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The President

Judith Igelsböck

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Honourable Mention – Short Story – Judith Igelsböck

Monday 7am. The president is walking through the corridor on her way to the office as she witnesses how, in a nearby room, some of her closest colleagues are sitting in front of a screen, laughing their asses off. Are they laughing about me? she wonders. She recognizes her voice and also her image while silently approaching the screen. As her colleagues notice that she has entered the room, they quickly turn off the video and immediately start apologizing.

Sorry, one of the colleagues says, we should not have even watched this. It is just yet another 'deep fake' somebody found yesterday. Don't even think about it. Forget that it exists. You do not need to worry about that at all.

But what is it about? the president asks. What is the fake me saying?

Nothing, a colleague replies. It is just pure crap.

Would you send me the link to this video or, even better, could you download it for me, please? the president insists, I need to attend a meeting now.

Monday 9pm. The president returns home. She briefly lets her team know that she does not need anything anymore and takes a shower. She has cancelled her evening yoga session with her personal trainer. Better tomorrow. She picks up a beer from the fridge, lights a cigarette and jumps into her bed. Again, she skims through her mail. Nothing extremely urgent, she happily notices. She clicks on the email with the subject matter 'Deep fake from the morning'. She knows that this is probably not a good idea, but she cannot leave it. Dear Marta, the email says, please find enclosed the link to the downloaded deep fake from the morning. I understand that you are curious, but I would not recommend watching it. It is not pornographic or anything but, still, we do not know who is behind it yet. It did not create much public attention, in any case. Nevertheless, you should better think of yourself and your actual life. We will take care of the rest. Have a nice evening, Mitzi.

Now the president got even more curious. She picks up another small beer and starts watching the video on big screen in her bedroom. It is incredible, she notices. Of course, she would not have believed for a second that this was really her. But she is surprised that the video doesn't give her the creeps at all. She is even intrigued. The video is a sort of dark comedy of her current presidency. Somebody has taken a lot of time and effort to deconstruct the politics she is pursuing. Who is behind this, she wonders? Who takes the time to create such content? Political opponents? Students in computer science? A frustrated citizen who spends the whole day in front of the TV? Activists? Is it just one person or a whole team? Is it a professional campaign against her or the past time of some wannabe politician? She has a hard time falling asleep.

Tuesday 7:30am. The president is late for her meeting. Her assistant brings her an extra cup of coffee. Mitzi, the president asks, have you figured out who is behind this deep fake video? Are you still thinking about this? Mitzi replies, we are working on it. You do not need to worry about it at all. Hardly anybody seemed to be interested in the video. Deep fakes have become such a common thing. Nobody takes them seriously anymore. And all eyes are on the outbreak of the volcano. Speaking of which, the plan is that you will leave at 2pm to meet the local authorities. I will assemble a proper outfit for you and join you on the trip. I will provide you with an update of the latest developments later. Have a good morning.

Tuesday 9:30pm. The president is in the car staring out of the window. She is tired from this trip and got a headache on the plane. She sends a message to the yoga teacher who is waiting for her: I'll be there soon, sorry for the delay.

The yoga makes her feel a little better. She closes her eyes to enjoy the final pose, Shavasana, and breathes deeply. The purpose of this exercise is not to think of anything, she knows. But the image of herself who is not herself does not move out of her head.

Wednesday 7am. The president is on her way to the office. Skimming through her emails. Good news, Mitzi writes, we believe that we have an idea where the video is coming from. It just seems to be a 'lay deep-faker'. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to find the person so fast. We will keep doing more research, but from what it seems, there is no reason to be worried, as we suspected. Happy to hear, the president replies, have you contacted the person?

Wednesday 12am. The president is returning to the office from a reception in a nearby town. Her colleagues have picked up lunch for all. Regarding the deep-fake, Mitzi says, as she enters her office with an espresso and the idea to briefly go through the afternoon schedule with her, what do you mean by contacting the person? It is not really how we are working. We are trying to understand whether this was more of a joke or a sort of 'attack.' It has all the looks of being more of a project out of boredom or something of the like. Most probably, there is no reason to be worried. The president lowers the voice when she replies: Mitzi, do you have the contact information? I would really appreciate to be informed about all of the details, not only about what you think is relevant for me. Of course, Mitzi replies, I will send you all we have.

