



JOURNAL OF DIGITAL LAW, PRIVACY & CYBER GOVERNANCE

ISSN No. _____

Volume 1 | Issue 1

2026

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Evaluating India's Information Technology Act of 2000 in the Context of Deepfake Technology

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ABSTRACT

Advances in artificial intelligence have given rise to deepfakes and other highly manipulated forms of communication, creating serious challenges for legal systems across the world. This paper examines the complex relationship between synthetic media and the legal framework in India, with particular emphasis on the Information Technology Act, 2000. It undertakes a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of the IT Act in dealing with the varied problems caused by deepfakes, including privacy violations, the need for possible amendments, and the changing nature of digital deception. The paper also discusses the criminal activities that may be carried out through deepfakes and identifies the provisions of the IT Act that may be invoked to address such offences. In addition, it offers recommendations and suggestions that may help in overcoming these challenges and in ensuring that the IT Act remains effective and responsive in an era dominated by synthetic media. As technology continues to evolve, this study seeks to assist policymakers, legal practitioners, and scholars in understanding and navigating the rapidly changing landscape of digital deception within the Indian legal context.

KEY WORDS

Deepfakes, Information Technology Act, 2000, Artificial Intelligence, IT Act, Synthetic Media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive research methodology to examine the legal issues associated with deepfake technology and its implications within the Indian legal framework. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including published newspaper articles, scholarly blogs, statutory enactments, governmental notifications, and other relevant legal materials. These sources have been analysed to evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal provisions and to understand the challenges posed by synthetic media in the contemporary digital environment.

HOW DEEPPFAKES ARE MADE

The creation of deepfakes primarily relies on the interaction of two sophisticated algorithms known as the generator and the discriminator, which together operate within a framework called a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). In this system, the generator is responsible for producing artificial digital content, while the discriminator evaluates whether the generated content is authentic or fabricated.

The effectiveness of this process lies in a continuous feedback mechanism. The discriminator examines the content produced by the generator and determines whether it resembles genuine material or synthetic output. Based on this assessment, feedback is provided to the generator, enabling it to refine and improve the quality of future outputs. Through repeated cycles of

evaluation and correction, the generated content becomes increasingly realistic and difficult to distinguish from authentic media.

Within the GAN architecture, these algorithms create an advanced learning environment capable of independently identifying intricate patterns and features. This capability is essential for generating highly convincing images, videos, and audio recordings. The neural network underpinning this technology must be trained using extensive datasets containing facial images captured from different angles, under varying lighting conditions, and displaying diverse expressions. Exposure to such comprehensive datasets allows the system to learn subtle facial characteristics and reproduce them with remarkable accuracy.

The process of deepfake creation can therefore be understood as a coordinated interaction between the generator and discriminator, operating within the GAN framework. Their combined functionality demonstrates the growing sophistication of artificial intelligence systems and their capacity to create increasingly realistic synthetic content.

TIMELINES

The development and growing influence of deepfake technology can be understood through a series of significant milestones that illustrate its evolution from a niche technological experiment to a major legal and societal concern.

Emergence of Deepfake Technology (2017)

The phenomenon of deepfakes first gained widespread attention in 2017 when a Reddit user operating under the pseudonym “Deepfakes” began publishing manipulated videos in which the faces of celebrities were digitally superimposed onto other individuals. What initially appeared to be a form of online entertainment soon demonstrated the immense potential of artificial intelligence to create highly realistic synthetic media.

Rise in Misuse and Online Exploitation (2019 Onwards)

By 2019, concerns surrounding the misuse of deepfake technology intensified significantly. A study conducted by Deep Trace reported that approximately 15,000 deepfake videos had been uploaded online by September 2019, representing a dramatic increase within a short period. The overwhelming majority of these videos contained pornographic content, with many featuring the manipulated likenesses of female celebrities. This period marked the transition of deepfakes from a technological novelty to a serious social and legal challenge.

Judicial and Regulatory Response (2018–2022)

Recognizing the growing threat posed by harmful online content, the Supreme Court of India, in the *Prajwala* matter in 2018, directed the Government to formulate measures for addressing online content relating to rape, child sexual abuse, and pornography. Subsequent policy discussions and regulatory developments culminated in amendments to the Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics framework, reflecting increasing governmental efforts to address emerging digital threats, including those facilitated by synthetic media technologies.

