

Countenancing Disinformation: Lessons from History, Photography, and AI

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Abstract

AI and Deepfake have become a trend for creating media through photographs, videos, and voice manipulations through prompts. This feature generates results quickly and simply with high accuracy. Advanced technology has shaped people's approach to obtaining information and polishing creative skills. Visual media like photography and video need convincing figures or narratives to get the audience's attention. For example, the video deepfake of Suharto (originally written as Soeharto) showed that a famous leader is powerful enough to influence Indonesians for the election. However, this causes risks of collective memory remodification into a disinformation of history. Could it follow the other media like photography that must re-curate the authenticity to speak the truth? How can political art and history be comprehended in this contemporary period? This paper highlights what we can learn from AI in the context of history through video and photography. Moreover, the application of artwork to learn history questions whether we should redevelop or stay authentic without reducing the accuracy of information.

Keywords: Deepfake, video, photography, history, memory, art.

Introduction

On 8 January 2024, a three-minute [Deepfake video](#) of Suharto (1921-2008), the second President of the Republic of Indonesia was uploaded by a politician from The Party of Functional Groups (Golkar), Erwin Aksa, during the Presidential Election period. This occurred ahead of the official vote scheduled for February 14, 2024. Each party had put in efforts, including creating interactive videos. However, Golkar's video showed an amalgamation between facts and fiction.

Suharto governed Indonesia for 32 years (1966-1998) and passed away on January 27, 2008. During his time as President of the Republic of Indonesia, there were various controversies, spanning issues like freedom of expression, economic policies, and human rights violations.¹ His presidency ended with the notorious May Riots in 1998, which involved civilians, police officers, and armies in Jakarta. They demanded to overthrow Suharto as President of the Republic until the Reformation Era was finally created with Habibie as the third president to replace Suharto.

With his historical record, it can be argued that Suharto left a negative impression on civilians affected by his public policies. However, the deepfake responses on social media showed the opposite; the citizens prayed and claimed that Suharto was the best leader during his legacy. Seeing the citizens' comments created a misconception of one figure based on history based on advanced technology. The questions come through observations in resourcing valid history about this iconic figure: how do citizens acknowledge Indonesian history from available sources? How does visual media expose historical documentation of a particular incident? Also, when words and visual media are not enough to explain history for beginners, how does visual art play a role in narrating political art?

To conclude this paper, the topic explains the urgency of resisting collective memory and how advanced technology affects the learning method for history. This shows how the future

¹ John Roosa, "Suharto (June 8, 1921-January 27, 2008)," *Indonesia*, no. 85 (April 2008): 142, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40376448>.

generation absorbs visual media and visual arts narrating about historical incidents in the region.

History Comprehension through Visual Media and Art

Visual media, such as video and photography, are commonly used to understand history as they are easier to comprehend than words. Furthermore, art needs layers to comprehend further meaning about the artwork itself, especially about history and politics. Nowadays, many artists use video and photography as their art mediums to explain their personal, episodic, and collective memories as a remembrance of specific incidents. In addition to this statement, photography and history intertwine to create artworks concerning politics and war.

Martin A. Berger claimed that photography and history are inseparable in conserving past moments and allowing future viewers to witness certain actions in one capture.² By replicating human sights to create a fine result in a visual image, Berger highlighted that the role of photography indirectly communicates between the past and present, including with the capturer and future viewers. One capture could signify the most critical momentum where people can travel back in time. Information becomes something explicable through visual support, and the role of photography justifies the context of the written statement from the authors.

Unlike photographs, video is a moving image recorded through a camera, transferred into a device, and transmitted to a monitor. Video is a landing invention of television that provides detailed information and messages with voices and human interactions. This innovation creates new information in direct response through many places.³ Documenting history through video is called oral history, supported by audiovisuals to listen to the speaker and narrator explaining the context of certain events and experiences. In learning history, the video can be summarised into an interview, a documentary film or a series that acts as a storyteller. To make a video of history, the author needs to curate credible history and political

² Martin A. Berger, "Photography, History, and the Historian," *American Art* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681648>.

