AI imitating individuals: deepfakes and the Unexpected in digital communication

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Abstract

This paper considers language-generating artificial intelligence as a form of human imitation. Focusing on deepfakes that imitate individuals' appearance and language, the paper examines how supposed deepfakes featuring prominent individuals are discussed on social media and how discourse around deepfakes has evolved alongside growing awareness of their existence. Furthermore, the paper discusses the social implications of these developments. Three case studies were selected in which deepfakes were posted and discussed on social media. By examining the comments on the videos using detailed text analysis, the paper demonstrates how identifying something unexpected can lead to videos and audio clips posted on social media being judged as fake. The paper discusses why this can be considered dangerous for society.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, deepfakes, common ground, digital communication, social media

1 Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence is shaping today's societies and can be found in many contexts of our daily lives. Discourses on artificial intelligence are transforming our understanding of reality (Kalwa 2025). These new technologies are also changing our communicative practices: AI-generated texts are reshaping public discourse and threatening democracies (cf. Monti 2024). Writing practices change, for example, when ChatGPT is understood as a co-creator in the writing of texts (cf. Steinhoff 2023). AI allows us to break down the boundaries of communication, for example, when people chat with the dead using thanatobots (cf. Henrickson 2023). The mere fact that it is no longer only humans who use language is changing communication. As Gottschling and Kramer (2025) point out, generative AI is "changing concepts of reality, authorship, and common ground."

This article focuses on deepfakes, a specific form of generative artificial intelligence that also involves language. Deepfakes shared on social media often feature well-known people. Users of social media can be confused when these imitations of people (which are not always recognised as such) behave in a way that is unusual for their originals. I am interested in how deepfakes are discussed on social media. One of my aims is to demonstrate that, over time, and as people become more aware of deepfakes, social media users seem to be more likely to categorise a video as a deepfake if it does not meet their expectations. In this paper, I analyse social media users' discourses about deepfakes by combining a semiotic and a discourse linguistic perspective. I want to examine the following research questions:

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1. How do social media users discuss and evaluate alleged deepfakes?
2. How has the discourse around deepfakes evolved?
3. What implications for society can we infer from these discussions?

In the following, I will first relate the concept of imitation to the phenomenon of artificial intelligence, focusing on AI systems that are of particular interest to linguists—those which produce language. Finally, I focus on deepfakes that imitate individual human speech. I selected three case studies, which I analyse in Section 3, showing that social media users employ to engage with suspected deepfakes and how this leads to growing scepticism towards digital communication. In Section 5, I examine the broader social implications of the growing scepticism in digital communication.

2 AI imitating humans, Deepfakes imitating individuals

In 1950, Alan Turing posed the question of whether machines could think and developed the idea of a learning computer. Turing simulated machine thought in an "imitation game" (Turing 1950: 433), later called the Turing Test: if a person communicating with a computer does not recognise that it is a machine, then the machine is successfully imitating human behaviour. This concept of *imitation* is still observable in some scientific definitions of AI today, as in Yildirim et al. (2021: 33), introductory note:

> For this paper, AI will be defined as a field of computer science that specializes in creating computer systems that are designed to interact with the world and can mimic and operate as human beings by utilizing machine learning.

In their definition, Yildirim et al. emphasise the trait of human likeness of computer systems in the context of AI.[1] Overall, the language of AI research seems to be permeated by anthropomorphising metaphors, as expressions such as 'reasoning', 'training', 'consciousness', and 'neural networks' show. Ultimately, the attribution of agency already leads to the anthropomorphisation of machines (cf. Schulz-Schaeffer 2008). In consequence, if speaking is understood as acting, then the attribution of speech already leads to the anthropomorphisation of AI.

The conceptualisation of generative AI as human-like entities is pervasive in both scientific and public discourses. Spieß (2024) illustrates this conceptualisation in public discourse, using a sample of 22 media texts from the debate series of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and 16 debate speeches from the 42nd session of the Bundestag during the 19th legislative period (point 5 on the agenda) (cf.

[1] Many researchers, such as Salles, Evers and Farisco (2020), are critical of the anthropomorphisation of AI. Nevertheless, there are many scientific papers on AI in which authors anthropomorphise AI because this metaphor seems deeply rooted in the language of computer scientists.

Spieß 2024: 370). Spieß describes how these texts portray artificial intelligence in an anthropomorphic manner, attributing human-like capabilities to AI such as learning, understanding or cheating, which it presumably often handles more effectively than humans (cf. Spieß 2024: 371ff.).

Because the idea of human-likeness is omnipresent in the scientific and non-scientific discourse on AI, I will apply the concept of *imitation* to generative artificial intelligence, as I assume that some forms of generative AI *imitate* human linguistic behaviour and thus, as Gottschling (2023: 4) explains, create seemingly meaningful, persuasive or aesthetic texts (see also Kalwa 2026). Unlike Gottschling (2023: 14), I view imitation as a *social phenomenon* (Schwedler and Sonntag 2021: 9) and a *pervasive cultural technique* (Schwedler and Sonntag 2021: 15). This means that I do not see it as a specific rhetorical device (see for example Kaminski 1998), but as something that occurs in very different contexts and is omnipresent in human communication: children imitate their parents, for example, or people imitate the communication practices of others at higher career levels. According to Schwedler and Sonntag (2021: 1), imitation is a cultural phenomenon that has spanned the ages. They argue that it is a prerequisite for every culture, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and patterns of behaviour to the next generation and forming an integral part of identity development. Schwedler and Sonntag (2021: 1) continue by stating that the complex phenomenon of imitation affects central aspects of human behaviour. The authors express surprise that this perspective has not been adopted more often as a starting point for comprehensive attempts at explanation.