Contemporary Challenges

Today, deepfakes represent one of the most pressing challenges in the digital ecosystem. Their ability to facilitate identity theft, financial fraud, reputational harm, cybercrime, misinformation, and social manipulation has exposed significant gaps in existing legal

frameworks. As artificial intelligence continues to advance, the need for adaptive legislation and effective regulatory mechanisms becomes increasingly urgent.

REVIEW LITERATURE

In recent years, synthetic media has gained significant prominence and has emerged as an influential technological tool across a wide range of industries. Several prominent corporations, including brands such as Cadbury, Zomato, and Sunfeast, have successfully incorporated deepfake technology into their marketing strategies. Through the use of synthetic media, these companies have been able to deliver highly personalized advertising campaigns tailored to the individual preferences and interests of consumers. This innovative approach has transformed conventional advertising by enabling brands to create more engaging and consumer-centric promotional content.

A notable feature of deepfake-driven advertising is its ability to customize content on a large scale. Businesses can integrate consumers' facial images into advertisements, generate personalized festive greetings, and even create interactions between consumers and their favourite celebrities. Such personalization enhances the relatability and emotional appeal of advertisements, thereby strengthening consumer engagement. By effectively targeting specific consumer segments, organizations have been able to improve brand recognition, foster customer loyalty, and increase the attractiveness of their products and services. Consequently, the adoption of synthetic media in marketing represents a significant shift in the manner in which technology is utilized to enhance consumer interaction and brand communication.

Beyond advertising, deepfake technology has also found valuable applications within the film industry. It is increasingly being employed during post-production processes to modify, improve, and correct scenes without requiring expensive reshoots. This capability substantially reduces production costs while maintaining creative flexibility. Additionally, deepfakes have the potential to revolutionize dubbing by producing realistic lip synchronization and enhancing the authenticity of dubbed performances. Such applications demonstrate the capacity of synthetic media to improve both the artistic quality and economic efficiency of film production.

Despite these beneficial applications, the widespread adoption of deepfake technology has generated serious ethical, legal, and privacy concerns. A critical examination of existing literature suggests that the potential risks associated with deepfakes often outweigh their advantages. The misuse of synthetic media presents substantial threats to personal privacy, public trust, and social stability, necessitating a cautious and regulated approach to its deployment.

Financial Frauds

Deepfake technology has also become a powerful instrument for facilitating financial fraud. In recent years, criminals have increasingly employed AI-generated voice clones and manipulated audio recordings to impersonate trusted individuals, corporate executives, and family members. Such fraudulent activities exploit the confidence of victims by making fabricated communications appear authentic.

A notable example involved the United Kingdom subsidiary of a German energy company, where a senior executive was deceived into transferring more than £300,000 after receiving a telephone call from an individual using an AI-generated imitation of the German parent company executive's voice. Similar incidents highlight the growing sophistication of voice-cloning technology and its potential for financial exploitation.

The Indian context is equally concerning. Reports indicate that a substantial percentage of Indian consumers have experienced financial losses linked to AI-enabled scams. Many individuals have acknowledged that they would be inclined to respond to urgent requests for financial assistance appearing to originate from trusted acquaintances or family members. Such findings demonstrate the vulnerability of individuals to deepfake-enabled deception and the growing threat posed by synthetic media in financial transactions.

Social and Political Unrest

The proliferation of deepfake videos on social media platforms presents significant risks to political stability and social harmony. Deepfakes involving political leaders and public officials have demonstrated the potential of synthetic media to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion. During the Russia–Ukraine conflict, fabricated videos depicting the presidents of both countries circulated widely online, illustrating how deepfakes can be weaponized during periods of political tension and conflict.

Similarly, manipulated audio recordings and videos of political figures have been used to disseminate false statements and inflammatory messages. Such content can influence public perception, create confusion regarding important national issues, and potentially interfere with democratic processes. The possibility of deepfakes being employed to damage the reputation of political opponents during elections raises serious concerns regarding electoral integrity and informed public participation.

