

Analysis

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Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

Misinformation woes could multiply with 'deepfake' videos

If you see a video of a politician speaking words he never would utter, or a Hollywood star improbably appearing in a cheap adult movie, don't adjust your television set - you may just be witnessing the future of "fake news". "Deepfake" videos that manipulate reality are becoming more sophisticated due to advances in artificial intelligence, creating the potential for new kinds of misinformation with devastating consequences. As the technology advances, worries are growing about how deepfakes can be used for nefarious purposes by hackers or state actors.

"We're not quite to the stage where we are seeing deepfakes weaponized, but that moment is coming," Robert Chesney, a University of Texas law professor who has researched the topic, told AFP. Chesney argues that deepfakes could add to the current turmoil over disinformation and influence operations. "A well-timed and thoughtfully scripted deepfake or series of deepfakes could tip an election, spark violence in a city primed for civil unrest, bolster insurgent narratives about an enemy's supposed atrocities, or exacerbate political divisions in a society," Chesney and University of Maryland professor Danielle Citron said in a blog post for the Council on Foreign Relations.

Paul Scharre, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a think tank specializing in AI and security issues, said it was almost inevitable that deepfakes would be used in upcoming elections. A fake video could be deployed to smear a candidate, Scharre said, or to enable people to deny actual events captured on authentic video. With believable fake videos in circulation, he added, "people can choose to believe whatever version or narrative that they want, and that's a real concern."

Chaplin's return?

Video manipulation has been around for decades and can be innocuous or even entertaining - as in the digitally-aided appearance of Peter Cushing in 2016's "Rogue One: A Star Wars Story," 22 years after his death. Carnegie Mellon University researchers last year revealed techniques that make it easier to produce deepfakes via machine learning to infer missing data. In the movie industry, "the hope is we can have old movie stars like Charlie Chaplin come back," said Aayush Bansal.

The popularization of apps which make realistic fake videos threatens to undermine the notion of truth in news media, criminal trials and many other areas, researchers point out. "If we can put any words in anyone's mouth, that is quite scary," says Siwei Lyu, a professor of computer science at the State University of New York at Albany, who is researching deepfake detection. "It blurs the line between what is true and what is false. If we cannot really trust information to be authentic it's no better than to have no information at all."

Representative Adam Schiff and two other lawmakers recently sent a letter to National Intelligence Director Dan Coats asking for information about what the government is doing to combat deepfakes. "Forged videos, images or audio could be used to target individuals for blackmail or for other nefarious purposes," the lawmakers wrote. "Of greater concern for national security, they could also be used by foreign or domestic actors to spread misinformation."

Separating fake from real

Researchers have been working on better detection methods for some time, with support from private firms such as Google and government entities like the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which began a media forensics initiative in 2015. Lyu's research has focused on detecting fakes, in part by analyzing the rate of blinking of an individual's eyes. But he acknowledges that even detecting fakes may not be enough, if a video goes viral and leads to chaos. "It's more important to disrupt the process than to analyze the videos," Lyu said.

While deepfakes have been evolving for several years, the topic came into focus with the creation last April of video appearing to show former president Barack Obama using a curse word to describe his successor Donald Trump - a coordinated stunt from filmmaker Jordan Peele and BuzzFeed. Also in 2018, a proliferation of "face swap" porn videos that used images of Emma Watson, Scarlett Johansson and other celebrities prompted bans on deepfakes by Reddit, Twitter and Pornhub, though it remained unclear if they could enforce the policies. — AFP



An AFP journalist views a video on Jan 25, 2019, manipulated with artificial intelligence to potentially deceive viewers at his newsdesk in Washington, DC. — AFP



Soldiers with a military coalition in Yemen backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stand guard at a facility of Yemen's Red Sea Mills company in the port city of Hodeida on Jan 22, 2019. — AFP

Fight over Yemen granary tests truce

Gunshots reverberate through a battle-scarred granary in the port city of Hodeida, where a mountain of grain meant for starving Yemenis remains inaccessible as a hard-won ceasefire comes under strain. The Red Sea Mills, one of the last positions seized by Saudi and Emirati-backed forces before last month's UN-brokered truce, holds wheat that could feed nearly four million people for a month in a country on the brink of famine.

But the facility, a shrapnel-pocked symbol of how controlling food is a weapon in Yemen's war, has remained off-limits to aid organizations since September as skirmishes shake the fragile ceasefire agreed with Houthi rebels during talks in Sweden. The site, on Hodeida's eastern edges, was rigged heavily with mines when it slipped from Houthi control in November.

