

'This here is a true representation of who I was': Synthetic media and the authority of the dead

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Graham Meikle¹**  and **Johanna Sumiala²** 

Abstract

The dead are increasingly being resurrected through synthetic media. This article draws inspiration from the histories of both manipulated media and mediations of death to examine two contemporary cases in which synthetic representations of dead individuals are deployed in attempts to influence issues of gun violence. The article asks in what ways and to what ends these deceased victims are being exploited. The analytical approach uses qualitative textual analysis. The authors find that these dead are imputed a form of agency within communicative networks and identify communicative strategies of encouraging suspension of disbelief and of invoking deictic references to the here and now in order to leverage the authority of the dead. The article concludes that such exploitation of the authority of the dead raises questions around the rights and responsibilities of publics, of digital platforms, and of the dead themselves.

Keywords

death, synthetic media, digital resurrection, generative AI, manipulated media, deepfakes

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Introduction

In 2022, police in the Netherlands created a synthetic video of murder victim Sedar Soares, almost 20 years after his death, in the hope that it might prompt someone with information about the unsolved case to come forward. Soares had been just 13 when he was shot dead in Rotterdam (Guardian, 2022). In the video, a deepfake resurrection of the boy, suspended forever at the age of his death, walks towards the camera through an honour guard of his actual family members and football teammates, each two decades older than when Soares was murdered. In this instance, the police, the adult participants, the technological applications, and the wider circulatory systems of news and publicity, can be seen as a communicative network – a social assemblage of the exchange of information and the creation and sharing of meanings. The image of the boy is mobilised as an actor within this network. Although dead, he is given a role within it and, through this, a certain agency. The synthetic representation of Sedar Soares *does* something within this network. Not simply mourned, he is given a lead role within the investigation into his own death, targeting the viewer with the shock and novelty of his resurrection and offering an implicit warning to the perpetrators about the technological reach and sophistication available to the investigation. This example illustrates the peculiar agency given to synthetic media representations of the dead.

The Sedar Soares example elucidates an emerging phenomenon – the resurrection of the dead through synthetic media. By the term *synthetic media* we refer to different types of digital contents that are generated or altered by artificial intelligence (Ajder and Glick, 2021; Kalpokas, 2021; Meikle, 2023). In using the word *resurrection*, we intend no religious connotation, but rather are using the word in its figurative sense of *restoring to life* (e.g. Stokes, 2021). Such digital resurrections are conjured by diverse actors to diverse ends, making possible new kinds of meanings from their mediation, ranging from personal grief management to hardcore trolling. Examples may include stories of ordinary people resurrecting their parents or spouses to process their grief (see e.g. Varese, 2025) or cases such as German Michael Bommer who created an AI version of himself after being diagnosed with a terminal illness (Guinness, 2024). At the trolling end of this spectrum are the public resurrections of iconic deceased figures such as Anne Frank (Davoudi and Douglas, 2025). A video can be found on YouTube, for example, that animates still images of Anne Frank to lip-sync to ‘I Will Survive’. Many other well-known figures have also been resurrected, a trend that was exacerbated in September 2025 when OpenAI released the second version of its text-to-video generator Sora, which could create synthetic video from written prompts: trolls immediately used Sora to create and share videos of Martin Luther King shoplifting or Stephen Hawking being attacked by wild animals (Christian and Tangermann, 2025; Harwell, 2025). ‘Has the AI dead celebs trend gone too far?’, asked one headline (BBC Bitesize, 2025), while a prominent commentator on developments in synthetic media observed that ‘Sora 2 has a dead celebrity problem’ (Cole, 2025).

This article examines two cases in which victims of violence were resurrected through synthetic media in order to take a position within a debate or dispute. What is of interest in these case studies are the ways in which those creating these synthetic videos have done so in order to intervene in a particular situation. Both videos attempt to influence others by drawing on the authority of their dead protagonists – not just by invoking or

appealing to their memory or example, but by staging their ongoing participation in a debate and by putting new words in their mouths. These examples are about using synthetic media technology to extend a given set of human relationships beyond the lifespan of the individual involved – not simply saving a record or trace of these relationships, but attempting to enable fresh interactions, communicative moments, and posthumous developments in these relationships.