³ Yvonne Spielmann, "Video: From Technology to Medium," *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 56-57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068481>.

or war survivors. Therefore, the video makes it much easier to acknowledge history with a certain duration to create it.

The application of history may be used in various forms, especially in the art history field for artists and researchers to engage with personal memory or raise awareness for specific issues. Several artists have the authority to criticise their surroundings like war and political conflicts. One of the implementations between photography and history through art is FX Harsono, an Indonesian-Chinese artist who raised socio-political issues during the Suharto regime and the multicultural self-identity.⁴ Living as an Indonesian-Chinese with his Javanese wife, Harsono explored his point of view about the conflicts in Indonesia and navigated the existence of Indonesian-Chinese culture for over 40 years. One of his notable works that explains the political conflict is *Republik Indochoas* (Figure 1). This photo-etching mode was inspired by several known photography documentations and literal messages that convey the May Riots 1998 in postage stamps, criticising a satiric view.



Figure 1 FX Harsono, *Republik Indochoas*, 1998, Photoetching, 10 Edition. Image courtesy of the artist.

FX Harsono is an example of exposing his works through “episodic” memory, as described by Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian Woon which compromises personal life experiences that concern social importance and how other generations engage certain incidents in their present life.⁵ While tools stay sustainable, memory cannot survive in a living individual because it will be constantly reconstituted and recreated. In this case, the artists use tools to revive the episodic memory that comes from the artist based on their personal experience to share the life they have been through.

⁴ Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 81.

⁵ Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian Woon, “The Work of Memory and the Unfinished Past: Deepening and Widening the Social Study of Memory in Southeast Asia (Special Focus: Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia),” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29, no. 3 (2001): 366, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23653956>.

In all cases, the nature of photography is to produce and inform actual information to the readers in the present and then become a remembrance in the future. Photography traces back to the events or incidents that are remembered publicly but traumatised in some ways, as Harsono's photographs selection. The relationship between history and photography reveals the truth in the past and raises awareness of the present about changes through time and social impact in particular areas.⁶ Prior to that, the urgency to resist the popular memory should be an agenda to avoid the modification and extinction that supports eligible photography.

AI, Deepfake and the Iconic Figure That Affect Historical Record

Artificial Intelligence, especially deepfake, has various features that people can use; photo, video, and voice manipulation. This generates the visuals through prompts. Usually, the user mentions the preferred person to be shown, and then the deepfake processes the photo and video.

Both mediums support understanding the truth and authenticity of history and how people reflect on the past and present. When talking truth and memory through photography and video, we cannot avoid AI being a target for information threats. AI production in photography and video is known as Deepfake and is commonly used as a disinformation tool.⁷ Making Deepfake with these digital tools is practical and takes less time.

By looking at Suharto's deepfake result, the curation of voice, face, and movement are similar, and he speaks like a live human. The politician also shared the video on social media through Facebook, TikTok, and X (previously Twitter) which caused many reactions from the citizens. Most comments showed protests as an unethical act to use someone who passed away in the interactive video. Another comment expressed their support for the party and presidential candidate. As a viewer and Indonesian, it can be speculated that Aksa's effort was part of

⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, "Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory," *Social Research: Collective Memory and Collective Identity* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 119, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972054>.

⁷ Todd C. Helmus, "Artificial Intelligence, Deepfakes, and Disinformation A Primer," *RAND Corporation*, (July, 2022): 1-2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42027>.

political propaganda by using an iconic leader who was attached to Indonesian collective history.



Figure 3 Deepfake video uploaded on Erwin Aksa's YouTube Channel titled 'Pesan Soeharto Dalam Menghadapi Pemilu 2024' (trans. Soeharto's Message in Facing Election 2024).

However, we need to be aware of the risks and implications of AI deepfake. Helmus mentioned that AI-deepfake could lower trust in the institution and authorities and undermine journalism and trustworthy sources of information.⁸ Deepfake results in mistrust between each other to receive information and interrogate people's initiative. In this case, the cause of news manipulations will increase due to the unsustainable sources from one source to another.