The 2018 controversy surrounding President Ali Bongo of Gabon further illustrates the political implications of synthetic media. Allegations that a televised speech had been manipulated contributed to widespread speculation regarding the President's health and generated political instability. Regardless of whether the video was genuinely altered, the incident demonstrated the disruptive impact that even suspicions of deepfake manipulation can have on public trust and governance.

PENALTIES IN CASE OF NON-COMPLIANCE

The legal consequences arising from the misuse of deepfake technology can be addressed through various provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000, and other applicable laws. Although the Act does not specifically regulate deepfakes, several provisions can be invoked when synthetic media is used for unlawful purposes such as identity theft, impersonation, dissemination of obscene content, financial fraud, or cyberterrorism. These penalties serve as deterrents against the misuse of digital technologies and provide legal remedies to victims.

Penalties for Identity Theft and Electronic Impersonation

Where deepfake technology is used to unlawfully assume another person's identity, create false representations, or facilitate fraudulent activities through electronic means, the provisions relating to identity theft and impersonation become applicable. Individuals found guilty of such offences may be subjected to criminal liability, including imprisonment and monetary penalties, depending upon the nature and gravity of the misconduct. Deepfake-generated content that falsely portrays an individual or misuses their unique identifying attributes may therefore attract legal consequences under the existing cybercrime framework.

Penalties for Dissemination of Obscene and Inappropriate Content

The publication, transmission, or circulation of obscene, pornographic, voyeuristic, or otherwise inappropriate material through electronic means attracts stringent penalties under the Information Technology Act. Where deepfake technology is employed to create or distribute such content, offenders may face imprisonment as well as substantial fines. The law seeks to prevent the corruption or moral degradation of individuals who may be exposed to such material and imposes enhanced punishments in cases involving repeated violations.

Penalties for Publishing Sexually Explicit Material

Where synthetic media is used to generate or distribute content depicting sexually explicit acts or conduct, the law prescribes stricter punishments. The creation, publication, or transmission of such material through electronic platforms constitutes a serious offence and may result in significant financial penalties and terms of imprisonment. Repeated violations attract more severe sanctions, reflecting the gravity with which such offences are viewed under Indian cyber law.

Liability for Misinformation, Defamation, and Hate Speech

Under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2022, digital content involving misinformation, defamatory statements, or hate speech may also attract regulatory and legal action. Deepfake-generated material designed to mislead the public, tarnish reputations, or incite hostility may therefore result in both civil and criminal liability, depending upon the circumstances of each case.

In essence, although India presently lacks legislation specifically dedicated to regulating deepfakes, existing statutory provisions impose significant penalties where synthetic media is used to facilitate criminal conduct. These legal mechanisms provide an important, albeit limited, framework for addressing the harms arising from the misuse of deepfake technology.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACT, 2000

India presently does not have a dedicated legislation specifically enacted to regulate artificial intelligence or address the unique challenges posed by deepfake technology. Consequently, the primary statutory framework governing such issues is the Information Technology Act, 2000, which serves as the principal legislation dealing with cybercrime, electronic commerce, and digital governance in the country. The Act was enacted largely on the basis of the United Nations Model Law on Electronic Commerce, 1996, and continues to form the foundation of India's cyber law regime.

The scope of the Information Technology Act extends beyond Indian citizens and is broad enough to cover offences committed by foreign nationals where the consequences of such acts affect individuals, institutions, or interests within India. This extraterritorial application enhances the effectiveness of the legislation in addressing cyber offences that frequently transcend national boundaries.

One of the primary objectives of the Act is to provide legal recognition to electronic records and digital signatures, thereby facilitating secure electronic communication and transactions. By granting legal validity to digital signatures and electronic documentation, the Act has significantly contributed to the development of e-governance, electronic commerce, and digital financial systems within India.

The Act further enables the electronic maintenance and preservation of records by government departments, regulatory bodies, law enforcement agencies, and authorized private entities.

Through these provisions, public institutions are permitted to store, access, and manage information digitally, thereby improving administrative efficiency and transparency. The legal recognition accorded to electronic records has also facilitated the modernization of governmental procedures and service delivery mechanisms.