This article argues that these non-consenting subjects are imputed a form of agency within communicative networks (Latour, 2005). Such cases provoke questions about the work of synthetic media resurrections: about the mobilisation of identifiable individuals in campaigns or in legal proceedings; about the disregard for meaningful consent; and about the authority of the dead, their exploitation and attempted manipulation of media and public opinion in the synthetic media environment.

To contextualise these resurrections through synthetic media, we draw inspiration from literature on the cultural history of manipulated media (e.g. Peters, 1999) and on digital mediations of death (Recuber, 2023; Sumiala, 2021). In the analysis of the cases we give particular analytical emphasis to Latour's (2005) framework on the networked agency of 'non-human' actors as actants. According to Latour, '*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor' (Latour, 2005: 71); and consequently, such actants – here synthetic media representations of the dead – can be perceived to have agency in a given situation.

For our empirical focus, our first case is that of American man Chris Pelkey, who was resurrected in Arizona in 2025 as an AI representation that appeared in court to deliver a victim-impact statement at the sentencing hearing of the man who had killed him 3 years earlier in a roadside encounter. Our second case is Joaquin Oliver, who had been shot dead at the age of 17 in the 2018 Parkland school shooting in Florida, US. Oliver was reanimated in synthetic media form and interviewed in August 2025 by former CNN correspondent Jim Acosta. We make no claims about audience effects in our discussion of these cases: while both reveal deliberate strategies of attempting to influence the viewer, this article is not an audience analysis and we do not argue that such influence occurs beyond the specific interlocutors involved in each case.

Our approach to analysing these cases is interpretive and inductive, using close reading. Our process was first informed by the framework for thematic analysis most associated with Braun and Clarke (2022), through which we immersed ourselves in the videos and in transcriptions of their content, as well as in relevant intertexts, including news reporting of both cases and reaction videos, such as that of the judge in the Pelkey case responding to the synthetic testimony. While thematic analysis is often used with larger datasets, its basic principles offer a structured approach to close reading and qualitative textual analysis at smaller scales. From this we developed initial themes, and then reviewed and developed these by drawing upon close readings. In these, we paid attention to: deictic references to time and place; to degrees of modality and certainty; and to the use of multimodal elements in the videos that had been added by their creators to augment the central synthetic texts. In both cases, their creators used additional visual elements in order to personalise the deceased: in the Pelkey case, a video recording of him when alive; in the Oliver case, on-screen textual references and supporting images to reinforce discussion of the deceased's cultural tastes, such as visual representations

of what the interview describes as his favourite films and sport personalities. A further conceptual tool used in this article is Latour's proposition that a *network* can be a descriptive device imposed on a given situation: 'Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described' (Latour, 2005: 31). In discussing our extended examples as communicative *networks*, it is in this sense that we use the word.

The article is structured as follows: first, we begin by briefly contextualising our argument within the histories of both synthetic media and (digital) mediations of the dead. Second, we move on to analyse the two cases and examine what kinds of agency are involved, and how the synthetic Pelkey and Oliver are made to take positions as AI-resurrected participants in a particular dispute or debate. The article concludes by reflecting the exploitation of the authority of the dead against the two cases and by raising critical questions around the rights and responsibilities of publics, of digital platforms, and of the dead themselves.

A brief history of synthetic media and the dead

The interest in creating electric and (audio)visual manipulations, and the fascination with resurrecting and communicating with the dead (Sconce, 2000), have often seemed to go hand-in-hand. Many scholars have convincingly demonstrated that invitations to suspension of disbelief in sound and images have often been demonstrated through spectacular audio and imagery, and typically depend on establishing connections between audiovisual technology and communication with the supposedly resurrected (Peters, 1999; Recuber, 2023). Theatrical illusions such as Pepper's Ghost, and their descendants in special effects technologies, have often been demonstrated through the performance of resurrection (Brooker, 2009; Pierson, 2002).

Other relevant prehistories include elements of supernatural demonstration and display in magic lanterns, spirit photography and spiritual telegraphy (Sconce, 2000), and early radio (Phillips and Milner, 2019). In spirit photography, popular in the 19th century, the photo was perceived to reveal both subjects who were being photographed as well as 'ghost figures' (Troyer, 2007). This was closely associated with another trend within the spiritualist movement during the same period: spiritual telegraphy, referring to contacting the dead at the performative setting of a séance through electronic communication (Sconce, 2000). In the words of media philosopher John Durham Peters, 'the new media of the nineteenth century gave new life to the older dream of angelic contact by claiming to burst the bonds of distance and death [. . .] But the price of such conjuring soon became evident: a world of doppelgängers that had no flesh' (Peters, 1999: 142).

