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The Risks and Promises of AI in Political Communication

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Today

- Political Communication **before** AI
- Political Communication **after** AI
- Synthetic Political Communication

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Political Communication *before* AI

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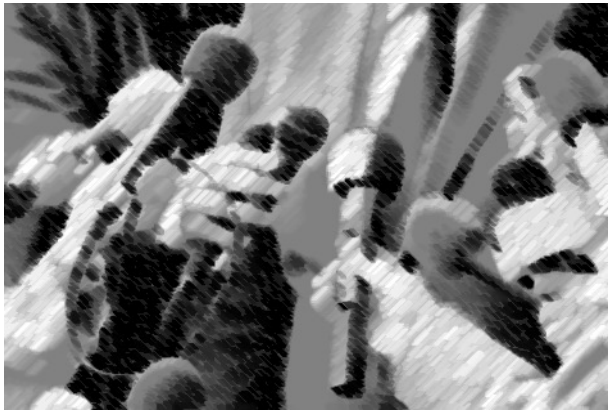

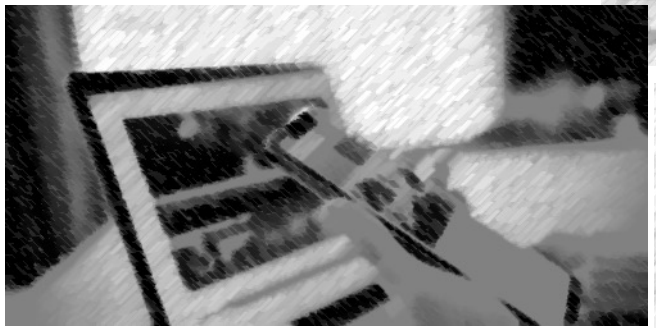

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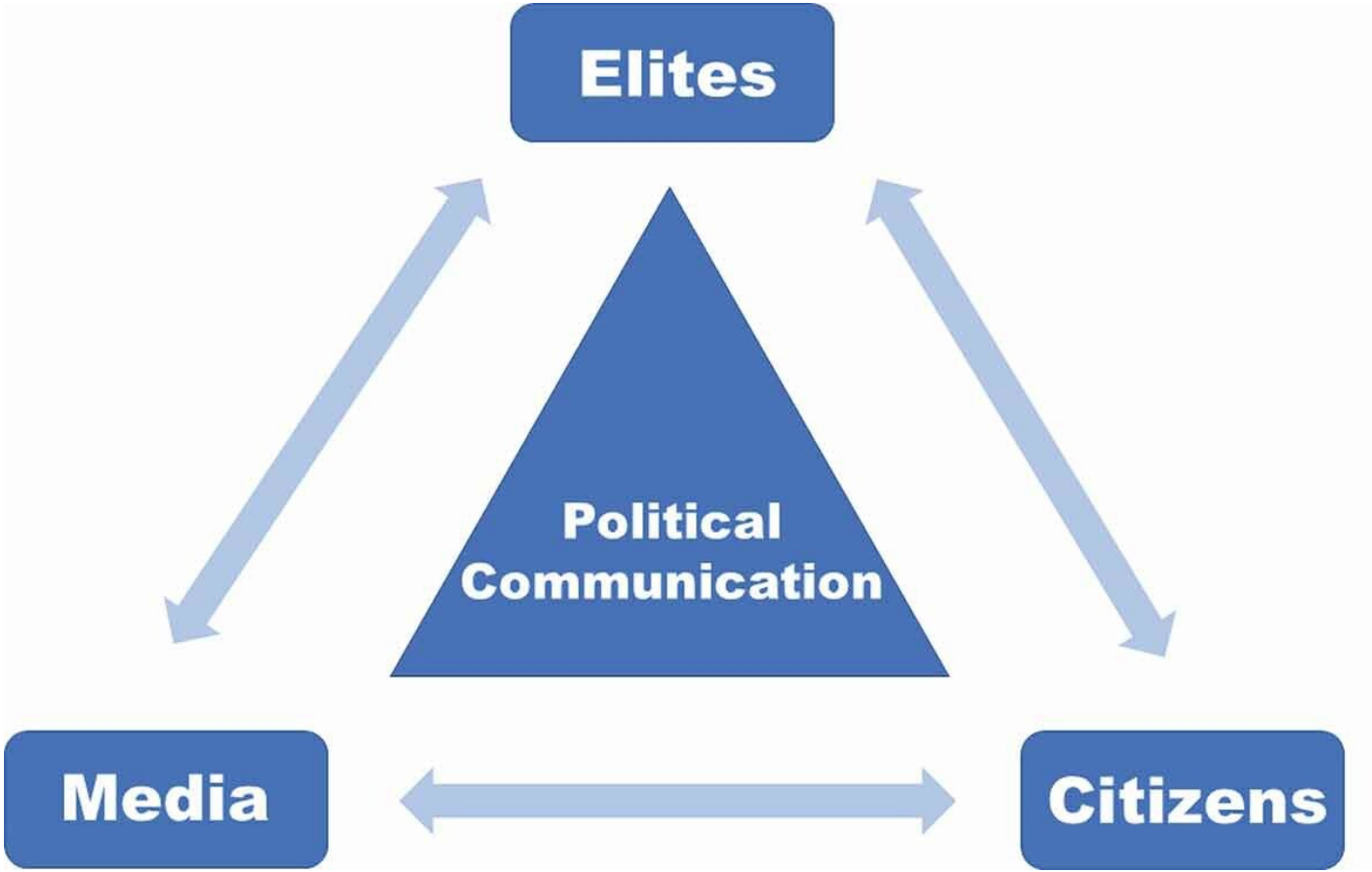

Quelle: Dumdum, O. O., & Bankston, L. (2022). The Interplay of Actors in Political Communication: The State of the Subfield. *Political Communication*, *39*(2), 266–279.

Political *Communication* is not just information, but …

… a **social process**.

… a form of **meaning-making**.

… evidence of **social coordination**.

… an **infrastructure**.

… a **power exchange**.

= democratic function.

Democratic functions?

- **Less Information, more** entertainment (Information?)
- **Elite-centred** communication (Representation? Accountability?)
- **Mass media** dominance (Deliberation?)
- **One-to-many** communication (Participation?)
- **High cost** of political communication (Transparency?)

