

SECURE TOMORROW SERIES

SCENARIO NARRATIVE 3: DEEP DISINFORMATION



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AMERICAN PUBLIC RADIO

American Public Radio's (APR) Jamie Muñoz talks first with Dr. Jacqueline Strickland, chief scientist at the Stenbirk Artificial Intelligence Research Consortium and then with former FBI Director Terrance Ford about the terror attack in Denver, efforts to counteract deepfake videos, and investigations into prior Russian disinformation campaigns.

Chief Scientist From SAIRC Discusses AI-based Technology That Showed Radiation Scare in Denver Was a Sophisticated Fake

April 24, 2026/4:40 PM EDT

Heard on *Considering Everything That's Happened*

TRANSCRIPT

Jamie Muñoz, host: Two days ago, downtown Denver was rocked by an explosion outside the Byron G. Rogers Federal Building that killed five people, injured hundreds more, and damaged or destroyed dozens of buildings. The American Patriots, an extreme fringe group that first emerged three years ago took immediate credit for the explosion. The group also posted several videos indicating that the explosion had released a dangerous amount of radiation into the air. The videos went viral, prompting panic and gridlock as people tried to flee the Denver metropolitan area. Drew Hall from our Denver radio affiliate reported yesterday about the huge number of “worried-well” residents who flocked to area hospital emergency rooms and urgent care centers thinking that they had been exposed to radiation, severely overloading regional medical capabilities. Since then, the Denver Fire Department, the Colorado State Patrol, and specialists from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy have all released preliminary reports finding no indications of a radiological release. However, many residents continue to express doubts about the results from initial environmental monitoring efforts and are pushing hard on local, state, and federal officials for proof that the videos are fake.

Earlier this afternoon, the Stenbirk Artificial Intelligence Research Consortium—or SAIRC—posted the results from their analysis, which showed with 99 percent certainty that the videos posted by the American Patriots were sophisticated fakes. Dr. Jacqueline Strickland, chief scientist at SAIRC, joins us from her office in Alta Palo. Welcome Dr. Strickland and thank you for joining us. What can you tell us about the work your organization has done to investigate and counter the viral videos posted by the American Patriots?

Dr. Strickland: Thank you for having me. The Stenbirk Artificial Intelligence Research Consortium is a public-private partnership between Stenbirk University, the Ethical AI Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and Radcliff National Laboratory dedicated to developing ethical uses of artificial intelligence—or AI. Among other things, SAIRC’s researchers have been investigating AI-based technologies for several years now as a way to identify flaws and inconsistencies that are inherent to even the most sophisticated “deepfake” videos.

Jamie Muñoz, host: The videos released by the American Patriots after the explosion in Denver show first responders shouting about their radiation pagers going off, doctors treating what appear to be victims of radiation poisoning, and bodies of deceased radiation victims being sealed in body bags and placed in trucks. How did SAIRC determine that the videos were fakes?

Dr. Strickland: Our program was able to determine with over 99 percent confidence that all of the videos purporting to show evidence of radiation following the explosion in Denver were deep fakes. Our latest program builds on prior research that trained AI networks to detect minute audio and visual inconsistencies that would not be visible to the naked eye, such as blinking patterns, distorted facial features, and mismatches between the sounds people make when speaking and the shapes of their mouths. The AI-based program we used to analyze the American Patriots videos also looks for subtle inconsistencies in how a person’s expressions, tone, and composure should change based on the information they are providing or receiving.

Jamie Muñoz, host: Like if a person tells you a funny joke, but his voice is monotone and his face doesn’t show any expression.

Dr. Strickland: Yes, exactly. The human eye is normally quite good at identifying these inconsistencies—we’ve all seen videos in which we know something is off, but we can’t quite place what it is. But our ability to rely on our own built-in lie detectors to assess videos began to break down in the late 2010s. The combination of more sophisticated, AI-based software programs and readily available apps made it easy to generate videos that couldn’t be easily identified as deep fakes. The SARS-19 deepfake videos in 2021 were the first instance in which a number of reputable news agencies were fooled into believing that they were true stories. There were numerous video testimonials from medical professionals about how the vaccine didn’t work and false narratives about high risks of permanent, debilitating side effects. These testimonials were based on real medical professionals whose images and voices were manipulated in wholesale fashion to generate fake videos. Other fake videos targeted extremely sensitive issues.

Jamie Muñoz, host: I remember APR reporting on the video about Edie Germaine, an ICU nurse from New York City, who was purported to have died from the SARS-19 vaccine. In fact, she had died tragically from a brain aneurysm.

Dr. Strickland: These videos were very effective in sowing distrust about the SARS-19 vaccine, which slowed vaccine uptake and ultimately prolonged the social and economic turmoil resulting from the pandemic. According to polls at the time, as much as 33 percent of the U.S. population accepted the fake videos as true, even after a Justice Department investigation traced many of them to a multipronged disinformation campaign conducted by the Russian government. These deep fake videos were flagged by social media platforms as false or misleading or even removed, only to be reposted by others. It was at this time that my colleagues and I recognized the need to develop an AI-based capability to identify and counter deepfake videos—to use AI to beat AI.

Jamie Muñoz, host: That was Dr. Jacqueline Strickland, chief scientist at SAIRC, which has shown that the radiation scare in Denver was a sophisticated hoax, hopefully bringing additional peace of mind to Denver residents. Dr. Strickland, thank you so much for talking with us.