To create deepfake, Helmus also highlighted time and effort as a primary factor that can take a month to formulate the narrative, choose the actor, and anticipate the risk of changes before it is officially published.⁹ Therefore, it is undebatable why AI-deepfake requires thousands of visuals of high-training data to create videos and images. For that reason, the video creation

⁸Helmus, 6-7.

⁹ Helmus, 9.

is feasible for the political party to choose Suharto as a familiar figure to be recognised by Indonesians.

Gardner and Avolio explained that the ethics of charismatic leadership are based on identity and its system.¹⁰ Being a politician and leader involves an identity image (self-schemata) that occupies a central and important part of the theory of self. Furthermore, leader identity has a dual meaning. It refers to identity as a whole and specifically defines those who affect other people more than they affect the leader. As a leader, image representation to attract people is also essential to influence and follow them as an example. Suharto's identity on that account as a president and part of a political party became an icon that has been remembered in Indonesian history.

Suharto joined the Golkar party after its first establishment, which left a strong engagement to put him into the video deepfake. However, the video narration questions the truth between the past and present. Besides, Suharto would never know what happened to Indonesia's democracy after his passing. The citizens' reactions raised awareness of whether the collective memory about his government policy until the downfall of the May Riots 1998 changed through technology.

There are commonalities and contrasts between this political propaganda and deepfake as a campaign tool. A politician used a common political strategy to gain the voters' attention for winning the election by using technology with well-built prompts. This shows the capability of manufacturing Deepfake by manipulating Suharto's presence and exact voice cloning with an infamous Javanese accent. Through this common technique, the dialogue with persuasive scripts nuanced charisma as a leader.¹¹

To answer the complexity, this paper also covers the authenticity of collective memory and the time when the modification is necessary or endangers the truth of the historical record.

¹⁰ William L. Gardner and Bruce J. Avolio, "The Charismatic Relationship: A Dramaturgical Perspective," *The Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 1 (January 1998): 36-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259098>.

¹¹ Avolio and Gardner, 42.

The Authenticity of Collective Memory Imposing the Truth

The slogan “Don’t ever try to forget history” has been echoed since Soekarno’s speech in 1966 (CNN Indonesia, 2019). Learning history is complicated, and people must realise the event outcome because they may need to navigate it. So, distance and perspective are necessary to process the understanding of the event.¹² History replaces memory erected to live, and memory has a vital role as storage that awaits relooked at on call or involuntarily.¹³

The idea of memory for Berliner is tracking the past in the present that is shared for the social remembering of precise history, even though it could be traumatic events and experiences.¹⁴ History is always correlated with the memory of the past, which people will interpret and adapt as an identity for their culture. The planted memory in each person will be validated as part of the society because the cycle that happened in the past has impacted people in the present. Today, the technology development has two roles to find new knowledge or modify the existing historical contents.

In that case, how far does AI affect people’s understanding of history without valid sources to convince today’s generation?

The correlation between collective and episodic memory depends on the new information sources. Nowadays, there are more platforms to explain history in shorter duration, such as YouTube, podcasts, and Instagram. As we find many video features to upload unlimited content, we don’t expect they can reduce our focus for certain attention. Johann Hari wrote about the phenomenon of ‘stolen focus.’ According to his findings, people are easily distracted to look at something else to watch for a long duration of media.¹⁵ Learning history is not enough to comprehend in the short term, and it takes a long process to discover something to acknowledge certain events and incidents. Therefore, books still hold an important role in obtaining knowledge regardless of advanced technologies with a shorter summary.

¹² Waterson and Kwok, 369.

¹³ Trachtenberg, 114.

¹⁴ David Berliner, “Social Thought & Commentary: The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 200-201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4150896>.

¹⁵ Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay At – And How to Think Deeply Again* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 26-28.