In the financial sector, the Information Technology Act has played a crucial role in enabling electronic transactions and digital banking operations. It provides the legal framework necessary for financial institutions to conduct transactions electronically, maintain digital records, and manage customer information through secure online systems. In conjunction with other regulatory statutes, including the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934, the Act supports the digitization of financial services and promotes the secure exchange of information within the banking ecosystem.

Although the Information Technology Act, 2000 was enacted before the emergence of advanced artificial intelligence technologies and deepfakes, several of its provisions can nevertheless be invoked to address offences arising from the misuse of synthetic media. Offences involving identity theft, impersonation, fraud, publication of obscene material, cyberterrorism, and unauthorized access to computer systems may all be prosecuted under various provisions of the Act. However, the absence of specific provisions directly addressing AI-generated content and deepfakes has created significant regulatory gaps that require legislative attention.

Given the increasing sophistication of deepfake technology and its potential misuse for criminal, financial, political, and social purposes, the Information Technology Act must continuously evolve to remain effective. The growing prevalence of synthetic media highlights the need for targeted amendments and specialized legal mechanisms capable of addressing the unique challenges posed by AI-driven digital manipulation.

CYBER APPELLATE TRIBUNAL

The Cyber Appellate Tribunal (CAT) was established under the provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 to provide a specialized forum for adjudicating disputes arising under the Act. Constituted under Section 48 of the Information Technology Act, the Tribunal was vested with powers comparable to those of a civil court and was empowered to hear appeals relating to cyber offences, data protection issues, and matters arising from decisions made under the Act.

The primary purpose of the Cyber Appellate Tribunal was to offer an effective appellate mechanism for individuals aggrieved by the decisions of authorities functioning under the Information Technology Act. Any person dissatisfied with an order passed by the Controller of Certifying Authorities or an Adjudicating Officer could approach the Tribunal by filing an appeal against such decision. Through this mechanism, the Tribunal served as an important safeguard against arbitrary or erroneous administrative determinations in cyber-related matters.

To invoke the appellate jurisdiction of the Tribunal, an appeal was required to be filed within twenty-five days from the date of receipt of the impugned order, along with the prescribed fee. However, the Tribunal possessed discretionary authority to entertain appeals filed beyond the stipulated limitation period if it was satisfied that sufficient cause existed for the delay. This flexibility ensured that genuine litigants were not denied access to justice merely on procedural grounds.

In order to ensure the expeditious resolution of disputes, the Tribunal was expected to dispose of appeals within a period of six months from the date of filing. This emphasis on speedy

adjudication reflected the dynamic nature of cyber disputes and the necessity of providing timely remedies in matters involving technology and digital transactions.

The establishment of the Cyber Appellate Tribunal represented an important step in strengthening India's cyber law enforcement framework by creating a specialized adjudicatory body capable of addressing technologically complex disputes. Its role was particularly significant in ensuring accountability, promoting legal certainty, and facilitating the effective implementation of the Information Technology Act, 2000.

Although the cyber regulatory framework has evolved over time, the concept of a specialized appellate forum remains essential in addressing contemporary cyber challenges, especially those arising from emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, synthetic media, and deepfakes. As digital offences become increasingly sophisticated, specialized adjudicatory mechanisms continue to play a vital role in ensuring effective legal redress and regulatory oversight.

AMENDMENTS

The growing concerns surrounding harmful online content, particularly content involving child sexual abuse, rape, and pornography, prompted significant judicial and regulatory intervention in India. A notable development occurred in the *Prajwala* case, wherein the Supreme Court of India, in December 2018, directed the Government to formulate and implement guidelines within a stipulated period for addressing objectionable content available on online platforms. The objective of this direction was to ensure the prompt identification, removal, and regulation of content promoting sexual exploitation and abuse through digital mediums.

Subsequently, increasing public concern regarding the impact of explicit online content, particularly on children, led to further governmental and parliamentary scrutiny. In 2020, a Parliamentary Committee examined the adverse consequences of exposure to pornographic material among minors, highlighting the broader societal implications of unrestricted access to harmful online content. These developments reflected a growing recognition of the need for stronger digital governance mechanisms capable of addressing emerging technological threats.