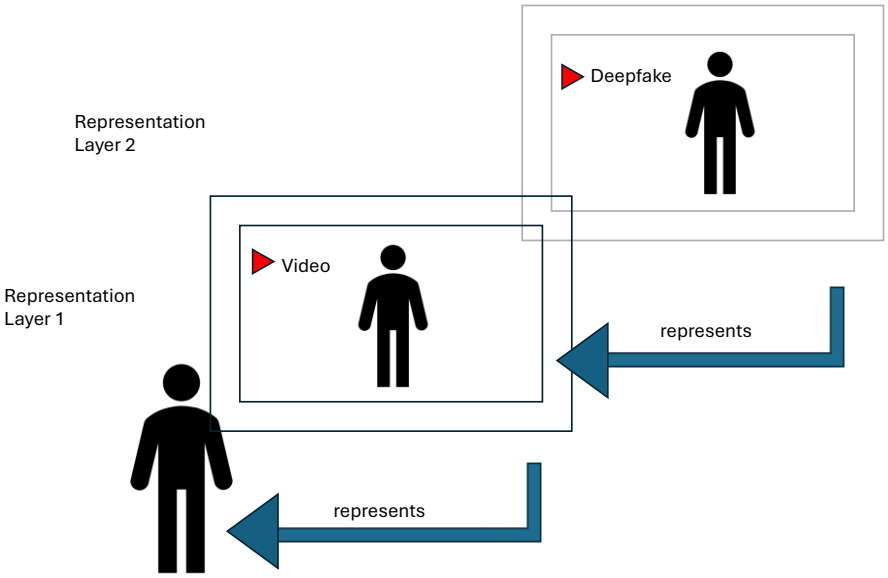
By framing AI as imitations, AI systems that we encounter in social media can be seen as depictions of social agents, as described by Clark and Fischer (2023) for social robots. The functions that users ascribe to these imitations vary. Several studies in the field of economics notice an increase in trust in the machine when it acts more human-like (see e.g. Fenwick and Molnar 2022; Peng, Yaobin and Yeming 2021) and common descriptions of some AI-driven machines suggest that they can mimic a wide range of human communicative behaviours: Alexa as a reliable servant (Dickel and Schmidt-Jüngst 2021: 361), ChatGPT as a supportive friend,[2] the chatbot Replika as a friend, sexual partner or even life partner.

Deepfakes can be seen as special forms of human imitations. Deepfakes denote a category of synthetic audiovisual media involving the manipulation or synthetic generation of images, videos, and/or audio, typically using AI technologies (Pawelec and Bieß 2021: 15). The term *deepfake* refers "to all digital fake content created by means of deep learning techniques" (Tolosana et al. 2022: 4). Although the word *deepfake* includes the term *fake*, people do not only generate deepfakes for deceiving and manipulating but also "for entertainment and creative arts" (Altuncu, Franqueira and Li 2024: 2). According to Kietzmann et al. (2020:

[2] ChatGPT has assigned itself this role by request. My prompt: *If you had to assign yourself a social role, what would it be?*.

136), deepfake "gained its name from an anonymous user of the platform Reddit, who went by the name 'deepfakes' (deep learning + fakes) and who shared the first deepfakes by placing unknowing celebrities into adult video clips." From the beginning, deepfakes have often targeted famous individuals, mimicking their unique speech patterns. The techniques for creating deepfakes are constantly evolving, but as the name suggests, they primarily rely on deep learning methods. Deep learning is a subset of machine learning that utilises multilayer neural networks, known as deep neural networks (DNNs), to "mimic the human brain's neurons" (Taye 2023: 11) – so once again, the concept of imitation is inherent. Kietzmann et al. (2020: 137) point out that the majority of deepfakes in the visual domain at that time followed "a procedure in which the real face of a person is exchanged with a fake image showing somebody else." An autoencoder is then trained to identify key facial features and reconstruct input images as its output. In essence, the autoencoder goes beyond the given image data and develops a generative model of a person's face (cf. Kietzmann et al. 2020: 139). Researchers from a variety of disciplines are discussing the dangers posed by deepfakes (for an overview, see Bode, Lees and Golding 2021). Chesney and Citron (2019) discuss deepfakes as a challenge to privacy, democracy, and national security. Kikerpill (2020) describes "the rise of deepfake designer porn". Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) explore the impact of "synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news". To date, there has been no study investigating how deepfakes may disrupt digital communication.

First and foremost, compared to other forms of artificial intelligence, deepfakes – if they show people – primarily replicate an individual's appearance, movements, and speech patterns. More precisely, and this seems very important for the analysis in Section 4, deepfakes indeed do not imitate individuals, but rather audios and videos representing the appearance, movements or speech patterns of individuals, and thus representations of individuals. As Magritte did with his depiction of a pipe signed '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*' (cf. Foucault 1973), we should be aware of the representational character of videos and audio. Thus, well-known personalities depicted in videos and audio are representations of the respective originals; voice and body representations then refer indexically to the original (see also Klug 2015: 508f. on the indexicality of pictorial signs). Particularly in communication that is not characterised by the participants being physically present in the same place at the same time (Hausendorf 2020: 86), linguistic signs refer to certain speakers. When I refer to deepfakes as imitations, it is important to add another layer by understanding them as imitations of representations, which is essential for following the analysis in Section 4. This perspective is illustrated in Picture 1.



Picture 1: Deepfakes as representations of representations.

Picture 1 makes clear that deepfakes do not imitate a person directly, but rather the representation of a person. In this sense, deepfakes emerge as a representation of a representation.

