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EDITORIAL

Ready or not, here I come. How synthetic media challenge epistemic institutions

Editorial to the Special Issue

Bereit oder nicht, hier komme ich. Wie synthetische Medien epistemische Institutionen herausfordern.

Editorial zum Sonderheft

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Abstract: This editorial examines how synthetic media and deepfakes unsettle the epistemic foundations of contemporary public communication. We outline how rapidly advancing generative technologies erode long-standing assumptions about the authenticity of visual and audiovisual content and challenge the institutional capacities of journalism, science, politics, and the arts to maintain credibility and public trust. The contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate these dynamics across different national contexts and communicative domains, highlighting how synthetic media transform political campaigning, newsroom practices, audience cognition and strategies of verification. The resulting picture is one of accelerating technological complexity confronting comparatively slow-moving epistemic institutions. We therefore argue for a coordinated, interdisciplinary research agenda that addresses challenges in media reception and effects, political communication, journalism studies, visual communication, media education, media ethics, media law, and communication history. Such an agenda is essential for safeguarding the integrity of shared knowledge in an increasingly synthetic information environment.

Keywords: Synthetic media, deepfake, journalism, detection, truth, artificial intelligence, trust

Zusammenfassung: Dieser einführende Beitrag untersucht, wie synthetische Medien und Deepfakes die epistemischen Grundlagen zeitgenössischer öffentlicher Kommunikation destabilisieren. Wir zeigen, wie schnell voranschreitende generative Technologien etablierte Annahmen über die Authentizität visueller und audiovisueller Inhalte untergraben und die institutionellen Fähigkeiten von Journalismus, Wissenschaft, Politik und Kunst, Glaubwürdigkeit und Vertrauen herzustellen, herausfordern. Die Beiträge des Special Issues illustrieren diese Dynamiken in unterschiedlichen nationalen Kontexten und Kommunikationsdomänen und verdeutlichen, wie synthetische Medien politische Kampagnen, redaktionelle Arbeitsprozesse, kognitive Rezeptionsmuster und Verifikationsstrategien verändern. Insgesamt ergibt sich das Bild einer technologischen Beschleunigung, die auf epistemische Institutionen trifft, deren Anpassungsfähigkeit vergleichsweise langsam bleibt. Wir plädieren daher für ein koordiniertes, interdisziplinäres Forschungsprogramm, das zentrale Heraus-

forderungen in Medienwirkungsforschung, politischer Kommunikation, Journalismusforschung, visueller Kommunikation, Medienpädagogik, Medienethik, Medienrecht und Kommunikationsgeschichte adressiert. Ein solches Programm ist entscheidend, um die Integrität gemeinsamen Wissens in zunehmend synthetischen Informationsumgebungen zu sichern.

Schlagwörter: Synthetische Medien, Deepfake, Journalismus, Erkennung, Wahrheit, Künstliche Intelligenz, Vertrauen

1. Introduction

The term "deepfake" was first coined in 2017 by a Reddit user in a forum dedicated to discussing the creation of pornographic content (Somers, 2020). It was meant to denote the use of deep-learning technology to create fake depictions of real human beings (Citron & Chesney, 2019). Today, the less ominous term "synthetic media" is commonly applied to AI-generated visual, auditory or audiovisual media (Brady & Meyer-Resende, 2020). While often used interchangeably in public discourse, it could be argued that deepfakes constitute a subtype of synthetic media, as deepfakes depict real individuals in artificially generated contexts. That is what characterizes the potentially deceptive nature of deepfakes and what motivates their close association with "fake news" or disinformation (Altuncu et al., 2022; Dan et al., 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2025; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023).

Instances of synthetic media that, instead, do not depict actual human beings are rarely considered problematic. Synthetic media can be used for utterly benign purposes, such as the arts and entertainment. In fact, even deepfakes, under specific circumstances, can be employed for constructive purposes, such as education, news, or in the creative industries (Bendahan Bitton et al., 2025). Yet, both in public discourse and in extant research on deepfakes, concerns about their deceptive potential dominate (Bendahan Bitton et al., 2025; Godulla et al., 2021).

