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INDIA'S GENERATIVE AI ELECTION PILOT SHOWS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN CAMPAIGNS IS HERE TO STAY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven main trends around AI and the 2024 Indian elections stand out:

- **Wide usage.** AI was used across the board, by political parties big and small, for a variety of tasks, including content creation and replacement of human survey callers.

- **Appeal of AI's translation capabilities.** The translation capabilities of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) make it particularly useful to political strategists, who craft entire campaigns in local Indian languages.

- **AI voice clones.** Voice cloning was used widely and was viewed as more authentic/ convincing than other types of AI, such as deepfakes.

- **Satire.** Official parties' social media handles used AI content to openly parody their rivals.

- **Plausible deniability.** As increasingly convincing AI content emerged, politicians began to use GenAI as an excuse to dismiss genuine videos as deepfakes in the hope of distancing themselves from unflattering content.

- **Lack of intervention by global companies.** At least eight chatbots focused on elections in India were publicly accessible in the GPT Store, flouting OpenAI's policy prohibiting the use of its tech for political campaigns, and most Meta platform content analyzed for this report had no disclaimers about AI usage.

- **Halfhearted local regulatory efforts.** It was not until the election was already underway that the Election Commission of India (ECI) notified national and state political parties that AI content was disallowed; their first letter instructed the parties to take down any deepfakes within three hours, but follow-ups were patchy and had little impact.

NOTEWORTHY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Three reasons underpinned concerns about voter manipulation with AI content in India's 2024 national elections:**

    - **India's tech-savviness.** As a high-tech nation, India provides fertile ground for any emergent digital campaigning tactics, including nefarious ones.

    - **Precedent of sophisticated digital campaigning in the region.** India's 2019 election was dubbed the "WhatsApp Election" because of the winning party's elaborate WhatsApp campaigning, and AI-generated content has interfered in elections in other countries in the region, such as Pakistan.

    - **India's political and linguistic status.** India's status as a multilingual global majority/ non-Western country allowed big tech companies, particularly Meta, to undertake complicated political efforts with little scrutiny. Meta owns Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp—three pivotal platforms in India, especially since TikTok is banned in the country.

- **Two unique findings stand out:**

    - AI voice clone phone calls in regional Indian languages were used not only to reach voters but also to motivate party workers.

    - Multiple unconventional start-ups producing synthetic novel content (such as hologram boxes and QR codes to take selfies) emerged; interestingly, many of the founders of these start-ups were self-taught and did not have computer science degrees.

- **One important, underreported finding became clear:**

    - **Extensive digital voter data played a key role in the election.** Deepfakes dominated the news coverage of the election, eclipsing the crucial role played by the enormous amount of voter data available to political parties and political consultants. This data, often sourced unethically through data brokers, is being used to personalize synthetic content disseminated on WhatsApp. It is also being used to create AI voice clone calls that solicit votes in candidates' names.

INTRODUCTION

India's closely watched general election this year was a high-octane thriller, defying both exit polls and the pundits who had predicted that Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would comfortably secure an absolute majority in Parliament. While the closer-than-predicted election did hand Modi a third term in office, it was a weak mandate that put Modi on unfamiliar ground, forcing him to rely on the support of two political allies to cobble up a coalition government. These results gave a shot in the arm to the previously written-off opposition.

The marathon elections, which stretched over six weeks from April 19 to June 1, 2024, during a scorching Indian summer of heatwaves, also upended some of the predictions about the role that AI-based misinformation would play in the election. India has an acute misinformation problem, which peaks during elections, fueled mainly by political parties and their proxies and supporters. While the elections saw old problems such as misinformation and lack of social media platform accountability persist, the volume of AI-based misinformation seen during the 2024 elections was significantly lower than what fact-checkers, academics and technologists had anticipated. However, the elections did offer a case study of how newer technologies such as generative AI (GenAI) can compound existing misinformation issues—and how keen political parties are to leverage GenAI to achieve their objectives. India's parties were reined in from using GenAI tools to their fullest

capability largely by technical shortcomings—particularly the absence of high quality text-to-speech models in Indian languages, a challenge that is expected to be transient. As Amber Sinha, an Information Fellow at Tech Policy Press, put it, "I think so far elections this year, including the ones in India, have been a very interesting kind of testing ground for this technology in political campaigns. It's almost been a POC (proof of concept) kind of thing from beginning to end[—]not just development of this content but how political campaigns can procure them, access them, how people will receive them."

