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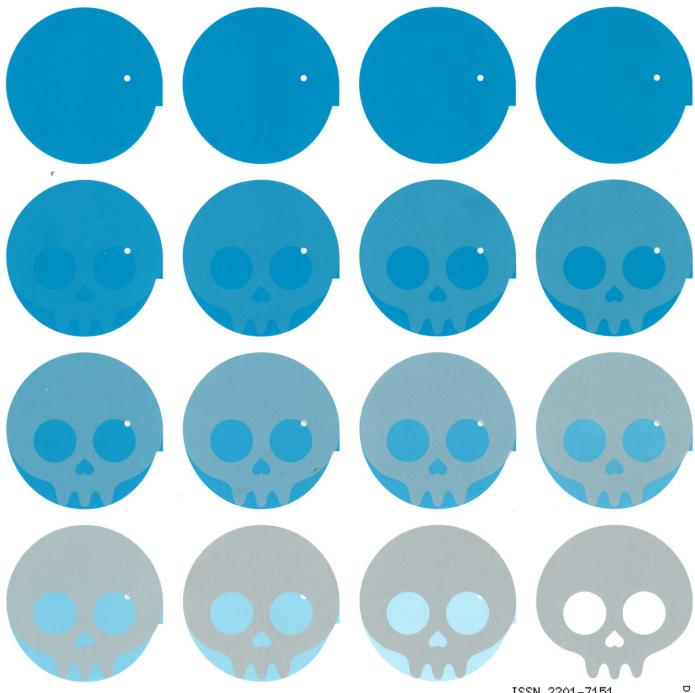
DBC PIERRE
Hidden truths

OLIVER BURKEMAN
The truth hurts

THE SHIFTING SEAT
OF TRUTH

By Mariana Alessandri

Zombie people, by Branko Devic

In 2012, a fake video of an eagle carrying away a baby went viral. In 2021, it was Tom Cruise playing the guitar on TikTok. We're talking epistemology now in critical thinking class, which I tell students is the philosophy that concerns what we know and how. I demonstrate by asking how they know what day they were born. Their first answer is a birth certificate, but when I bring up fake IDs, they try again. "Because my mum told me," is met with "and Santa Claus?" "No pic, didn't happen," chirps a back-row student. Quickly, someone suggests it could be photoshopped. "What about video?" another asks. If it's captured on camera, doesn't that prove it?

'Synthetic media' refers to what comes out when a programmer 'teaches' a computer put famous faces on not-so-famous bodies. These are deepfakes, and in 2020, Facebook banned them. Except they didn't, because what they banned was any video that both: a) intends to mislead users into thinking that someone said or did things they did not, and b) is a product of AI but appears to be authentic. Most deepfakes circulating today, including DeepTomCruise, are not intended to deceive the viewer. They're meant to entertain us.

'Deepfake' was originally the name of a Reddit user who created what journalist Samantha Cole calls "fictional footage" of celebrity pornography in 2017. Cole repeatedly points out that AI-generated porn fails to ask for consent. If plagiarism names the act of taking someone's idea and presenting it as your own, what do you call taking a real woman's face and making it writhe and moan? "To most deepfakers," Cole writes, "these women are simply the sum of interchangeable body parts". Sounds like a problem.

Corporations like Facebook, however, are more worried about lawsuits than ethics. What if people start believing that Scarlett Johansson made a sex tape, or that a politician said things they didn't say? Others worry about truth: what happens when people start calling "deepfake" on any video they don't like? Are we headed toward a world where seeing is no longer believing?

Few philosophers ever thought it was a good idea to trust your eyes. Plato warned us against it, comparing much of what we see to shadows on the wall of a cave. Descartes pointed out that our eyes would mislead us into thinking sticks bend in water or that the Sun is as big as the circle I make with my thumb and forefinger (Lucretius the Epicurean got ridiculed for believing just this). Most philosophers think reason can help us make sense of what we see – if only we'd use it. It might even lead us to truth.
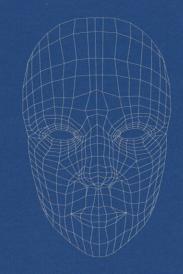
In 1984, social critic Neil Postman published a genealogy of truth in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Once upon a time in the USA, he wrote, truth lived in the spoken word. The oral tradition made it conceivable that the Dunkers, an 18th century Baptist denomination, would refuse to write down their beliefs lest they become dogma. In those days, you could trust (or distrust) a person's word, because truth (and falsehood) lived in spoken words.