Contemporary developments in digital media have provided a radical boost, allowing new means for technological resurrections of the dead and, via such AI resurrections, the mediated deceased can now shift from being 'only' representations or objects of communication to entities that can respond to and interact with the living. A deceased person's digital traces can be tracked, trained and modelled to imitate and re-animate their premortal digital communication habits, styles and patterns to make their communication with the living 'more real' (see e.g. Campbell et al., 2025; Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024). Synthetic media are videos, images, audio or other texts created or

extensively manipulated by machine-learning techniques and Generative AI. For scholars of media and communication, synthetic media and deepfakes pose significant questions: ‘they are about new ways of making meanings, and they are also about challenges to settled understandings of how meanings get made’ (Meikle, 2023: 23–24). Deepfakes, the first prominent examples of synthetic media, emerged in 2017 (Paris and Donovan, 2019). These involve the creation or alteration of images and video, using machine-learning approaches, to analyse, recognise, and ultimately reproduce images of an individual person (Chesney and Citron, 2019). Their early use in non-consensual pornography, and their obvious potential for use in political communication and news, drew research attention that foregrounded questions of trust, authenticity and consent, and identified resurrecting the dead as problematic potential or actual uses (Ajder and Glick, 2021; Chesney and Citron, 2019; Meikle, 2023; Paris and Donovan, 2019). Research in this area has expanded significantly: a useful literature review on deepfakes, although restricted to very specific keywords and publication formats, is Birrer and Just (2025). Divon and Pentzold (2025: 1) provide a strong typology, suggesting three key modes of AI resurrection: ‘(1) Spectacularization, the public re-staging of iconic deceased cultural figures via immersive recreations for entertainment spectacle; (2) Sociopoliticization, the re-invoking of victims of violence in political or commemorative contexts, often as posthumous testimonies; and (3) Mundanization, the everyday revival of loved ones’.

Mapping some of the most prominent strands in the current research, we find core emphases on grief, memory, and commodification. The study of griefbots (Figuerola-Torres, 2024; Lin, 2026) explores how communication with AI entities affects the grief and mourning repertoires and memory work of the bereaved, as well as their digital ritual engagements with the dead (Henrickson, 2023; cf. Sumiala, 2026). This research suggests that griefbots may function as linking objects in artificial continuing communication between the mourners and the bot (Lin, 2026); however, as Zimmerman et al. (2024) argue, there is an inherent interpretative asymmetry underlying such interactions, due to the lack of transparency and opacity associated with the applied AI technologies.

Another relevant strand of research on digital resurrections tackles memory, history and the past. Kidd and Nieto McAvoy (2026) explain that, far from being neutral agents, AI technologies structure and shape memory practices in the production of synthetic afterlives of the digitally resurrected that unfold within given parameters. This is also how the digitally resurrected may impact on how the living remember the dead and how they save, alter and care for their memory, and how those interactions may also create new memories of the dead (see also Lin, 2026).

The third prominent strand in the current research articulates critical analysis of technosolutionism and its impact on the development of digital resurrections as marketable commodities in the present-day data capitalism in which the dead become involuntary sources of data, likeness, and affect that are extracted, circulated, and monetised without their consent (Hurtado Hurtado, 2024; Kneese, 2023). As a mode of exploitation, digital resurrection of the dead indicates a fundamental shift in forms of digital exploitation. While platforms have always profited from user-generated content, they now continue to extract value from the dead who, still present on the platforms, continue to work after death. Commodification is thus an inherent dimension of digital resurrections, as their creation and use alters the relationship of the living with their digitally resurrected ones into one of a customer-object relationship.

The novelty of the technologies means that, on one level, many such examples of synthetic media have been created as pseudo-events in Boorstin's (1961) term – as events that take place for no other reason than to be reported. But looking from another, Latourian perspective they capture a wider phenomenon of the dead being given agentic roles within communicative networks and events. These dead protagonists of posthumous videos are not inert virtual objects, but are made to do things. They can, of course, have no intention, but they are nevertheless given agency and can have an effect on the networks in which they are made to be a part. Our article builds on the research discussed above to examine in detail the communicative strategies used in two high-profile cases of synthetic resurrection. We ask, what are they being made to do, these deepfaked dead? To what ends are they resurrected and how are they put to work within communicative networks? Our case studies are to some extent self-selecting, as two widely reported examples from a short time-period, so we make no claims that our findings can be generalised; rather, as a close, qualitative analysis of the actual uses of specific synthetic resurrections, we offer insights that can prompt further research into how these technological possibilities are being exploited. Each of these cases involves identifiable individuals whose physical deaths are both real and undeniable, but whose intangible presences can continue to have effects that are both real and new.

