

Going Viral

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Going Viral is an interactive artwork that invites people to intervene in the spreading of misinformation by sharing informational videos about COVID-19 that feature algorithmically generated celebrities, social media influencers, and politicians that have made or shared claims about the coronavirus that are counter to the official consensus of healthcare professionals and were categorized as misinformation. In the videos, algorithmically-generated speakers deliver public service announcements or present news stories that counter the misinformation they had previously promoted on social media. The shareable YouTube videos present a recognizable, but glitchy, reconstruction of the celebrities. The obvious digital fabrication of the videos prevents their classification as deepfakes by content moderators and helps viewers reflect on the authority of celebrities on issues of public health and the validity of information shared on social media.

Keywords generative art,
artificial aesthetics, cGAN,
misinformation, social media,
pix2pix, tactical media, video art

Description

Celebrities and social media influencers are now entangled in the discourse on public health, and are sometimes given more authority than scientists or public health officials. Like the rumors they spread, the online popularity of social media influencers and celebrities are amplified through neural network-based content recommendation algorithms used by online platforms. The shareable YouTube videos present a recognizable, but glitchy, reconstruction of the celebrities. The glitchy, digitally produced aesthetic of the videos keeps them from being classified as “deepfakes” and removed by online platforms and helps viewers reflect on the constructed nature of celebrity, and question the authority of celebrities on issues of public health and the validity of information shared on social media.

Fig. 1. *Going Viral*, 2020, Derek Curry and Jennifer Gradecki, screenshot of website with algorithmically generated videos, image courtesy of the artists.

