

Impact of Deepfakes, Ambivalent Identities and the Question of Privacy in a Posthuman World: An Overview

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Abstract: Contemporary transnational life is increasingly shaped by technological transgressions into social, political, and cultural boundaries. While digital devices offer new forms of identity and connectivity, they also disfigure social experience and intrude upon personal privacy by manipulating human subjectivity. This paper examines how visual media, both consciously and unconsciously, normalize the panoptic gaze effected through modern technology, with a specific focus on deepfake technology. Using the example of a viral deepfake video featuring Mollywood superstars in a scene from *The Godfather* (1972), the author illustrates how public fascination with entertainment and aesthetics often overshadows serious ethical concerns. The paper situates these concerns within a post humanist framework, which questions anthropocentrism and the primacy of human values in the face of overwhelming technological change.

Drawing on theories of identity from Stuart Hall and others, the paper argues that identity has become fluid, multilocal, and hybrid, with 'digital identity' as its newest formation. Without regulatory measures, deepfakes can worsen the post-truth crisis, erode trust in media and promote factual relativism. The paper also mentions Ethical AI and the R.E.A.L. Framework as potential countermeasures, while questioning their effectiveness. Ultimately, the paper calls for reflection on where humanity is heading when extension into technology threatens the very essence of being human.

Key Words: deepfake, posthumanism, digital identity, globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION:

I would like to initiate the discussion by mentioning the deep fake video where Mollywood superstars outshined the iconic scene from Coppola's gangster classic *The Godfather* (1972), and the uproar created within no time. Many expressed their wish to reimagine the full version of the movie with actors of their own interest. Even when the youth behind this viral clip has disclosed that his only intention was to make people aware of deepfake technology and the caution to be taken while using AI tools, we, the fans are being caught up by the captivating performances and the aesthetic potential it offers for entertainment. This kind of digital manipulation, also known as 'deepfake technology' which can create utterly convincing and realistic images using techniques from machine learning and AI, which is increasingly accessible to the common men in this century is of course a potential threat to human privacy. Keeping aside the aspect of entertainment and creativity, where can we place AI generated fake videos in this posthuman cite? The problem of hacking lurks the whole scenario and the question of morality, idea of consent, privacy and identity - all get challenged in this context. Today's hype over artificial intelligence is a breakthrough, for sure; but without some regulatory measures, this could lead us to a dystopian realm, where we are exposed to 'realistic fake news', 'realistic fake images', 'realistic fake persona'- too ironic. The paper will explore the major concerns raised by the technique as well as the extent to which society, privacy and identity of people will be manipulated in this posthuman era.

2. POST HUMANISM AND GLOBALIZATION

The notion of posthumanism or the idea of ‘posthuman’ is an offshoot of post modernism and post structuralism, which invariably denotes the end of ‘humanism’, or the subversion of the assumptions ensembled in humanism. The assertion of humans as the center, or the master faith in the capabilities of man, which started with Renaissance and Enlightenment has become an area of conflict in this 21st century, and found entry in different disciplines like anthropology, psychology, literary theory and so on. The privilege and priority given to man, and the idea of search for moral and ethical values through human means have become not only a debased form of belief, but also gave rise to more theoretical and philosophical concerns and discussions. In a gist, we can call ‘posthumanism’ as a philosophical framework, that came out with revolutionary ideas after 1990, that goes beyond our existing thought and concepts regarding man and questions the primacy of the humans.

With a divergence from the idea of anthropocentrism, also exhibiting an involuntary denial of man in preference to machines, ‘posthumanism’ is a term that does not yield to any set definitions. Yet, to quote Shambu R,

Posthumanism refers both to an ontological condition in which human beings will live genetically reengineered lives aided by prosthetic enhancements that help them overcome their biological limitations, and a body of thought that analyzes to what extent human beings can lay claim to a pure and unsullied form of “humaneness” and how the so-called human values are undergoing attribution in the face of overwhelming technological changes. (88)

When we look at the second dimension cited here, it is a special faculty of humans to use technology to overcome difficulties. But a question persists. When we push ourselves beyond the anthropocentric formalities to embrace the machines, where can we draw a boundary? The present scenario of industrial explosion and techno-culture has of course, damaged the balance between man and machine resulting in the dominance of the latter. The science of robotics, AI, Microelectronics, Robots with human attributes - all provide a posthuman dimension to the world, by deconstructing and diminishing the very notion of ‘being’ which in turn emphasize the notion of ‘becoming’.

