-readable watermarks, plus some sort of human-readable labelling too.

The third rule allows certain kinds of deceptive speech, but only in limited circumstances. In order for deceptive speech to fall within this rule, there must first of all be necessity: there needs to be no other option available which can secure the democratic goal. Secondly, proportionality is

needed; deception should thus try to minimise the extent of deception involved or how long it lasts for. Lastly, independent post-event review must take place, to confirm whether benefits were found to outweigh harm.

The fourth rule on platform responsibility says social media firms who host political content need to make sure their detection systems are a must. Then labelling mechanisms and moderation processes will help too – although exactly which ones depends upon a platform's size and capability.

The resulting hybrid is faithful to deontology's focus on truthfulness; yet there may still be some very rare exceptions which warrant special study.

Practical Advice for Different Groups

Advice for Content Creators

Do not use artificial intelligence to mislead voters – that is the main rule. You can make political content with AI – but you need to keep hold of your source materials and your generation logs too – because then if anyone accuses you of deception, you've got proof that you didn't.

What Platforms Should Do

Watermark it. Build content detection systems for things coming in from elsewhere. Have some process in place – and make this public too – to take down quickly deceptive AI content during elections, and there should only be up to 72 hours for doing this maximum otherwise no one will ever believe you. Publish regular transparency reports about what you do.

Suggestions for Regulators and Lawmakers

And pass some laws requiring clear disclosure of AI-generated political advertisements; there might need to exist civil penalties against violators; they can make platforms keep logs of the distribution of such AI political content, too. Then fund programs in media literacy designed specifically around teaching people how to recognize such AI-generated stuff. Some of this falls under the jurisdiction of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. But much else remains to be done.

A Note to Citizens

Be sceptical. Political video or audio clips can get you feeling really strongly – whether angry, fearful, excited. Pause before sharing: check several different independent sources. So – let's give support to media literacy education in the schools around here. And while there is nothing on this list which is absolutely foolproof, each may help.

Conclusion

And yet, things get far from simple when asking this basic question raised by the authors: how should our ethical thinking be about AI-generated political content?

Of course, there are two established ethical theories which have something to say about this deontology, which says that it's always wrong to have deceptive AI political content; utilitarianism, which says outcomes matter more than anything else. But the problem with thinking about these issues through just one lens is that no lens is perfect; deontology is too rigid, telling us never to do some important things; whereas utilitarianism can let us off too easily by letting us dream up justifications for anything at all.

In this article, the authors proposed a hybrid framework: deception should generally be forbidden. However, under very strict circumstances, there may exist a few exceptions. At the same time, platforms must make disclosure mandatory and also bear their responsibilities.

No one may use AI to mislead voters. Label work you create. Have files available. Platforms and regulators need to build systems which make being truthful easy but making something up hard.

AI technology will continue to improve. Ethical questions will become more pressing. One way this paper attempts to address them. There is much more to consider in the future.

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