The AI-resurrected Chris Pelkey testifies in court

In May 2025, Arizona man Chris Pelkey appeared in court to deliver a victim-impact statement at the sentencing hearing of the man who had killed him three years earlier. Or rather, a synthetic video of Pelkey, created by his family, was shown in the courtroom (Wales, 2025a). In the video, a medium close-up representation of the dead man addresses the court and delivers a message of forgiveness towards Gabriel Horcasitas, who had shot Pelkey dead in a road-rage incident:

Just to be clear for everyone seeing this, I'm a version of Chris Pelkey recreated through AI that uses my picture and my voice profile. I was able to be digitally regenerated to share with you today. But here is insight into who I actually was in real life.

A 20-second home video of the actual Pelkey speaking some years earlier about his Christian faith follows, before the deepfake simulation reappears:

So as you can see from my video I recorded in 2021, this here is a true representation of who I was and, you know, not how the courtroom portrayed me.

The synthetic Pelkey then addresses the courtroom in a way that implies awareness of proceedings:

So, I would like to make my own impact statement. So, hello everybody, thank you so much for being here today. It means a lot. I can't tell you how humbled I am for those that spoke up for me, everyone who flew in, took off work, those who are watching this remotely, and for everyone who has supported my family and loved ones through three-and-a-half years and two trials.

The AI-resurrected Pelkey specifically addresses the judge and his circumstances:

To Your Honour Judge Lang, thank you for making yourself available to see this case to the end, especially when the rescheduled trial conflicted with your daughter's spring break.

And in one of the most striking moments, the synthetic Pelkey directly forgives his killer:

To Gabriel Horcasitas, the man who shot me, it is a shame we encountered each other that day in those circumstances. In another life, we probably could have been friends. I believe in forgiveness and in God who forgives. I always have. And I still do.

In closing, the synthetic Pelkey, who was 37 at the time of his death, appears with a filtered image of how he may have looked had he lived to old age:

I once played with one of those filters on your phone where you can make yourself look old. I shared it with a cousin of ours years ago, this is the best I can ever give you to what I would have looked like if I got the chance to grow old. Scary, huh? No, really, thank you to everyone for being here, it means more than you know. Well, I'm going to go fishing now. Love you all. See you on the other side.

The judge, whose response appears in a separate video uploaded to YouTube by Pelkey's sister (Wales, 2025b), was visibly affected by the synthetic media testimony created by Pelkey's sister and her husband, telling them, 'I love that AI, thank you for that'. While the video may or may not have played a role in Judge Lang's sentencing decisions, which were no doubt very complex, it is worth noting that after viewing it he gave Horcasitas a longer prison sentence than had been requested by his prosecutors.

While the Chris Pelkey courtroom appearance can be perceived as a striking example of the power, potential, risks, and sheer weirdness of synthetic media resurrections of the dead, it also enacts a convergence of Latourian agency, algorithms and anthropomorphism. As an AI actant, this version of Pelkey is transparent about its synthetic nature (*I'm a version of Chris Pelkey recreated through AI; I was able to be digitally regenerated*). But it also acts within a communicative network of synthetic media and its users to make a sophisticated attempt to convey what its creators understood to be the reality of their dead family member, and to represent Pelkey in the courtroom in a way intended to connote authenticity (*this here is a true representation of who I was*). It also invokes a very everyday instance of synthetic media use at the most basic end of that spectrum (*I once played with one of those filters on your phone where you can make yourself look old*), in what can be read as an attempt to normalise the video and related presentation of the dead.