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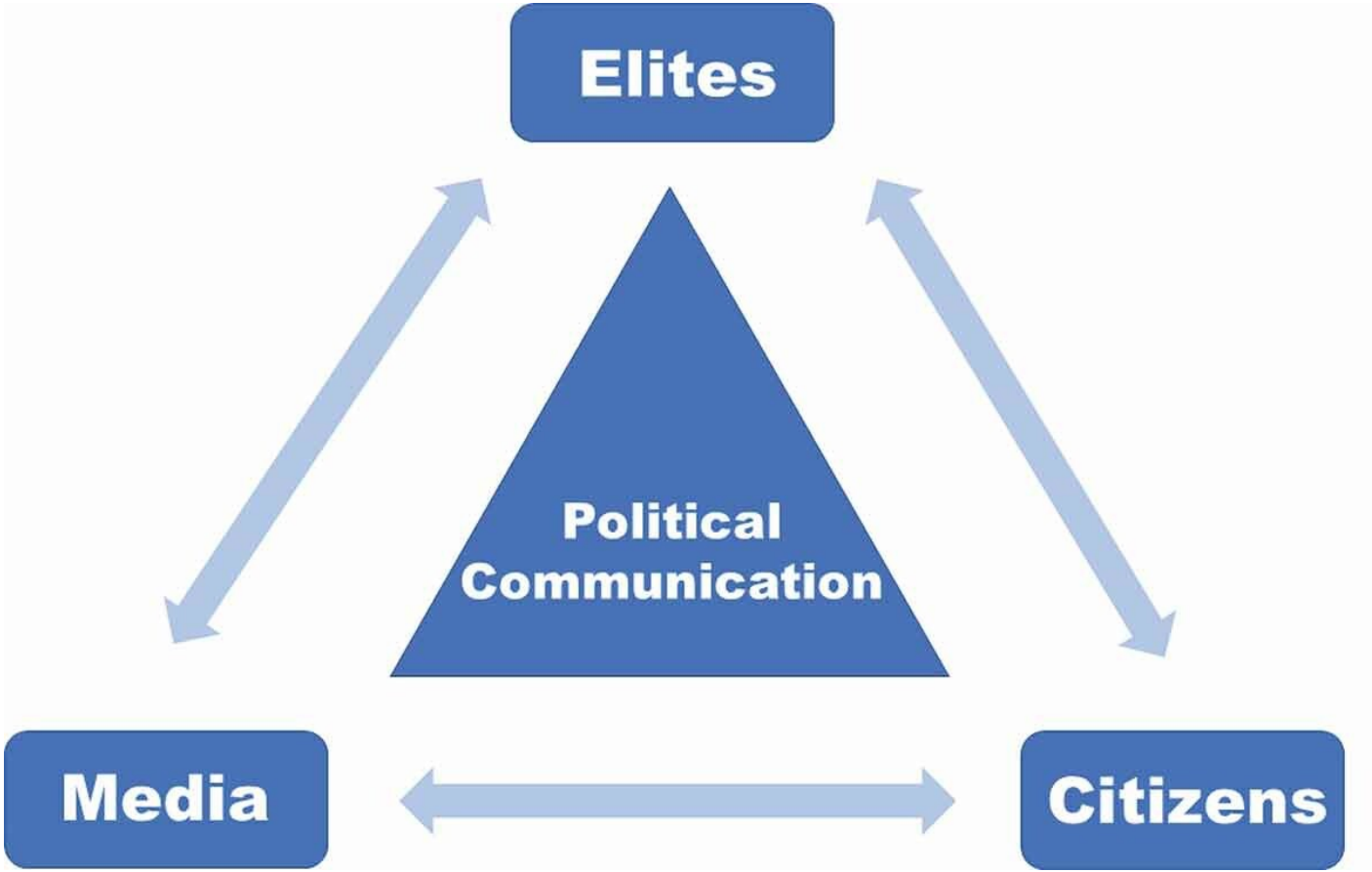
Political Communication *after* AI

Risks and Promises

Democratic Function	Promise	Risk
Information	Accessible explanations	Misinformation
Participation	Lower barriers	Manipulation
Representation	Better responsiveness	Surveillance
Inclusion	Multilingual & low barrier communication	Algorithmic bias
Deliberation	Wider participation	Emotional optimization
Accountability	AI transparency tools	Opaque decision-making, black box



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Political Elites

- **Routine** Tasks (press releases, manifestos, communication)
- Research and **Data** Analysis (voter research, party structure, mobilisation)
- **Content** Creation (communication, election campaigns)
- **Personalisation** and Targeting (campaigns)