Political parties experimented[1] with GenAI in myriad ways, including using it to revive dead politicians, to generate personalized messages to voters and cadres, and to edit satirical videos targeting political rivals. While most use cases were gimmicky and intended to grab attention, India did see at least a handful of AI voice clones peddling disinformation—a new way of delivering misinformation that, at least in this election, supplemented rather than supplanted more traditional methods. These voice clones were highlighted by Pamposh Raina, head of Deepfakes Analysis Unit (DAU),[2] a coalition of academics, researchers, startups, tech platforms and fact-checkers created to combat AI-based misinformation in India. Raina said, "While we did not see so many deepfakes, we saw some high profile deepfakes. We saw a lot of manipulations and audio—voice clones were being used left, right and center."

While AI voice cloning was surprisingly common, actual deepfakes were not, despite pre-election warnings based on the significant adversarial use of GenAI deepfakes in the recent elections in Bangladesh[3] and Pakistan.[4] According to Raina, "I think [the news reporting that] the fears were overblown is fair, but I also want to take a step back and say that those fears emanated from the fact that we had seen how AI was misused in other countries." Raina continued, "I think what probably was our concern was that essentially if it's happening in country A, if it's happening in our neighborhood, it can happen here as well. I think in that sense we were all very cautious."

To ascertain the extent of GenAI's use and influence in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, I reviewed the work of Indian fact-checkers in the lead-up to and during the polls. To supplement this content analysis, I also spoke to experts in synthetic content creation, detection and tech policy in India.

An X user posted an AI voice clone of Imran Khan to falsely claim his party was boycotting the election

# HOW GENERATIVE AI WAS DEPLOYED IN THE GENERAL ELECTION

Voter Communication

Broadly speaking, I found that generative AI (GenAI) was used during the elections primarily for data analysis and sentiment analysis; translation; and content creation and personalization. The data and sentiment analysis[5] use cases included political consultants using AI phone calls as a survey tool to glean voter stances on particular issues and their candidate preferences. (Indeed, this was so successful that one political consultancy said it was considering automating all its call centers used for conducting ground surveys during elections.)

Translation was also a popular use case: India is linguistically diverse and recognizes 22 languages in its Constitution, and Generative AI's translation capabilities make it attractive to political strategists who craft entire campaigns in local Indian languages. In this election,

AI voice clone phone calls in regional Indian languages were used to reach voters and motivate party workers. The ruling BJP used *Bhashini*, an ambitious language translation platform being developed by India's Ministry of Electronics and Information and Technology, to translate Modi's speeches from Hindi into different regional languages.[6] Multiple X handles using Modi's nickname "Namo" (such as "Namo in Tamil," "Namo in Odia," etc.) were created to post videos of the Prime Minister (PM) speaking in different Indian languages. Party workers described Bhashini as a game-changer[7] in BJP's bid to gain a foothold in Southern India, where Hindi is not spoken.