In 2021, the authors published a systematic literature review in *Studies in Communication and Media,* highlighting that research on deepfakes, at the time, was (1) dominated by legal studies and computer science, and (2) overwhelmingly focused on risk mitigation (necessary amendments to legal frameworks and technological approaches to deepfake detection). In the social sciences, a range of studies explore user abilities to detect deepfakes and the impact of deepfake encounters on user attitudes (Bray et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2023; Thaw et al., 2020). Numerous studies find that users struggle to accurately distinguish real from deepfake pictures and videos, even when supported by detection software (for a review, see Somoray et al., 2025; see also Holmes et al, 2025 and Vief et al., 2025, both in this issue).

The latter is a noteworthy finding given the recency of the deepfake or synthetic media technology and its rapid proliferation across society. Within less than a decade since its inception, the average human will no longer be capable of reliably distinguishing a real depiction of actual events from a computer-generated facsimile. We argue that the social and cultural impact of this development is still ill-understood. Most extant research focuses on individuals struggling to recognize specific instances of deepfakes. The wider implication of this failure, however,

affects the epistemic institutional order buttressing modern society. Since the invention of daguerreotype in 1839, humans have been conditioned to trust in the accuracy of photographic depictions of reality (Hoy, 2006). Journalism fundamentally relies on visual and audiovisual media to accurately, reliably and engagingly convey information (Noelle-Neumann, 2000).

Several studies, consequently, find that encounters with deepfakes induce a deep sense of uncertainty in audiences and shake trust in journalism – even bolstering media cynical attitudes (Dobber et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2024; Hoffmann et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2021; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). The term "liar's dividend" denotes a tactic of discounting unflattering or inconvenient visual and audiovisual depictions as AI-generated (Farid, 2025). In an environment of generalized epistemic uncertainty, any claim to reality can be challenged. Journalism struggles to implement technologies or processes to reliably verify visual and audiovisual digital content. While some studies examine the adoption of artificial intelligence in journalism (Arguedas & Simon, 2023; Graßl et al., 2022; Simon, 2024), and even potential journalistic applications of deepfake technology (Davis & Attard, 2025, in this issue; Raemy et al., 2025), few explore how the rapid proliferation of synthetic media and the ensuing epistemic shock challenge the institutional role of journalism in society.

Beyond journalism, recent examples of fraudulent uses of AI in academic publishing (Hong, 2025) indicate the challenge of generative AI to science. Countless journals now publish AI-generated slop (Naddaf, 2025). Synthetic media, specifically, render established research methods less reliable (Gu et al., 2022). It could even be argued that the epistemic function of the arts is challenged by synthetic media as AI dissolves any boundaries of realistic artistic expression. In short, epistemic institutions face a novel and profound challenge posed by synthetic media and deepfakes. Time plays a key role here, as the tremendous pace of proliferation of the technology is fundamentally at odds with the slow pace of institutional reform and adaptation. New norms of establishing and delineating truth in the absence of reliance on audiovisual representations will likely take decades to evolve.

In many ways, AI-based technologies such as synthetic media and deepfakes build on and contribute to trends that are associated with social media: Journalism no longer maintains its gatekeeping role (Godulla & Wolf, 2024) but rather has accurately been characterized as gatewatching (Bruns, 2009). Social media shakes trust in established institutions – by increasing transparency to a frequently uncomfortable degree, by giving voice to critics, challengers and outsiders, by providing a platform to those challenging authority (Donges et al., 2024; Gurri, 2018; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). Science is also subject to these challenges, as, for example, social media played a key role in questioning and undermining scientists' epistemic authority during the Covid-19 pandemic (cf., Park et al., 2022; Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020).

Likely, those dissatisfied with the status quo and critical of established (epistemic) institutions will be especially drawn to using synthetic media to advance their interests (e.g., Geise et al., 2025, in this issue). Already, deepfakes are used to illustrate critiques that *feel* true to those involved, rather than literally being true (e.g., the deepfake of Democratic candidate Kamala Harris self-describing as a "diver-

sity hire" shared by Elon Musk on X during the 2024 US presidential election; Tenbarge, 2024). Previous studies have shown that misinformation is shared even when known to be untrue if it supports the sharer's worldview (Altay et al., 2022). Conversely, misleading deepfakes are perceived as more credible if they are deemed plausible (Barari et al., 2025; Hameleers et al., 2024), which depends on the content's congruence with viewers' preconceived notions.