Globalization, characterized by “the intensification of worldwide social relations” (Giddens 285) has shrunk the concepts of time and space to a great extent. Though the term ‘globalization’ primarily imparts an economic perspective, it suggests the integration of the world where “more people become more closely connected across larger distances and grow more aware of their connections as well” (Lechner 1). The innumerable flows across borders as suggested by Appadurai through his ‘five scapes’ resulted in the formation of hybrid cultural forms and transnational lives. This present globality, which is highly dependent on the technological advancements, provides a virtual space where each human being is given the false promise of enjoying a personal, subjective space.

3. ANALYSIS

As digital tangent has become an unavoidable part of today’s ecology, and as we are increasingly placed on a virtual space, the cult of aliteracy has become the norm of the day. The visual, verbal and textual signifiers on the screen thoroughly fascinate our subjectivities and prompt us to seek an inner validation of the self. As a result, cyber space has now become a platform of self-revelation and communication, where our Narcissistic urges are being satiated. In such a ‘deceptive milieu’, where each one is a celebrity, or getting ideologically conditioned within the comfort zone of social media echo chambers, the question of human subjectivity needs to be validated and negotiated, which is steadfastly denied by Artificial Intelligence.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a rapidly evolving field of computer science that aims at creating machines that can perform tasks which usually require human intelligence. The increased use of AI in various fields has provided it an indispensable status in the realm of technology. Many popular applications of AI like facial and speech recognition, natural language processing, personalized shopping, smart surveillance and manifold game applications – all have been incorporated so easily with today’s competitive world. We can refer it as a quest to understand and contest with the cognitive abilities of living beings, especially that of the humans. As it has intruded into various disciplines like mathematics, neuroscience and so on, it has the potential to transform our society and economy. But at the same time, we cannot close our eyes towards the social, ethical and moral challenges posed by it.

Recent advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have led to rapid developments in audio, video, and image manipulation techniques. Here, we can pause a while to discuss the deepfake technology, and the uproar created by the deepfake video that casts Bollywood superstars, Mammootty, Mohanlal and Fahad Faasil in the iconic scene from the masterpiece Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972). The scene is vital to the movie, where

Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) meets Moe Green (Alex Rocco) in San Francisco to buy the latter's stake in the casinos run by the Corleone family. This deepfake video which was uploaded on the internet on 23rd June 2023 by one named 'vavvalmanushyan', is strangely realistic and simply iconic. The actors in the scene present themselves in their younger persona, where the lip sync, facial expression, accent all in coordination with the Hollywood classic, that within no time, gone viral and demand for the full version of the movie with the Mollywood actors began to echo the whole scenario. But at the same time, it is interesting to note the comment made by the content creator of this viral video. To quote his response,

I am not proud of making 'The Godfather' video. I had not expected it to go this viral. My only objective was to generate awareness about this technology, while also telling people to be careful while handling the tool. At least some of you would have understood this is a mediocre video. I could have created a better product by increasing the processing depth, but I made this mediocre video on purpose. The deepfake technology is among the many AI applications available on the web. This technology is not even new. It's five years old, though people are becoming more aware of it now. (*onmanorama*)

He also added that even though he was happy at its initial response, later on he became paranoid at people's curiosity and had to deal with sleepless nights. He was also determined not to create deepfake videos any more.

As the video featured veteran actors from the Malayalam film industry (since public figures are often marked as private property owned by all), and as the content familiar and favorite of all, the audience was caught by amusement, curiosity which resulted a frenzy over the video. Leaving beside the exciting and enjoyable part, the whole incident poses a multitude of questions. We can contextualize our own image being manipulated in an uncannily realistic way, or ourselves occupying the center of a false narrative. It could be intentional or unintentional, but in either way the crisis will have farfetched consequences. Is it a kind of misuse? Is it an intrusion into one's life? Is it a kind of manipulation? Does it challenge individual privacy? How safe are we in this digital era? How can we define the concept of identity at the time of digital revolution? How can we safeguard ourselves? How can we define the privilege and priority attributed to man in this context? To quote:

Creating a false narrative using deepfakes is dangerous and can cause harm, intentional and unintentional, to individuals and society at large. Deepfakes could worsen the global post-truth crisis as they are not just fake but are so realistic that they betray our most innate senses of sight and sound. Putting words into someone else's mouth, swapping someone's face with another, creating synthetic images and digital puppets of public personas to systematize deceit are ethically questionable actions and should be held responsible for the potential harm to individuals and institutions. (Jaiman)

