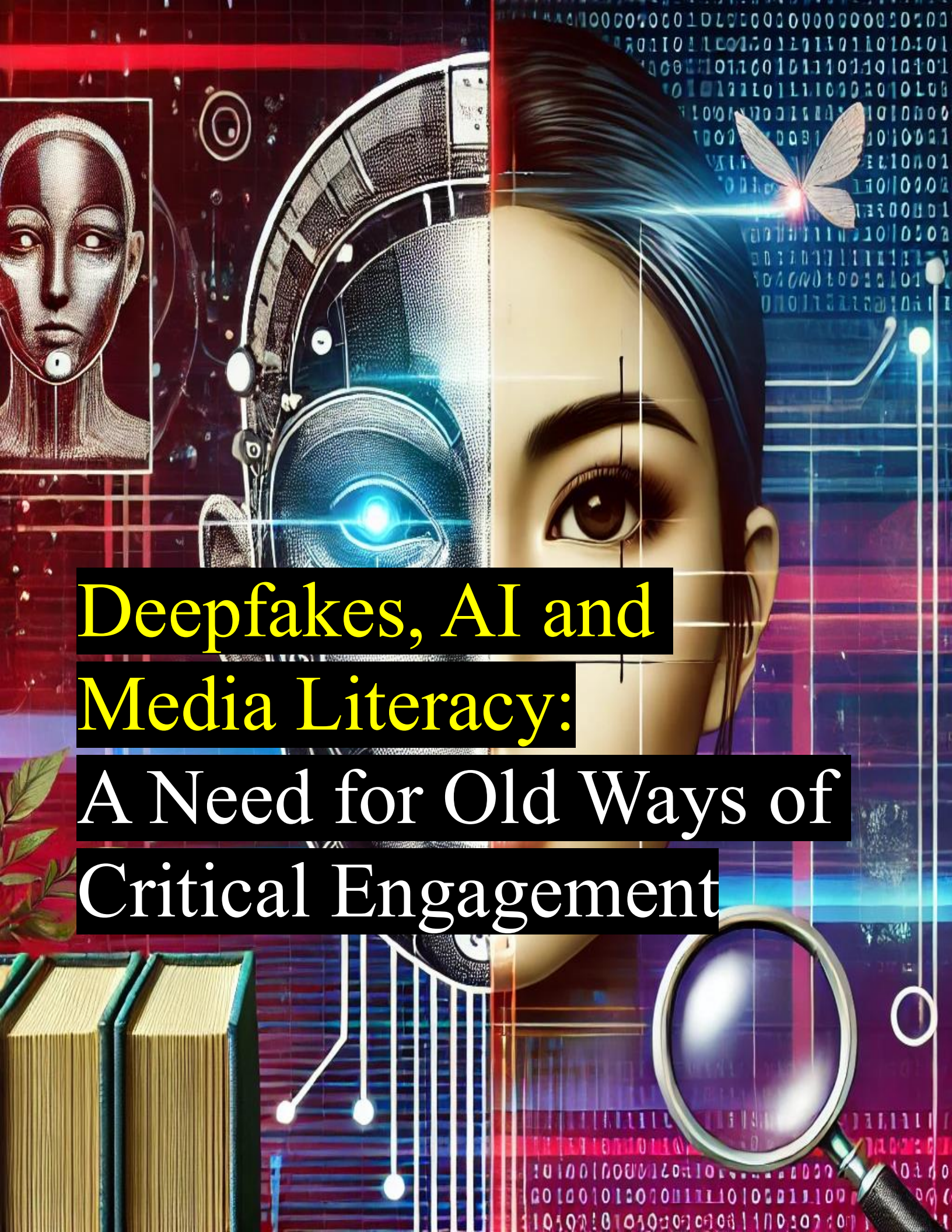




Deepfakes, AI and Media Literacy:

A Need for Old Ways of
Critical Engagement

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Deepfakes use artificial intelligence to predict how people might appear from different angles or performing actions not originally recorded, often merging visual and audio samples from various sources to create convincing but false representations. Moreover, deepfakes can now be produced cheaply by non-experts. In our already visually driven culture, especially in the TV and internet age, this undeniably introduces new avenues for bullying and harassment, as images can be more damaging than words. However, does this signal the onset of the post-truth “infocalypse” that some foresee, where counterfeit videos are easily made, and bad actors can dismiss legitimate, incriminating footage? Such a conclusion is premature, especially if we engage with media using the same critical thinking we applied before photography’s invention.

Before the photographic age, written and pictorial accounts were not considered definitive proof of the events they conveyed. We should have maintained this critical perspective, as photographs and video recordings can also be misleading.

U.S. war propaganda offers an example. During the 1991 Gulf War, under George H. Bush’s leadership, American news audiences frequently saw videos of Patriot missiles launching, accompanied by narratives from reporters or military officials claiming the final blast marked the destruction of Iraqi Scud rockets. However, while the launches and detonations were real, the explosions seldom indicated a successful interception. Instead, they were often caused by premature detonations (see Figure 1). Today, deepfaked images of a Patriot destroying an incoming missile might be created, but they would likely be less convincing than the 90s videos, as the latter were bolstered by eyewitnesses unable to detect the deception.



Figure 1: The first two stills show the trajectory of a Patriot missile, but does this third image show it intercepting a Scud?

In the lead-up to the Gulf War, a widely circulated video featured a young woman identified as “Nayirah” emotionally recounting Iraqi atrocities to the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Though the video itself was genuine, the woman was later revealed to be the Kuwaiti Ambassador’s daughter, and her story was fabricated (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Roughly a decade later, under the leadership of George W. Bush, the U.S. commenced another invasion of Iraq. There was testimony, including alleged photographic evidence, claiming that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (see Figure 3). Yet these weapons were never found after the invasion.



Figure 3

Another example is the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Iraq (see Figure 4). The video footage (and photographic stills) of the event were genuine, showing Iraqis seemingly welcoming U.S.-led forces as liberators. However, misleading techniques were used that weren't clear to viewers. U.S. military personnel helped topple the statue and provided props to the crowd. Camera operators used tight shots to make the crowd seem larger and more celebratory. The video was edited (and as filmmakers know, editing can create impressions or narratives not in the raw footage). Thus, whether in the era of deep-fakes or not, skepticism toward images – both still and moving – was and remains warranted.



Figure 4

Images from the deepfake era, then, require critical scrutiny but this remains the case even when photographs are genuine. One case is a photo retweeted by Yair Netanyahu, Benjamin Netanyahu's son, which purportedly showed a large turnout of Arab voters with the clear intention of getting right-leaning Israeli Jews to cast their ballots. However, the photograph was from Turkey (Figure 5). Another instance involved an image of a camp, released by Israeli officials, intended to depict well-cared-for Palestinian (Gazan) refugees. It was later revealed that the photo was from the Moldova-Ukraine border (Figure 6). Israeli officials later clarified that the image was used for "illustrative purposes".



Figures 5 and 6

Again, these last two photos were not deepfakes, but their impact would have been similar if they were, as the intent was still to deceive through imagery. The rise of deepfakes, therefore, does not necessarily herald the onset of a post-truth “infocalypse”. Instead, if the increasing prevalence of deepfakes makes us more cautious about accepting images at face value, their proliferation may actually serve as a corrective, challenging our previously uncritical assumptions about photograph-like images.