Recent events, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, have illustrated how partial, manipulated, decontextualized, or misattributed imagery is shared on social media to misleadingly advance political interests (Hameleers, 2025). Journalism struggles to keep up with and verify such content (Godulla, 2014). Synthetic media and deepfake technology will not just render the verification of visual and audiovisual content more difficult; they will also embed such conflicts of epistemic judgment and authority in a context of generalized uncertainty and mistrust towards media and other epistemic institutions. As noted above, new norms will have to emerge to adjust the epistemic institutional order to a techno-social environment shaped by social media *and* synthetic media or deepfakes (see Vogler et al., 2025, in this issue).

Grappling with the impact of synthetic media and deepfakes on society, thus, requires an inter- and transdisciplinary research effort. Legal studies, computer science, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, history, sociology and political science, and, of course, communication and media studies need to apply their unique perspectives and methods, and need to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries to establish an understanding of the implications of the rapid proliferation of synthetic media for the epistemic institutional order of the future. The present Special Issue, therefore, had called for contributions from across the various subfields of communication and media studies grappling with the "age of synthetic media".

2. Contributions in the Special Issue

The contributions gathered in this Special Issue respond directly to this call for interdisciplinary engagement. They offer concrete empirical and conceptual insights into how synthetic media are reshaping the conditions under which communication, verification and truth discernment take place. By approaching the phenomenon from multiple angles, the articles illustrate the diversity of challenges that arise when established epistemic institutions encounter rapidly evolving generative technologies. The following sections briefly summarize and contextualize these studies and outline their contributions to understanding the societal implications of synthetic media.

In their full paper, *A new face of political advertising? Synthetic imagery in the 2025 German federal election campaigns on social media*, Stephanie Geise, Anna Ricarda Luther, Sabine Reich and Michael Linke (2025) examine how artificial intelligence is transforming political communication through the strategic use of AI-generated visuals. Based on a quantitative content analysis of more than 1,800 Instagram posts published by Germany's major political parties and their youth organizations during the 2025 federal election campaign, the study identifies 68

synthetic images, corresponding to roughly four percent of all posts. The findings reveal that the Alternative for Germany (AfD) employed such visuals far more frequently than any other party, primarily using photorealistic depictions designed to appear authentic. None of the analyzed images were labeled as artificially produced, raising significant ethical concerns regarding transparency and the potential manipulation of voter perception. The authors demonstrate that AI-generated imagery was used mainly for emotional and ideological framing, particularly through portrayals of "ordinary citizens" and symbolic metaphors that sought to evoke belonging, pride or resentment. Methodologically, the study highlights the limitations of automated AI-detection tools and underscores the superior consistency of structured manual coding. Theoretically, it situates these findings within the concepts of the disinformation order and Habermasian communication ethics, arguing that unlabeled generative visuals undermine the principles of truthfulness and informed deliberation.

The second article, *"The morass is just getting ... deeper and deeper and deeper": Synthetic media and news integrity* by Michael Davis and Monica Attard (2025), explores how Australian newsrooms are responding to the opportunities and challenges posed by generative AI and synthetic media. Drawing on a two-phase qualitative study with editors and product leads from a broad range of media organizations, the authors analyze how journalists perceive and implement AI tools in newsroom workflows, and how concerns over news integrity shape these practices. Their findings reveal an extremely cautious adoption of generative AI in Australian newsrooms, especially regarding the production of audience-facing synthetic media. Most experimentation remains confined to back-end applications such as transcription, summarization, and translation, with limited exploration of synthetic voice or image generation. Across all participating organizations, fears about audience trust, authenticity, and the erosion of editorial standards strongly constrain implementation. The study demonstrates that these apprehensions are grounded not only in professional ethics but also in a broader understanding of journalism's sociopolitical role as a democratic institution. Davis and Attard conclude that while Australian newsrooms recognize the transformative potential of AI, their restrained approach reflects a principled defense of journalistic integrity against both technological hype and the growing dominance of platform economies in shaping information environments.

In the third paper *Spotting fakes: How do non-experts approach deepfake video detection?*, Mary Holmes, Klaire Somoray, Jonathan D. Connor, Darcy W. Goodall, Lynsey Beaumont, Jordan Bugeja, Isabelle E. Eljed, Sarah Sai Wan Ng, Ryan Ede and Dan J. Miller (2025) investigate how individuals without technical expertise attempt to identify deepfake videos and which cognitive and perceptual strategies they employ. Drawing on two complementary studies, the authors examine both self-reported reasoning and eye-tracking data to better understand human behavior in deepfake detection. Study 1, an online experiment with 391 participants, tested whether providing a list of written detection tips could improve accuracy. Although detection rates remained modest, content analysis revealed that the intervention shifted participants' focus on visual cues such as skin texture and facial movement, while the control group relied more on intuition or body language.

