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Title: Using Deepfakes to Hack the Unconscious Mind

**Authors:** Sean Hughes[[1]](#footnote-2)\*, Ohad Fried2, Melissa Ferguson3, David Yao4, Ciaran Hughes5, Rian Hughes6, & Ian Hussey1

Conventional wisdom tells us that “seeing is believing”. Yet thanks to recent advances in artificial intelligence this may no longer be the case. A branch of machine learning known as ‘deep neural networks’ has made it increasingly easy to take a person’s likeness (whether their face, voice, or writing style), feed that data to a computer algorithm, and have it generate a synthetic copy. The results are equal parts impressive and frightening: a digital doppelganger which can convince others that what they’re seeing, reading, or hearing is fact rather than fiction. Although mainly used to mimic real individuals, this technology can also be used to generate images of people who do not exist [ref], synthetic voices that belong to no-one [ref], and synthetic text that sounds human-authored [ref]. Content generated or manipulated in this way is collectively known as ‘synthetic media’.

Synthetic media is rapidly evolving: it’s becoming highly realistic, easier to produce, and thanks to the Internet, can be distributed and shared on a mass scale. One recent report suggests that the number of ‘Deepfakes’ (a subcategory of synthetic media) is doubling online every six months [ref]. What once took a small fortune and a Hollywood special-effects department can now be achieved using only a computer or smartphone.

The technology behind synthetic media can be deployed for both good or ill. Some are using it to generate believable voices and images for those who have lost their own through traumatic injury or cancer [ref], or to allow celebrities such as David Beckham to deliver public health messages about malaria in nine different languages [ref]. Museums are using it to bring the dead back to life (at the Salvador Dalí Museum visitors can interact with a synthetic Dalí to learn about his art [ref]), while combining it with natural-language learning could one day lead to smart digital assistants capable of truly natural interactions [ref]. Synthetic media can also be used as a digital veil to swap the faces and voices of witnesses or confidential sources during court proceedings [ref], and is already helping sexual assault victims and marginalized groups share their experiences in film and documentaries [ref]. Voice skins can enable women and children, often subject to internet bullying, to control when and how their gender and age is shared with others, while members of the trans community can use it to more accurately reflect their identity when interacting online [ref].

Nevertheless, this technology is also ripe for abuse. Deepfaking has quickly become a tool of harassment against activists [ref], and is a growing concern for those in the entertainment, business, and political sectors [ref]. The ability to control a person’s voice or appearance opens companies to new levels of identity theft, impersonation, and financial harm [ref]. In one high-profile case, hackers Deepfaked a CEO’s voice and used it to trick an employee into initiating a six-figure wire transfer [ref]. The rich and famous, whose data is widely available online, also represent an easy target. The voices of male celebrities are being synthetically copied and digitally distributed [ref] while their female counterparts are being non-consensually grafted into pornographic scenes so realistic that only they know its fake [ref]. Elsewhere, politicians are being digitally manipulated into endorsing controversial positions [ref], while worry grows that a well-timed video in the days prior to an election could have them ‘confess’ to bribery or sexual assault, political disinformation that distorts democratic discourse and election outcomes [ref].

The dark side of synthetic media goes even further. Deepfakes have sparked a new disinformation frontier where malicious actors are using the technology to pose as journalists, analysts, or consultants [ref]. These fake identities are legitimized through connections to genuine professionals on LinkedIn [ref], and used to manipulate mainstream news outlets into publishing content for political or personal gain [ref]. Elsewhere, intelligence services and think-tanks warn that Deepfakes represent a growing cybersecurity threat, a tool that state-sponsored actors, political groups, and lone individuals could use to trigger social unrest, fuel diplomatic tensions, and undermine public safety [ref]. This technology can be used to distract the public, hijack narratives, and waste opponents’ time and resources by forcing them to fight lies and slander [ref]. Given the speed with which information now proliferates and how quickly individuals, systems, and governments react, these digital lies could be half-way around the world before the truth gets its boots on. And the consequences could be catastrophic.

One day soon it will be impossible to tell with the naked eye or ear if content is genuine or synthetic. Recognizing this inflection point, industry leaders and lawmakers are looking to two forms of protection. Politicians, in Europe and the USA, are advocating for legislation that regulates a technology they believe will further erode the public’s trust in media and push ideologically opposed groups deeper into their own subjective realities [ref]. At the same time, technology giants such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft are developing algorithms to detect Deepfakes, excise them from their platforms, and prevent their spread [ref]. Although legislative and technological stopgaps are undoubtedly necessary, they are also in a perpetual game of ‘cat-and-mouse’, with certain actors evolving new ways of evading detection, and others rapidly working to catch up. In such a world, no law or algorithm can guarantee that the public will always be protected from contact with malicious synthetic content [ref].

What is needed then, alongside legislation and technological fixes, is a greater focus on the human dimension. It’s imperative that we understand the impact of this new technology on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. With this in mind, we carried out seven pre-registered studies (*n* = XXX) that sought to answer the following questions. Can Deepfakes be used to manipulate our (unconscious) attitudes and intentions? How effective are they in doing so relative to authentic content? Are people aware of this new technology, and perhaps more importantly, can they detect when they are being exposed to it? Finally, does awareness of Deepfaking and the ability to detect when it is present immunize people from its influence?

