

Opinions

This new technology could send American politics into a tailspin

By Ben Sasse

October 19 at 5:26 PM

Ben Sasse, a Republican, represents Nebraska in the Senate and is the author of the new book “[Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal](#),” from which this op-ed was adapted.

Flash forward two years and consider these hypotheticals. You’re seated at your desk, having taken your second sip of coffee and just beginning to contemplate the breakfast sandwich steaming in the bag in front of you. You click on your favorite news site, one you trust. “Unearthed Video Shows President Conspiring with Putin.” You can’t resist.

The video, in ultrahigh definition, shows then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin examining an electoral map of the United States. They are nodding and laughing as they appear to discuss efforts to swing the election to Trump. Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump smile wanly in the background. The report notes that Trump’s movements on the day in question are difficult to pin down.

Alternate scenario: Same day, same coffee and sandwich. This time, the headline reports the discovery of an audio recording of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch brainstorming about how to derail the FBI investigation of Clinton’s use of a private server to handle classified emails. The recording’s date is unclear, but its quality is perfect; Clinton and Lynch can be heard discussing the attorney general’s [airport tarmac meeting](#) with former president Bill Clinton in Phoenix on June 27, 2016.

The recordings in these hypothetical scenarios are fake — but who are you going to believe? Who will your neighbors believe? The government? A news outlet you distrust?

If you thought the fight over Brett M. Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation couldn’t have been more horrible, buckle your seat belts. Imagine how the public divisions would have deepened had there been fake-but-plausible video of an undergraduate Kavanaugh [partying hard](#) at Yale, or fake-but-plausible audio of Senate Democratic Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) huddling on strategy calls with lawyers for Kavanaugh’s accusers.

Deepfakes — seemingly authentic video or audio recordings that can spread like wildfire online — are likely to send American politics into a tailspin, and Washington isn’t paying nearly enough attention to the very real danger that’s right around the corner.

Consider: In December 2017, an amateur coder named “DeepFakes” was [altering porn videos](#) by digitally substituting the faces of female celebrities for the porn stars’. Not much of a hobby, but it was effective enough to prompt news coverage. Since then, the technology has improved and is readily available. The word deepfake has become a generic noun for the use of machine-learning algorithms and facial-mapping technology to digitally manipulate people’s voices, bodies and faces. And the technology is increasingly so realistic that the deepfakes are almost impossible to detect.

Creepy, right? Now imagine what will happen when America’s enemies use this technology for less sleazy but more strategically sinister purposes.

I spoke recently with one of the most senior U.S. intelligence officials, who told me that many leaders in his community think we’re on the verge of a deepfakes “perfect storm.” The storm has three critical ingredients: First, this new technology is staggering in its disruptive potential yet relatively simple and cheap to produce. Second, our enemies are eager to undermine us. With the [collapse of the Russian economy](#), Putin is trying to maintain unity at home by finding a common enemy abroad. He has little to lose and lots to gain — it’s far easier to weaken U.S. domestic support for NATO than to actually fight NATO head-on. Russia hasn’t mastered these information operations yet, but China is running scout-team offense behind every play. China will eventually be incredibly good at this, and we are not ready.

The United States isn’t ready largely because of this perfect storm’s third ingredient: We are so domestically divided right now, about who we are and what we hold in common, that malevolent foreign actors can pick at dozens of scabs as they seek to weaken us. In many of the current domestic flash points — over guns and geography, race and gender, religion and institutions — the nation’s cultural, political and even economic leaders often seem more interested in fomenting discord than in rallying us around a shared battle plan.

How to prevent the potentially catastrophic use of deepfakes? One part of the solution obviously is to ramp up our offensive and defensive cyber efforts. The U.S. military and intelligence communities are not yet where they need to be to fight the wicked hybrid and technologically enabled “gray space” war. The government itself must be modernized for the digital age in a host of ways.

But what can we the people do about the deepfake threat? We can work hard to roll back the distrust of our opponents that makes us more susceptible to the effects of disinformation. Rising political tribalism, shamelessly exaggerating our opponents’ claims or behavior, is leaving us vulnerable: No one loves America’s internal fighting — and our increasingly siloed news consumption — more than Vladimir Putin.

One of the most important ways to combat the gathering storm is to be aware that it’s coming — to become more mindful of the ways that confirmation bias and narrower networks distort our view of reality. Another step: Vow to give your perceived political antagonists the benefit of the doubt. Some of

the United States’ enemies now assume, perhaps rightly, that we hate each other so much that we’d sooner collaborate with them than do the difficult work of listening to each other.

It doesn’t need to be this way — but national recovery won’t come from Washington. It has to start with you.

Read more:

[Jennifer Rubin: Whatever Republicans are doing isn’t helping](#)

[E.J. Dionne Jr.: No one is an ‘animal’](#)

[Jennifer Rubin: The pink resistance is growing](#)

[Charles Lane: We’re staying silent out of fear](#)

[Michael Gerson: Tribalism triumphs in America](#)



Thank you.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

Stories from The Lily

The Lily, a publication of The Washington Post, elevates stories about women.

[Diana Evans’s ‘Ordinary People’ looks at what happens to love after infatuation](#)



Perspective

[My husband and I struggled with division of labor when we had our first child. Here’s what we did.](#)



Perspective

Will the #MeToo Movement lead to lasting social change?
Six women weigh in.

