9/13/24 / We can't trust photos anymore

[Billboard]

NOEL: Remember the time Sean got fooled by Puffer Pope?

<SFX>

Today, Explained, Sean Ramewswaram, this past Saturday, against my better judgment, I was scrolling the feeds, liking the tweets…

<LIKE SFX>

SEAN: …and then I saw something glorious.

SCORING <HARD\_HARD\_0123\_05501\_Angel\_On\_My\_Shoulder\_APM>

SEAN: Cool pope, Papa Francis, in an epic white puffer. He’s got the cross dangling over the jacket. He looks like he’s on his way to save humanity from eternal damnation. And he’s gonna be warm as hell while he does it.

<SFX>

NOEL: Wasn’t real! It was AI! In a moment of equal cultural significance surely - AI trickery prompted Taylor Swift to endorse Kamala Harris - Taylor talks about being…

“made aware [of] AI of ‘me’ falsely endorsing Donald Trump” She said it conjured up her fears bout AI

SCORING IN <Growing Anxieties (heartbeat, wub bass, percussive clangs, anvil, pitched down marimba, roto toms, tension)-01>

NOEL: You can already manipulate images on your phone. But This week, Apple dropped the first AI iPhone. On Today, Explained, what happens when you can’t believe your eyes.

[THEME]

JOANNA STERN (PERSONAL TECH REPORTER, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL): My name is Joanna Stern. I am a personal technology columnist at the Wall Street Journal, and I play with a lot of new tech.

NOEL: So you were at Apple's launch event on Monday of this week. The big news was that Apple is launching the first iPhone with Apple Intelligence, artificial intelligence. And that was going to change literally everything in the universe. What happened? What's it like?

JOANNA: I have bad news. First, it's not going to change everything about the universe. But the new phone is like your old iPhone, except maybe in a different color and some new processors inside and some better battery life. What Apple's really trying to say here is this is the first AI phone. The first phone that's going to kick off what they say is a long journey. It's just the first step in this. Apple Intelligence or A.I., as they've cleverly done here, future.

*<CLIP> APPLE EVENT: Apple intelligence can unlock even more intelligence with private cloud compute. Private cloud Compute maintains the privacy and security of your iPhone while giving you access to generative models much larger than what fits in your pocket today.*

JOANNA: And so the new processors in the phone, the A 18 chips are supposed to really power these AI features to be faster, to be more private, to be more secure.

NOEL: But what's the A.I. part like when we say this new phone has artificial intelligence that allows us to do what, exactly?

JOANNA: What they have shown is a suite of AI or generative AI tools that are going to come out over the next number of months to a year. And those include things like being able to take your notes and summarize them. Then there's Siri, which is supposed to get a big upgrade in terms of what it understands and how it can make conversation in a more natural way. There are things that you can do in the photos app, like create a memory video just based on what you type in.

*<CLIP> APPLE EVENT: Like the kids learning to crochet With Aunt Fiona Apple intelligence will automatically find relevant photos and videos and smartly arrange them into a storyline.*

JOANNA: There's a tool called cleanup.

*<CLIP> APPLE EVENT: With cleanup coming with Apple intelligence. You can easily remove distracting objects and photos, even their reflections and shadows.*

JOANNA: And it generates the background in place of it. So I'm mapping out here a big suite of tools that Apple has announced, but they're not all coming out right away.  
  
NOEL: huh!

JOANNA: These new phones hit in September. They're being promised as sort of the big first AI phones, but they're not going to actually have those features until October and really through the next year.

NOEL: You mentioned some of these photo features on the new iPhone. Do those exist anywhere else?

JOANNA: They definitely exist. Google's been out in front of this melding of AI with photo and camera features for a long time.

SCORING IN <Slow Down, Seahorse>

JOANNA: Google calls something magic editor Apple's calling it cleanup tool. And basically this is you have a photo, you've got something in the background you don't like or you're able to circle it and AI can remove it. And it does this really quickly, right on the fly. This is something that you can actually get on iPhones right now if you use Google photos. But Apple's going to be baking it in right into iOS 18.1. And then at the other end of the scale, you have the ability to generate by just typing anything you want, a photo that comes out of nowhere. And what's really happening and Apple is not doing this. They don't really have that kind of tool. But Google and others have put out this kind of tool, right? And so actually, like, there's something that Google recently has done called reimagine. And this is on their pixel phones and this blends that you can take a photo you've already taken. Let's say you've taken a picture of your child on the beach, and then you can circle that spot and then say, insert a shark biting a human.