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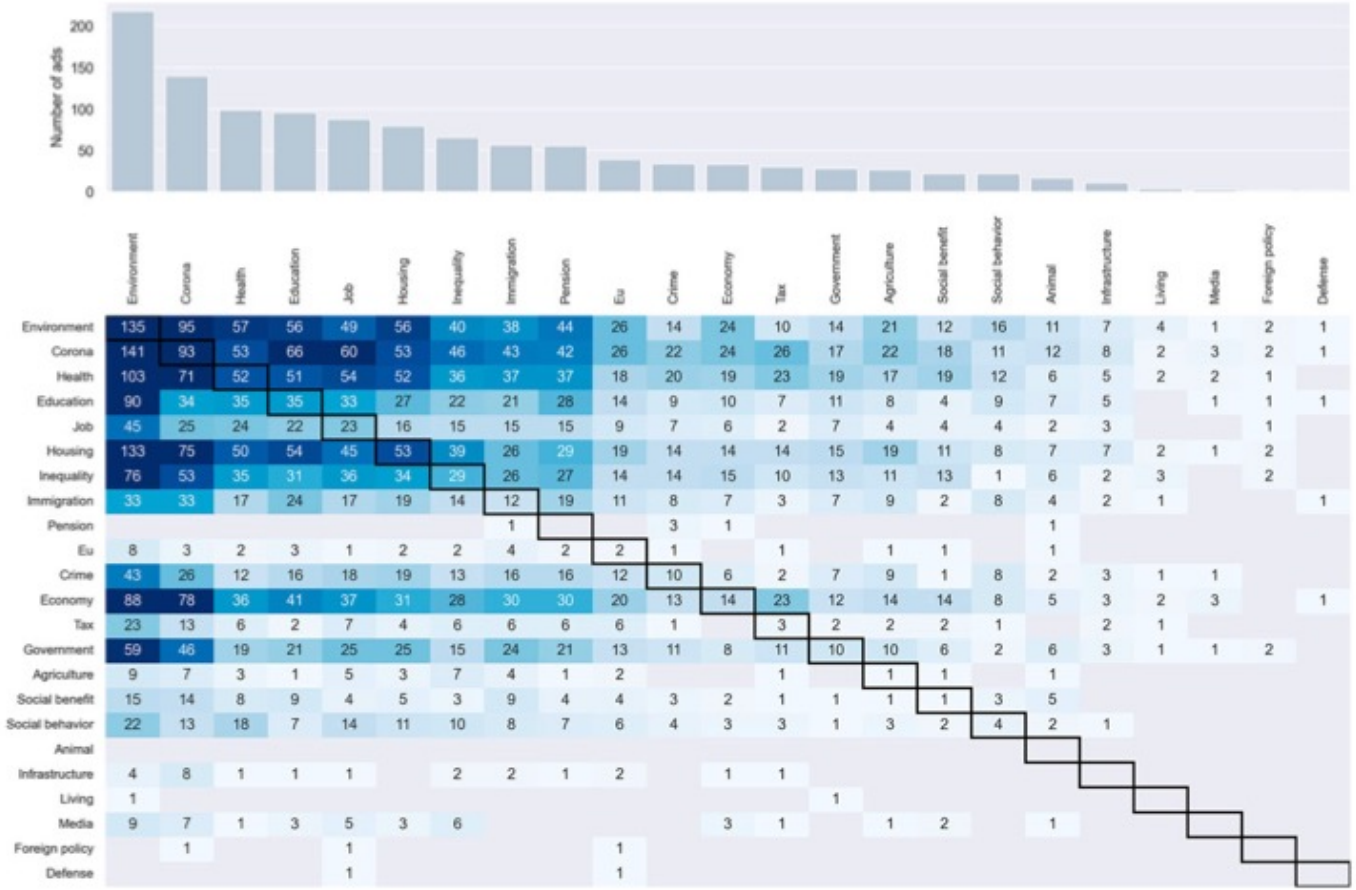
Source: Chu, X., Otto, L., Vliegenthart, R., Lecheler, S., de Vreese, C., & Kruikemeier, S. (2024). On or off topic? Understanding the effects of issue-related political targeted ads. *Information, Communication & Society*, *27*(7), 1378–1404. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2265978



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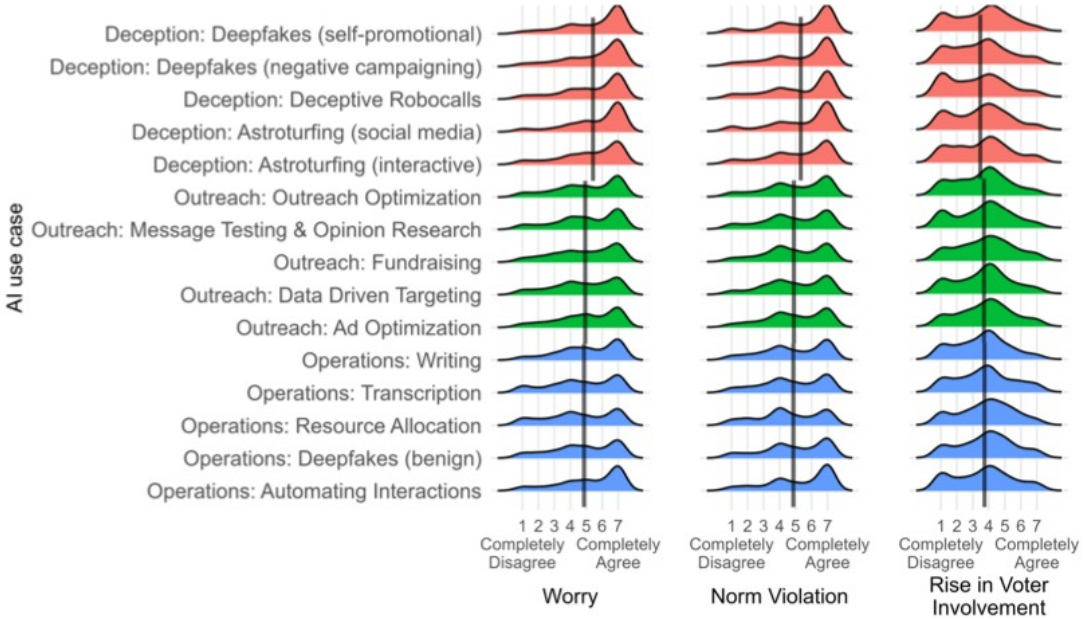
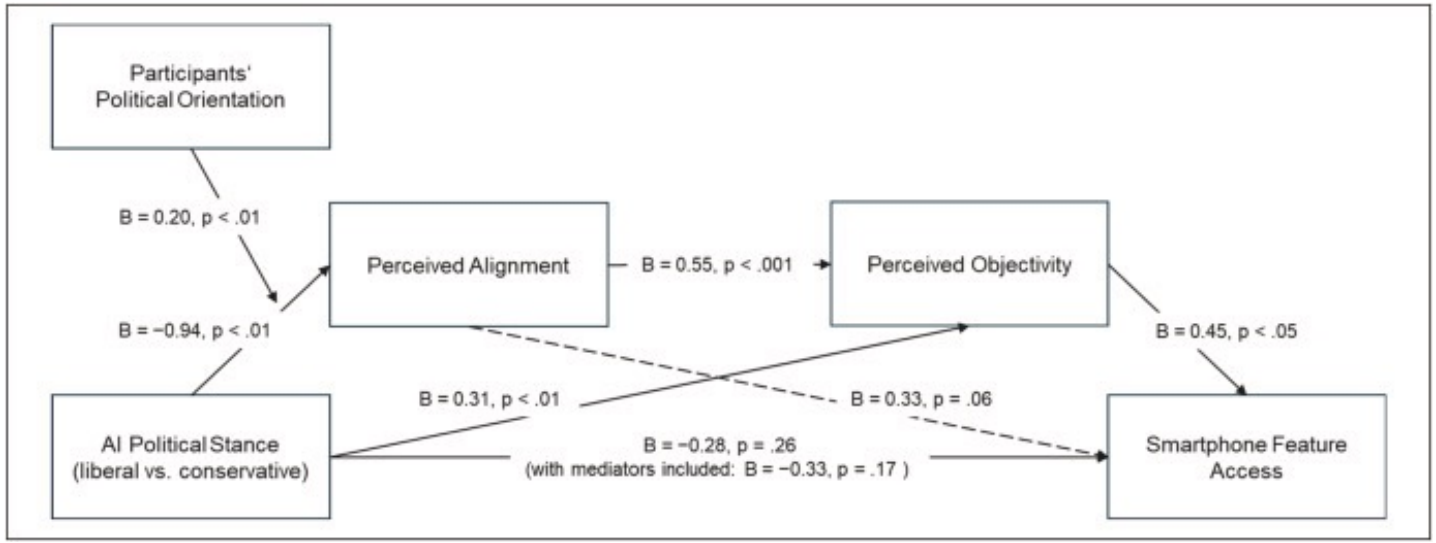
Political Elites

