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June 27th, 2025

Seeing is believing? The dangers of visual misinformation go beyond its credibility

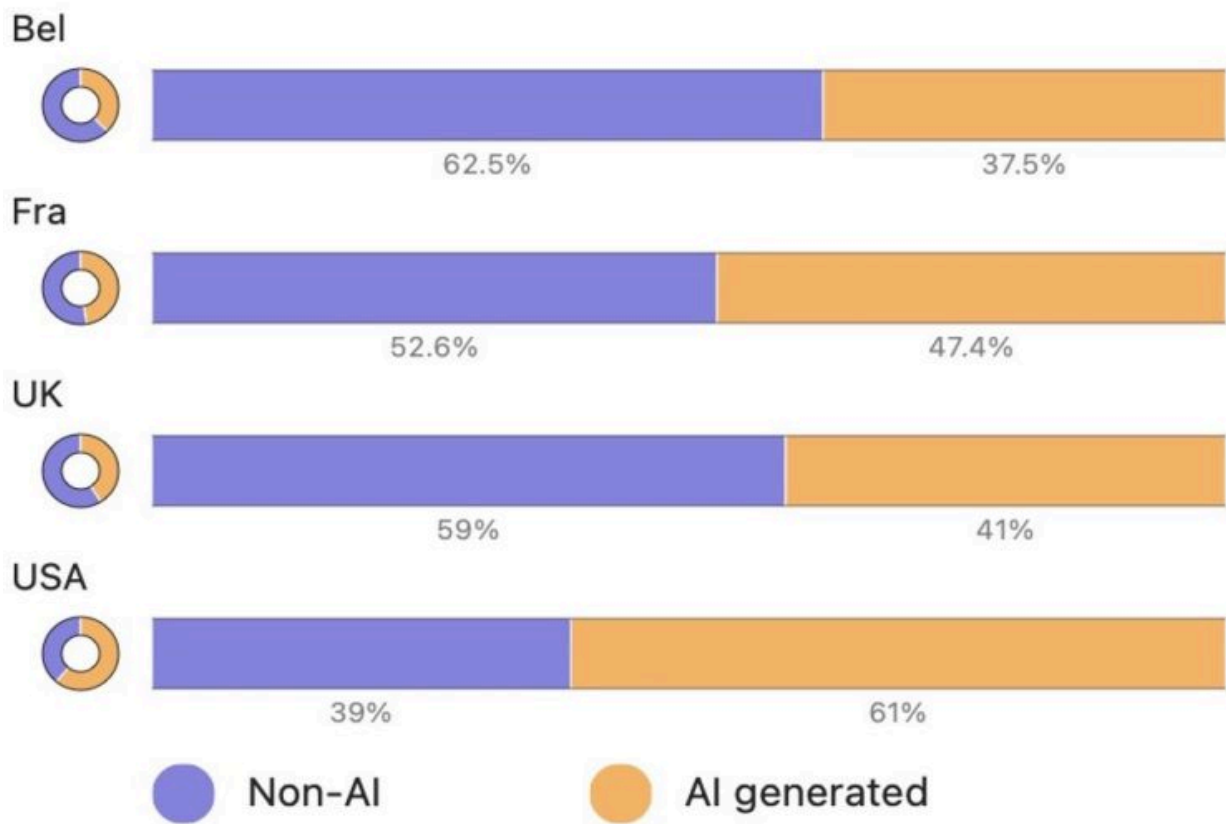
LSE's Nick Anstead and Bart Cammaerts explain some of the findings of their work looking at visual misinformation during elections in four countries – Belgium, France, the UK and the US – and how we might need to reconsider key elements of the debate around generative AI and deepfakes.

Prior to the wave of elections which took place around the world in 2024, there was considerable concern about the risk posed by visual misinformation, and especially the potential of so-called “deepfakes”. The concern was that hyper-realistic AI generated images and videos could flood social media, making it increasingly challenging to discern what was real and what was not.

The results of our recent study of visual misinformation conducted across elections held in four countries – Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and the United States – could be interpreted as providing some reassurance. Using dummy accounts set to follow either prominent right-wing or left-wing users on various social media platforms, we gathered examples of visual misinformation that appeared on our feeds. The data we gathered suggests a different and more complex picture than pre-election public discussion might have suggested.

First, as shown in Figure 1, visual misinformation goes beyond AI-generated deepfakes. Indeed, in three of our study countries (Belgium, France and the UK) other forms of visual misinformation (e.g. cropped, edited or mislabelled images and videos) were more common than AI generated content. Only in the United States did AI content make up a majority of the sample.