Generative AI's speech translation capabilities was also adopted by popular YouTuber and Modi critic Dhruv Rathee:[8]
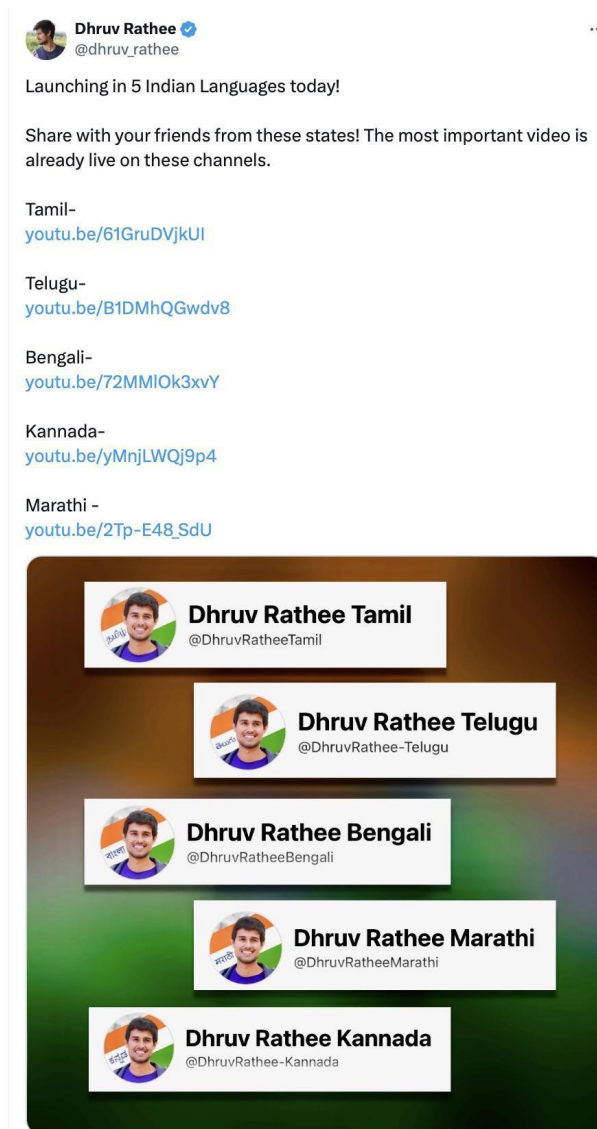
However, in both use cases, the tech fell short of convincingly cloning Modi's and Rathee's voices.

In addition to translation, GenAI was used to create various types of content,[9] including personalized videos, audio and text messages to be distributed over WhatsApp. Candidates reportedly used WhatsApp-based chatbots[10] to reach out to voters, and in April of this year, Decode found at least 8 chatbots focused on India's elections in the GPT Store, flouting OpenAI's policy prohibiting the use of its tech for political campaigns.[11] (It is not clear whether these particular bots were actually used in any campaigns). There was also a surge in unconventional start-ups producing *synthetic content* such as QR codes to take selfies and hologram boxes. Many of the founders of these start-ups are self-taught and do not have formal computer science degrees, but the experiment has been so successful that some of the synthetic start-up companies have gotten inquiries from political campaigns outside India.

Content Creation, Including Internal Deepfakes and Voice Cloning

Parties did create some of their own deepfake content. In South India—a generally literate and tech-savvy region—generative AI was used to digitally revive deceased political figures to endorse their parties' current candidates.[12] For example, the founder of Chennai-based Muonium AI, a company that creates special effects for movies, created a deepfake of late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi for the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party. More surprisingly, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which was known for opposing computers in the 90s for fear of job losses, created a deepfake video of one of its iconic leaders (who had retreated from the public eye due to advanced age) encouraging voters to vote for the party.[13]
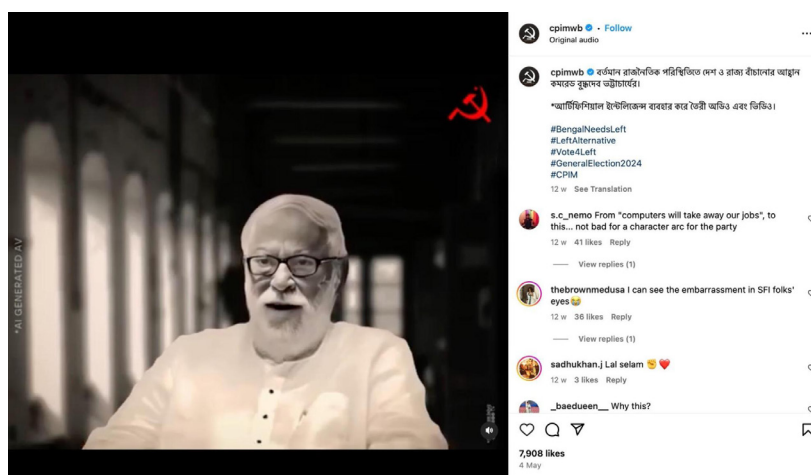
A deepfake video posted by CPI(M) on its Instagram account

Smaller parties used generative AI to clone its own leaders in an attempt to create a more level playing field in campaigning. A worker for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which lacks the deep pockets of the BJP, created voice clones of its party leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.[14] (Kejriwal was in jail at the time, facing allegations of corruption; this echoed an AI use in Pakistan's 2024 elections, when the Tehreek-e-Insaf party had used voice cloning technology to create a message from incarcerated former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan to his supporters.[15]) The AAP's voice clones in both Hindi and English blamed the BJP for Kejriwal's arrest. However, they were far from sounding realistic, and they did not go viral.