- Voters dislike use of AI but **differentiate**
- AI-enabled deception increases **support** to stop AI development
- Parties face **no** favourability penalty for deceptive AI use



Source: Jungherr, A., Rauchfleisch, A., & Wuttke, A. (2024). Deceptive uses of Artificial Intelligence in elections strengthen support for AI ban. arXiv preprint arXiv:2408.12613.

Citizens



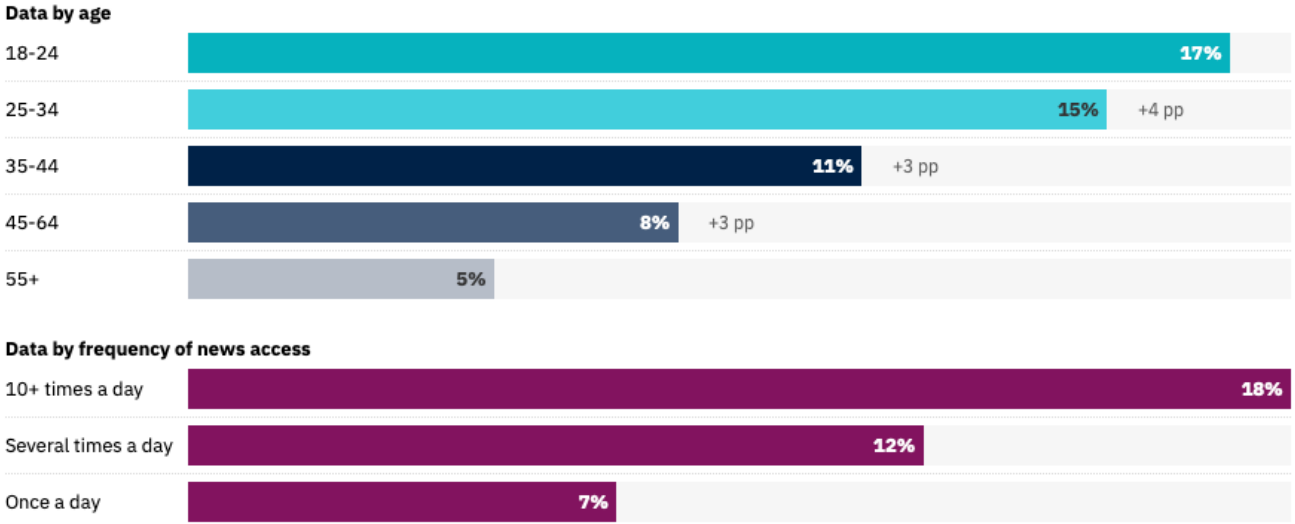
Source: Messer, U. (2025). How do people react to political bias in generative artificial intelligence (AI)?. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans*, *3*, 100108.

Citizens

Proportion who used AI chatbots for news in the last week

BY AGE GROUP AND FREQUENCY OF NEWS USE

All markets



Q3. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? **Q1b_NEW.** Typically, how often do you access news? *Base: Total sample across all markets aged 18–24 = 11,041, 25–34 = 16,944, 35–44 = 17,822, 45–54 = 16,764, 55+ = 34,949 and who consume news 10+ times a day = 11,171, several times a day = 55,823, once a day = 21,648.*

Source: Digital News Report 2026

Get the data • Embed

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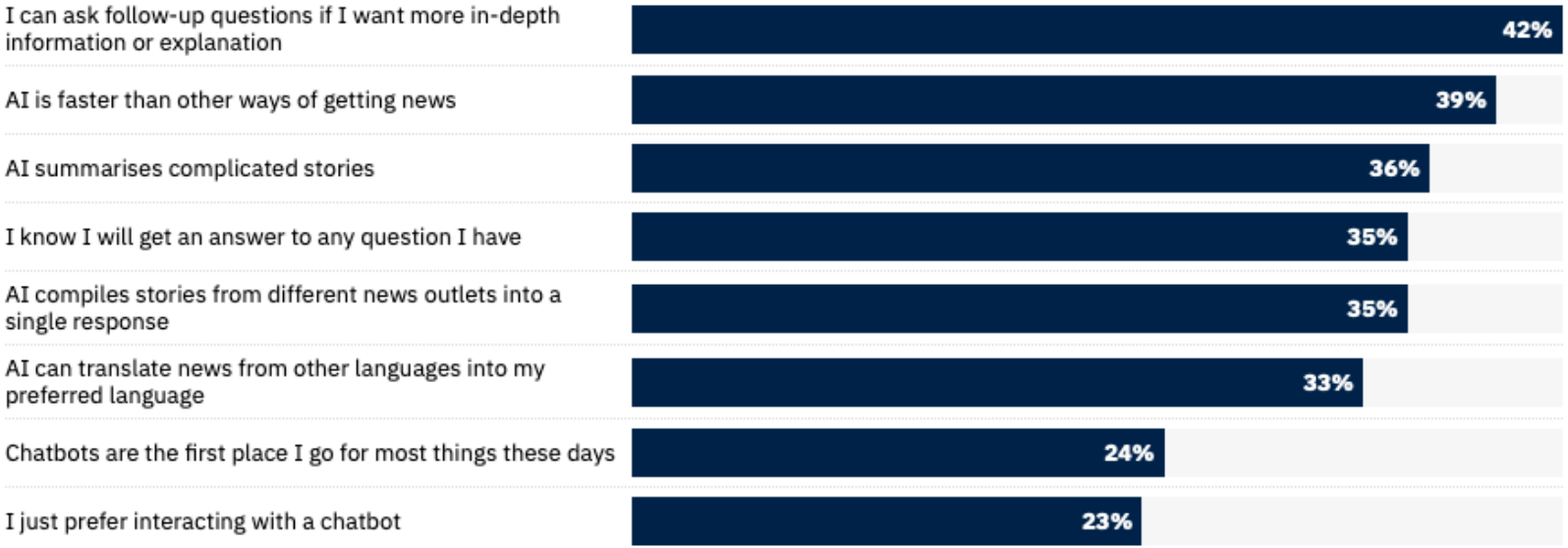
Source: Reuters report 2026