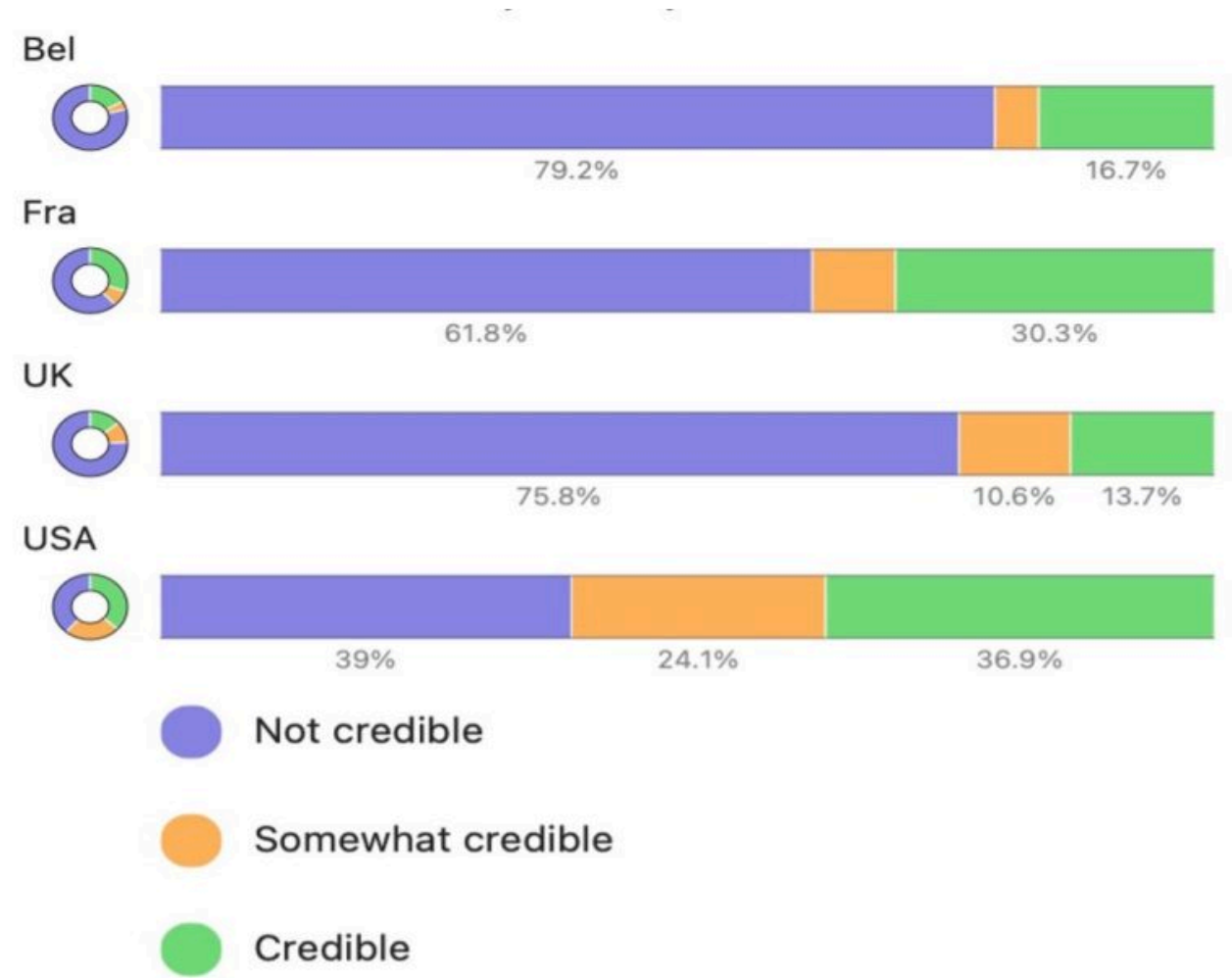
Figure 1: Proportion of content that is AI-generated across case study countries



Note: Overall data n=402. Belgium dataset n=24, France dataset n=76, UK dataset n=161, US dataset n=141).

Second, visual misinformation generally and AI-generated content more specifically is not always directly misleading. We coded our data for credibility, using a three-point scale: not credible, somewhat credible, and credible. The results are shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Credibility of content across case study countries



Note: Overall data n=402. Belgium dataset n=24, France dataset n=76, UK dataset n=161, US dataset n=141).

Figure 3: Deepfake of Nigel Farage playing Minecraft



There might be many reasons for this – the creators may lack the technical skills or resources to produce believable content, or they may not have the intention of creating something that is convincingly realistic. This last explanation may be particularly likely in some genres of content, such as satire, which makes up a significant proportion of our dataset. For example, in the UK, more than half of the data gathered (52.2 per cent) could broadly be described as satirical (the YouTube video above shows an example of the sort of content we found, featuring Nigel Farage playing Minecraft).

However, we also find a darker manifestation of this tendency when AI tools are used to generate visual imagery which accords with extreme, anti-democratic or racialised political narratives. These images and videos might not appear particularly credible in a photo-realistic sense, nor aim to convince a viewer that they are seeing something real. Instead, they offer a visual or symbolic manifestation of a particular political belief. This in turn can be used to create, mobilise and signal to an online network of supporters. For example, it seems unlikely that anyone would believe that a photo of Keir Starmer in a rainbow hijab was real, but the signal the image sends about politics, race and sexuality are very clear indeed.

Figure 4: AI-generated image of Keir Starmer in a rainbow hijab

We would argue, therefore, that our analysis points to a corrective that needs to occur in the debate about AI and deepfakes. Broadly, the discussion of these technologies has assumed that the risk they pose is directly correlated to the credibility of the visuals they can produce – simply put, the assumption was that as the fakes become more believable, the problem grows. But we would argue that there are additional risks posed by these technologies being co-opted to create ideological aesthetics, which in turn can be used to augment and promulgate false and destructive political narratives.

This recalibration requires a change in how we think about visual misinformation. It is not just a technical problem fuelled by the development of new tools, nor can it be fixed by simply fact checking inaccurate content which is in circulation. Instead, its potential potency relates to the underlying narratives which are embedded in contemporary politics, and it is only there that solutions can be found.

To read the full report, please see [here](#). For a post about the challenges of studying visual misinformation, please see [here](#).

This article represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by [Kayla Velasquez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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Nick Anstead is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His archive of research can be accessed at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/view/creators/Anstead=3ANick=3A=3A.html> including his comparative work on TV debates in Parliamentary democracies.

Bart Cammaerts

Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

Posted In: Political communications



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