To answer these questions, we created a set of videos where an unknown target (‘Chris’) disclosed personal information about himself. In one video he emitted positive self-statements while in another he emitted negative statements. One group of participants navigated to YouTube (where the videos were hosted), watch the positive or negative variant, and then completed measures of their self-reported attitudes, automatic attitudes, and behavioral intentions. Results indicate that genuine content strongly influenced people’s thoughts and feelings towards the target (see Fig X.) stats here.

A second group encountered a similar procedure but with one key difference: they watched a Deepfaked video. Computer graphical (CG) renderings of Chris’s face were created and then converted into photorealistic synthesized video using a trained Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). This allowed us to Deepfake the mouth motions of the target saying positive statements and then transplant these onto authentic clips of him saying negative statements and vice-versa. Deepfakes created in this way strongly influenced people’s (unconscious) attitudes and intentions towards the target (see Fig X.) stats here. In follow-up studies we created a second set of Deepfakes. Rather than graft mouth motions from one video to another, we now fabricated the content from scratch, so that the target emitted statements he had never previously said. Manipulating him in this way allowed us to take subtle control of the viewer’s perceptions, having some like the target and others despise him (see Fig X).

We then generalized these findings from one synthetic media type (videos) to another (audio). Audio recordings of the target were fed to a bidirectional text-to-speech (TTS) autoregressive neural network (see [ref]) in order to create a completely synthetic clone of the target’s voice. In several studies one group of participants listened to the clone saying the same statements as in the videos while another listened to genuine recordings. By synthetically cloning the target’s voice and manipulating what he said we once again controlled (automatic) attitudes and intentions towards him (see Fig X.) stats here.

Taken together, our findings show that Deepfakes can be used to bias what people think and feel. But how *effective* they are in doing so? Most - including our own - contain video or audio artefacts which represent ‘tell-tale’ signs of manipulation. It’s possible that these artefacts undermine the effectiveness of Deepfakes relative to authentic content. Yet in our studies this was never the case: Deepfakes were just as effective in altering attitudes and intentions as genuine content (see Fig X.) stats here.

We were also curious to know if people are aware that online content can be Deepfaked, and if they can detect when they have been exposed to it. Our findings were not encouraging: roughly half of those who took part in our studies had never heard of Deepfaking (XX%), and even after they were told what it entailed, many were unable to detect if the content they had just encountered was genuine or synthetic in nature (i.e., they were unable to make accurate or informed judgements about the authenticity of online content) stats here. That said, people who were previously aware of Deepfaking were XX times more likely to detect when they were exposed to a forgery relative to their unaware counterparts. stats here.

Finally, does an awareness of Deepfaking, or an ability to detect when it is present, confer any protection on the viewer? In our studies this was never the case: these individuals were just as likely to be manipulated by the Deepfake as those without awareness or who thought the Deepfaked video was genuine (see Fig. X). stats here. Even those who were both aware *and* who detected the Deepfake still fell prey to its influence.

In short, Deepfakes do not need to be undetectable or even perfectly convincing in order to psychologically impact the viewer. They can be used to manipulate attitudes and intentions just as effectively as authentic content. Many are unaware of this new technology, find it difficult to detect when they are being exposed to it, and neither awareness nor detection serves to protect individuals from its influence.

At present society is focusing on legislation to regulate as well as technology to detect Deepfakes. Our findings suggest that this will not be enough. We need to start studying the *psychology* of Deepfakes - and in particular – their capacity to exploit our cognitive biases, vulnerabilities, and limitations for maladaptive ends. Future work should identify those properties of the individual, situation, and/or content that increase the chances of Deepfakes being believed and spread versus detected and rejected. Others could examine if these lies root themselves quickly and deeply in our minds, and linger on as insinuation or by association long after efforts to debunk them have ended (as is the case with fake news; [ref]). If so, then approaches currently favored by tech companies, such as tagging Deepfaked videos with a warning, may be less effective than is currently assumed [ref]. Still others could examine if Deepfakes can be used to manipulate what we remember, either by trigger Mandela effects (i.e., false memories that never happened) or by altering memories of events that did [ref]. If they can then it is not only the present and future that can be manipulated but also the past.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of Deepfakes is their capacity to erode our belief in what is real and what can be trusted *in general*. Instead of questioning a single image, video, audio, or text this new technology may push us towards questioning *everything* we see and hear, thereby accelerating an already growing trend towards epistemic breakdown: an inability or reduced motivation to distinguish fact from fiction. This “reality apathy” [ref] is already being exploited by some to dismiss inconvenient or incriminating content as a fabrication (the so-called ‘liars’ dividend’ [ref]). Given that the human mind is built for belief [ref], we will need interventions that inoculate individuals against synthetic media attacks, and together with technology and legislation, a ‘shared immune system’ that safeguards our individual and collective belief in truth. Without such safeguards we may be moving towards a world where seeing is no longer believing, and where our individual and collective ability to agree on what’s true slowly disappears.

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Supplementary Materials:

Materials and Methods

Figures S1-S#

Tables S1-S#

Movies S1-S#

Audio Files S1-S#

External Databases S1-S#

References (*##-##*)

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