Study 2, a laboratory eye-tracking experiment with 32 participants, found similar accuracy levels and revealed that participants primarily directed their gaze to the eyes and mouth, rather than the body, with no differences in gaze patterns between authentic and deepfake videos or between correct and incorrect classifications. The authors conclude that improving human detection may depend on redirecting visual attention from the eyes to more diagnostic cues, such as inconsistencies between face and body or irregularities at facial boundaries, offering valuable insights for future educational and training programs.

In the fourth contribution *Support for deepfake regulation: The role of third-person perception, trust, and risk*, Daniel Vogler, Adrian Rauchfleisch and Gabriele de Seta (2025) analyze how citizens' perceptions of deepfakes relate to their support for state or industry regulation of this emerging technology. Drawing on a pre-registered online survey of 1,361 participants in Switzerland – a country characterized by direct-democratic mechanisms such as referendums – the authors examine whether third-person perception, trust in institutions and risk awareness predict attitudes toward regulation. The study finds strong evidence of a perceptual third-person effect: Respondents believe that deepfakes influence others' opinions more than their own. This perceived influence on others serves as a weak but significant predictor of regulatory support, while the presumed effect on oneself does not. Contrary to expectations, the data reveal no general second-person effect, though exploratory analyses suggest that such a relationship may exist among women, who are disproportionately affected by non-consensual deepfake pornography. In addition, higher trust in political and journalistic institutions as well as heightened risk perception – particularly regarding media, the economy and individual privacy – are positively associated with stronger support for regulation. The authors conclude that public endorsement of deepfake regulation is rooted less in personal vulnerability than in broader concerns about societal risk and institutional trust, highlighting the democratic relevance of perception gaps in emerging technology governance.

In the fifth and final article *Synthetic disinformation detection among German information elites – Strategies in politics, administration, journalism, and business*, Nils Vief, Marcus Bösch, Saïd Unger, Johanna Klapproth, Svenja Boberg, Thorsten Quandt and Christian Stöcker (2025) investigate how professional actors with expertise in disinformation attempt to identify AI-generated content across text, visual and audio formats. Based on guided interviews with 41 elite actors from four sectors of German society – politics, administration, journalism and business – the authors explore which detection strategies these groups employ and which skills and resources they use in the authentication process. The study distinguishes between internal strategies based on intuition and prior knowledge and external strategies relying on verification through other sources. The findings reveal marked differences between the groups: Journalists consistently apply analytical, externally oriented methods, while actors in politics, administration and business mainly rely on intuition or describe no systematic strategy at all. Across all sectors, respondents perceive synthetic disinformation detection as a race between technological progress and human verification skills. Visual content evokes the highest concern, while audio-based disinformation remains largely overlooked. Journalists rely on con-

textual verification, reverse image search, and specialized software, but anticipate that AI will soon outpace human detection capabilities. The study concludes that external, context-based authentication strategies offer the most promising defense against synthetic disinformation yet are currently limited to the media sector.

To summarize, the Special Issue brings together empirical and conceptual work that, first, advances our understanding of how synthetic media reshape the epistemic foundations of contemporary societies. Across methodological approaches and empirical settings, the contributions illuminate how deepfakes and other forms of AI-generated content affect practices of political persuasion, journalistic verification, regulatory practices and elite strategies in information management. Together, the articles demonstrate that synthetic media not only introduce new modes of manipulation, but also challenge institutional norms of authenticity, credibility and public accountability.

Second, the issue spans a broad set of international contexts and thereby highlights that the implications of synthetic media unfold differently across media systems, political cultures and professional traditions. The studies examine the German federal election campaign, Australian newsrooms, Swiss regulatory preferences and the perspectives of German information elites, complemented by experimental research engaging participants from diverse backgrounds. This comparative breadth underscores that synthetic media constitute a global technological phenomenon whose societal effects are mediated by local institutional arrangements, political dynamics and communicative practices.

