

Deepfake democracy: South Korean candidate goes virtual for votes

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AI Yoon's creators believe he is the world's first official deepfake candidate.

In a crowded campaign office in Seoul, young, trendy staffers are using deepfake technology to try to achieve the near-impossible: make a middle-aged, establishment South Korean presidential candidate cool.

Armed with hours of specially-recorded footage of opposition People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol, the team has created a digital avatar of the frontrunner—and set "AI Yoon" loose on the campaign trail ahead of a March 9 election.

From a deepfake video of Barack Obama insulting Donald Trump to failed New York mayoral candidate Andrew Yang campaigning in the metaverse, AI technology has been used in elections before.

But AI Yoon's creators believe he is the world's first official deepfake candidate—a concept gaining traction in South Korea, which has the world's fastest average internet speeds.

With neatly-combed black hair and a smart suit, the avatar looks near-identical to the real South Korean candidate but uses salty language and meme-ready quips in a bid to engage younger voters who get their news online.

It's been a huge hit. AI Yoon has attracted millions of views since making his debut January 1.

Tens of thousands of people have asked questions, but it's not the usual policy-related fare.

"President Moon Jae-in and (rival presidential candidate) Lee Jae-myung are drowning. Who do you save?" one user asks AI Yoon.

"I'd wish them both good luck," the avatar snaps back.

Meta-snark

At first glance, AI Yoon could pass for an actual candidate—an apt demonstration of how far artificially generated videos, known as

deepfakes, have come in the last few years.

The real Yoon recorded more than 3,000 sentences—20 hours of audio and video—to provide enough data for a local deepfake technology company to create the avatar.



People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol in the flesh.

"Words that are often spoken by Yoon are better reflected in AI Yoon," said Baik Kyeong-hoon, the director of the AI Yoon team.

What the avatar actually says is written by his campaign team, not by the

candidate himself.

"We try to come up with humorous and satirical answers," Baik told AFP.

The approach has paid off. AI Yoon's pronouncements have made headlines in South Korean media, and seven million people have visited the "Wiki Yoon" website to question the avatar.

"If we had only produced politically correct statements, we would not have this reaction," Baik said.

"The political establishment has been too slow in the face of a fast-changing society," he added.

When answering questions posed by users, AI Yoon mockingly refers to President Moon and his rival Lee as "Moon Ding Dong" and "Lee Ding Dong".

"I want to ask Moon Ding Dong this question: Who is our real enemy?" AI Yoon says, in a thinly-veiled swipe at what his critics say is the president's more conciliatory approach towards Pyongyang.

North and South Korea remain technically at war and Moon has met with Pyongyang's leader Kim Jong Un four times since taking office—an approach candidate Yoon rejects as too soft.

The avatar politician has also used humour to try and deflect attention from Yoon's past scandals, for example claims he received inappropriate fruit gifts from a construction company when he was a senior prosecutor.

"I am not beholden to persimmons and melons. I am only beholden to

the people," AI Yoon said—although his campaign was later forced to acknowledge he had accepted some gifts.

The kind of script used by the campaign for AI Yoon draws on the language used in the online gaming world, Kim Myuhng-joo, professor of information security at Seoul Women's University, told local media.



AI Yoon team director Baik Kyeong-hoon (R) and his colleagues pose with the avatar.

"AI Yoon reads off the scripts compiled by its creators, who do not mince words," Kim said.

Ko Sam-seog, a staffer for Yoon's main opponent Lee, accuses the cyber-candidate of "downgrading political decorum".

But the snark is working: while polling for the March 9 election remains neck-and-neck, Yoon has pulled ahead of rival Lee Jae-myung with voters in their 20s.

– AI future –

Tech-savvy Baik and his two other team members—all in their 20s and 30s—are some of the youngest staffers in the sprawling Yoon campaign.

They come with AI Yoon's responses in rapid-fire brainstorming sessions, which can take as little as 30 minutes, in contrast to the carefully-honed rhetoric usually found in public policy debates.

South Korea's election monitor allows AI candidates to campaign on the condition it is clearly identified as deepfake technology, and does not spread misinformation.

The technology has more often been flagged as harmful—the 2018 deepfake video of Obama was produced by Oscar-winning filmmaker Jordan Peele to warn viewers about trusting material they encounter online.

But Baik thinks AI is the future of election campaigns.

"It's so easy to create huge amounts of content with deepfake technology," he told AFP.

"It is inevitable that this will be used more and more."

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