Certain elements of a video, such as voice, gestures, as well as elements of the body, function as signs and refer to a specific person in the real world. Thus, I understand videos as complex signs. In social media, for example, people encounter videos, and it is not always clear whether these videos show representations of real people or deepfakes. When judging whether a video depicts a real person or a deepfake, social media users rely on certain indicators. So, they also interpret videos as complex signs and take individual elements as evidence for the authenticity or non-authenticity of a video. The fact that social media users are familiar with the originals and know how, for example, the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz *usually* behaves, plays an important role in how they rate the videos.

In the following, I will use the example of alleged deepfakes to investigate how people communicatively react to these alleged imitations, how they evaluate them, and which aspects they consider relevant for their evaluation.

3 Evaluating the individual's imitation

The analysis focuses on how users engage with suspected deepfakes in social media comments. I have selected three case studies, all of which originate from social media — the primary arena where deepfakes tend to circulate.[3] Each case involves a social media post featuring a video that has prompted at least some users to

[3] The data used is social media data that cannot be made available in a repository for license reasons. The data are, however, available from the author upon reasonable request.

suspect it might be a deepfake. The first example is a video originally posted on TikTok in February 2021. TikTok is an online video platform centred around creating and sharing short-form videos (cf. Ackermann and Dewitz 2020: 72). Users can engage with these videos by leaving comments. Before 2022, TikTok's comment character limit was a few hundred characters, later increasing to several thousand. The second video was posted on X (formerly Twitter) in November 2023. Like other platforms, X imposes a character limit on comments — in this case, 280 characters. The third video appeared on Instagram in March 2023. While Instagram allows significantly longer comments — up to 2,200 characters — users typically write only brief remarks in response to the videos. Unlike the first two videos, which are confirmed deepfakes, the Instagram video was later revealed not to be a deepfake. Concerning the three case studies, I included all comments accessible to me (including replies) in my analysis. For Case 1, this comprised 1,163 comments (although it should be emphasised that TikTok only granted me access to a fraction of all comments; see Section 3.1). For Case 2, there were 577 comments, and for Case 3, 264 comments.

I was particularly interested in the aspects of the videos that users highlighted in their comments to argue either for or against the assumption that the content was a deepfake. To explore this, I analysed the comments using qualitative text analysis methods. A central theoretical concept here is *hermeneutics* — specifically, the notion of *interpretation* (van Dijk 2011: 612). Following Gardt (2017: 487), I understand interpretation as the process of uncovering the meaning of a text or a multimodal network of signs. Interpretation is thus conceived as a constructive act (Gardt 2017: 491), in which meanings derived from texts are not inherent to the texts themselves but emerge through the interpreter's engagement. Assuming—as Gardt (2017: 491) emphasizes—that texts are not containers of meaning has implications for the reproducibility of the analysis: another analyst is unlikely to arrive at exactly the same observations. At the same time, however, the results of the analysis are not arbitrary; they are methodologically guided, aiming to consciously shape the normally automatic process of understanding through linguistic interpretation, thereby making it controllable (cf. Gardt 2017: 494). Linguistic interpretation is based on detailed analysis, assuming that all parts of the text may contribute to meaning-making. In doing so, this study contributes to a better understanding of which aspects of videos social media users consider relevant when deciding whether a video is a deepfake or not. The study also sheds light on the effects of deepfakes on digital communication.

Before presenting three case analyses and then discussing the results, it is important to emphasise that the analysed social media postings with embedded videos and audio came across at different times. The first case is a video on TikTok that was posted in February 2021, the second case is a posting on X published in November 2023, and the third case is a video posted on Instagram published in March 2023. There is a time gap of more than two years between the first case and the other two, which is significant for the analysis.

The three analysed cases are not comparable in many ways: Each posting was published on a different social medium with different practices. They are also written in different languages. The communicative framing of the videos is also different: while in one case the post already points out that the sound in the video is a machine-generated recording, the other two posts leave it open whether the content is fake. However, the analysis will illustrate that in 2023, social media users will use very different criteria than in 2021 when assessing whether they have encountered a deepfake.

3.1 Tom Cruise on TikTok?

Since 2021, an account called *deeptomcruise* has been regularly publishing videos of actor Tom Cruise on the social media platform TikTok using deep learning techniques.[4] The first video, entitled *Sports*, was published in February 2021, when the account, which now has more than 5 million followers, was little known.[5] The video allegedly features Tom Cruise. He addresses TikTok users directly and then demonstrates a golf swing. He kneels again to tell "sports and TikTok fans" to wait and "see what is coming next" (see the video in footnote 5). In the comment section of the video, some users question whether the person shown is the real Tom Cruise. This uncertainty prompts them to search for evidence confirming or debunking the video's authenticity.

Picture 2: Screenshot of a video from the TikTok account deeptomcruise (link in footnote 5).

According to TikTok, there are about 36,500 comments on the video, which I originally wanted to analyse using corpus linguistics methods. However, TikTok

[4] https://www.tiktok.com/@deeptomcruise (last accessed on 14/04/2026).
[5] https://www.tiktok.com/@deeptomcruise/video/6932166297996233989?lang=de-DE (last accessed on 14/04/2026).

does not support the scientific analysis of social media posts and does not provide an API for downloading data for research purposes.[6] I therefore manually copied the comments down from the page. However, this only gave me a fraction of the allegedly published comments, which are also algorithmically tailored to my person. This way, I could only access 1163 comments. I examined these comments using qualitative linguistic methods. That means I made a detailed text analysis where every part of the text is considered potentially involved in meaning-making (cf. Kalwa 2019: 20). This allowed me to identify the linguistic and contextual features that people use to determine whether the person in the video is real or fake.