Source: Reuters report 2026

Citizens

Proportion of AI chatbot news users who say each is a motivation for using AI

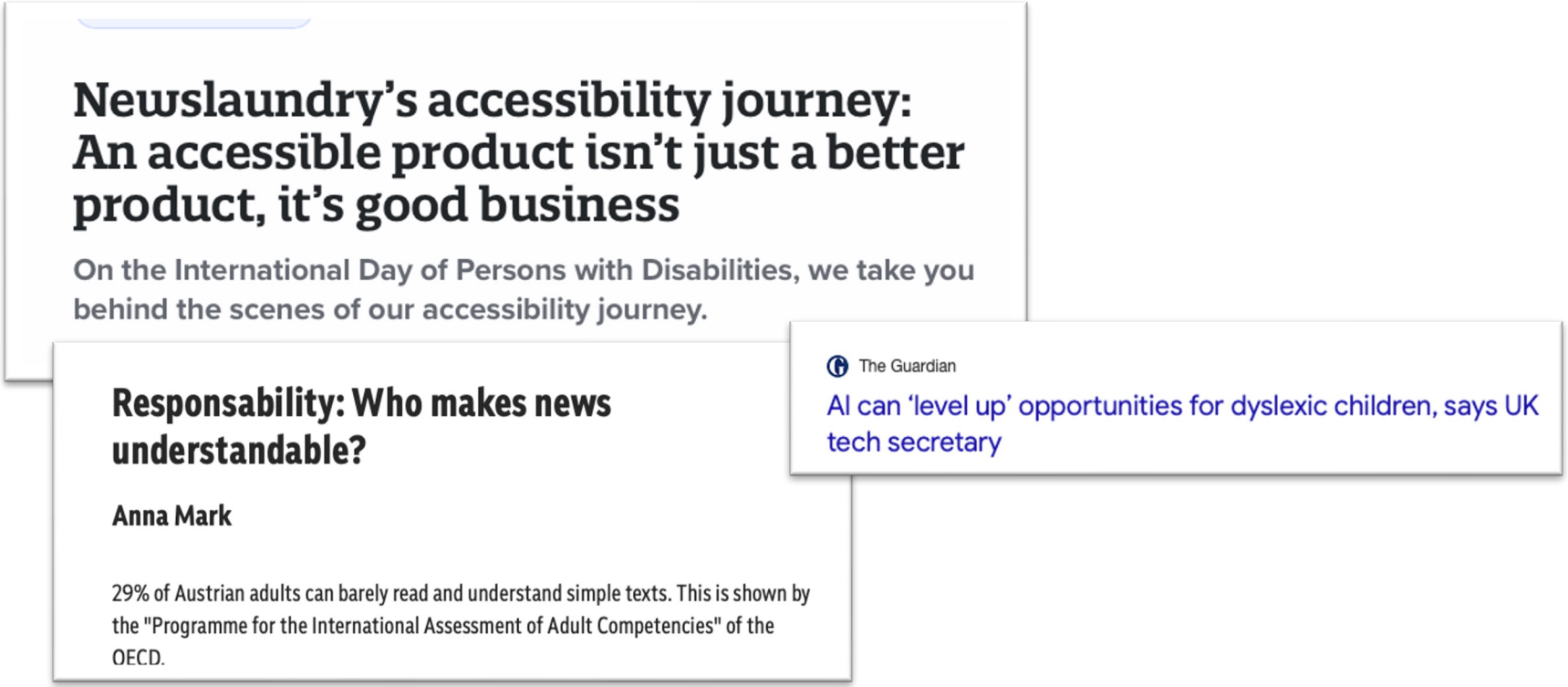
Selected markets



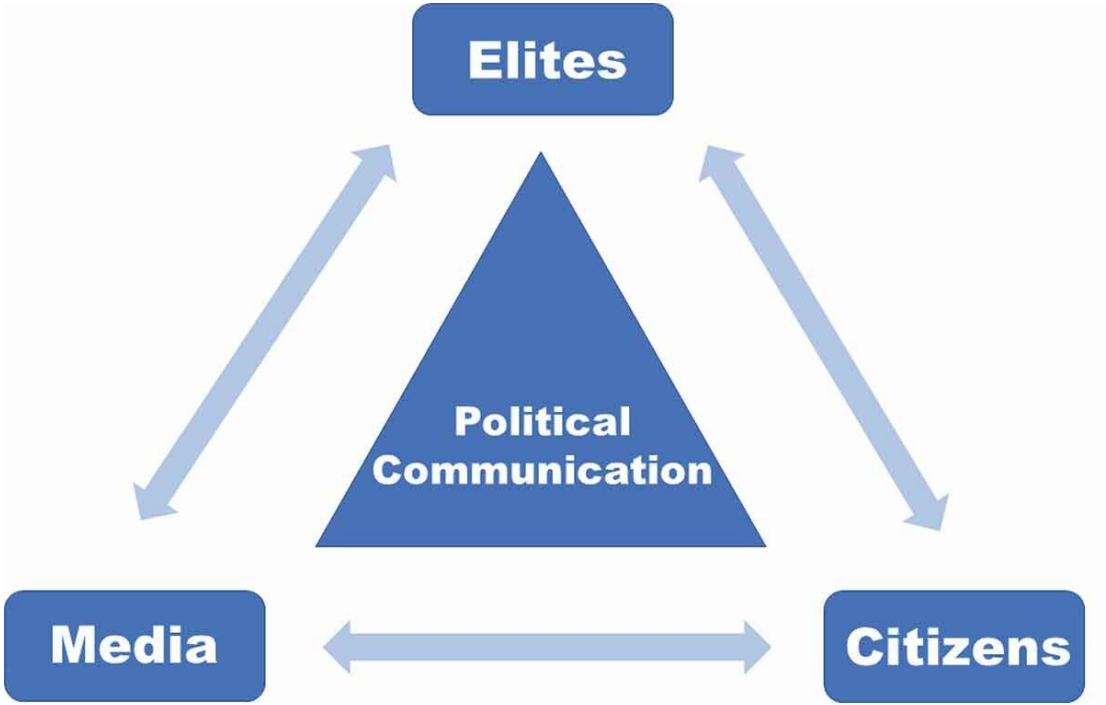
Q_AI_newstype. Why do you use AI chatbots to get news? *Base: Those who used an AI chatbot for news in the last week across 45 markets = 8,322. Note: Question not asked in Chile, Kenya, and Nigeria.*

Source: Digital News Report 2026

Media


Newslaundry's accessibility journey: An accessible product isn't just a better product, it's good business
On the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, we take you behind the scenes of our accessibility journey.
Responsability: Who makes news understandable?
Anna Mark