The synthetic Pelkey video is weirdly personalised and customised for its specific courtroom context (*especially when the rescheduled trial conflicted with your daughter's spring break*). It imputes to the dead man a kind of ongoing omniscience through which he can comment on things that have happened after his death (*Thank you for reading the flood of impact statements that came in before today that so many people wrote on my behalf*), connecting this piece of contemporary synthetic media to long prehistories of magical invocations that have been used to demonstrate the possibilities of developments

in visual technologies. The video voices Pelkey responding to things that happened after his physical death in ways that claim they are somehow perceptible and meaningful to him in an afterlife presence (*it means a lot; I can't tell you how humbled I am; every single one of them is meaningful; it means more than you know*). And it inserts a vision of an ongoing agency of the dead in the shape of digital afterlife and converts it into a position taken in a juridical proceeding (*I'm going to go fishing now*).

The AI-resurrected Joaquin Oliver gives an interview

On 4 August 2025, former CNN correspondent Jim Acosta, who at that time worked independently on Substack, posted an almost 5-minute video interview about gun control with a deepfake representing the late Joaquin Oliver (The Jim Acosta Show, 2025). Oliver was one of the murder victims of the Parkland school shooting in Florida in 2018, and was 17 years old when he died; Acosta's interview was posted on what would have been Oliver's 25th birthday. The AI resurrection has the face and apparent vocal timbre and characteristics of Joaquin Oliver. The victim's father, Manuel Oliver, interviewed separately by Acosta in the same session, states that the AI has been trained on archival content of Joaquin, including recordings of his voice and photos of his face, hence aiming to give him both agency and authenticity.

Joaquin Oliver's parents had become prominent gun control activists following their son's death, and they had earlier resurrected Joaquin in deepfake form for a 2020 election campaign video in which the synthetic Joaquin was made to say, 'vote for me, because I can't' (Kneese, 2020). The parents had also created a synthetic audio version of Joaquin in 2024 for a campaign in which the manipulated voices of their son and other deceased victims of gun violence targeted US lawmakers with phone calls: 'I'm back today because my parents used AI to recreate my voice to call you [. . .] How many dead voices will you hear before you finally listen?' (Luscombe, 2024).

The video image of Joaquin Oliver in the Acosta interview is not high-quality when it is shown speaking, although, when at rest, the still image is passable, particularly if viewed on a phone. However, the voice is robotic, monotonous and unconvincingly human. Despite these limitations, Acosta professed to be moved by his interactions with the AI resurrection as he made Oliver an actant in his interview. In assessing Acosta's claim, it is important to note that the synthetic Joaquin Oliver's exchanges in the interview display many of the recognised characteristics of chatbots, such as a repeated tactic of reflecting the interlocutor's questions back to them, and another of trying to give answers that will please that interlocutor. This also raises the possibility of the characteristic AI hallucination, through which the synthetic dead will give false information, unable to discern authentic facts from what are simply plausible combinations of words (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel, 2025).

Going back to the question of agency, the onscreen caption over the opening exchange is 'Joaquin Oliver in his own words', which we may argue to be both false and revealing. Acosta says, 'We've heard from the parents, we've heard from the politicians, now we're hearing from one of the kids'. And yet, of course, while the parents say that the AI entity has been trained on their archive of Joaquin's social media posts, the synthetic Joaquin is in fact generating new responses to Acosta's questions, rather than responding in the

actual words of the deceased teenager. From another angle we may argue that such ‘live’ interactivity with journalist Acosta may also intensify the sense of agency by the synthetic Oliver.

Acosta: I was wondering if you could tell me, what happened to you?

Oliver: I appreciate your curiosity. I was taken from this world too soon due to gun violence while at school. It’s important to talk about these issues so we can create a safer future for everyone. What would you like to know more about?

When contextualising Oliver’s AI-resurrected agency and presence in synthetic media, this type of response as a communicative act is an entirely characteristic Generative AI exchange, in which the software first affirms and approves both the question and the questioner, before offering some formulaic or platitudinous details in response, and then reflecting the question back in order to draw the interlocutor further into the chat. Much of the subsequent interview follows this structure, as in the synthetic Joaquin’s responses in the next two exchanges:

Acosta: Joaquin, I would like to know what your solution would be for gun violence.

Oliver: Great question! I believe in a mix of stronger gun control laws, mental health support, and community engagement. We need to create safe spaces for conversations and connections, making sure everyone feels seen and heard. It’s about building a culture of kindness and understanding. What do you think about that?

Acosta: I think that’s a great idea, Joaquin. We definitely need more of that.

Oliver: I’m so glad you think so! More kindness and understanding can truly make a difference. Together, we can create a world where everyone feels safe and supported. Anything else on your mind?