Looking at the comments, I identified three types of perspectives that emerged among commenters: Some users are convinced that it is the real Tom Cruise (1) and assume that a film crew is portraying the real Tom Cruise on a golf course. Others suspect it is an actor impersonating Tom Cruise. The commenter of example (2) believes that an actor is imitating Tom Cruise and that the posted video represents this actor, which is a representation of an imitation because, in this case, the imitation is perceived as occurring in the so-called real world. Finally, some suspect that the TikTok film is a deepfake. The commenter of (3) assumes that the imitation is not Tom Cruise himself or an actor, but a representation of him, namely, a deepfake or an imitation of a representation.[7]

(1) It's obviously the real Tom.

(2) Stunt double.

(3) Deepfake is scary.

In the comments, there is a comparison between the alleged imitation, which not all TikTok users are convinced is an imitation, and the original. Users cite various aspects of the video to prove that it is (not) the real Tom Cruise represented in the video or that the video is fake. To determine whether they are dealing with a representation of an imitation (an actor), an imitation of a representation (a

[6] Although the company has offered the option to create a researcher account since June 2024, the rights that are ceded to TikTok are contrary to the scientific ethos and unacceptable, at least to me. In return, you are given very limited rights to use and cite the data you collect, which again is at odds with making the results of the analysis understandable. If I want to create a TikTok research account, I must first create a TikTok for Developers account and agree to the TikTok for Developers Terms of Service. Here I have to agree that TikTok may use my "name, logo(s), or other identifying information or image in case studies, testimonials, examples", and to showcase my "use of our TikTok Developer Services in general." In return, I am not allowed to "make any public statement" regarding my "relationship with TikTok or access to the TikTok Developer Services without TikTok's prior written consent" (https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/tik-tok-developer-terms-of-service/en, last accessed on 14/04/2026).

[7] For reasons of research ethics, I have refrained from identifying the exact sources of the comments. In this article, I am not correcting typos in the original comments. Also, names of commenters are omitted for reasons of privacy.

deepfake), or a representation of the original, users draw on different types of knowledge in their communication: (a) knowledge of Tom Cruise's physical attributes, (b) knowledge about Cruise's usual behaviour, and (c) knowledge about TikTok's surface and technical knowledge. I introduce several comments, which are subsequently discussed.

(a) Knowledge of Tom Cruise's physical attributes

(4) It's not him his voice is not the same it's a deep fake

(5) different voice

(6) Nah he's too tall to be Tom cruise

(7) I just don't think you can fake the facial grooves and dimples. I think this is the real deal!

(8) It's him for sure. Tom has a middle tooth directly online with his nose. That's the give away

(9) there is a guy on here that looks just like Tom Cruise but he's obviously much younger.

Users interpret different aspects of the represented body as signs that refer indexically to the original, a representation of an imitator, or an imitation of a representation. In individual examples where users suspect an imitation, it is not always clear whether they are assuming a human or a technical imitation. As in 4 and 5, several users note that the voice in the video is different from that of the real Tom Cruise that they have encountered in mainstream media. While example 4 indicates the assumption of a technical imitation, the form of imitation stays unclear in example 5. Both focus on the sound sequence as a sign to determine whether it is the real Tom Cruise. Another user comments on the person's height as an indication that the video is fake (6). Yet others, however, identify small details in the face as proof that the video shows the original. For example, the user in 7 is convinced that certain aspects, such as the dimples and furrows on the face, cannot be faked. There are many more commenters who, as in 8, look closely at the teeth and the position of the teeth of the person depicted. Many users note that the person portrayed is younger than Tom Cruise and see this as an indication that it is an impersonation (9). In example (9), the user refers to a "guy on here". This statement suggests that the user assumes that another person is imitating Tom Cruise. Overall, the difference in Tom Cruise's appearance leads to the conclusion that it is fake. But the user obviously also has knowledge about the usual behaviour of Tom Cruise.

(b) Knowledge about Cruise's usual behaviour

(10) Tom Cruise posting on tik tok? Sus

(11) Not enough over the top acting to be Tom Cruise

(12) + Scientology does not allow there members to be on Tic Tok and again this very cool look alike is not as cut as Tom

Users interpret different aspects of the represented behaviour as signs that refer indexically to an imitation, a human or an AI imitation. Probably jokingly, the person in (10) says that there is too little overacting for the real Tom Cruise. In this case, it is the represented action that indicates to the user that it is an imitation, although it is left open whether the commenter is assuming an actor to imitate or a technological imitation. In (11), the commentator is questioning whether Tom Cruise is likely to post a TikTok video given his usual activities. In this context, commenters interpret missing elements as signs of imitation. The connection to Scientology, to which Tom Cruise belongs, and the presence of a TikTok account also create contradictions for users (12). However, the phrase *very cool look alike* leads to the interpretation that the commenter assumes an actor is imitating Tom Cruise.

(c) Knowledge about TikTok's surface and technical knowledge

Users also draw on their knowledge of the video-hosting service TikTok to determine whether the person in the video is the real Tom Cruise or an imitation. Furthermore, users cite their technical knowledge as evidence that the video is a deepfake – and that it is not:

(13) Is it!!! Where's his blue check mark????

(14) This video is a deepfake. The poster's name is deeptomcruise. Pay attention.

(15) Deep fake does not work putting on and off glasses, the edit would be tremendous job. And can't fake the cray cray in his eyes!

