

Don't Believe Your Lying Ears or Eyes - What the AI Revolution Means for Us All

January 31, 2023 - Just in case you haven't been paying attention, there has been a lot of recent news about artificial intelligence (AI), and while some of it is has been good, a lot of it hasn't. It's causing all sorts of issues for educational institutions, businesses and, over the past few days, for some celebrities. It is already at the point that people are having difficulty discerning the difference between what it real, and what isn't. And we're really in the very early stages of AI's introduction to the general public.

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Some of the issues being created by AI have been around for several years now. The ability to fake photos for instance. Good photographers and developers produced fakes long before the personal computer came along. But since the development of photo software, there has been a revolution. Programs like Photoshop allow people to insert objects into photos and change their backgrounds. And more recently, Google's latest release of its Pixel camera can make changes to photos on the fly. This means that any photo you are looking at now has the potential to have been doctored.

We're now moving from photos to video. There are already experimental programs that can place one person's head on another person's body and then animate their facial features. While none of these have been released to the general public (at least to our knowledge) it's only a matter of time before that happens. Just think of the consequences of this for law enforcement. Depending upon how good this technology becomes, the police won't necessarily be able to believe something simply because it was captured on video.

We're already seeing some of this with services that are available to the public. A couple of months ago Openai.com released a program called ChatGPT. Anyone can register to use this chat bot, and its' results are somewhat remarkable. Ask the bot a question and it will give you a concise answer. Unlike Google or Bing, you won't have to go through page after page of search results to find what you are looking for. And if it doesn't know the answer to your question, it will tell you. Executives at Google are already concerned that ChatGPT will destroy their business model.

But ChatGPT can do a lot more than just give you answers to questions that you would normally search for on the internet. It is now being used by students to write entire essays for their classes. And more recently it actually passed a law school exam given by the University of Minnesota School of Law. While it only received a C+, since it is AI, it is likely to learn from its mistakes. In other words, the next time this two-month-old technology is quite likely to do better.

The most recent entry into AI is something called Prime Voice AI by the British firm, ElevenLabs. This particular bot can fake just about any voice imaginable and it is free to use right now. PVAI was just released to the public and it is already causing quite a stir. It didn't take long for pranksters to use it to make statements with celebrity voices; many of which were racist. Due to the bad publicity it has received over the past few days, the company has said that they are rethinking their model. At the very least, they are likely to put some safeguards in place to restrict certain words or phrases.

But pranks aren't the real issue with PVAI. The point here is that the technology can be used to fake the voice of just about anyone saying just about anything. What could possibly go wrong?

As with any tool, all of these technologies can be used for good or bad. They're like a hammer; fantastic when you need to hit a nail, but easily converted into a weapon. We're now at a point that you can no longer take for granted that what you are reading was written by a human, or that what you are hearing was actually spoken by the person you think you're listening to. Soon you won't be able to tell if the video you are watching is real or not. And there are virtually no laws or regulations for technology like this.

The implications of all of this are huge. Just think about what this means for personal privacy and personal autonomy. A perfect stranger could pick you out of a crowd and with a little effort, get a sampling of your voice. They could snap a few pictures and then place you in a video doing something you never did, saying something you never said, visiting a place that you never visited. Nobody seems to be thinking about this. We think it is time that someone did.

It's a brave new world and we now have to live in it.

by Jim Malmberg

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