The seat of truth shifted, Postman explains, when writing became the dominant medium of American society. The gentleman's agreement collapsed when truth moved onto the page; now you'd need a signature in addition to your word. The atmosphere of the Age of Exposition, was, well, wordy. The 19th century was filled with lengthy books and treatises, and public discourse was, as Postman put it, serious, coherent, and rational. And just like some fish grow to fit the size of their tank, the American mind expanded to accommodate the demands

of written culture. If you were an average American in 1859, you would have been able to follow a seven-hour debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. You would have been able to focus on complex ideas and pay attention to speeches without visual aids. Your mind would have been sharp enough to ask epistemological questions and patient enough to seek the answers.

A student recently asked me why Hegel used so many words. TikTok, Instagram, Twitter – the dominant media of the 21st century – aren't shaping our minds in quite the same way as the printing press did. Unlike Hegel's *Phenomenology*, social media suggests that you don't need many (or even any) words to get a point across. A short video, photo, or one-liner is today considered sufficient to convey any idea. We live in the Age of the Meme, and then you factor in Blinkist and TedTalks, you've got a society that treats books like summaries padded out with extra words.

What intellectual heft, Postman would ask, can you convey using Twitter? What complexity, what nuance,

what relevance? TikTok works well for DeepTomCruise; not for philosophical embroidery. Youtube is ideal for decluttering videos, not discussions about deepfakes. Following Postman's logic, the minds grown in this era will be distractable, fragmented, and simple. Shrunken.

It's not our fault. Postman blames the television, which he describes as the marriage between the telegraph

(the first Twitter) and the photograph (which, worth a thousand words a pop, drove Hegel's stock way down). Postman worried that photos tempt us into what Socrates called ignorance: thinking you know something when you don't. Photos lack context, they don't tell the whole story; but we forget that. Instead, we say, "seeing is believing", and call ourselves visual learners. The television era replaced truth with 'credibility'. If a video looks real, why doubt it? When immediate sense perception is all we have – when we abandon Hegel and every other long-winded philosopher who insists on context and begs us not to abandon reason – we leave ourselves vulnerable to deepfakes.

If the ideas produced during television's heyday – the Age of Show Business – were irrelevant, impotent, and incoherent, what about our Age of Distraction? How shall we characterise the crumbs that pass for ideas on social media? What mind, starving for intellectual rigour but fed headline after headline, has muscle enough to ask whether Tom Cruise could really have become a professional guitarist

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overnight? After all, I took up a new hobby during quarantine.

The problem isn't just that our minds are fallow, unable to corroborate evidence. For Postman, the rot lies in the fact that we'd rather do just about anything else. The Age of Show Business cancelled public discourse concerning religion, politics, and education by running them under lights, camera, and action. Now, Postman concludes, entertainment is the expected end of all discourse. He pines for a public forum in which people gather to think about truth, consent, and other 'boring' topics. The Twitterverse, peddling novelty, outrage, and celebrity, will not do.

A modern-day Postman wouldn't worry about people calling "deepfake" on real videos. He'd bemoan the fact that we don't care enough to ask anything before refreshing the page. Those of us who grew up on disinformation, or "information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing", wouldn't know how to spot truth. Every year it gets easier to get my students to doubt their birthdays. But since they've also been "amused into indifference", they just don't care that much. It's irrelevant (to everyone but Facebook's legal department) that deepfakes admit they're fake. When the TikTok handle reads DeepTomCruise and people still wonder if it's really Tom Cruise, you can know we're way past caring. The battle for truth in media was already lost by 1984; Postman was only hoping that someone would care.

We turned on the TV in the '80s for the same reason we open apps in 2021: to be distracted and amused – to not think critically – so naturally it has worked. Postman would say that today's answer to "is this a deepfake?" is neither yes nor no. It's, "Who cares? What's next?" Tom Cruise may just as well have become a guitar aficionado

today because tomorrow Alec Baldwin will kill someone by mistake.

The answer isn't to make our eyes sharper, in part because the technology will outstrip us. If we're really considering asking reason to take us back after partying hard for two decades and wrecking our thinking faculty, we'll need to speak reason's language: coherence, seriousness, relevance. We'll need to stop shifting our attention every thirty seconds. We'll need to admit that a Google search is not research and that multitasking splinters our brains. We'll need to resist the moving walkway of TedTalks and Blinkist and agree to suffer Hegel cover to cover. We'll need to create a public domain, offline, in which we can talk about snoozers like consent. If we really want to stop amusing ourselves to death, we'll need to stop ingesting flavour-blasted, idea-like morsels, and start choking down unsalted philosophical vegetables until we are nourished enough to, as Søren Kierkegaard put it, "think a thought whole". ◼

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