

Research article

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Visual content as a tool for manipulating public opinion in election campaigns. The role of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion

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Abstract. Visual content is a powerful tool for manipulating public opinion, especially in election campaigns. Modern technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), are actively used to create visual images that can influence the perception of the audience. Thanks to the ability of visual content to be remembered and evoke emotional reactions, political technologists can purposefully shape the image of a candidate by manipulating public opinion in their favor. AI allows you not only to accelerate the creation of visual material, but also to analyze the preferences of the audience, adapting the content to specific social groups. However, the use of AI in politics raises ethical questions related to the possibility of manipulation and distortion of reality. Visual content created using AI requires strict controls to ensure transparency and integrity of election processes.

Keywords: visual content, artificial intelligence, manipulation, election campaigns, public opinion, political technologies

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Научная статья

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Визуальный контент как инструмент манипуляции общественным мнением в избирательных кампаниях. Роль искусственного интеллекта в формировании общественного мнения

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Аннотация. Визуальный контент является мощным инструментом манипуляции общественным мнением, особенно в избирательных кампаниях. Современные технологии, включая искусственный интеллект (ИИ), активно используются для создания визуальных образов, способных влиять на восприятие аудитории. Благодаря способности визуального контента запоминаться и вызывать эмоциональные реакции, политтехнологи могут целенаправленно формировать образ кандидата, управляя общественным мнением в свою пользу. ИИ позволяет не только ускорять создание визуального материала, но и анализировать предпочтения аудитории, адаптируя контент под конкретные социальные группы. Однако использование ИИ в политике вызывает этические вопросы, связанные с возможностью манипуляций и искажением реальности. Визуальный контент, созданный с помощью ИИ, требует строгого контроля для обеспечения прозрачности и честности выборных процессов.

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Ключевые слова: визуальный контент, искусственный интеллект, манипуляция, избирательные кампании, общественное мнение, политические технологии

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Introduction. It is believed that with the development of digital technologies, the influence of visual images on public opinion has noticeably increased, and this opinion is supported by domestic researchers [13]. In this regard, the importance of studying the mechanisms by which visual content can manipulate public opinion increases. This issue is becoming especially relevant in the context of global digitalization and the growing influence of social networks, where visual content is becoming the main tool of political communication. One of the most important factors enhancing the impact of visual content on public opinion is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) [13]. AI allows not only to automate the creation of visual materials, but also to analyze data on voter preferences. This makes it possible to have a more accurate and targeted impact on different social groups. However, at the same time, the use of AI in political campaigns raises ethical issues regarding manipulation and distortion of reality, which emphasizes the need for further study of this topic.

The aim of the work is to study the role of visual content as a tool for manipulating public opinion in election campaigns, as well as to analyze the use of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion and identify its impact on political processes.

The influence of modern technologies on the perception of information. The change in the perception of information by users is directly related to the evolution of the methods of presenting both printed and digital texts. According to A. M. Yakovleva, it is becoming increasingly difficult for modern readers to perceive books and other printed publications without highlights, images, graphs and other visual elements. This is explained by the fact that monotonous text blocks are difficult to hold attention. People are increasingly adapting to quick perception, concentrating on key information and ignoring secondary information. As a result, such text simplifications are perceived more positively. Over time, users get used to this format, accepting it as the norm [1].

In turn, if we consider this aspect through the prism of the possibility of its use in election campaigns, then understanding the mechanisms of influence of visual elements allows us to form a positive image, strengthen trust and motivate voters to support a certain candidate or program. An important aspect of visual elements is the use of images and symbols to establish an emotional connection with voters. High-quality photographs of candidates that reflect their sincerity, professionalism and determination significantly increase the level of trust and sympathy of the audience. The use of symbolic images, such as images of candidates surrounded by voters, participation in public events or demonstration of personal values, helps to strengthen positive perceptions and form a sustainable image [2].