Dr. Strickland: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Former FBI Director Provides Update on Denver Terror Attack and Discusses the History of Disinformation Campaigns and Deepfake Videos

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Heard on *Considering Everything That's Happened*

TRANSCRIPT

Jamie Muñoz, host: We are joined now by former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Terrance Ford. Director Ford headed the FBI from 2022 to 2025 and oversaw several investigations into deepfake videos and disinformation campaigns that were traced back to the Russian government. Sir, thank you for joining us today. As the dust settles, what do we really know about the events in Denver?

Terrance Ford: Thank you for having me. Although the investigation is ongoing, what I can tell you is that the fringe group calling themselves the American Patriots took responsibility for the explosion two days ago in downtown Denver. They apparently used a nondescript panel truck to deliver the explosives. Minutes before the explosion, witnesses reported hearing a warning coming from the truck that highly radioactive materials would be released into the area. Just after the explosion, videos surfaced of first responders at the scene shouting in alarm that their radiation pagers were going off. Soon thereafter, other videos of doctors treating victims of radiation poisoning began to circulate. The result was a citywide panic, with officials scrambling to warn the public about a radiological attack that we now know had in fact not happened. Meanwhile, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency radiation response teams, which were meant to reassure the public that there was no radiation, arrived in full protective gear to conduct radiation tests. This led to further confusion and more outlandish theories among social media groups, stoking the public's fears about radiation, distrust in the government, and lack of confidence in nuclear safety institutions and fueling rumors about a federal cover-up.

Jamie Muñoz, host: Who are the American Patriots? What can you tell us about them?

Terrance Ford: We first learned about the American Patriots back in 2023. They were responsible for viral videos that purported to show illnesses arising from a contamination incident at a water treatment plant servicing an under-resourced community in the Milwaukee region. Another deepfake video provided undercover footage of senior plant operators and public officials, linking the incident to cost-savings measures and displaying an attempted cover up. The later deepfake video, initially attributed to the American Patriots, was ultimately traced to Russian hackers who were opportunistically building on the American Patriots videos to create more confusion and distrust. In a joint press conference, a spokesperson from the plant and an official from the public health department both vehemently denied the accuracy of these videos, and experts from the private

sector and the Justice Department confirmed that they were sophisticated fakes. But far left- and right-leaning news organizations and social media groups continued to spread misinformation to their listeners, relying heavily on powerful algorithms to ensure that their groups got only the story they wanted to tell, effectively generating echo chambers that reinforced preexisting beliefs. The American Patriots, for example, flooded their followers with “proof” that those affected in the videos were real and results showing the water was safe to drink were fake, emphasizing an underlying government conspiracy and inflaming tensions within the community.

Jamie Muñoz, host: You mentioned Russian hackers, and Dr. Strickland in our previous segment brought up the Russian government–sponsored disinformation campaign that prompted millions of Americans to forgo the SARS-19 vaccine. Is there any indication that the Russian government is behind this attack or supporting the American Patriots?

Director Ford: Although we don’t have any indication of Russian involvement in the videos posted following the Denver terror attack, we do know from experience that the Russian government sees polarization among Americans as a good thing and has become very effective in using micro-targeting to spread disinformation to individuals, pushing them further into their echo chambers. Take for example the disinformation campaign two years ago that played off fears of both illegal immigration and another pandemic, with videos and interviews of immigrant caravans from Mexico and Central America carrying infectious diseases to the U.S. southwest border. Frankly, we didn’t know what to believe when presented with realistic-looking videos showing diseased people massing across the border from San Diego and El Paso and what looked like U.S. Border Patrol agents deploying tear gas and beating asylum-seekers. There were numerous calls to close the southern border. We saw protests and counter-protests in major cities across the U.S. and left- and right-leaning fringe groups became more violent in response to what they believed was happening.

From the Russian perspective, their efforts were a monumental success, as these videos definitely affected the national public discourse and the views of lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Not only did it lead to protests, but it also influenced the passage of legislation reducing the numbers of allowed legal immigrants, including H1-B visas. Several lawmakers felt pressured to do something to assuage their constituents.

The Russians have a mature capability to sow discord through disinformation and if they sense an opportunity, they’ll seize it. Remember the conspiracy theory that linked 5G towers to the spread of SARS-19; disinformation campaigns played on these fears, which eventually led to attacks on 5G infrastructure. Something similar happened with data centers. The Russians spread stories about data localization trends preventing companies from building data centers in cooler climates and linked this to exponential growth in energy consumption. They incited fringe environmental groups to try and sabotage data centers in the U.S. by convincing them that these centers posed an unprecedented environmental threat. Time and time again we’ve seen the Russians use disinformation as a means for it to punch above its weight class. Russians identify the fringes and fissures in society and encourage them to grow. Micro-targeting and deepfake videos are just one set of tools in their disinformation efforts to undermine U.S. stability and cause us to focus more attention domestically.

Jamie Muñoz, host: Is there anything we can do to limit the effectiveness of these disinformation campaigns?

Director Ford: There’s a common thread in the Justice Department investigations into the SARS-19 vaccination, water contamination incident, and southern border disinformation campaigns—these videos were targeted toward specific people and groups. The campaigns used sophisticated AI

technology that gathers information on people by harvesting data from third-party cookies, location services, and user profiles. Congressional action is needed to regulate the gathering of online data that allows malicious governments and fringe groups to prey on those most susceptible to believing in the credibility of deepfake video messages and imagery, information that has damaged the fabric of our society.

Jamie Muñoz, host: Congress is set to debate a bill to do just that next week. But its supporters are facing an uphill battle. Information technology companies that use this data to improve services and advertisers that use this data for targeted ads are already gearing up to fight this legislation in its current form.

Director Ford, thank you for joining us this afternoon.