As a consequence of these concerns, amendments were introduced through the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, strengthening the obligations imposed upon intermediaries and digital platforms. These amendments sought to improve accountability within the digital ecosystem and enhance the regulation of unlawful online content.

Computer-Related Offences under Section 66

Section 66 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 deals broadly with computer-related offences. Within this framework, certain provisions assume particular significance in addressing misconduct involving deepfake technology, especially where synthetic media is used for identity theft, impersonation, fraud, or deception.

Section 66C: Identity Theft and Unauthorized Use of Electronic Identity

Section 66C criminalizes the dishonest or fraudulent use of another person's electronic signature, password, or any other unique identifying feature. In the context of deepfakes, this provision may be invoked where artificial intelligence is used to unlawfully replicate an individual's identity, voice, image, or other identifying characteristics for deceptive purposes. The section serves as an

important legal tool for addressing identity-related offences facilitated through digital technologies.

Section 66D: Cheating by Personation through Computer Resources

Section 66D addresses offences involving cheating by personation through the use of computer resources or communication devices. Where deepfake technology is employed to impersonate another individual and thereby induce a victim to act upon false representations, this provision becomes relevant. Offenders engaging in fraudulent conduct through digital impersonation may be subjected to criminal prosecution under this section. Upon conviction, an offender may face imprisonment extending up to three years along with the prescribed fine.

Section 67: Publication or Transmission of Obscene Material in Electronic Form

Section 67 imposes penalties upon individuals who publish, transmit, or cause the publication or transmission of obscene, pornographic, voyeuristic, or otherwise objectionable material through electronic means. Deepfake-generated obscene content falls squarely within the ambit of this provision where such content has the potential to corrupt or deprave individuals exposed to it. A first conviction may result in imprisonment extending up to three years and a monetary penalty that may extend to five lakh rupees.

Section 67A: Publication or Transmission of Sexually Explicit Material

Section 67A specifically addresses the publication or transmission of material containing sexually explicit acts or conduct in electronic form. The use of deepfake technology to create and disseminate sexually explicit synthetic media may attract liability under this provision. For a first conviction, the offender may be punished with imprisonment extending up to five years and a fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees. Enhanced penalties apply in cases involving subsequent convictions.

Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code (Amendment) Rules, 2022

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2022 further strengthened the regulatory framework governing digital platforms. Under these rules, offences involving misinformation, defamation, and hate speech may be subjected to legal scrutiny and enforcement action. Deepfake content designed to mislead the public, damage reputations, or incite hostility may therefore attract liability under the amended regulatory regime.

SUGGESTIONS

The increasing sophistication of deepfake technology has exposed significant vulnerabilities within India's digital ecosystem, particularly in the context of misinformation, cybercrime, and public awareness. Given the realistic nature of synthetic media, individuals often find it difficult to distinguish authentic content from manipulated material, thereby increasing the risk of deception. To effectively address these challenges, a comprehensive strategy involving legal reforms, technological advancement, regulatory oversight, and public awareness is essential.

Enhancement of Digital Literacy

One of the most effective measures for combating the adverse effects of deepfakes is the promotion of digital literacy. The widespread circulation of manipulated content often succeeds because individuals lack the necessary skills to critically evaluate information encountered online. Therefore, substantial investment and coordinated efforts should be directed towards

developing nationwide digital literacy programmes. Such initiatives should target diverse segments of society, including students, professionals, rural populations, and senior citizens. By fostering critical thinking and improving the public's ability to verify digital content, the influence of deepfake-generated misinformation can be significantly reduced.

Strengthening Regulatory Enforcement

The effective regulation of online content requires a robust and enforceable legal framework. Existing laws should be strengthened through targeted amendments that specifically address offences involving artificial intelligence and synthetic media. Regulatory authorities should collaborate with technology experts, policymakers, legal scholars, and civil society organizations to formulate comprehensive guidelines governing the creation, dissemination, and detection of deepfake content. Strong enforcement mechanisms will not only deter misuse but also promote accountability among digital platforms and content creators.

