



Nina Schick, *Deep Fakes, The Coming Infocalypse*. New York, 2020.
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206 pages, with Resources and Endnotes.

Nina Schick ends this account of a growingly polluted information ecosystem on a positive note: “If you do not want the [infocalypse]... to become a permanent reality, engage now. Be careful [and mindful] about what information you share. Verify your sources. Correct yourself when you get something wrong. Be wary of your own political biases. Be skeptical, but not cynical” (pp. 205-206). She then lists three pages of excellent resources for fact-checking, media provenance, disinformation detection and protection, and media best practices. So, what is this *brave new world* Infocalypse threat?

“Processing Fluency” is the idea that humans are “wired to want to believe audiovisual material that *looks* or *sounds* right” (p. 29). Schick qualifies this “wired tendency,” noting that, nonetheless, “those of us who are more attuned to the fact that photographs can be manipulated can correct for processing fluency on the second or third view” (*ibid*).

Enter stage left the world of “AI” algorithmic-assisted deepfakes. In general, we tend to believe that video and audio footage captures what we would have seen with our own eyes or heard with our own ears, so they function as an extension of our own perception. This [phenomenon] makes it even more worrying, then, that the means for AI-powered subversion of audio and video are developing at a time when these media are becoming the *most important* form of human communication” (pp. 29-30).

We are quickly moving into the post-information age, or the age of mis- and disinformation. (Disinformation is maliciously manipulated content, while misinformation is just bad or false content.) “This rapid rate of change has made our information ecosystem ripe for exploitation. Increasingly, bad actors – ranging from nation states to lone ‘influencers’ – are using this new set of circumstances to spread ‘disinformation’... for their own nefarious purposes” (p. 11).

“As more and more people are becoming increasingly politicized in our *polluted information ecosystem*, well-intentioned efforts are directed into winning arguments over problems that become ever more intractable..., culminating in a doom-loop of partisanship. Neither side can persuade or convince the other in the Infocalypse – each attempt only risks entrenching further division” (p. 12).

“Technology is making human manipulation of media easier and more accessible to everyone. But, now, AI has granted humans a new tool by giving machines the power to generate wholly synthetic (or fake) media. This technology is still nascent [as of 2020], but we are in the early stages of an AI revolution which will completely transform representations of reality through media.... We still tend to think of video and audio as authentic and incorruptible. As synthetic media become ubiquitous, however, we have to prepare for a world where seeing and hearing are no longer believing” (pp. 25-6).

Those who still primarily rely on the written word now have the epistemic advantage (*vis-à-vis* discerning true content from false content); but they are more and more in the minority. “It is estimated that by 2022, 82 per cent of global Internet traffic will come from video streaming and downloads. By 2023, over 70 per cent of the global population will have mobile Internet connectivity. Through their devices, 5.6 billion people will not only become consumers of online video, but producers too: they will not only listen and watch, but also record and share” more and more *manipulated content* (p. 30).

Starting with deepfake porn and moving onto Covid-19 mis- and disinformation, Schick tells the as yet unfinished story of “our corroding information ecosystem,” and the role of evolving Infocalypse alternative realities, that may spell the end of “history” – or at least the end of any verifiable historical record of events, past, present, and future. Classic analytic philosophy, reasoned logic, critical realism, and epistemic skepticism, these will be our best defense in the coming years –

along with the printed word, newspapers, journals, books. Older books! That is not Ludditism, which buries its head in the sand, but classic liberal arts education, analytic thinking, historical intelligence.

A recent example of the deepfake dilemma: Well-known intellectual Dr. Jordan Peterson launched legal action against “NotJordanPeterson.com” which allowed users to generate deepfakes of his voice, resulting in detractors harassing him with inflammatory deepfake content. Peterson warned:

I’m already in the position (as many of you soon will be as well) where anyone can produce a believable audio and perhaps video of me saying absolutely anything they want me to say. How can that possibly be fought? ...[How] are we going to trust anything electronically mediated in the very near future (say, during the next presidential election)? ...The sanctity of your voice, and your image, is at serious risk. It’s hard to imagine a more serious challenge to the sense of shared, reliable reality that keeps us linked together in relative peace. The deepfake artists need to be stopped, using whatever legal means are necessary, as soon as possible. (p. 145. Source: Jordan Peterson. “The deepfake artists must be stopped before we no longer know what’s real,” *National Post*, 23 August 2019, [nationalpost.com/opinion/Jordan-peterson-deep-fake.](https://nationalpost.com/opinion/Jordan-peterson-deep-fake/))

The annual report of the Center For Fraud Studies, University of Portsmouth, and Crowe Clark Whitehill accounting firm “put the cost of global fraud in 2019 at \$5.127 trillion, with losses rising by 56 per cent in the last decade. This jump coincides with the emergence of the Infocalypse. This trend will likely continue as deepfakes become more common” (p. 147).

What does this development mean not only for big businesses and corporations but for smaller non-profits and businesses and individual entrepreneurs? “While ‘disinformation’ currently falls under general risk mitigation...,” former intelligence officer Matthew F. Ferraro “tells me that it is only [a] matter of time before businesses have to invest in more specialized tools and strategies to actively combat these specific risks” (pp. 147-48). That is, we are all becoming potential targets by industry competitors and malicious bad actors; *business continuity plans* will need to include more research and resources on synthetic media risk management. Note also, elderly and vulnerable groups “have traditionally been targets for individual fraud as they are supposedly easier to fool. However, with deepfakes, even the most discerning and savvy among us could be duped” (p. 149).

Schick warns, “All organizations and individuals are more vulnerable to fraud in the new information ecosystem, and we are all now also potential targets of mis- and disinformation that could ruin our reputations, businesses, and lives” (*ibid*).

In the early days deepfake synthetic media had much of its economic impetus in the lucrative and exploitative porn industry, especially what has come to be known as “stars-porn-fakes” or “involuntary porn” where famous persons are seamlessly faked into pornographic content. DeepTrace, an Amsterdam-based company set up in 2018 to research deepfakes’ evolving capabilities and threats, released a report in 2019, and founder Giorgio Patrini confirmed that “the number of deepfakes (both porn and others) would go up significantly throughout 2020 and beyond. However, for now, they are still mostly in one category...; 96 per cent of deepfake videos are of non-consensual porn” (p. 40).

Indeed, while the porn industry has been the bread-and-butter of the criminal synthetic media world, today synthetic media is becoming more and more ubiquitous in political propagandistic mis- and disinformation and anti-democratic malicious media manipulation, as well as in sophisticated business and economic malware, scamming, phishing, and public infrastructure systems attacks.

We’re still in the early days of the synthetic media revolution. While, for example, the movie and entertainment industries are using synthetic media for legal, legitimate artistic purposes, organized crime and transnational terrorist actors (Russia, Iran, the QAnon-Trump cult) are finding it easier and easier to weaponize this new technology. Welcome to the Infocalypse. But remember: quality content – vetted information – *knowledge* – is still power.

Nina Schick is a political commentator, advisor, and public speaker, with degrees from Cambridge University and University College London. Schick regularly contributes to international broadcasters including CNN, Bloomberg, Sky, and the BBC. Her works have been published by the *Times* of London, the *Telegraph*, and the *New Statesman*, among others.