Abstract

In 2020, the documentary film Welcome to Chechnya disguised the sources it portrayed using deepfake-like 'digital masks', to wide acclaim: many described the use of the technology in this way to be game-changing for the industry. This qualitative study examines documentary filmmakers' and video journalists' (practitioners') perceptions of the benefits and limitations of the use of deepfakes, or AI-assisted synthetic media, to anonymise sources in their work, in the context of theoretical understandings of photographic realism and applied journalistic ethics. Through one unstructured interview with the film's visual effects supervisor, Ryan Laney, and eight semi-structured interviews with practitioners who have previously visually disguised sources, the study identifies four key themes of practitioners' views about the use of deepfakes as a tool to anonymise: the impacts on practitioner-source relations, practical considerations, aesthetic impacts of synthetic media and broader industry implications. Overall, practitioners emphasised the limitations of the potential use of deepfakes in this context, much more than the benefits.