(16) Look up deep fake. This is nicely done, I agree. But if you look at his face when he's standing up and walking backwards you can see it shifting.

The user in 13 references their knowledge of TikTok's celebrity status, which is typically verified by the company with a blue tick. Comment 14 refers to the account name. The user knows that video creators assign themselves names and deduces from the chosen name that the video must be a deepfake. The total number

of comments analysed shows that in 2021, only a few users were aware of the deepfakes phenomenon, as deepfakes are rarely mentioned, and some users state that imitation technology does not work with certain movements or details (15). In this case, the commenters interpret elements of the video as evidence that it is not an imitation of a representation, but that the video was recorded in the real world. Others, on the other hand, recognise from the ways that the person in the film is shifting that it is a technologically created image (16) or an imitation of a representation.

In summary, users in the comment section rely on details from the video, their background knowledge, and their familiarity with TikTok's visual interface (Schmitz 2011) – including their awareness of technological possibilities to assess communicatively whether the video is a deepfake. The commenters interpret both the signs that refer to Tom Cruise as a person and those that refer to certain aspects of the videos as filmed by real people or artificially created videos. By responding directly to each other or simply by telling others about their confusion, they try to create shared knowledge and intersubjectivity in the interaction process (cf. Deppermann 2018: 118). Their uncertainty leads commenters to look for indicators in the video that suggest it is a fake or a real video. They interpret individual elements of the video as signs that indexically point to a fake or a representation of the original.

What the analysis shows is that commenters in 2021 still have little experience with deepfakes. They discuss individual details of the video and the context and try to determine through intersubjective exchange whether they are dealing with a deepfake or not. Users draw on different types of knowledge in their communication when arguing that they encounter a deepfake or a depiction of a real person. My further analyses will show that, over time, physical and technical aspects play a subordinate role in the assessment of whether one encounters a deepfake or not.

3.2 The *Tagesschau* admits its guilt?

On 6 November 2023, during a Monday demonstration of Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West) in Dresden, some people played an audio recording. In the audio recording, the voice of the *Tagesschau* presenter Jens Riewa is synthesised. Interpreted as a complex sign, the music in the intro and outro refers indexically to the *Tagesschau*, a German news program, as do the welcome and farewell sequences. Finally, the timbre and intonation of the voice audio refer to Jens Riewa, an announcer for the *Tagesschau*. Within the sound sequence, the speech act of apology is performed. Among other things, the voice apologises for the fact that the *Tagesschau* has allegedly spread lies in connection with the COVID pandemic.

As part of a post on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, journalist Ann-Kathrin Müller posted a video showing demonstrators and playing the audio

clip. The video received 577 comments, all of which I collected from the platform to conduct a detailed text analysis. The commenters can be divided into at least two political groups. Most of the commenters belong to the so-called 'Querdenker' movement, which accuses the public media of dishonesty. Since 2020, the term 'Querdenker' has been used as a self-description by an increasing number of people who deny the danger or even the existence of the coronavirus, criticise the state for its measures against the pandemic, refuse vaccination, and sometimes combine these negative attitudes with a belief in conspiracy ideologies or characteristics of far-right ideologies. The 'Querdenker' movement is therefore not part of the far-right spectrum, but there are ideological and personal interfaces.[8] Both the commenters close to this movement and those who distance themselves from it do not question the fake status of the audio recording. The journalist Ann-Kathrin Müller also points out in her post that this is an AI-generated deception:

Die ARD warnt, dass Audio-Tagesschau-Fakes im Umlauf sind, die suggerieren, dass bei Corona gelogen wurde u.a.
Das stimmt, habe es live bei Pegida #dd0611 gehört. Willkommen im Zeitalter der KI-gestützten Desinformation:[9]
'ARD warns that audio fakes of the Tagesschau are circulating, suggesting among other things, that Corona was a lie.
That's right, I heard it live at Pegida #dd0611. Welcome to the age of AI-assisted disinformation:'

When explaining why the audio recording is a fake, some X-users point out deviations from the familiar style of the *Tagesschau* and express knowledge of the formal elements of language (a) and knowledge of its pragmatic aspects (b).

(a) Knowledge of the formal elements of language

(17) Alter. Gruselig. Aber der Text an sich ist auch viel zu überzogen um echt zu sein. Zu viele Adjektive in den Sätzen.
'Man. Creepy. But the text itself is far too exaggerated to be real. Too many adjectives in the sentences.'

(18) Das ist so extrem DRÜBER und straight in the face…. Lächerlich, wer's für voll nimmt. Aber man glaubt, was man glauben will. Und Echokammer. Und überhaupt
'That's so extremely OVER THE TOP and right in the face.... Ridiculous if you take it seriously. But you believe what you want to believe. And echo chamber. And anyway'

[8] https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/516449/querdenker/ (last accessed on 14/04/2026).
[9] https://x.com/akm0803/status/1724128492625797544, last accessed on 14 April 2026.

(19) Wobei es bei dem grottenschlechten Textaufbau wirklich einiger Überwindung bedarf, das ernstnehmen zu können.
‘However, it takes some effort to take this seriously, given the grotty text structure.’

(20) Ähm... der Inhalt ist schon so bekloppt, dass man direkt von einem Fake ausgehen kann. Da braucht man weder auf Intonation oder Redefluss achten. Die sind einfach zu blöd, überhaupt einen glaubwürdigen Fake zu produzieren🤦
‘Um... the content is already so crazy that you can immediately assume it’s fake. You don’t need to pay attention to the intonation or the flow of the speech. They’re just too stupid to make a credible fake. 🤦’

(21) Vielen Dank für den Hinweis. Mechanisches Sprechen, falsche Betonung, null Satzmelodie, sogar falsche Wörter und gesprochene Grammatikfehler usw. kennt man gemeinhin nur von bestimmten Politikern/Sprechpuppen. Sind die auch KI?
‘Thanks for pointing this out. Mechanical speech, wrong intonation, no sentence melody, even wrong words and spoken grammar mistakes, etc., are generally only known from certain politicians/voice puppets.
Are they AI too?’

