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Title: Using Deepfakes to Hack the Human 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 age old saying may no longer be the case. A new branch of machine learning, known as ‘deep neural networks’, has emerged and 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 be used to convince others that what they’re seeing, reading, or hearing is fact rather than fiction. Although mainly used to mimic real individuals, this technique can also be used to generate photographs of people who do not exist [ref], synthetic voices that belong to no-one [ref], and synthetic text that sounds human-authored [ref].

Synthetic media is becoming highly realistic, easier to produce, and according to a recent report, one subcategory known as ‘Deepfakes’, 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. Like any new technology it can be used 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 Deepfaked 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 transgender community can use it to more accurately reflect their identity when interacting online [ref].

Yet the technology is also ripe for abuse. Deepfakes have quickly become tools of harassment against activists [ref], and are 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 recently cloned a CEO’s voice and used it to trick an employee into initiating a six-figure wire transfer [ref]. Elsewhere, politicians have already been 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 rich and famous, whose data is widely available online, also represent an easy target. The voices of male celebrities are already being synthetically copied and digitally distributed [ref] while their female counterparts are being non-consensually inserted into pornographic scenes so realistic that only they know its fake [ref].

The dark side of synthetic media goes even further. Deepfakes are giving rise to a new ‘disinformation frontier’ where malicious actors are using the technology to create identities for themselves as journalists, analysts, and political consultants. These identities are akin to a “digital prosthesis”, worn by a real human and used for political or personal gain [ref]. These actors have sought to legitimize themselves by building connections with professional targets on LinkedIn [ref] and have already tricked dozens of main-stream news outlets into publishing their opinion pieces [ref]. Deepfakes have also been used to rewrite history (one such example involves President Nixon claiming that the Apollo 11 moon landing never happened [ref]), while intelligence services and think-tanks warn that they 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]. A convincing video of a world leader declaring the launch of a nuclear weapon or severe economic sanctions on a trading partner could incite violence, trigger stock-market volatility, and damage foreign relations. 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.

Soon it may be impossible to tell with the naked eye or ear whether a video or audio clip is authentic. Recognizing this inflection point, industry leaders and lawmakers are looking to two forms of protection. Politicians, both 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 even 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, namely, the *psychology* of Deepfakes. We need to understand how synthetic media comes to shape what people think, how they feel, and what they ultimately do. To illustrate, take a branch of psychology known as person perception. So far Deepfakes have been used to target prominent individuals such as Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Mark Zuckerberg [ref]. However, as the availability of this technology grows, and the online sharing of personal data continues, it will become increasingly easy to scrape anyone’s data, use it to generate a Deepfake, and have them act in ways that either enhance or destroy their reputation. This begs the question: how easily can a Deepfake shift our attitudes and intentions towards another person, especially one we’ve just met?

To answer this question we created a set of videos wherein an actor (‘Chris’) pretended to disclose personal information on his YouTube channel. In one video he emitted positive self-statements (e.g., “*When I was in college I helped my friend study for his final exam*”) while in another he emitted negative statements (e.g., “*I won’t give up my seat on a bus if I see a heavily pregnant woman standing. It’s not my problem if she needs it more than me*”). A first group of participants were asked to navigate to YouTube (where the videos were hosted), watch either the positive or negative variant, and then provide measures of their self-reported attitudes, automatic attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards Chris. Results indicated that genuine videos strongly biased people’s initial impressions of the target (see Fig X.): stats here.

A second group encountered the same procedure but with one key difference: they watched a Deepfaked video of Chris. This video was generated by feeding authentic footage of the actor to a deep neural network and having it output a synthetic copy. These videos digitally manipulated Chris into emitting the same statements as in the genuine footage (for examples of the videos see link). We found that a single exposure to one of these Deepfakes strongly biased how the target was perceived, and that by digitally controlling his actions, we could influence how much he was either liked or despised (see Fig X.): stats here. These findings replicated when a different algorithmic process was used to generate the videos and also generalized from one synthetic media type (videos) to another (audio). That is, in a separate set of studies, we fed audio recordings of the actor to a deep neural network and had it create a completely synthetic clone of his voice. One group listened to the clone saying the same statements as in the videos while another listened to genuine recordings of the actor. Synthetically cloning the target’s voice and manipulating what he said allowed us to control (automatic) attitudes and intentions towards the target (see Fig X.): stats here.

Demonstrating that Deepfakes influence person perception is an important first step. Nevertheless, many questions remain. For instance, how effective are Deepfakes in changing what we think and feel? Most - including our own - contain minor video or audio artefacts which, to a discerning eye, represent ‘tell-tale’ signs of manipulation. It’s possible that these artefacts undermine the believability and thus validity of synthetic media as an information source. If so, then we would expect Deepfakes to bias people to a lesser extent than authentic content. Yet comparing the meta-analytic effects of Deepfakes to those produced by the authentic videos revealed that the former were just as effective in shifting attitudes and intentions as the latter (see Fig X.) stats here. It seems that Deepfakes don’t have to be perfect in order to hack the human mind and do so in ways that are comparable to authentic media sources.

We were also interested in ‘Deepfake detection’ in humans. When synthetic media is used for malicious purposes the recipient is exposed to a forgery masquerading as something genuine. If people can detect when they are being exposed to such content they can prevent it from influencing their decision making. Unfortunately, when we explained the concept of a Deepfake to participants and informed them that they had just encountered one during the study, only a small fraction (X%) of those who were exposed to the Deepfake recognized it for what it was. The vast majority (X%) believed that what they had encountered was an authentic recording. Perhaps more worryingly, when we told participants in the genuine content group that the videos or audio were Deepfakes, many agreed (X%). It seems that in a world where Deepfakes exist, the mere suggestion that content is fake is enough to make certain people question the validity of what they see or hear [ref].

Finally, we wanted to know if ‘Deepfake detection’ serves to protect the individual from its influence. If one recognizes that the information they are being exposed to has been intentionally manipulated in order to influence them, then the recipient should reject that content or at least attempt to minimize its control. Surprisingly, however, we found that this was not the case: those who detected that the video or audio clip was a Deepfake were just as likely to be manipulated into liking or disliking Chris as those who failed to do so (see Fig. X; stats here).

Taken together, it seems that a single (brief) exposure to a Deepfake can alter how people think and feel about others; that it impacts them in a similar way to genuine content; that most people are unaware they are being exposed to a synthetic forgery; and that Deepfakes do not need to be undetectable or even perfectly convincing in order to hack the human mind.

So far society has focused on legislation to regulate, and technological solutions to detect and filter out Deepfakes. This is not enough. We need to start studying the psychology of Deepfakes - and in particular - the capacity of this new technology 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 more traditional forms of 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 now 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 is up for change 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. 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 need to start developing interventions that inoculate individuals against synthetic media attacks, and together with technology and legislation, create 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#

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1. Department of Experimental Clinical and Health Psychology, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium. 2 Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel. 3 Department of Psychology, Yale University, USA. 4 Department of Computer Science, Stanford University, USA. 5 Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab), USA. 6 Rudolf Peierls Centre for Theoretical Physics, Oxford University, UK.

   \***Corresponding author. Email: sean.hughes@ugent.be (S.H.)** [↑](#footnote-ref-2)