Misinformation and Deceptive/Antagonistic Deepfakes

Generative AI was also used to spread disinformation during the election in several instances. In two separate high-profile incidents, the Congress party posted real videos of well-known Bollywood actors—Aamir Khan[16] and Ranveer Singh[17]—with AI-cloned voice tracks criticizing Modi overlaid on top of the authentic video footage. Just days before Delhi went to vote, two manipulated videos—fake graphics and AI voice clones—of familiar Hindi news anchors were posted,[18] delivering bogus reports that the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) west Delhi candidate[19] was ahead in opinion polls. In another instance of AI voice cloning, a "leaked audio" claiming to be a phone call between Swati Maliwal (an MP of the upper house of parliament) and YouTuber Dhruv Rathee went viral.[20]

All five of these instances of adversarial deepfakes appear to have used crude off-the-shelf voice cloning technology. However, a few AI start-up founders said they declined shady requests from political parties to create custom-made deceptive synthetic content. Senthil Nayagam, founder of Muonium AI, said,

> Somebody wanted me to create a content where somebody was speaking in parliament and change the speech in a particular way. This is a party which asked. But my intention was whatever you speak in an assembly or parliament is actually history. Everything is documented. Until and unless the Speaker says this should be kept out, you can't modify that part. Just because I'm capable…I thought these were not the right approaches.

Nayagam worried that the government could temporarily ban the use of AI during elections, which would harm the nascent industry's ability to progress technologically: "we said hey, listen, even if we make money or not; AI is a fast moving train. We were early adopters. If we miss something at this stage we will not be able to catch up again." To prevent this kind of blanket ban, Muonium AI and two other AI start-ups, Dubverse and Polymath Synthetic Media Solutions, founded the Ethical AI Coalition.[21]

Satire and the Weaponization of Memes

In addition to these covert uses of generative AI, political parties also used the tool overtly on social media (primarily Meta) in clearly satirical content that openly targeted their rivals. None of these included disclaimers about containing AI-generated content. For example, the official Instagram handles of the Congress party and the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) posted AI-based parody videos targeting each other.[22] First, the Congress party posted a video of a man singing about a burglary at his house, using face swap and voice cloning technology to replace the man with a likeness of Modi.

Date uploaded: 2024-02-20 14:16:25

अपने सबसे प्रिय दोस्त को समर्पित एक भावुक गीत 🥺
सुनकर बताइएगा कैसा लगा दोस्तों 🤓

An AI edited video posted by the Congress party on its Instagram account

In return, BJP posted a video of opposition leader Tejashwi Yadav's speech in the Bihar assembly, using face-swapping technology to blend Yadav's face with that of another opposition leader Rahul Gandhi.

An AI edited video posted by the BJP on its Instagram account

A similar exchange of volleys took place in May between Modi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Banerjee had been the target of mockery by X users, who posted a video made with Viggle (which turns static images of a target into motion videos) of Banerjee dancing on stage; Banerjee set the Kolkata Police on them and threatened them with legal action.[23] Modi mocked Banerjee's strong reaction by approvingly quote-tweeting a Viggle-made video of an AI version of himself dancing on stage, based on a meme of US rapper Lil Yachty.[24]

Narendra Modi quote tweeted an X user who posted a Viggle AI video of Modi dancing down a ramp

AI-generated satirical content was common on non-official party pages, run by political consultancies. These proxy pages posted content that used face-swap photos, face-swap videos, voice cloning and cheap off-the-shelf AI editing apps. Many also experimented with

AI-generated images as a form of propaganda. It is unclear which image generators were used, but these highly unrealistic images depicting Indian contexts did not contain any disclaimers about being generated by AI.