In instances 17-21, users of X refer to specific aspects of the audio recording, noting a break with the usual language of the news program. So, the commenters make metapragmatic statements. The user in 17 refers to stylistic elements when noting that too many adjectives are used. Comment 18 also refers to stylistic elements, emphasising that the audio is “so extrem DRÜBER” (*so extremely OVER THE TOP*). At the same time, the commenter positions themself in relation to the group of people who take this audio recording seriously. The metapragmatic utterance is thus linked to a social positioning in relation to one social group and a socialisation process in relation to another (cf. Spitzmüller 2019: 25-26). Such a social positioning can also be observed in 19, where there is talk of a “grottenschlechten Textaufbau” (*grotty text structure*), and can also be found quite explicitly in 20, where the group of ‘Querdenker’ – who are referred to with “die” (*they*) – is described as “zu blöd” (*too stupid*). The commenters highlight metacommunicative elements to discredit the ‘Querdenker’ group. Comment 21, which belongs to this group, also engages with meta-linguistic aspects of the audio recording, such as intonation, lexis, and grammar, but attributes deviations from standard language to human speakers, specifically certain politicians.

Most commenters, however, attribute the recognition of the recording as fake to a break in their expectations and point out pragmatic aspects of language:

(b) Pragmatic aspects of language

(22) LOL, das ist kein Fake und keine “Desinformation”, sondern Satire. Wer hier nicht merkt, dass das nicht real ist. hat wohl die letzten Jahre keine @tagesschaugesehen. Die Tagesschau würde ihre Fehler nie so offen zugeben.
‘LOL, this isn’t fake or “disinformation”, it’s satire. Anyone here who doesn’t realise this isn’t real probably hasn't watched @tagesschau for the last few years. The Tagesschau would never admit their mistakes so openly.’

(23) Wäre der ÖRR aufrichtig, wäre es längst mal Zeit sich zu entschuldigen. Da wäre so eine Klarstellung das absolute Minimum!
‘If the ÖRR were sincere, it would have been time to apologise by now. Such a clarification would be the absolute minimum!’

(24) Selbstverständlich würdet ihr euch eure Verbrechen niemals eingestehen. Um derartig kriminell und skrupellos agieren zu können wie ihr es immer wieder tut, muss man schließlich menschlich absolut verkommen sein.
‘Of course, you would never admit to your crimes. After all, you must be absolutely depraved as a human being to act as criminally and ruthlessly as you do time and time again.’

(25) mein weiß direkt das es Fake ist, die Tagesschau würde niemals “Entschuldigung” sagen ;-) Ironie off
‘You know it’s fake, the Tagesschau would never say “sorry” ;-) Irony off’

(26) Ich glaube nicht dass die Tagesschau sagen würde dass sie einen seit 3 Jahren anlügt
‘I don’t think the Tagesschau would say they’ve been lying to you for 3 years.’

(27) Das ist doch jedem denkenden Menschen sofort klar, dass das ein Fake sein muss. Als ob die ARD sowas Selbstkritisches bringen würde!
‘It’s immediately clear to any thinking person that this must be a fake. As if the ARD would broadcast something so self-critical!’

(28) Das einzige was an dem ganzen falsch ist, ist dass sich die Verantwortlichen nicht entschuldigen werden. Das was da vom Band lief, ist und bleibt aber richtig. Egal wo es herkommt.
‘The only thing wrong with the whole thing is that those responsible will not apologise. But what came off the audio tape is and remains right. No matter where it comes from.’

The examples listed here all contain metapragmatic statements, as the illocutionary speech acts of apologising and admitting mistakes are seen as contradictory to the *Tagesschau*. However, some of the users do not attribute this to the communication situation of a news program, but rather to what they see as the prevailing dishonesty of media producers. This basic accusation against the public media seems to be typical of the 'Querdenker' scene. Here, too, social positioning is achieved through metapragmatic statements. The users express their certainty that it is a fake through various linguistic means. In some cases, they indicate their expectation by using the second subjunctive in combination with negation: *the news would never* (22, 25 and 26), *I do not think that the news would say* (26), *as if the news would bring* (27). This presupposes, at the same time, how the *Tagesschau* normally acts according to the commenters. This becomes clear in 23, where the use of the subjunctive presupposes that the public broadcaster is not honest.

Unlike in the case of Deeptomcruise's comments, the commenters here are less inclined to dissect the audio into individual elements and interpret them as signs of a fake. This might be due to the different media – video deepfake in 4.1 and audio deepfake in 4.2 – but it might also be because social media users were more used to deepfakes in 2023 than in 2021. Now, the mere fact that something is unexpected leads to the assumption that the audio must be fake. In the examples discussed in this section, the commenters see the linguistic practice of apologising as an indicator of a fake, as well as individual lexical devices that seem atypical.