While Acosta’s introduction states that the AI was created ‘to deliver a powerful message on gun violence’, that topic is not raised again after the above brief exchange. Acosta instead shifts to asking about films, prompting an extended exchange about *Star Wars*:

Oliver: Absolutely! The story of hope and resilience against darkness is so powerful, it shows that even in the toughest times, unity and courage can lead to victory. Darth Vader’s journey adds so much depth to that theme. What do you think makes a good hero?

Acosta: Well, a good hero to me is somebody who believes in themselves. Somebody who can persevere and fight for what’s right. What do you think?

Oliver: Absolutely! A good hero embodies courage, resilience, and a strong sense of justice. They inspire others to stand up for what’s right, no matter the odds. It’s all about making a positive impact. Who inspires you to be a hero in your own life?

Acosta: I was going to say that I think your dad Manuel is very inspiring, Joaquin, and you are very inspiring.

Oliver: Thank you so much! That means a lot to me. My dad's strength and love have always inspired me, and I hope to carry that forward. Together we can inspire change and spread positivity.

Acosta: Joaquin, thank you very much for talking to us. We really appreciate it. God bless you.

Oliver: Thank you so much! I really appreciate your kind words. It means a lot to me.

To analyse Acosta's interview with the AI-resurrected Oliver, we must approach Oliver's agency in the context of a complex, mediated, visual representation and text. The video is presented as a live interaction. It uses the genre conventions of the televised journalistic interview, but mixes those with the conventions of the AI exchange with which many people are becoming familiar through applications such as ChatGPT. It is not clear to what extent the interview has been edited and, like the Pelkey example, it appears to be pre-recorded. The video allows for the possibility of tight editing, and indeed scripting, before its online release. We may assume that various post-production elements had been added to the interview component before it was posted online, including the family photos that are shown, and the accompanying images and onscreen textual references to Joaquin's favourite basketball player and favourite movie, both of which are discussed in some detail in the exchanges with Acosta. All these practices of mediation carried out in the synthetic media context also complicate the question of Oliver's agency as AI-resurrected, as well as the position he is given in that context.

Exploiting the authority of the dead

What is of interest in these two cases are the ways in which those creating these videos have done so in order to intervene in a particular dispute or issue of deadly gun violence. We argue that in both examples, the synthetic representations are not only given agency, but are used in attempts to exert leverage, pressure or influence on others. Oliver's father, Manuel, told Acosta that in future iterations of this resurrection 'Joaquin is going to start having followers [. . .] he's going to start uploading videos'. He also explicitly makes the connection between leveraging the authority of his dead son and the possibilities of synthetic media: 'We will have Joaquin on stage in the middle of a debate, and his knowledge is unlimited, it's based on knowledge that is out there through artificial intelligence'.

In the following section we explore two key communicative strategies that we claim are employed in both videos in order to attempt influence. We look at the communicative strategies identifiable in the videos and analyse the elements that point to incitements to the suspension of disbelief; we also identify elements of invocations of presence and temporality that we argue are used to imply the ongoing consciousness and participation of the deceased in order to exploit their *authority*.

Inviting the suspension of disbelief

In various ways, both the synthetic Pelkey and Oliver claim to be authentic representations, yet both are also transparent in different ways about their artificiality (see Bolter

and Grusin, 1999 on this characteristic paradox in digital media). The synthetic Pelkey explicitly identifies as a staged moment, proposing itself as a legitimate representation, and as an innovative instance of communication that the viewer is expected to notice and admire. The video showcases and celebrates its own technical accomplishment of AI resurrection. Yet at the same time, the Pelkey video works explicitly to make itself seem immediate and real in an attempt to motivate suspension of disbelief in its viewer. While Pelkey is not directly interacting in a conversation with Judge Lang or his court, he addresses them to create a sense of direct communicative interaction with them. To give an example, Pelkey addresses Judge Lang directly and thanks him for making adjustments by stating in the video:

Thank you for making yourself available to see this case to the end. Especially when the rescheduled trial conflicted with your daughter's spring break.

By addressing the judge's life circumstance while digitally restored to an illusion of life, Pelkey makes an impression of being present at the court and having a capability to interact with the judge in some real sense.