Here the question of privacy looms at large. The earlier connotation of term, i.e to sit within closed rooms, ruminating and reflecting upon things, far from the aggression of others, is outdated in this modern digital era. Now, 'privacy' has become an inquisitive concern regarding the way in which we can safeguard our 'digital identities' and personal spaces from prying eyes. Digital privacy denotes the way in which we can have control over our data. The present technocentric world permeates every aspect of our lives without our knowledge through gadgets like mobiles, security cameras, Amazon Echo, Google Home and the like, so that it can capture our conversations, trace locations, record audio and video, suggesting their unfettered access to our personal lives which can ultimately lead to data transfer and data manipulation. Whatever digital information we share, contribute in building up an elaborate profile of ours, which can be manipulated, purchased and exploited. Our thoughts, preferences, inclinations, interests and even emotions can be manipulated. Even though man is considered to be a social animal, privacy is an essential component for our survival and if we happen to be under constant surveillance, it is natural that we become conscious, and we restrict ourselves from expressing freely. In other words, we lose our freedom and identity. But, in this digital era, how can we define the concept of 'identity'?

From static notions of identity, we have come a long way now to a kind of "bilocal or multilocality in identity" (Clifford 247). Stuart Hall also hints at its complexity and explains 'identity' as a 'production,' which is never complete. We also have come across another identity outfit provided through consumerism and higher consumption patterns. As concepts like 'space' and 'identity' became more fluid in the transnational world and as people became increasingly deterritorialized, they seem to know that their identities "are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 402). So, it has achieved a hybridized form where a constant negotiation is done. Stuart Hall also suggests the idea of a 'translated identity' in the age of globalization. He explains 'translated identities' as follows:

Those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people

who have been dispersed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bear upon them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. ("The Questions" 310)

'Digital identity' is the new addition in this field of identity web, so to say. It can be defined as "a one-to-one relationship between a human and their digital presence. A digital presence can consist of multiple accounts, credentials, and entitlements associated with an individual" (*Beyondtrust*). In this context, the idea of digital privacy also needs to be discussed. To quote:

Digital privacy refers to the desire and/or right to have one's identity, and sensitive data related to one's identity, concealed and only authorized to access or know by those authorized by the identity. Data privacy and digital privacy protections are important for protecting identities. Many regulations, such as EU GDPR, HIPAA, etc. have explicit mandates around how data is collected, transmitted, and handled to protect identities and privacy. (*Beyondtrust*)

Yet, the question is, to what extent we are safe in the digital era. Recent advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have led to rapid developments in audio, video, and image manipulation techniques. Coming back to the technology of deepfakes, if unchecked, it can aggravate the global post-truth crisis. Face and body swapping, voice swapping, face morphing, full body puppetry as in porn videos or images without our consent is highly risky and damaging, to the individual as well as to the society. To quote:

Although deepfakes could be used in positive ways, such as in art, expression, accessibility, and business, it has mainly been weaponized for malicious purposes. Deepfakes can harm individuals, businesses, society, and democracy, and can accelerate the already declining trust in the media. Such absolute erosion of trust will promote a culture of factual relativism, unravelling the increasingly strained fabric of democracy and civil society. Additionally, deepfakes can enable the least democratic and authoritarian leaders to thrive as they can leverage the 'liar's dividend', where any inconvenient truth is quickly discounted as 'fake news' (Jaiman)

4. CONCLUSION

Extension of human beings can be embraced, only to a certain extent. Otherwise, what is the essence of humanity? So, if unchecked, these advanced technologies will have an adverse effect on social, political, economic and religious scenario. Here, we can focus on Ethical AI, a method where we can expect safe and responsible AI use. To quote,

Ethical AI is artificial intelligence that adheres to well-defined ethical guidelines regarding fundamental values, including such things as individual rights, privacy, non-discrimination, and non-manipulation. Ethical AI places fundamental importance on ethical considerations in determining legitimate and illegitimate uses of AI. Organizations that apply ethical AI have clearly stated policies and well-defined review processes to ensure adherence to these guidelines. (*C3.ai*)

I would also like to mention the R.E.A.L Framework to counter or manage deepfake risks suggested by J. Kietzmann et. al. According to them, there are four options,

Record: We would need evidence to expose the DF. Technology already exists to track and 'life log' a person's whereabouts in terms of location, communication and activities. Such life log data could be stored and encrypted to use when needed

Expose: Technology are being developed to detect and classify DFs by identifying issues with image resolution, scaling etc.

Advocate: Very little legal frameworks exist but this is changing. (Advocate legal protection)

Leverage: One way to counter DFs for individuals and organizations is to strengthen trust in their content and presence

But even if such options are there, we need to think about the extent to which these methods are effective. To where humanity is heading to is a question that we need ruminate as a serious subject.

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