Wednesday 5pm. Two more events. The president thinks about how much she would love to cancel and just take two days off. Today she is not in the mood at all. She knows that it looks unprofessional but she is checking the inbox while waiting for her turn to speak. Mitzi has sent a 10-page report containing all of the information they have found on the alleged deep-faker, including three email addresses and a telephone number. Deep Fake: Confidential and unconfirmed, it says in the subject matter. She is surprised to learn that apparently a 56 years old woman has published the video. She has been working as a mathematics teacher for the last 30 years, has two kids who are both studying at different universities, and divorced from her husband 6 years ago. She is living in the countryside, more than 1000 kilometres away from here. She has an absolutely clean slate. The president knows that this is what Mitzi wanted to avoid, when she chooses one of her non-official email addresses that she has kept for newsletters from online-shops and other kind of spam and starts typing: Dear 'Ms. President', I have watched this recent video of yours (or should I say of mine) in which you criticize my work. I was wondering whether you could also impersonate the president you would wish for? What is it that you would like me to do? Is there the possibility of producing a constructive deep-fake?
If yes, I would like to get in conversation.
Kind regards, The President.

Thursday 5:15am. The president wakes up before the alarm rings. She has a bad feeling. What was she doing? Why would she get in contact with a person who is deep-faking her? She has no idea about her intentions and also not whether it was really her or not. She checks the mail. No reply. She has a hard time going back to sleep and finally decides to take a shower and start the day early.

Thursday 9pm. Still no reply. Maybe there won't be any, the president thinks. She meets with a friend in her favourite bar. They are sitting in a booth that allows them to watch other guests, while they cannot be seen. The president loves listening to her friend's stories. She lives the life of a 20-year-old student, always dating three people at the same time. Together they are usually debating about who she should meet again and who maybe not. When was the last date I had? the president wonders. Must be more than two years ago. And it was such a disaster, she remembers.

Friday 7am. The president wakes up with a slight headache. She cancels the first meeting and takes a stroll with her dog in the nearby woods. She is not happy that upon return she immediately checks the mail. Nothing. She is looking in the spam folder. And there it is: 'Happy to talk', it says. The reply came from another email address, none of the ones mentioned in the report. There is an invitation to a video-call. Subject matter: 'President meets President.' The president can feel her heart beating fast. Time: Saturday October 30, 2021 08:00 PM Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome, Stockholm, Vienna. She decides to ignore the mail for now and jumps into the shower.

Friday 10pm. The email kept distracting her during the whole day. What should she do? Can she join such a meeting? Is it going to be a trap? Would that cost her the presidency in the end? Is she going to get known for being the most stupid president ever – inviting her enemies? Should she involve Mitzi? She has not taken any action throughout the whole day and now –sitting on the couch with a beer and a pizza– she is staring at the email. And then she suddenly replies: Great. Let's talk! See you tomorrow. And to her own surprise she presses the send button.

Saturday 9am. The president has slept wonderfully. She feels revived and for the first time in a while, full of power. Of course, she also has to attend a few events today, but this will be done in a couple of hours. A funeral, an opening of a festival, and a birthday celebration. She takes the dog outside. It is a beautifully sunny day.

Saturday 7:45pm. The president cools her nerves with a strong drink. Just do not join the call, she tells herself. She does not remember when was the last time she was that nervous. Why not, she now hears herself thinking, what can go wrong? What else is there to do this evening? She imagines the meeting being aired live in one of these horrifying private television channels, or going viral on diverse social media. But then, curiosity prevails. At exactly 8pm she joins the meeting. And as soon as the connection is established, she looks into her own face. Good evening, the fake her says in her voice. Good evening, she replies…

The short story 'The President' is inspired by a homonymous and semi-documentary novel written by Clemens Berger (2020) in which the author takes us to the moment in Jay Immer's life in which he (with immigrant parents and having worked as policeman his entire life) is hired as body-double for the president Ronald Reagan. While at first Jay Immer enjoys the excitement and privilege that comes with this position, he continuously finds himself parting

away from Reagan's political agenda, specifically with regards to labour rights and environmental sustainability. Gradually, Jay Immer turns from being a dutiful impersonator into an 'evil twin.'