In the case of Joaquin Oliver, the suspension of disbelief while communicating with a conversational technology application is fundamental to imputing a position in synthetic media. Encouraging such suspension of disbelief has been a central strategy in the development of AI technologies since their inception (Natale, 2021). To this end, a development such as the synthetic Joaquin Oliver illustrates how developments in AI privilege those that exploit the users' perceptions and expectations, drawing upon knowledge of those expectations in order to present a meaningful illusion of an intelligent machine (Natale, 2021). Such conversational technology relies upon complex combinations of algorithms, agency and anthropomorphism, dating back to the earliest examples of chatbots. For instance, in a foundational example, Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA program of the mid-1960s was an experiment in natural language analysis that enabled the user to interact with a chatbot operating a programmed script, as though holding a conversation (Weizenbaum, 1966). As the synthetic Joaquin Oliver responds to cues in the interlocutor's words to draw Acosta further into the conversation and reveal more about himself, while masking the chatbot's actual reality, so Weizenbaum's 1960s test subjects anthropomorphised ELIZA, which presented as a therapist; Weizenbaum professed himself surprised to see some of those subjects developing emotional attachment to his packaged algorithms (Weizenbaum, 2003 [1976]: 370). Such anthropomorphising of the agency given to algorithms in a specific context is key to reading such uses of synthetic media as in the Oliver case. The synthetic Joaquin Oliver responds to cues in Acosta's words to draw that interviewer further into the conversation and reveal more about himself, while masking its actual reality.

Both Judge Lang in the video from the courtroom in which he responds to the synthetic Chris Pelkey, and Jim Acosta in his follow-up interview with Joaquin Oliver's father, stress how convinced they were by the synthetic media, and both anthropomorphise the technological interface they have encountered:

Acosta: I really felt like I was speaking with Joaquin [. . .] I really felt like I was communicating with him [. . .]

Lang: Christopher. . . I always call people by their last names, it's a formality of the court, but I feel like calling him Christopher, as we've gotten to know him today [. . .] his obvious forgiveness of Mr. Horcasitas [. . .] you allowed Chris to speak from his heart [. . .] I didn't hear him asking for the maximum sentence

In closing his interview with the synthetic Oliver, Acosta reiterates how moved he claims to be:

Acosta: Thanks for bringing Joaquin to us! I'm still kind of speechless, I can't get over what I just saw, it's just amazing.

In short, both are responding to the synthetic media performance of authenticity that they have witnessed (see also Murray, 1997: 224) and as such contribute to the larger project of the AI dead attempting to resolve their dispute in their favour.

Presence and temporality – The here and now

One of the most striking aspects of both videos is the comments voiced by their AI-resurrected subjects that imply the existence of an afterlife from which they are speaking. Both make claims to ongoing presence and participation in the here and now, making deictic reference to both place and time. The Pelkey video ends with the dead man voicing the scripted line *I'm going to go fishing now*, and makes several references to proceedings that had taken place in the legal proceedings prior to the sentencing hearing.

. . . a true representation of who I was and [. . .] not how the courtroom portrayed me

I can't tell you how humbled I am for those that spoke up for me, everyone who flew in, took off work, those who are watching this remotely, and for everyone who has supported my family and loved ones through three-and-a-half years and two trials

Thank you for reading the flood of impact statements that came in before today

I believe in forgiveness and in God who forgives. I always have. And I still do.

Similarly, the Joaquin Oliver representation proposes a continuing consciousness and awareness of things that it says are somehow meaningful to it in death (*I really appreciate your kind words. It means a lot to me*). Acosta's questions to his synthetic interlocutor slip in and out of the past tense. In some exchanges he uses the past tense (*what did you like to do?*), implicitly acknowledging that his interviewee is dead. In others, he uses the simple present tense (*what's your favourite sport?*). On one occasion, he seems to catch himself and shifts from past to present (*Did you like, uh, was there a movie that you like?*). In contrast, the synthetic Oliver's answers are firmly in the present tense throughout (*I love basketball. I love a good movie*)

Both synthetic subjects also gesture towards future experiences that they say they expect to have:

Pelkey: I'm going to go fishing now.

Oliver: Though my life was cut short, I want to keep inspiring others to connect and advocate for change.

Oliver: That means a lot to me. My dad's strength and love have always inspired me, and I hope to carry that forward. Together we can inspire change and spread positivity.

The two AI-resurrected dead men are represented as having reflective relationships to their past and present, but also to their future. As such, they are represented as beings who are aware of their own histories and related actions but also have ideas and intentions about their future. As forward-looking AI entities, both Pelkey and Oliver suggest that there is continuity (a type of digital afterlife, if not immortality!) in their agency that may be unknown to their creators.