Last week, during a military embed organized by the Saudi-led coalition, AFP saw government loyalists including Sudanese soldiers scouring the vast complex with metal detectors amid fears rebels were sneaking in to plant new booby traps. Sudan is a member of the Saudi-led coalition. A column of smoke snaked into the sky from Houthi positions less than a mile away, with loyalists saying the rebels were burning tyres in a provocative move.

Then, a volley of close-range gunshots cracked through the complex. It was not possible to tell who was firing. "We are committed to the truce... but the enemy has not committed to anything as you can see and hear," said Yemeni commander Mohammed Salman. Just after the tour, the UN on Friday reported apparent mortar shelling at the mill had started a fire that left two food silos damaged. "The loss of this wheat comes at a terrible time,"

said the UN's humanitarian coordinator Lise Grande. "More than 20 million Yemenis, nearly 70 percent of the entire population, are hungry."

In Hodeida, the entry point for more than two-thirds of Yemen's food imports and international aid, the choices are stark - either an imperfect truce with violations on both sides or all-out fighting that could unleash famine. The ceasefire came after Western nations pressed Riyadh to end its four-year military campaign in Yemen following the murder of Saudi critic and journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

But with recurring breaches, observers warn its collapse could be just a matter of time. "If it is allowed to break down, there will be no opportunity for a similar deal for a long time," the International Crisis Group said. Inside Hodeida, a city rippling with tension as the war-wounded continue to trickle into hospitals, a common refrain among civilians and military officials is "mafi hudna" - Arabic for "no truce".

Colonel Saeed Salmeen, an Emirati commander on Yemen's west coast, told AFP his men were committed to the ceasefire but were "always ready" for battle. He warned Yemen's west coast road - a key supply route linking the south to Hodeida - was a "red line". UN chief Antonio Guterres said on January 7 that neither side had tried to gain new territory since the ceasefire. But an agreed redeployment of rival forces from the city, a key confidence-building measure, has not happened.

UN envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths said Monday the expected timeline for a truce in Hodeida and a prisoner swap between the warring parties had been pushed back. "We are dealing with a complex situation

on the ground," he told Saudi-owned newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat.

'Food is a weapon'

"How long can the international community accept this Houthi game - ceasefire, regroup, ceasefire, regroup?" a member of the coalition told AFP, requesting anonymity. "Only when you catch them by the neck will they come to the negotiating table." The sentiment was echoed by other pro-government troops who insisted to AFP that military action was the only solution. The truce has given the World Food Program "some breathing room" to reach districts in southern Hodeida previously inaccessible due to fighting, its country director Stephen Anderson told AFP. However, 51,000 metric tonnes of wheat - one quarter of WFP's flour-milling capacity in Yemen - remains locked away in the Red Sea Mills. The WFP has been trying to get access "to see for ourselves the scale of the damage" after the fire, a spokesman said, adding one of the damaged silos held about 4,500 tonnes of WFP wheat.

For starving Yemenis on both sides of the conflict the lack of access is collective punishment. Salman, the Yemeni commander, alleged the Houthis hoarded grain, creating artificial shortages and exacerbating famine-like conditions. When the Houthis controlled the mill, they accused the coalition of destroying food with indiscriminate air strikes. The mills are "being used in the most Machiavellian ways by all warring parties to achieve political goals," said Wesam Qaid, executive director of Yemeni development organization SMEPS. "Whoever controls such facilities will have greater say on who gets fed. Food is a weapon." — AFP

Man vs condor: King of the Andes under threat

By all accounts, Dasan and Illika should have died of poisoning. But they are back on their feet, poking their beaks through the bars of their cages, impatient to return to the skies over Colombia, which have been transformed into hostile territory for the so-called king of the Andes - the condor. Dasan, a five-year-old male, fell victim first. Locals found him in November - weak and strangely docile - in Cerrito, located about 400 km west of the capital Bogota.

Then Illika, an older female, was found just 200 m from that spot, showing the same symptoms of poisoning - which may have been intentional. According to the Neotropical Foundation, the incident marks at least the fifth time that ranchers have used poisoned carrion to eliminate the birds of prey, which they see as dangerous to their herds of cattle, sheep and goats.

In the Andes, the paramo ecosystem - at an altitude of about 4,000 m - is a tropical mountainous area with hardy vegetation, prone to retaining moisture and resisting temperature changes. It is not conducive to serving as a grazing pasture for livestock. But with development and the gradual disappearance of native wildlife, the Andean condor's habitat has been forever changed.

The paramos: Andean reservoirs

"In Andean nations, the paramos serve as our reservoirs. Without this tropical heathland, we would literally be parched and dead," Sebastian Kohn, director of the Andean Condor Foundation in Ecuador, told AFP. "The livestock is having a negative impact, but if we pull them all out in one fell swoop, the condor will have nothing to feed itself," he added, highlighting the complexity of the problem.