Figure 2 Kerusuhan Jakarta 14 Mei 1998 di Matraman (Jakarta Riots of May 14, 1998, at Matraman), taken by Rully Kesuma, courtesy of Tempo Data Science.

Before social media arose, the media press took an important role in taking photographs of political and war conflicts in real-time. While it takes a high risk due to the security and candid capture, those photographs became the most popular in Indonesian history in media outlets like Tempo and Kompas (Figure 2). In some ways, video is more attractive as it contains performance, facial expression, and political agitation.¹⁶ According to Wahl, body, voice, language, and writing are also needed to provoke, convince, and persuade the viewers and actors to create a video. When the influence is successful, the comments show support or against it, like the social media reactions to video deepfake (Figure 3).

¹⁶ Chris Wahl, "Between Art History and Media History: A Brief Introduction to Media Art," *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art*, (2013): 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp6f3.6>.



Figure 4 X (previously Twitter) user's interaction in responding to Erwin Aksa's video Deepfake.

Photography and video as visual media play a fundamental function in bridging visibilities between history and memory. They have different benefits in portraying historical records in resisting memory. Photography is accurate, visible, and precise, especially in narrating history. The video gives more accurate information through people's reactions, voices, and body language. Political and war photography's relationship with memory and history helps define identity, culture, and social impact. Waterson and Kwok stated that memory would be blurry in the present without those pillars.¹⁷ The technology innovates rapidly, including photography editing features. Photography reproduction increases from time to time (e.g., dodging, cropping, compositing, retouching, double exposures, and burning), and it is possible to make image manipulation with advanced technology.¹⁸

AI technology tells us that people can orchestrate their narrative for personal purposes or public interest. Using the correct prompt to create something that we truly want, and value can occur through photography and video to influence people. However, does the initiative impact the written history that people already know? People used to understand history

¹⁷ Waterson and Kwok, 368-369.

¹⁸ Berger, 2.

through books, interviews, documents, and documentary videos. If deepfake isn't regulated by law as soon as possible, the content will be looked at in two blades, it can blur the truth or crack new information for the future. Technology helps us to get various sources so they can become a narrator on their own. As the sources become more liberal than before, today's task for the audience is curating the information more to prevent disinformation.

Then what art should do to help the audience understand history? Art has multiple layers, which pushes people to understand the purposes of making the artwork, recognise the artist's background, and follow the latest until current issues. As we live in the contemporary world, it is passing the present that diverse conjunctions bring persons, things, ideas, and time together in one head and direction.¹⁹ Moreover, contemporary art provides many historical contexts within the histories of art itself. They invite unexpected questions, which raise questions that challenge critical thinking about the previous event that shaped people and the nation. Therefore, art should encompass the human conscience with other relations, including political ideologies and war, because it contains a very personal, subjective perspective but holds the key to truth.

Conclusion

Photography and video have an inseparable relationship as visual media because images are created with precise results when the video is adapted from a transformative image.²⁰ However, deepfake's presence alerts us that everyone is a curator of their content, and everything can be faster when receiving any information, especially storytelling on history. I assume the term 'back to basic' in acknowledging something to prevent disinformation is still essential: reading books to appreciate the slow absorption and reassessment of information to observe the accuracy of truth and memory resistance. Nevertheless, art has a role in validating both mediums through art research-based methods on the artist. They have the authority to get valuable sources to make the artwork genuine and valid. In the end, deepfake urges us to put the accuracy check at a higher level to avoid disinformation and remodification of collective memory.

¹⁹ Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 368-369, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29546137>.

²⁰ Spielmann, 58.

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Author's bio

Amirahvelda Priyono is Indonesian based in Singapore and a recent graduate of Asian Art Histories from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. Her thesis research centres on war, photography, memory, and trauma in Vietnam and Cambodia. As she has a background in French studies, her primary interest is exploring contemporary art in Indonesia, Thailand, and Indochina through various photography mediums. She is emerging in art writing and navigating her main topics for future research interests. She aims to study and research war, politics, and inter-generation in art perspectives.