In the short story, 'The President' gets transferred into an imaginary present-day nation in Europe. It is playing with the very same issues, namely: impersonators and doubles, yet in the 'digital age'. While the 'original' novel narrates from a body-double going rogue, in the digital version of 'The President' what is usually considered to be a variety of an 'evil twin' of unclear intentions and origins (the deep fake) turns out to be a potential 'twin stranger', creating the possibility for a lonely president to reconnect with the world.

Writing digital twin fiction –such as the short story 'The President'– is part of an ongoing project[1] that revolves around the metaphor of the 'digital twin': a current hyped-up expression of intelligent digital representation and simulation. By now, digital twins have mostly been deployed in industrial production (e.g., for predictive maintenance) and urban development (e.g., for the simulation of future mobility solutions), but digital twins are also imagined to be useful as medical applications, as for instance in preventive tele-care (see e.g., Apte & Spanes 2021, Bruynseels et al. 2018, Lattanzi et al. 2021). In the promissory discourse, the digital twin gets depicted as an intelligent replica of a 'real world' entity, which –due to continuous technological advancement and increasing availability of 'real-time' data– continuously progresses with the 'original'.

The social sciences have highlighted in various ways, however, that digital worlds are not solely representational spaces but integral parts of our reality – with performative, and accordingly, transformational powers. Despite the reductionist deployment of the metaphor of the digital twin, the project does not argue for dismissing it all along. In contrast, it seeks to explore potential ways of dealing with digital representation and data 'about us' and 'our worlds' through the metaphor of the twin. Concretely, the discourse on digital twins is confronted with a variety of twin types and twin-relations human twin studies and twin fiction have been generating (such as the twin stranger, the evil twin, the parasitical twin, see e.g., Sullivan 2004, Viney 2021). Narrating digital twin relations creatively gives space to those facets the promoters of digital twin technologies implicitly capitalize on (such as our fascination with twins) or those dimensions that tend to get silenced (such as matters of ownership, algorithmic injustice, privacy, transparency, or artificial unintelligence, see e.g., Broussard 2018, Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy 2017).

To give an example: Following the logics of Shakespeare's 'Comedy of Errors', a consumer of a medical digital twin application for preventive care could be fed with somebody else's data, which in turn could positively or negatively influence on her well-being. In another story, the very same application could suddenly be unavailable due to the bankruptcy of the software company, leaving our protagonist with the feeling of having left a part of her body, and confronting her with the challenge of either needing to redevelop a sense for her body or finding a way to recreate the digital twin in some way (just like in the heart-breaking graphic novel 'The Phantom Twin' by Brown 2020).

Fiction allows the exploration of a multiplicity of possible digital twin relations without the need of having to think too much about technical accuracy or the question of whether a digital twin technology is or will be existing in this exact way or not. At the same time, writing digital twin fiction opens up for a critical expansion of the current digital twin discourse, which is presenting the digital twin as 'ready-to-use', fully unproblematic, and politically neutral 'product.' Parting away from that narrow vision, digital twin fiction seeks to encourage a critical yet techno-optimistic engagement with emerging technologies, and wanting to share the impression that –just like human twin relations– digital twin relations can be manifold and that we have a stake in defining and shaping what they will become.

1 https://www.mcts.tum.de/en/research/der-digitale-zwilling-viel-mehr-als-ein-abbild/

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Author information

judith.igelsboeck(at)tum.de
Judith Igelsböck is a social researcher specialized on the study of emerging technologies and innovation. She is working in the Department of Science, Technology and Society of the Technical University of Munich (TUM) and in the Linz Institute of Technology (LIT) of the Johannes Kepler University (JKU). Judith enjoys experimenting with research methods and derives a lot of inspiration from the arts and collaborations with artists.

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