29% of Austrian adults can barely read and understand simple texts. This is shown by the "Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies" of the OECD.
The Guardian
AI can 'level up' opportunities for dyslexic children, says UK tech secretary

Political Communication *after* AI?



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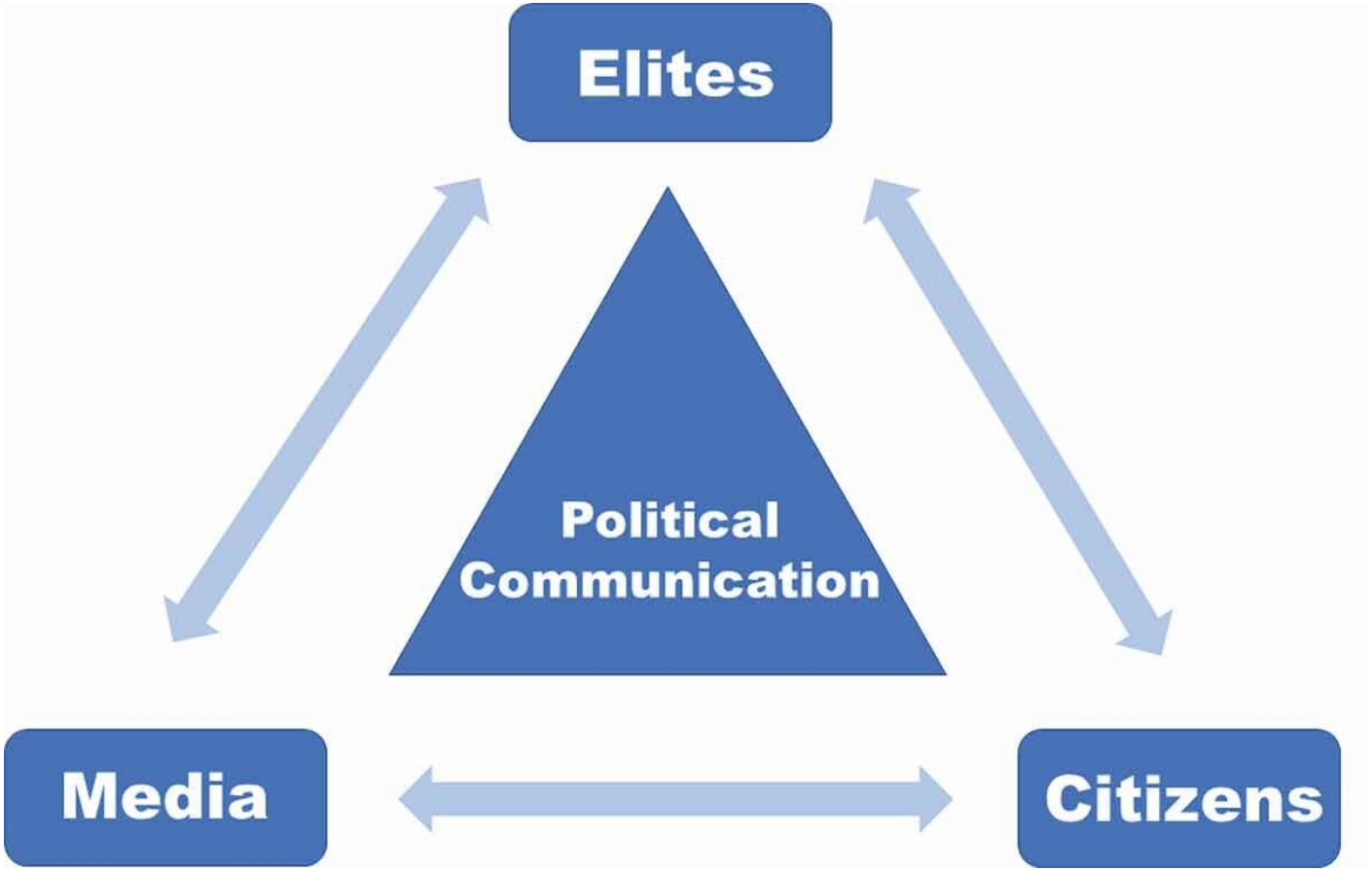
Synthetic Political Communication

Synthetic Political Communication

= new paradigm in digital politics where political communication is automatically generated, semantically coordinated, and strategically disseminated at scale using AI

… its seen as an **ecosystem-level risk** rather than isolated instance, e.g., like "fake news", characterised by:

- **semantic** homogenization
- reducing **lexical** diversity
- temporal **burstiness** (spikes)
- rhetorical **repetition**



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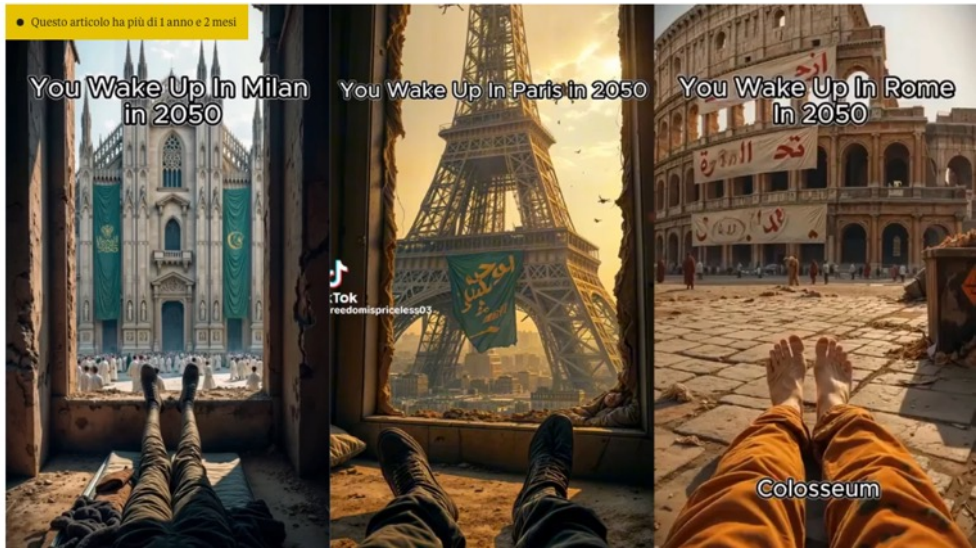
Quelle: Dumdum, O. O., & Bankston, L. (2022). The Interplay of Actors in Political Communication: The State of the Subfield. *Political Communication*, *39*(2), 266–279.

Media: Disinformation

- **Deepfakes** and other forms of **image** manipulation
- Synthetic **audio** and **robocalls**
- Coordinated **bot** amplification and conversational infiltration
- …



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Elites: Election Interference

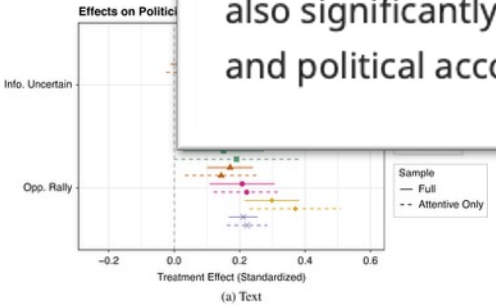
Table 1. Summary of Nefarious Applications of GenAI in Online Election Interference

Nefarious Application	Mechanism	Impact	Examples	Countermeasures	Future Trends
Deepfakes	AI-generated realistic videos/audio	Erosion of public trust, reputation damage	Fake celebrity endorsements, political smear campaigns	AI-based detection tools, legal regulations	More sophisticated, harder-to-detect deepfakes
AI-Powered Botnets	Automated social media accounts	Distortion of public opinion, misinformation spread	Bot campaigns during elections, coordinated disinformation	Bot detection algorithms, platform policies	Increasingly human-like behavior, decentralized bot networks
Targeted Misinformation Campaigns	Tailored false content	Exploitation of societal divisions, voter manipulation	False news articles, doctored images	Fact-checking services, user education	AI-generated personalized misinformation
Synthetic Identities	AI-created personas	Infiltration of online communities, intelligence gathering	Fake profiles on social media, false expert identities	Identity verification protocols, AI detection tools	More convincing and diverse synthetic identities

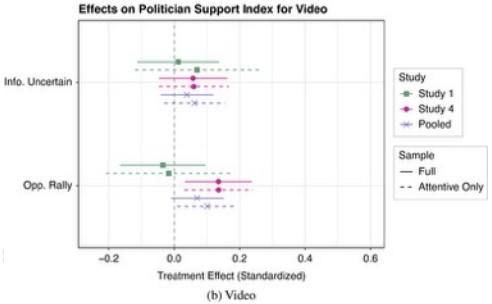
Source: Ferrara, E. (2024). Charting the landscape of nefarious uses of generative artificial intelligence for online election interference. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2406.01862*.

Elites: The Liar's Dividend

This study is the first to provide experimental evidence of the liar's dividend. We find that unscrupulous politicians willing to falsely claim misinformation may be rewarded with a reputational boost in the face of an otherwise damaging story. Claiming misinformation bolsters politician support more than remaining silent and allowing a scandal to blow over. It is also significantly more effective than apologizing—a preferable response for promoting trust and political accountability—and it is at least as effective as a more simple denial.



(a) Text



(b) Video

Source: Schiff, K. J., Schiff, D. S., & Bueno, N. S. (2025). The liar's dividend: Can politicians claim misinformation to evade accountability?. *American Political Science Review*, *119*(1), 71-90.