The Andean condor, one of the biggest birds in the world with a wingspan of up to 3.2 m and a weight of 9-15 kg, is considered to be in critical danger of extinction in Colombia, a nation that has adopted the predator as its national symbol. But the bird is not at risk on a global scale, even if its numbers are dwindling, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Experts say there are only about 150 Andean condors left in all of Colombia, where there is no official count of the birds. Condors typically only feed on dead animals, but it appears that some have taken to attacking live prey, according to residents of Cerrito. "If the condors see an animal move, they hit it with their wings, two or three times. When they see it's no longer moving, they start eating it," explained Eduin Conde, a 38-year-old sheep farmer. In all, 80 percent of Cerrito's total surface area is made up of wet heathland. Many rivers begin there,



Peasant and keeper of condors Gilberto Conde looks through his binoculars in a mountainous area in the municipality of Cerrito in Colombia on Jan 16, 2019. — AFP

including the Arauca, which provides part of Venezuela with its water.

Poisoning suspected

At least 30 condors soar over the Cerrito area, according to Fausto Saenz, scientific director for the Neotropical Foundation. The foundation worked with the Andean Condor Foundation in Ecuador, the US non-governmental organization The Peregrine Fund and the Jaime Duque zoo outside Bogota to rehabilitate and release Dasan and Illika back into the wild. Researchers, firefighters and police officers took care of the birds at first. Then a helicopter airlifted them to the veterinary clinic at the Jaime Duque zoo. "They were not reacting to any stimuli," recalls Saenz. The two birds also had the exact same symptoms - an indication that "they had both eaten from the same poisoned source."

Cerrito's mayor, Carlos Romero, told AFP that an investigation was ongoing to determine whether the birds were intentionally poisoned. Dasan and Illika remained in isolation for two months, with only minimal human contact and regular tests to monitor the toxicity in their systems. Slowly, they regained their strength.

During their convalescence, a contest was launched on social media to choose their names. "Dasan means 'head of the birds', while Illika means 'lucky one' in the Uwa dialect," Saenz said, referring to an indigenous group native to northeastern Colombia. Poisoning is the top threat to condors in Colombia. The species is present throughout the Andes, from Venezuela to Argentina and Chile. Experts say there are about 6,700 left in the wild. But the bird, which only lays an egg every two years, also faces risks from hunting and electrocution on power cables. Andean bears and jaguars, whose natural habitats have been encroached upon by the expansion of farming and ranching, encounter the same risks. About 100 people showed up at the spot where Dasan and Illika were found ill to watch the two majestic birds return to the wild. They took flight before their admirers - with newly fitted tags so they can be tracked and monitored for research purposes. — AFP

Voulez-vous take it outside? Italy-France row gets personal

Baguette in hand, beret tilted jauntily, the Parisian looks down at the rowdy, pasta-scoffing Roman: they may be stereotypes, but perceived French smugness is again being blamed for a falling out with Italy. "French arrogance has lost its charm," Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said shortly after Italy's populist government took power last year. While ordinary citizens still hop back and forth on holidays, official relations across the Alps are icy.

Tension has been building for weeks, with small jibes leading to boorish accusations and finally to blunt insults, effectively killing off political and diplomatic dialogue, according to Nathalie Loiseau, France's European Affairs Minister. The neighbors have often had turbulent relations, but the climate has seriously deteriorated since Western Europe's first populist government came to power in June in Italy, a founding member of the European Union.

Migration a hot topic

"It's the French who started to dislike Italians," insists Milan newspaper vendor Maria Rosaria Varella, 54. "For Europeans, we are pizza, mandolins and mafia, and that's it. They think we are superficial," she complained. A member of Salvini's far-right League party, she admitted: "We think the French are a bit arrogant. You can see it in football."

At the World Cup final last summer, Italians overwhelmingly backed Croatia. The joke doing the rounds on social media in Italy was that the only country supporting France was France. And while retired France midfielder Emmanuel Petit called his own people "arrogant, smug, lying and hypocritical," Italy's populist leaders appear to wholeheartedly agree.

Twice the French ambassador to Rome, Christian Masset, has been summoned - and both times it was to be given an earful over the hottest issue in Italy today: Migration. Of all the European countries accused of turning a blind eye to a migration crisis - which saw tens of thousands of people land in Italy - Paris' perceived betrayal has hit the hardest.

France's signing of a new friendship treaty with Germany this month to strengthen their alliance in the face of growing populism in the EU rubbed salt in the wound. — AFP