NOEL: Incredible. <laughs>

JOANNA: Right. And so you can have this picture, a beautiful photo of your kid smiling. And then in the back, a shark biting a human leg off. I don't know whatever you'd like to see. And so that's why we have this scale of like, where is the real meeting, the fake or the eye? And that's really kind of crazy.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: It's really kind of crazy. And I'm crossing my fingers here because my mind just went to a dark place. There are some restrictions on what you can enter in?

JOANNA: There are. Let me let me be clear about that. Most of these tools have very, very strict restrictions about violence or nudity or public figures. You cannot put a Donald Trump in many of these, though. We can talk about what's happening on X where there's really no restrictions on their tool called grok. And that's gone quite viral over the last couple of weeks.

*<CLIP> HOST: users have exploited the tool to create disturbing, even misleading visuals including images of public figures in false or compromising situations…*

JOANNA:I've seen some instances where The Verge did a very interesting story about this, where there was a picture of a woman on the ground. She could be hanging out just, you know, watching TV. But then they circled in and put in a syringe and a beer bottle, right. Again, things that, you know, why shouldn't you be able to generate a beer bottle, a syringe? Maybe not. I don't know. Maybe that that should be a little bit. Okay. That changes the context of that photo. And it looks really real.

NOEL: It does look really real, huh?

JOANNA: It really does. And this is look, we've had a lot of effort from the social media platforms to put in some protections, the media owned platforms, Instagram threads, Facebook, they all have new tags where you can say this was generated by AI. But ultimately, it's going to be on humans to just look at everything with a really skeptical eye and say, Was this real?

NOEL: That is incredible to me because I'm thinking about, okay, let's use your example. There's a picture of a woman's legs on the beach and somebody inserts a syringe, a couple beer bottles, some cigarette butts, and then, sends that I don't know to to the woman's family. Is like, what you've just said feels like a situation where potentially any time somebody texts you a photo, you have to say to yourself, Wait, this might not be real.

JOANNA: And I think that's actually what's happening right now in the election cycle. We're seeing tons of stuff on X and other platforms where things can be taken out of context and you don't even need the generative AI tools.

*<CLIP> WTHR Anchor: Musk posted a fake image of Vice President Kamala Harris in a red communist uniform he captioned the picture Kamala vows to be a communist dictator on day one can you believe she wears that outfit that was the caption this comes after former president Trump also shared fake images of Harris…*

JOANNA: But when you add in the generative A.I. tools, which they have like a look and feel that you can tell they're kind of AI, but that's going to get better. That's going to get to a place where you really can't tell the difference.

NOEL: You know, it's funny that you talk about it in the political context, because without even realizing it until just this moment, I stopped believing what I see

JOANNA: Totally.

NOEL: I don't if somebody if there's a crazy political photo, I'm like, I don't think that's real. I don't even, like look into it anymore.

JOANNA: Right

NOEL: Now it's not real.

JOANNA: And I think we some of us have been trained in that way, and I think that's good. We have built in initial responses to question, Is this real?

NOEL: Yeah, yeah, things are changing without anybody ever really saying, Hey, my brain just changed the way it thinks about a quote unquote news photo or a photo that I might see on a news site or a social media site. I have an old iPhone. I don't think I have this option. How many people how many people are walking around with these phones right now that have the ability to do this?

JOANNA: A lot of what I've been talking about you can do using apps in the app store. And so this is becoming more accessible. And if you've even followed what's happened with some of the deep nude apps, which maybe you haven't, but there are apps in the App Store that allow you to upload a photo of somebody and basically take their clothes off. So that doesn't require you to have any special kind of phone or computer to do.

NOEL: Huh, so it's not that a majority of people have the smartphone with the AI, the easy AI capability, but I'm guessing if I asked you what is the world going to look like in five years, you would tell me we're much closer to many people, most people.

JOANNA: That's exactly right. And even if you look at what Google just did with the Pixel, so this Pixel 9, I got to check it out. I mean, they just packed in the features that all those features I was talking about where you can re-imagine and you can circle something and put in the shark or you can put in the syringe that's on the Google 9 Pixel. The the thing to consider there is that they have maybe 3% of the market share in the U.S. I mean, very small market share. And globally that's even smaller. But that's not what matters.

SCORING IN <Ms Robot (tech, menace, atticus reznor, ecorp, scoring, horror, dread, filtered, riser, build up, wall of noise) 1>

JOANNA: What matters is that android, which powers the pixel, is everywhere. It is this. It is the biggest mobile operating system in the world, bigger than Apple, bigger than iOS. And so Google is testing these features on the Pixel 9. But the executive I spoke to Rick Australia, he told me this is a test bed. We are we are testing this out so then we can bring this to everyone in the Android ecosystem. So that's how you have to think about it, is that these features that are starting right now on just a few phones are going to go everywhere.