Disowning Unflattering Statements or Events

As deepfakes and synthetic content became increasingly convincing, politicians seized the opportunity to disown unflattering public statements or conduct, dismissing genuine videos as deepfakes. For example, a BJP candidate was caught on video claiming that both Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Ajay Mohan Bisht better known as Yogi Adityanath (a Hindu monk) had chosen to remain childless in order to stop unemployment. In an effort at damage control, Amit Malviya, the head of the BJP's information and technology cell, falsely claimed that the video was a deepfake.[25] In another incident, a doctored video of Home Minister Amit Shah, seen as the de facto second in command after Modi, was dubbed as a deepfake.[26] In fact, the video was a "cheapfake": a doctored version of real content. The video's audio track was edited, splicing together different portions of Shah's actual speech to make it sound like he promised to end reservations - India's affirmative action policies. The state's response to the video was swift; Delhi Police detained[27] and questioned several opposition party workers in connection with the video, and they also asked X to help trace the original poster.[28]

LESSONS FROM INDIA'S EXPERIMENTS WITH GEN AI IN ELECTIONS

India's 2024 election coverage focused on deceptive deepfakes, but not because deepfaking lived up to the pre-election hype; instead, election coverage pointed out the conspicuous *absence* of a large volume of deepfakes. According to Indian fact-checking outlet BOOM Live, of the 258 election-related fact-checks it published in English, Hindi, and Bangla between March 1 and May 31, 2024, only 12 focused on AI-generated content.[29] What did not make headlines was the other ways that AI was used during the elections: voter data harvesting and analysis and, particularly, the use of AI voice clones to spread disinformation. Amber Sinha of the Tech Policy Press summed it up this way: "The fear of adversarial uses of Gen AI remains very real. Some of us who had been studying just the state of the market and the state-of-art of technology, we weren't very convinced that this year [in] the election we [we]re going to see that sort of dystopia and I'm very happy that that hasn't happened so far, at least half way through this year. [...] It gives tech companies a little bit more time to regroup and pay more attention to adversarial use cases and how they can potentially control that at their level itself." However, experts were concerned that off-the-shelf AI editing tools—sophisticated technologies democratized through apps—would increasingly enable the creation of "cheapfakes" (less convincing but easily accessible GenAI content that could flood the political zone).

The experts I spoke to agreed that the political use of sophisticated deepfake technology was still relatively uncommon in India, particularly for video content.[30] According to Muonium AI's Senthil Nayagam, making a deepfake video look realistic currently takes a lot of effort, and it is comparatively easier to manipulate audio. However, even audio remains difficult; the experts I interviewed pointed out that the quality of text-to-speech models (TTS) in non-English Indian languages significantly lags behind TTS models in English: "At least this election, Indian language content was difficult to create using current models. So a good enough text-to-speech model was not available," said Nayagam.

However, the gap between English and non-English TTS capability could close under the Indian government's current initiative to outsource AI models built via Bhashini, its AI translation platform, to private companies. But not everyone thinks this will be enough: "Using it in more adversarial ways requires the technology to be at a completely different level. And there again, like I was mentioning about Bhashini, it's still a relatively small data repository." Amber Sinha explained:

> Even if you're doing it for things like translation or just generally synthetic audio content, you won't be able to fool people into thinking that this is real. So that, I think, was definitely a factor and I think both campaigns who were procuring these services and service providers were fairly cognizant of it right from the beginning. That you could use them to create attractive campaigns, you could use them to generate a lot of attention, but you were not going to be able to make adversarial uses of the technology.

Deepfakes Are Not the Only Concern

With deepfakes hijacking most of the news coverage, much less attention has been given to the sheer amount of voter data that political parties and political consultants have. This data, often sourced unethically through data brokers, is being used to personalize synthetic content disseminated on WhatsApp. It is hard to quantify the scale on which this took place in the 2024 elections, but anecdotes indicate that survey robocalls and AI voice clone calls, ostensibly from candidates seeking votes, were common; many Indians posted on social media about receiving these types of calls.

No Disclaimers

Many experts were disturbed less by the volume of AI content around the election than about the lack of disclaimers about what was and was not AI generated. As Pamposh Raina of the Deepfakes Analysis Unit (DAU) put it,

I think it's only a function of how transparent are you in your use of AI. It might be harmless, but are you informing the general public that it is AI generated? Now the voice clone aspect, if there is no disclaimer, it is a problem. […] We go back to the Biden robocall…that would be a problem. So similarly, if there is no disclaimer in your voice calls, if there is no watermarking in your videos, it is definitely a problem. Whatever you are using, you have to be transparent. You have to tell people.