The process of public opinion formation is determined not only by social norms and traditions, but also by emotional factors [3]. Its formation is influenced by several main factors: social attitudes; authoritative persons; emotional responses; confirmation of personal beliefs. [4]. Various methods are used to study public opinion, such as questionnaires, telephone or personal express surveys, and interviews. These tools help to determine the direction and strength of public sentiment. However, it is worth noting that public opinion is not only studied, but can also be artificially formed [5]. The main parameters of interaction include the number of participants, the technologies used, the synchronicity or asynchrony of communication, as well as the format of the content, be it text or multimedia. In Russian political practice, the promotion of candidates via the Internet is still considered a relatively new direction, which makes it especially interesting for analysis.

One of the first examples of the active use of digital technologies in politics was the 2004 Presidential elections in Russia. Candidates began to create their own websites to promote their programs. Since then, digital technologies have become an integral part of political campaigning. Today, online platforms provide politicians with the opportunity to reach new audiences and quickly disseminate the necessary information. In addition, online promotion is often cheaper than traditional media, which makes it attractive for candidates with limited budgets.

Social media have proven to be key tools for campaigning. The results of elections in recent years demonstrate that the importance of new media in political campaigns continues to grow. In the future, political headquarters will pay more and more attention to Internet platforms. There is a stable trend: the audience's trust in digital media is increasing, while traditional media are gradually losing their audience, which reflects global trends [6].

Such beneficial functions of media communications include political and ideological influence, support of social connections, information, education and entertainment. These functions depend on the social and cultural context, which determines the methods of communication and influences economic and interpersonal interactions [7].

In addition, social media play a significant role in the political sphere. These platforms have become an effective tool for engaging citizens in political activities. Various political issues are discussed here, online actions are organized, signatures are collected for petitions, and support is provided to political figures. Thus, social networks expand civic participation in political decision-making and stimulate public debate.

However, along with the positive aspects, social media also has its drawbacks. The dissemination of false information and fake news can significantly distort the perception of reality, forming erroneous ideas. It is also worth considering that the use of bots and fake accounts can create the illusion of mass support or protest, which negatively affects the objectivity of public opinion [8, 9]

Next, we will consider the role of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion. Thus, artificial intelligence (AI) is currently rapidly penetrating social processes, changing traditional socio-economic relationships. This technology, which emerged in the second half of the 20th century, quickly gained popularity due to its numerous advantages. Today, it continues to actively penetrate various aspects of human activity [10]. However, issues of ethics and privacy remain on the agenda. AI can increase social inequality and be used to violate human rights, for example, through mass surveillance systems [11].

Recent research suggests that artificial intelligence can subtly influence users' perceptions. In one experiment, participants were asked to use an AI to create an essay, and their opinions changed depending on whether the AI supported or opposed a particular point of view. The effect persisted even after the experiment was over. Professor Mor Naaman of Cornell University noted that people are not always aware of this influence, which he called "implicit persuasion."

AI can adapt to different political preferences, creating unique "personalities." For example, an employee of an environmental organization might use an AI called ProgressiveGPT, while a conservative audience would prefer GOPGPT. In the future, there are plans to create specialized AI for different tasks, such as SalesGPT for the sales department or SupportGPT for customer support. Research also shows that automated "smart replies" in Google's Gmail can influence the perception of communication, making it more positive. These responses contribute to the fact that the interlocutor is perceived as more friendly and ready for dialogue [12].

Materials and research methods. To conduct expert interviews with political strategists working with visual content in election campaigns, a total of 3 political strategists were involved in election campaigns. Testing was conducted after the completion of the election campaign in 2024. These respondents were asked the following questions:

1. How do you assess the influence of visual content, such as video messages, videos, photographs and illustrations, on the formation of public opinion in election campaigns?

2. What types of visual content have the greatest impact on audiences? What role can artificial intelligence play in this process?

3. Can neural networks become a universal tool of manipulation, creating the image and media activity of a candidate in such a way as to "make people love"? What is the role of a political strategist in this process?

4. What are the ethical aspects of using AI-generated content in political campaigns? What risks does this pose for a candidate?

5. What challenges and opportunities does the use of neural networks open up for political strategists in election campaigns in the future?