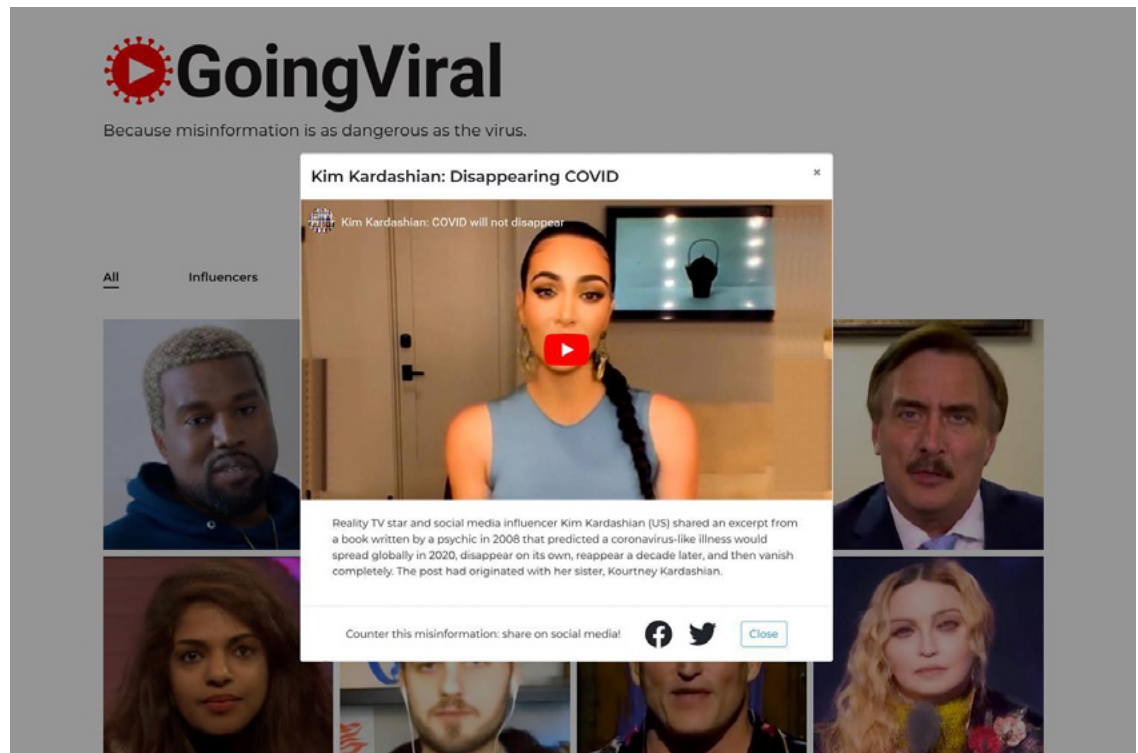
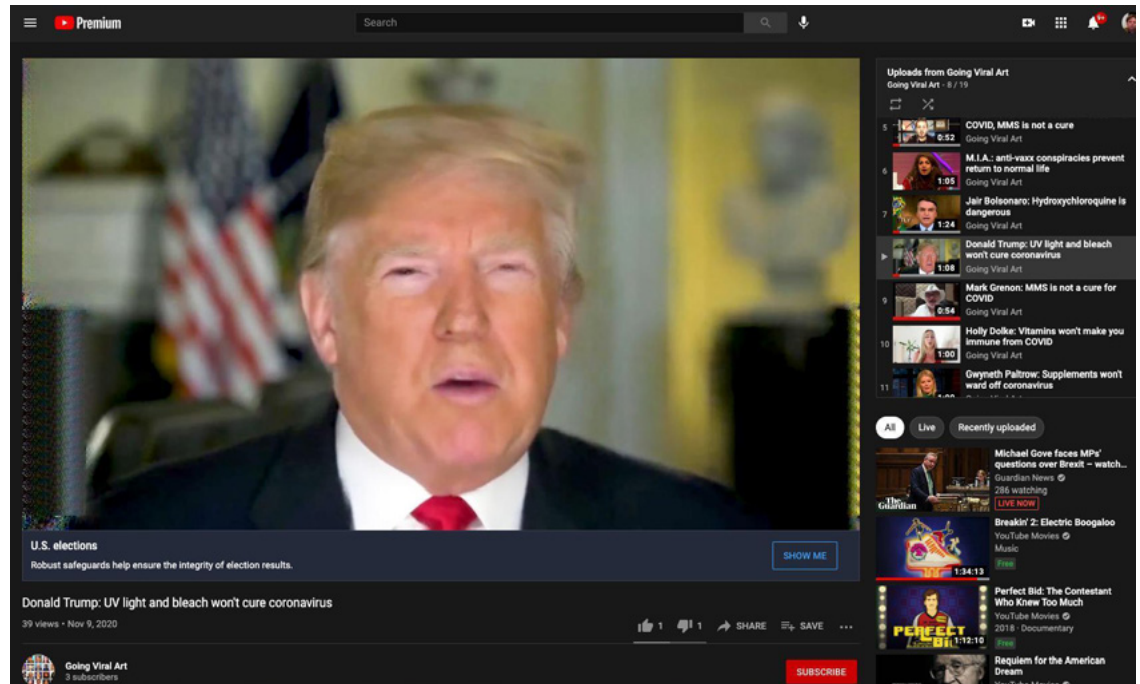
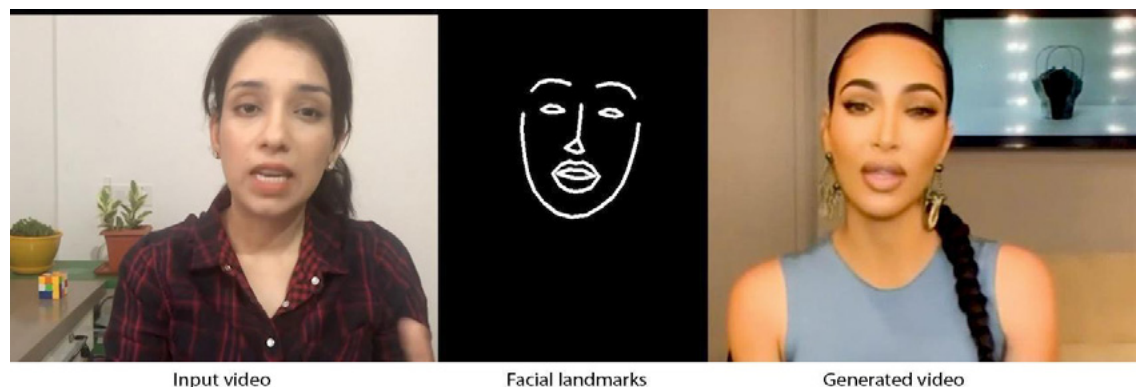


Fig. 2. *Going Viral*, 2020, Derek Curry and Jennifer Gradecki, screenshot of algorithmically generated video on YouTube, image courtesy of the artists.



The videos in *Going Viral* are the result of an experimental use of a Pix2Pix conditional generative adversarial network (cGAN). In a cGAN, a neural network is trained on sets of two images where one image becomes a map to produce a second image. In *Going Viral*, the two images are a frame from a video and facial recognition landmarks from that video frame. Once the model is trained, it can be used to generate an image of a face based only on the facial landmarks from the first image (Fig 3). The process starts by extracting the facial landmarks of an influencer, celebrity, or politician from frames of a video. A model that maps the landmarks to an image of the influencer is then trained. Next, the facial landmarks of an expert speaking on a topic are extracted and used to generate new video frames. The new frames are combined with the audio track of the expert or journalist to produce a public service announcement that counters the misinformation spread by the celebrity, influencer, or politician. Finally, these videos are posted to YouTube and are shareable on social media via goingviral.art.

Fig. 3. *Going Viral*, 2020, Derek Curry and Jennifer Gradecki, Example of video generation using a cGAN, image courtesy of the artists.



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Project website: <https://www.goingviral.art/>

Informational video: <https://vimeo.com/509818547>