Implementation of Multi-Factor Authentication Mechanisms

As cyber threats continue to evolve, enhancing digital security becomes increasingly important. The adoption of multi-factor authentication systems for electronic signatures and digital transactions can significantly improve identity verification processes and reduce the risk of impersonation and unauthorized access. By incorporating additional layers of authentication, users can be better protected against fraud facilitated through deepfake technologies and other forms of digital manipulation. Governments and technology companies should work collaboratively to promote the widespread adoption of secure and user-friendly authentication systems.

Strategic Investment in Advanced Technologies

Given the rapidly changing technological landscape, sustained investment in cutting-edge technologies is essential. Resources should be allocated towards research and development initiatives aimed at creating sophisticated tools capable of detecting and countering deepfake content. Government institutions, academic organizations, cybersecurity firms, and technology startups should be encouraged to collaborate in developing advanced detection mechanisms powered by artificial intelligence and digital forensics. Such investments will strengthen national capabilities in identifying and mitigating emerging digital threats.

CONCLUSION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has significantly transformed the digital landscape, with deepfake technology emerging as one of the most complex challenges confronting legal systems across the globe. This study has examined the implications of deepfakes within the Indian context, particularly through the lens of the Information Technology Act, 2000, and has highlighted the legal, ethical, and regulatory concerns arising from the proliferation of synthetic media.

Deepfakes, developed through sophisticated artificial intelligence models such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), possess the capability to produce highly realistic images, videos, and audio recordings that are often indistinguishable from genuine content. While the technology offers legitimate applications in sectors such as advertising, entertainment, education, and digital communication, its misuse presents serious threats to individual privacy, public trust, and societal stability. The increasing use of deepfakes for identity theft, financial fraud, cybercrime, reputational harm, political manipulation, and the dissemination of sexually explicit content underscores the urgent need for an effective regulatory response.

The study further demonstrates that although the Information Technology Act, 2000 provides certain legal mechanisms capable of addressing offences arising from the misuse of deepfake technology, the Act was enacted long before the emergence of artificial intelligence-driven synthetic media and therefore lacks provisions specifically designed to regulate such technologies. Existing provisions relating to identity theft, cheating by personation, publication of obscene material, cyberterrorism, and related offences offer a limited framework for legal intervention; however, these provisions alone are insufficient to comprehensively address the unique challenges posed by deepfakes. Similarly, relevant provisions of the Indian Penal Code may be invoked in appropriate cases, but the absence of a dedicated legislative framework continues to create regulatory gaps.

In light of the rapidly evolving technological environment, it is essential to recognize that legal challenges associated with artificial intelligence and synthetic media are dynamic in nature and require equally adaptive solutions. Artificial intelligence possesses immense transformative potential, but its misuse can facilitate a wide range of criminal activities capable of causing substantial harm to individuals, institutions, and society at large. Consequently, platforms and services that promote the unlawful use of deepfake technology must be effectively regulated, while legislative frameworks should be continuously updated to address emerging risks.

The vast scale of social media networks and digital communication platforms further demonstrates the limitations of relying upon a static legal framework. Instead, a proactive regulatory approach involving continuous monitoring, periodic legislative review, technological innovation, and institutional collaboration is necessary. Such an approach will ensure that legal mechanisms remain responsive to technological developments and capable of addressing new forms of digital deception as they emerge.

To strengthen India's preparedness against the threats posed by deepfakes, this study advocates a multifaceted strategy that includes the enhancement of digital literacy, stricter regulatory enforcement, implementation of robust authentication mechanisms, investment in advanced detection technologies, and regular review of existing laws. These measures, when implemented collectively, can contribute to the development of a resilient legal and technological framework capable of safeguarding the integrity of digital information and maintaining public confidence in online communications.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges posed by deepfakes requires more than merely adapting existing laws; it necessitates the creation of a forward-looking regulatory ecosystem capable of responding to future technological developments. By adopting a balanced approach that encourages innovation while ensuring accountability, policymakers, legal practitioners, and scholars can effectively protect the interests of individuals and society in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and synthetic media. This will be essential for preserving trust, transparency, and authenticity within the digital domain.