Research results and their discussion. In answering the first question about the influence of visual content on the formation of public opinion, experts note the following:

Alexander Nazarov emphasizes that visual content should be truthful and reflect the real image of the candidate. In his opinion, the discrepancy between the idealized image and the real person causes confusion, laughter or anger among voters. He introduces the concept of "seamless image", where the boundaries between the conventional "picture" and the real person are blurred, which helps to strengthen the trust of voters.

Ilya Grashchenkov believes that visual content forms the first impression of a candidate and plays a key role in creating his image. He notes that this is especially important for candidates who are not in power and need to increase their recognition. Photos and visual materials should be as realistic as possible and emphasize the candidate's strengths.

Yaroslav Ignatovsky notes that in modern Russian election campaigns, the role of campaign content is declining due to the dominance of administrative and mobilization tools. In his opinion, public sentiment is largely formed through social networks and messengers, and visual content performs an auxiliary function.

Speaking about the types of visual content and the role of artificial intelligence, Alexander Nazarov claims that artificial intelligence has become a full-fledged participant in election campaigning. AI is used to analyze data, personalize messages, and create a system of communication with voters. However, he draws attention to the legal aspects of using AI related to authorship and regulatory restrictions.

Ilya Grashchenkov notes that AI is actively used to create unique messages for the target audience, analyze data, and segment voters. Artificial intelligence helps political strategists quickly respond to changes in public opinion and adapt communication strategies.

Yaroslav Ignatovsky acknowledges the potential of AI in political campaigns, but points to the underutilization of these technologies in the current conditions. He attributes this to the low competitiveness of campaigns and budget cuts, which limit the possibilities for implementing innovations.

When answering the question of whether neural networks can act as a tool for manipulation and the role of a political strategist, experts agree that neural networks and AI are tools that can significantly facilitate the work of political strategists, but are not capable of completely replacing a person. Alexander Nazarov believes that AI can only replace low-skilled labor, while creativity and communications remain with a person.

Further answering the fourth question concerning the risks and challenges of using artificial intelligence, Alexander Nazarov draws attention to the legal risks of using AI, including possible legal violations and the removal of a candidate from the elections. He also notes the inertia of political strategists and their unwillingness to adapt to new technologies, which may become an obstacle to the effective use of AI.

Ilya Grashchenkov warns of the risks associated with possible AI errors that could have fatal consequences for the campaign. He emphasizes the need for constant monitoring and verification of AI work to avoid inconsistencies and maintain the trust of voters.

Yaroslav Ignatovsky discusses the challenges of getting content to voters in the context of information bubbles and information overload. He points out that voters are increasingly limiting

themselves to consuming content from a limited number of sources, making effective communication more difficult.

Speaking about the development prospects of this area, experts also agree, noting that despite the development of AI and automation of processes, the role of political strategists remains important and irreplaceable. Alexander Nazarov believes that maximum automation of routine functions will allow political strategists to focus on creating effective communication models and campaign structures.

Thus, having considered the opinions of political strategists working in election campaigns, the following recommendations were formed on the effective and ethical use of visual content and AI in election campaigns. When creating AI-based visual content, it is important to avoid creating fake images or videos (so-called “deepfakes”) that mislead the audience and undermine trust in the electoral process. The use of AI and visual content is only effective if it reinforces the core message of the campaign, promotes voter engagement, and reflects the true intentions of the candidate or party.

Conclusion. Thus, visual content combined with artificial intelligence is an important mechanism for influencing public opinion in election campaigns. Thus, Gundarin M.V. and Oleshka P.A. note in their work that in modern conditions, artificial intelligence plays a major role at the stages of election campaigns, starting with the analysis of voter data and ending with 3D holograms for holding virtual rallies and determining trends in social networks, and this is just the beginning [13]. Visual images, having a high degree of memorability and the ability to evoke an emotional response, have a significant impact on the perception of candidates by voters. Artificial intelligence provides political strategists with the opportunity not only to develop more accurate and effective methods of influence, but also to customize visual components in accordance with the needs of individual target audiences. However, the use of such technologies requires a cautious approach to ethical issues, since excessive manipulation of images and distortion of facts can cause a loss of voter confidence and call into question the legitimacy of the electoral process.

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