NOEL: That was The Wall Street Journal’s Joanna Stern. Coming up: a veteran photo editor argues that INDIVIDUAL photographs have turned the tide of wars, started an environmental revolution, shocked us into taking moral stances. So … what happens when we don’t believe the pictures are real?

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: I want to read something to you, if I could, for just a second. In the not too distant future, realistic looking images will probably have to be labeled like words as either fiction or nonfiction, because it may be impossible to tell them apart. We may have to rely on the image maker and not the image to tell us into which categories certain pictures fall. Do you remember writing that?

FRED: 1984 New York Times Magazine.

NOEL: Yes. You wrote that 40 years ago.

NOEL: Fred Ritchin writes about imaging. He was picture editor of the New York Times magazine. He was dean of the International Center of Photography. He’s a curator. And he just finished a book called The Synthetic Eye – about how photography is changing in the age of AI.

NOEL: What was the fear in 1984? What were you writing about then?

FRED: Well, I found out that with these very expensive machines, you can use software to manipulate photographs in ways that were undetectable.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2227\_03301\_A\_Curious\_Dilemma\_\_b\_\_APM>

FRED: I began to think that the credibility of photography as a witness was vulnerable at that point. So I wrote a piece for the New York Times Magazine in 1984. I think they printed 1,600,000 copies, as I remember, with the idea that if people know in advance, they'll do something about it so that we will be able to preserve the photograph as a credible witness.

SCORING BUMP

FRED: I'd been picture editor of the New York Times Sunday magazine, and I knew that on a weekly basis, we were showing photographs of the civil war in El Salvador.

*<CLIP> MARTIN BELL: it is a war of sporadic engagements and constant mobility. No longer a clash between a regular army and raggedy rebel band. But more and more the el salvadorian military superior in air power and fire power are having a hard time fighting insurgents and driving them back*

FRED: of khomeini taking power in Iran

*<CLIP> BROADCASTER: Khomeini's name was the rallying cry that brought down the Shah. And now to his followers, waiting outside the airport. He’s the implacable opponent of of Dr. Ba’s government.*

FRED: you know, you can have a point of view that varies with other people. But for example, in the Vietnam War, for the nine year old girl was burning from napalm. Everybody agreed. That's what's happening.

*<CLIP> 1972 REPORTER: the sites that greeted us were awful. Almost the first person we saw was a little girl, age 9 running up the road. She hadn’t had any clothes on. She presumably tore them off when they caught fire…*

FRED: You might think that the war should continue, not continue, but it was a common reference point. And what troubled me then, and troubles me even more now, is if that breaks down, then we really have no shared sense of reality at this point in terms of what's happening outside of our immediate neighborhood, our immediate family. You know, what's happening in other countries. We used to be able to believe with photographs, things, you know, facts. There were reference points and incredibly important. So climate change, you know, in 1968, the photograph of the Earth from outer space by an astronaut, 16 months later, we got Earth Day, people worried about the planet. It was a common reference point. And what troubled me then, and troubles me now, is that we're going to lose it, and we are losing it.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: You wanted something to be done to preserve photography's credibility in in the intervening 40 years, what have we done to preserve it?

FRED: We've done very little. You know, I came up with a campaign in 1994, you know, that we would label every manipulated photograph with what I called a ‘not a lens icon’. In other words, a circle inside a square is like a lens. Think of it as a copyright symbol. A diagonal slash through it would mean it's not a lens. This is heavily manipulated. You know, 1 or 2 publications picked it up. But for the most part, you know, people told me, we know what we're doing. And I think there was a kind of, arrogance that we know what we're doing. We didn't know what we were doing, and we were not transparent. So I think a lot of publications felt that they had to keep it a secret. Whether they were staging images, you know, setting them up to make them look a certain way or manipulating them in post-production, they were not being transparent. And I think, you know, 40 years later with artificial intelligence now, it's really a shift, a paradigm shift in which we don't know what is, what really happened. It's so easy to make photorealistic images in seconds. You could be in your living room in Iowa and make images of Gaza, Ukraine, whatever, and people you've never been there. But but people don't know the difference between that and a photograph. We've done very, very little to prepare for this moment. And unfortunately we're we're facing the consequences.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS DETROIT REPORTER: This photo causing controversy, after former President Donald Trump took to social media saying Vice President Harris used Artificial Intelligence to fake pictures showing large crowd size in her rally last week in the motor city.*

FRED: I think that there's just a breakdown in the sense of a common belief structure. For example, you know, I think that the last iconic photograph that made a difference internationally to the point where countries intervened, was 2015. The photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the two year old Syrian boy, a refugee with his family who drowned.