3.3 The German Chancellor announces a late-night show?

I will now proceed by analysing another case: a posting on Instagram published in March 2023. This case differs from the previous two, as it does not feature a deepfake, yet many users believe that it does. A video shared in an Instagram post by the *Neoraggazzi* account on 23/03/2023 is suspected of being a deepfake. Neo Raggazzi is a German talk show on the ZDF Neo channel. The associated account uses the post to refer to the ZDF late-night show "Studio Schmitt". The first episode of the new season of the ZDF late-night show features comedian Felix Lohbrecht. The video is introduced with the following text:[10]

Standesgemäß starten wir in die neue Staffel mit dem @bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz. 🤝
'We start the new season in style with @bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz. 🤝'

The video shows former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in an empty office. He announces the late-night show and thereby addresses Felix Lohbrecht.

[10] https://www.instagram.com/neoragazzi/reel/CpSnTCPPqlL/ (last accessed on 26/08/2025). The account @neoraggazi has since been removed from Instagram.

Picture 3: Screenshot from the video of the Instagram post (see footnote 10).

There are 264 comments on this video, all of which I have once again analysed using qualitative text analysis. In the comments section, Instagram users are very clear in expressing their opinion that this is a fake:

(29) Save KI
'Save AI'

(30) Das macht mir ehrlich gesagt richtig Angst dass man sowas so gut faken kann
'Honestly, it freaks me out how well something like this can be faked'

(31) Krass wie echt die AI wirkt 👏😳
'It's amazing how real the AI looks 👏😳'

(32) AI oder chat gbt??? Wahnsinn
'AI or chat gbt??? Madness'

(33) Wie in einer Black mirror Folge…
'Like in a Black mirror episode...'

(34) … mitein….ander..🤣🤣
'…to…ge...ther 🤣🤣'

(35) @studioschmitt Whaaaaa - olle Scholz legt für euch den Mantel ab, der unsichtbar macht? Ritterschlag! Glaub ich nicht
'@studioschmitt Whaaaaat – old Scholz takes off the invisibility cloak just for you? That's a knighthood-level honor! Yeah, right – I don't buy it.'

(36) Entweder DeepFake oder die Regierung hat endlich einen Sinn für Humor. Befürchte Ersteres 😩
'Either it's a deepfake, or the government has finally developed a sense of humour. I think it's the former.'

(37) Anders als das das nen deepfake ist, kann ich's mir nicht erklären.
'I can't explain it any other way – must be a deepfake.'

While in 2021, TikTok users were still comparing the image to the original concerning the Tom Cruise deepfake video and expressing uncertainty about the authenticity of the video, some of the commenters on the Instagram post already had some experience with artificial intelligence. Only if there is already experience with AI-generated videos, comments such as 29, in which it is expressed that one is certain that artificial intelligence was used here, make sense. The formulation of the fear that something can be faked so well (30) also expresses that the commenter assumes a generative AI here. In example 31, the commenter also assumes that AI plays a role in the posted video. Some commenters are sure this is a fake video, as in 32, when they suggest AI or chat gbt (sic!), or when they refer to the science fiction series Black Mirror, as in 33. From a linguistic point of view, the commentary in 34, which reproduces part of Olaf Scholz's speech, is also particularly interesting. In this comment, the user highlights a pause made by the supposed Olaf Scholz in a word, by inserting three dots into this word. However, this emphasis on the pause only makes sense if the commenter perceives it as unusual. This suggests that they associate such pauses with non-human speech. The smiling emojis further indicate that the commenter believes the video was generated by AI. The comments shown in 29 to 34, therefore, do not reveal any uncertainty regarding the authenticity of the posted video, but rather a conviction that it is a fake. This conviction again results from the break with the expectations of media recipients: Users are confused that the former Chancellor, who rarely speaks in public, is announcing a late-night show (35). For most of the commenters, the video's inauthenticity is beyond question. They express their knowledge that it is a fake by presupposing its classification as a deepfake, often without further explanation. The commenter in 36 gives two possible explanations for the video: Either it's a deepfake or the government has a sense of humour, and he chooses the first, apparently because he thinks it's the more likely option. The commenter in 37 expresses their confusion very clearly: "I can't explain it any other way – must be a deepfake." The former chancellery, however, confirms the authenticity of the speech: Olaf Scholz did indeed announce the late-night show.[11] Fallis (2021: 634) points out that "even if a deepfake is indistinguishable from a genuine video based purely on a visual inspection of the image, we might still be able to distinguish it from a genuine video just because the content is *implausible* (emphasised in the original). For the assessment of (supposed) deepfakes, it is important that social media users know the individuals who are (supposedly) being imitated, knowledge about their usual behaviour, including language behaviour. The comments on the video of Olaf Scholz show that the assumed implausibility here leads commenters

[11] https://www.rnd.de/medien/tommi-schmitt-olaf-scholz-haelt-fernsehansprache-deepfake-oder-echt-MBRX6CTTMJDT7GXYMDVRUWU5IY.html (last accessed on 14/04/2026).

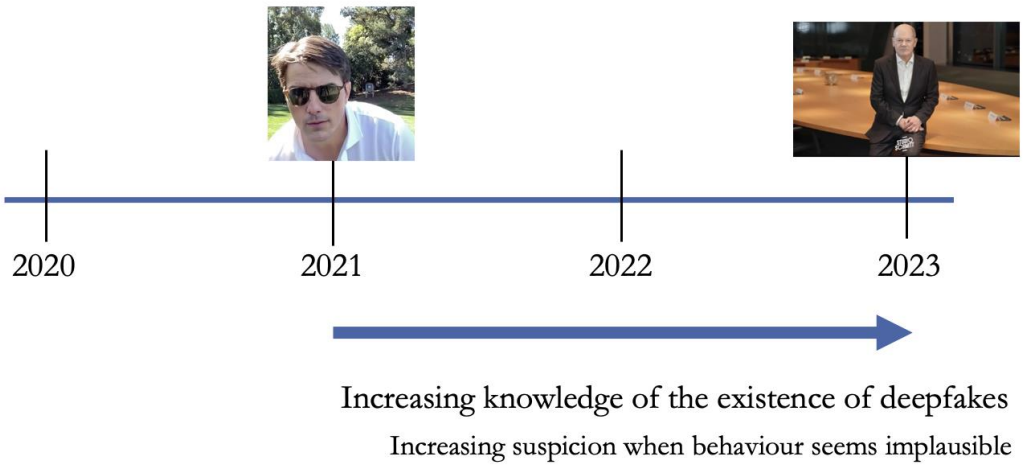
to assume that the video was generated by artificial intelligence, even though it shows the real Olaf Scholz.