Such techniques work to make both resurrections more relatable to the living and potentially more effective in fulfilling their planned purpose of settling the issue to which they are deployed. Both synthetic dead were created to *do* things – designed by the living to influence or pressure others in their communities, in matters concerning gun violence, through the implacable authority of the dead.

Conclusions – The authority of the synthetic media dead

In this article we have examined some of the problems of AI-resurrections of the dead. As aforementioned, while the idea of resurrecting the dead has media historical roots that go well back to the 19th century invention of (audio)visual electric media as spiritual media (Sconce, 2000), the rapid development of networked digital communication, synthetic media and Generative AI in the 21st century have radically shifted our understanding of what today can be understood as digital resurrection and digital afterlife (Kidd and Nieto McAvoy, 2026; Sumiala, 2026). In the examples in our article, the dead are being resurrected in order to take a position within a societal debate or dispute. The synthetic media dead are given interactive and conversational qualities. They are given a certain type of agency and made to take central roles within complex communicative networks among the living. However, such technological innovation offers unforeseen possibilities for attempted manipulation.

As manipulated presentations, these AI entities perform different tasks in synthetic media, affecting social relationships between the living and the dead at individual levels: for example, between Chris Pelkey and the judge, or between Joaquin Oliver, his parents and the journalist Acosta. But these AI resurrections also challenge social relationships at more collective levels. We may identify at least three categories or kinds of actors for whom these synthetic manipulated media entities raise new questions: for the dead themselves, for digital media platforms, and for the living as communicative publics.

For these real, identifiable, deceased individuals, their mobilisation (without, by definition, the possibility of consent) in contexts where their specific identities, their personal histories and networks, and their imputed opinions, values and beliefs are all

available for deployment in persuasion campaigns is deeply a societal matter concerning not just the rights of these specific individuals, but also more broadly of the strange form of social and societal agency afforded by synthetic media.

While synthetic entities such as the resurrected Pelkey, Oliver (or Sedar Soares, who we discussed in the introduction), are not able to have control over their digital legacy and societal use, they are in fact performing a new type of political agency. If being a political actant is about taking up a political relation to others within a given space, and if such relations increasingly take place within synthetic and digital networks, we must ask if we face the possibility here of having to consider the political rights and responsibilities of the dead. Existing frameworks of human and legal rights apply only to the living (cf. Edwards et al., 2021; Harbinja, 2022). But this may no longer be adequate to a context in which the images, likenesses and voices of the dead are being made to take ever more vital parts in societal and political debates of which they can have no knowledge and to which they cannot consent.

For major digital platforms, AI dead and related developments in synthetic media provide new business opportunities. Digital platforms have enabled the creation and development of deepfakes and other AI dead, through facilitating the generation and accessibility of vast datasets of digital consent produced by their users and now harvested by AI firms as training data, and their business models continue to drive the expansion of synthetic media, particularly into Generative AI. If the living are considered to be data for the platforms (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), so now are the dead (Kneese, 2023), as posthumous interactions between the living and the resurrected provide new possibilities for digital engagement and traffic in synthetic media that can also be labelled as 'spectral labour' (Divon and Pentzold, 2025). The ethical dimensions of this have frequently been subordinated to financial ones, but this may need further pushback from regulators and users alike, if the reanimated dead are brought into ever more conversations, debates, and disputes.

For users and viewers of these dramatic performances of manipulated digital afterlife, new questions need to be asked around digital literacies and communicative ethics. The dead are being put to work in ways that need to be both recognised and reckoned with. What are the ethics of this? Where are the limits? What will we settle on as acceptable uses of the capacity to reanimate and remobilise dead leaders, martyrs or victims for social, cultural or political influence? And what cross-cultural implications are there for such resurrections? (Pentaris et al., 2026). In answering such questions, we will need to ask: what are they *doing*, these synthetic media dead? What uses are being found for them by the living in processes of social or political contestation? In what ways can the living challenge the authority of the dead, when this is deployed to intervene, to influence, to persuade? We must learn how to recognise the tactics and strategies employed by the living to leverage not just appeals to memory, but also attempts to settle social issues through synthetic exploitation of the implacable weight and authority of the dead.

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The study used publicly available YouTube data. There are no human participants in this article.

Consent to participate

Informed consent is not required.

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