Third, the contributions approach synthetic media from distinct analytical perspectives, ranging from lay audiences and voters to journalists, political parties and elite actors in public administration, business and politics. They cover key areas of contemporary debate: Human detection capabilities, newsroom adoption and implementation, campaign communication strategies and public support for regulatory interventions. Across these domains, concerns about misinformation, epistemic uncertainty and declining trust recur as central themes. The combined insights of the articles point to a widening gap between the acceleration of synthetic media and the comparatively slow adaptation of epistemic institutions tasked with safeguarding the integrity of public communication. The following contributions address various aspects mentioned above.

3. Future research

Looking ahead, the rapid proliferation of synthetic media calls for a more systematic and programmatic research agenda that addresses the technological, psychological and institutional challenges outlined in this Special Issue. While the existing literature provides important early insights, the accelerating complexity and diffusion of generative models require a broader, more coordinated effort across the subfields of communication and media studies. Future research must therefore clarify how synthetic media reshape established practices of reception, persuasion, verification and representation, and identify which competencies, norms and regulatory frameworks will be necessary to safeguard the epistemic integrity of public communication in the years to come.

Research on *media reception and effects* will need to move beyond documenting losses of trust and instead specify the psychological mechanisms through which synthetic media alter the interpretation of audiovisual content. Future studies should examine how attention, involvement and entertainment value interact with credibility judgments, and which dispositional factors (such as prior knowledge, political attitudes or epistemic vigilance) structure these responses. In addition, robust experimental and field-based research is required to identify scalable interventions that effectively weaken the influence of deepfake misinformation without inducing generalized media cynicism. In *political communication*, a central task for future research is to determine how synthetic media reshape electoral persuasion, strategic messaging and the production and dissemination of political disinformation. While individual persuasion effects remain important, scholars must also investigate how political actors integrate synthetic visuals into campaign repertoires, conflict narratives and targeted mobilization efforts. Comparative and longitudinal designs will be essential to understanding how exposure to political deepfakes shapes voters' beliefs, emotional responses and democratic engagement across political systems and over time.

For *journalism studies*, future research should clarify how professional standards can be maintained in an environment in which the provenance of visual and audiovisual material becomes increasingly uncertain. Systematic work on labeling regimes, verification protocols and transparency practices is needed to determine how synthetic media may be incorporated without eroding the credibility of news products. At the same time, research must examine which technical, analytical and ethical skills journalists require to navigate deepfakes and how these competencies can be integrated into training and newsroom routines. Similarly, the field of *visual communication* faces the task of mapping how synthetic media alter the cultural and cognitive foundations of visual authenticity. Future studies should compare the persuasive power of audiovisual deepfakes with that of text-based or hybrid forms and specify which features, such as plausibility cues, contextual coherence, prior attitudes or psychological predispositions, amplify or weaken credibility. This line of research should also investigate how the very notion of authenticity evolves when the distinction between recorded and generated imagery becomes increasingly opaque.

Media education research must address how citizens can be equipped with the cognitive, technical and ethical competencies needed to critically evaluate synthetic media. Beyond traditional media literacy, future work should identify which specific skills help audiences detect manipulations, question the provenance of audiovisual content and maintain a healthy balance between skepticism and trust. Particular attention should be given to the protection of children and adolescents, who are highly exposed to algorithmically curated visual environments and especially vulnerable to harmful applications. Therefore, future research in *media ethics* must articulate normative boundaries for the creation and circulation of synthetic media, especially when real individuals are depicted in fabricated contexts. Scholars will need to clarify the conditions under which generated content may be used to represent real events, and which obligations arise for educators, journalists and strategic communicators who employ such material. Ethical analysis should also

consider the implications of resurrecting deceased individuals through synthetic media and the responsibilities inherent in shaping public memory through artificial means.

Legal research will need to develop regulatory models capable of preventing harmful uses of deepfake technology without unduly restricting creative expression, innovation or freedom of speech. This includes clarifying the scope of personality rights, privacy protections and liability in cases where synthetic media are used to mislead, defame or deceive. Future work should also address the legal status of synthetic depictions of the deceased and determine under what circumstances such uses may be permissible or require explicit safeguards. Furthermore, *communication history* offers an essential framework for situating synthetic media within a longer trajectory of manipulation, remediation and technological augmentation. Future research should compare contemporary deepfakes with historical practices such as photographic retouching, staged newsreels or digital image editing, and examine how earlier authenticity crises shaped audience expectations. By placing synthetic media within these lineages, scholars can illuminate how trust in audiovisual representation has been constructed, eroded and renegotiated across successive technological epochs.

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