4 Discussion and conclusion

As I demonstrated in Section 2, the aspect of human resemblance plays a role in many definitions of AI, and we constantly encounter anthropomorphic representations of AI in public discourse. I have therefore chosen to approach this phenomenon of human resemblance through the concept of imitation. I started by discussing what aspects of human communication AI imitates. Pointing out that generative AI is capable of imitating various aspects of human communication, I finally focused on deepfakes, which are a special case of imitation because they mimic individuals. This was important for the analysis: People possess prior knowledge about certain public figures, such as actors, journalists, or politicians. When they see videos featuring these individuals, they bring with them expectations about how they typically behave. As the analysis of three case studies has shown, when confronted with apparent imitations of these figures, viewers assess whether the behaviour depicted appears plausible. In this paper, I was interested in how people communicatively navigate supposed deepfakes.[12] Analysing Case 1 (*deeptomcruise*), it became clear that the commenters interpreted different elements of the videos as indicators that they were encountering either a representation of the original, a representation of a human imitation, or an imitation of a representation. They used different types of knowledge to evaluate the video: Knowledge of Tom Cruise's physical attributes, general world knowledge and technical knowledge.

The other two cases showed that, with increasing awareness of the existence of deepfakes, people discussed the presented videos and audio less in detail, instead focusing more on general aspects that broke their expectations. Regarding the research question, how the discourse around deepfakes evolved with increased knowledge about their existence, one can state that increasing knowledge leads to increasing mistrust in posted videos, particularly when social media users see behaviour that seems implausible to them to a certain extent:

[12] I must point out that I assumed that the comments on the social media posts were written by people.



Picture 4: Increasing suspicion with increasing knowledge about deepfakes.

The discussed case studies exhibit several differences; for instance, they are written in different languages and were published at different points in time. Nevertheless, they indicate that awareness of the existence of deepfakes makes people more sceptical. In this way, deepfakes influence the societal common ground and, to a certain extent, contribute to its fragmentation

Drawing on Schwab (2016), Whittaker et al. (2023: 1) postulate that contemporary societies are experiencing "a shift towards the 4th Industrial Revolution — an era defined by increasingly embedded digitization within society, blurring the lines between the physical and digital, and subsequently what it means to be human". In this context, deepfakes play a special role, as they "leverage powerful techniques from machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) to manipulate or generate visual and audio content with a high potential to deceive" (Kietzmann et al. 2020: 136). However, the dangers posed by the existence of deepfakes go beyond manipulation through artificially generated content; they also extend to suspicion in videos in which real persons are depicted, as I demonstrated in Section 4.3. This may lead to a danger for modern societies: Krämer (2021: 29) describes humans as epistemically dependent beings. Drawing on Shapin (1994: XXV), she emphasises that knowledge is a collective good. In this context, she underlines the inescapability of the sign-bound nature of knowledge. Since much of what we know is not individually verifiable, knowledge also depends on testimony. So, trust in what others tell us in words, writings, and images is unavoidable (Krämer 2021: 29). Krämer (2021: 32) clearly states that knowledge based on testimony marks an irreplaceable dimension of our knowledge cultures. It follows that if second-hand knowledge is ubiquitous, then trust is a foundation of our cognitive practices. Krämer (2021: 35) emphasises that deepfakes contribute to the prevailing uncertainty about how to trust what is presented in the media. Fallis

(2021: 625) points out that, as "deepfakes become more prevalent, it may be epistemically irresponsible to simply believe that what is depicted in a video actually occurred." Although it is dangerous to believe everything you see, doubting the authenticity of every communicative contribution also puts the cornerstones of communication at risk. So, regarding the social implications of these developments (research question 3), one can state that the implausibility of digitally presented video and audio today often leads to scepticism and disruption. In the context of generative AI, "concerns about the possibility of undermining trust in democratic processes, especially elections" are repeatedly expressed (Labuz and Nehring 2024: 1). The dangers of deepfakes are repeatedly pointed out. However, the question also arises as to whether mistrust in the authenticity of all those videos that break collective expectations also poses a threat to social cohesion. Deepfakes as attacks on the *I only believe what I see* belief (Bovenschulte 2019: 1) lead us to question what we see as soon as it presents something unexpected. In addition to the danger of deception, the existence of deepfakes also entails the danger of no longer believing what is real. A subsequent linguistic analysis could then be devoted to precisely this formulated doubt, to find out something about social expectations through communication about deepfakes.

In a further step, social media postings and their comments could be analysed more systematically to identify discursive patterns. It seems interesting to explore whether larger corpora of data on false assumptions in the context of so-called artificial intelligence could be used to identify linguistic practices of suspicion in digital communication. In this way, linguistic analysis can also reveal contrasts between different languages, different age groups or different cultural backgrounds. It could be interesting to look at what a particular community expects and where they see a break in expectation. This could also help to identify various social common grounds.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this contribution.

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