Lack of Oversight by the Election Commission of India and by Big Tech Companies

The 2024 general elections underscored the urgent need for tighter regulations around political content in India, both from the Election Commission of India (ECI) and by Big Tech companies such as Meta; this study highlighted precisely how much leeway these companies give to political parties around AI-generated content and misinformation.

In the leadup to the elections this year, the ECI was silent on the use of AI and synthetic content by political parties. This led to accusations that the ECI is partisan to the ruling party, the BJP, which had used a full-fledged deepfake in the Delhi Assembly election as far back as 2020. Not just the BJP, the opposition Congress party had used AI voice clones in the assembly elections held in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Telangana in late 2023.

In early May, during the election itself, the ECI sent its first notice to national and state political parties. The letter instructed them to take down any deepfakes within three hours of receipt of the letter, and to refrain from posting any misinformation, including deepfakes in either audio or video form or any synthetically modified content that might appear true to a recipient. As the digital rights advocacy group Internet Freedom Foundation pointed out, this notice was very belated, arriving after two out of the seven phases of voting had already ended, and after AI-generated misleading content had already been widely disseminated.[31]

A poster created by the Internet Freedom Foundation saying the ECI failed to regulate deepfakes, misleading media and communal content during the election.

After voting ended in June, the ECI claimed at a press conference that it had been able to effectively "manage and control the menace of deepfakes and AI-generated synthetic content" and that the volume of such content had come down during the polls due to their efforts. This seems unlikely, given that the ECI's guidelines for political parties' spending on digital social media campaigns are entirely voluntary; compliance and oversight are challenges, and political parties have been pumping enormous amounts of money into social media campaigns.

The laxity of the ECI's oversight was echoed by the laxity of tech companies' guidelines for political campaigning. Big tech companies such as Meta do not police political parties' large networks of surrogate pages,[32] which target political rivals and post misinformation, hate speech, propaganda and polarizing content. For example, an investigation by Decode revealed that Varahe Analytics, a political consultancy company, was hired by the BJP to run multiple surrogate Instagram handles that used face-swap and voice clone technology to create satire videos targeting opposition leaders.[33]

There is little transparency built into the infrastructure of political campaigns' social media platforms: Meta's Ad Library, which was created to improve transparency in political ads, has loopholes that make it easier to hide the entities behind surrogate pages, and Google Ads Transparency Center (which also shows spending on YouTube ads) restricts search, making it difficult to investigate campaign spending, thus negating the whole point of the ad library.

In addition, I found that though Meta does have a labeling policy requiring AI-generated or synthetic content be labeled, the policy was hardly enforced. Most of the AI-based election content went unchecked, there were hardly any voluntary labels on AI-generated political content on Meta.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 general elections in India were a pilot project for political parties and strategists who were keen to get a sense of what is possible using generative AI in campaigning. They were restrained largely by the absence of advanced text-to-speech models in Indian languages and a handful of ethical AI start-ups that declined to create deceptive content. In the near future, the technological guardrail may no longer be in force, given the ongoing development of TTS models in Indian languages. In the 2024 elections, political parties and their strategists primarily used off-the-shelf AI manipulation techniques such as face-swapping, AI voice clones, and "cheapfake" apps like Viggle AI to create not-so-realistic political memes and (in at least a handful of instances) low-quality AI-based disinformation. While deepfakes hogged the headlines, political strategists' use of generative AI in data analysis and personalization of political messaging has largely gone underreported, and this phenomenon needs more scrutiny.

The elections also showed that, despite forewarnings that AI content would disrupt the polls, the Election Commission of India was passive and reactive rather than proactive. Their lack of action underscores the urgent need for guidelines regulating the use of synthetic content in political campaigns. The role of tech companies such as Meta, which allowed surrogate political Facebook pages and Instagram accounts to flourish despite posting misinformation, hate speech and AI-edited memes, should also be critically examined; what are their obligations around monitoring AI-generated political content being shared?

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