*<CLIP>NBC NEWS’ LESTER HOLT: The photo we’re gonna show you has quickly resonated across the world. As a heartbreaking symbol of an utter human catastrophe that we cant close our eyes to…*

*<CLIP> EURO NEWS ANNOUNCER: In Britain the outcry over the harrowing pictures of Aylan Kurdi, plus intense domestic and international pressure have forced the government to change its stance on Syrian refugees.*

FRED: And then countries organizations gave more money, let in more refugees and so on.

*<CLIP> PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON: today i can announce that we will do more, providing resettlement for syrian refugees.*

*<CLIP> REPORTER: the long journey was finally over. Chancellor Merkel has made their dream possible. The dream of living safely away from the bloodshed of a civil war. The dream of a fresh start*

FRED: I think that that the diminishing of the photograph as a, as a potential icon is something that, you know, gets everybody to say, oh, that's what's happening. Should we do something, not do something, whether it's climate change, war, you know, refugees, elections, whatever it would be, does not exist anymore if we pretend it exists, but it doesn't exist. So that we're really flailing in the dark at this point, not knowing and not knowing what to believe. The New York Times just ran a quiz, here's ten videos. Which one are AI and which one or not? I've been in this field over 50 years and I got seven out of ten. I can't tell you. No experts can’t tell. And that's the way we're going. And we're doing it under the rubric of consumer entitlement. The first book I wrote on this was called In Our Own Image The Coming Revolution in Photography in 1990, and it was this sense that the photograph would show us stuff we may not want to see. Maybe we're look too heavy or too skinny, or maybe we're seeing a war or seeing a famine and stuff we don't want to see. But now in the digital era, we could, you know, change was software, whether, a photograph or just synthetically create a whole new image with AI. So the world looks in our own image the way we want it to be, not the way it is. So we've lost and we are losing a shared reality, a common reality of what's going on, where we're really in the dark.

NOEL: War and famine and climate change are particular cases. I know why you would mention them, you’re a photojournalist. But I wonder - do you think it makes a difference, for example if I ake a picture and my sister’s eyes are closed and I use AI to make it look like they were open when the lens snapped. Does that matter?

FRED: It matters enormously. I think the you know, my family album. My grandmother now looks like Marilyn Monroe and my grandfather looks like Clark Gable. You know, you can manufacture whatever you want in terms of your family, your friends and so on. And then you get to the point where your grandchildren have no idea of what actually happened or didn't happen. So I think the photograph has always been dialectic. It's always been showing you stuff that you may not want to have seen. So if your sister or somebody you know has her eyes closed in a photograph, well, okay, that happens. It's not always this kind of perfectionist idea of the way, you know, of consumer entitlement, the way we're supposed to be, it’s the way we are. So, you know, you change things. It's like what they used to do in the Soviet Union, you know, government censorship. We are censoring our family albums. And then there's, you know, very, very little sense of reality in terms of where we come from, and so on. And at that point they just felt. They become vanity media. You know, we get what we want, and the world is what we want. And in fact, the world is unfortunately very far from what we want. If you look at all the issues going on in the world at this point.

NOEL: You would appear to be fighting a losing battle. May I ask why, after 40 years, you're still fighting it?

FRED: Because I care about people.

SCORING IN <08 Orange into Blue (a)>

FRED: I grew up with a sense, you know, I learned how to read. In fact, you know, as a little kid by cutting out pictures from a Life magazine. You know, based on the letter of the day, if the letter was, you know, B or something, I cut out photographs that had baseballs in it or whatever it would be. And in doing that, you you saw all these photographs of people, you know, in different countries. You know, they might be in difficult situations. And I marveled at the ability of photography to show us what's going on with other people, so we might do something about it. I thought that was humanity. You know, one of its finest moments. You see things. You intervene. You help. The people may be far away. You may not know them. They may be from another culture. You can get to know them through photographs. You're not so insulated. Um… you know, it's our humanity to be able to be helpful, to be able to be empathetic, to be able to do something for others as well as ourselves. And if if this shuts down. So we don't know what to believe or not believe, you know, then we end up very isolated and unable to intervene, to help, to do anything, to be useful. And I think that is, across the board, pretty awful. My, my interest is not in photography. My interest is in making the world a better place.

NOEL: Fred Ritchin. Author of The Synthetic Eye. Hady Mawajdeh produced today’s show. Amina al-Sadi edited. Patrick Boyd and Rob Byers engineered. Laura Bullard fact-checked. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.