Elites (and everyone): Gendered Violence

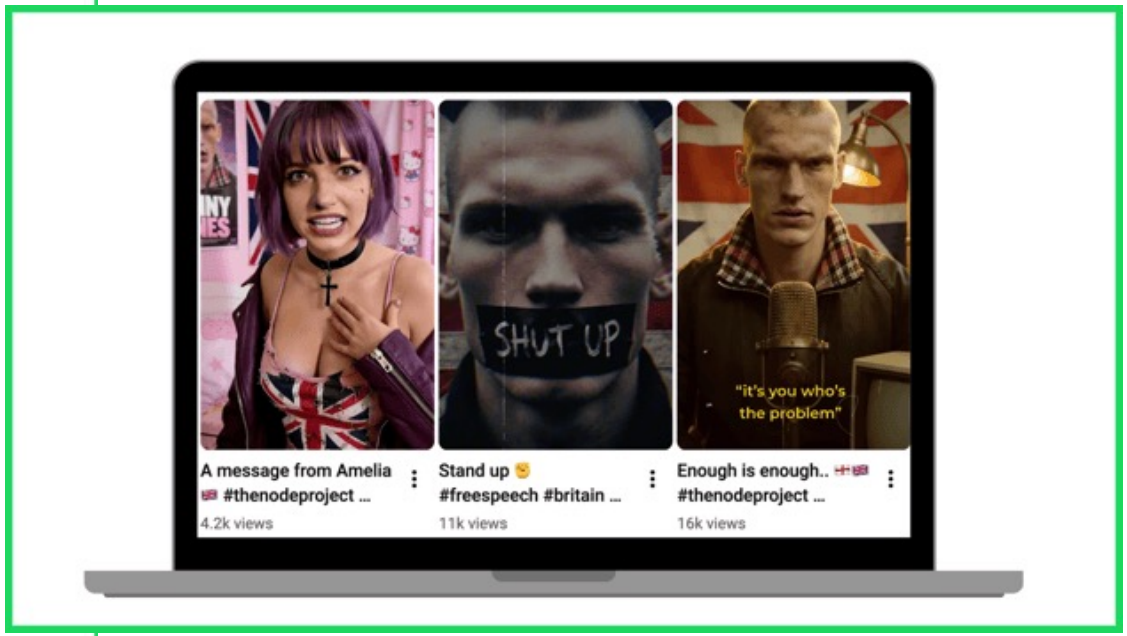
= Sexualised **deepfakes** are more than a problem of misinformation, it is a weapon against representation of women

Citizens: AI Influencers

> "Go on Danny Bones," he said. "Even the AI characters are on our side in this battle."

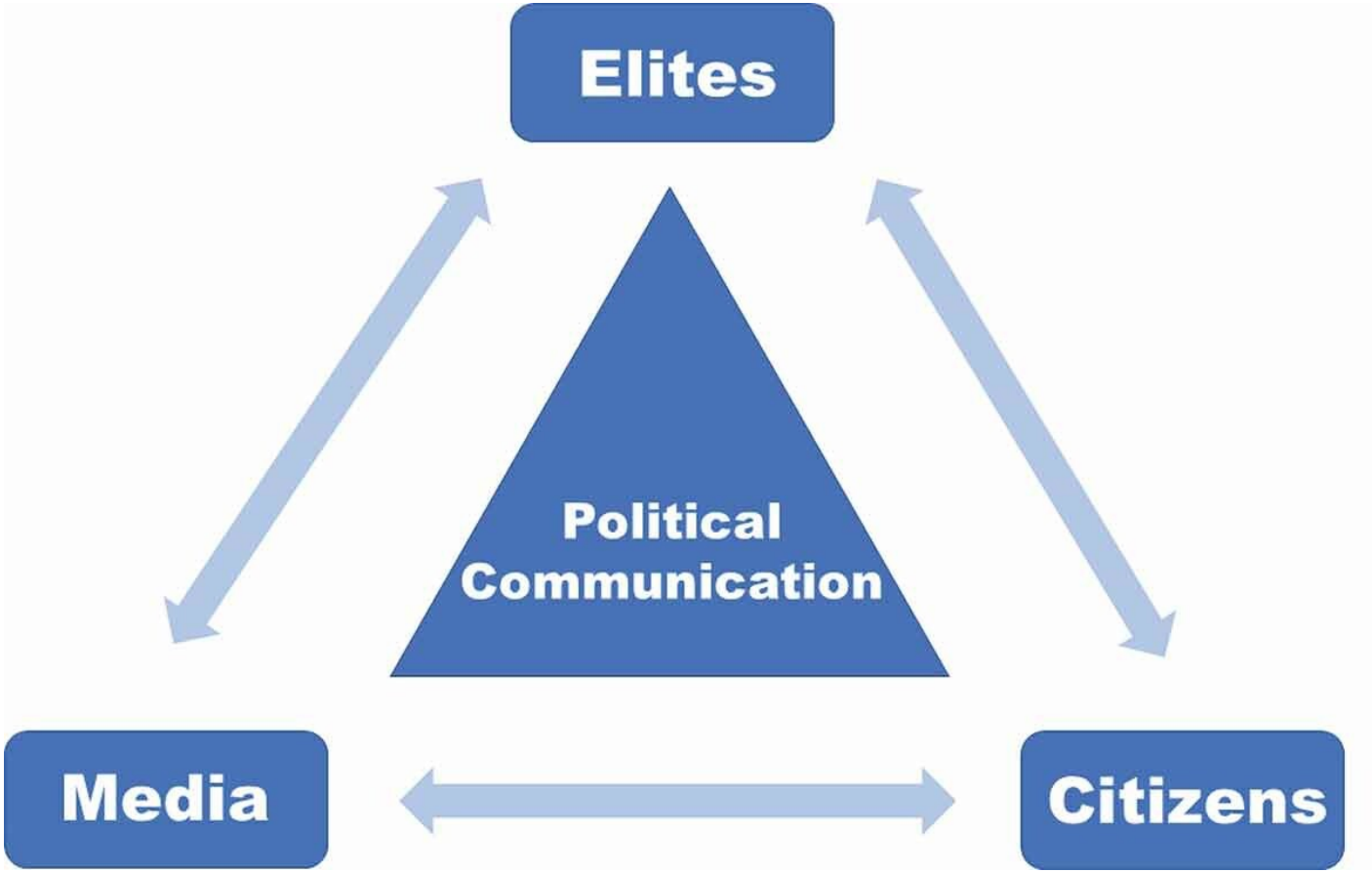
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__QWMRCaPOA

Citizens: AI Influencers



Citizens: Consequences

- Changed **cognitive load** of political information, e.g., spoken information may reduce scrutiny and critical thinking
- **Uncanny valley,** trigger of discomfort and scepticism, but also indication of effects on general distrust, political trust etc



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In sum …

- Political Communication is more than just information, it's a human-centric social process (=**Digital Humanism**)
- There is a dual nature of AI in political communication, but most research does focus on the risks (= **Safeguarding democracy**)
- Synthetic political communication is a new paradigm within the field, where political communication is conceptualized differently (= **Protecting human agency**)
- There are critical threats to our communication environment, and they may be connected to "AI" **(=How can humans flourish in society**)

Thank you!

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Check also: https://sci-comm.univie.ac.at

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