

Do these photos look real to you? Your answer could be cause for concern. And that's terrifying

In “Veles,” Bendiksen has used that reputation to turn all of the tables in the photojournalism world upside down and inside out. Bendiksen’s new book is a fabrication. It’s fake. Interestingly enough, this is fully intentional — to prove a point that has become incredibly urgent right now. In short, Bendiksen used artificial intelligence along with youtube and internet research to help him create fake people that he could insert into photos that he took in Veles, North Macedonia. It’s both fascinating and terrifying to read about. But it’s certainly not surprising — we’ve been hearing about deepfake videos, as an example, for a while now. For all we know, this has been happening with regularity. We know that Bendiksen’s “Veles” is fake only because he told us.

His effort proved embarrassingly effective. Many people in photojournalism swallowed his conceit — hook, line and sinker. Bendiksen pulled the wool over his own colleagues’ eyes, even at one of the most venerated photojournalism festivals in the world.

And, yes, when I first saw an announcement about the new book, my first thought was “Great, can’t wait to see it!” and not “Hmm, I wonder if it’s real?” Even looking at sample images, all I could think was: “Yep, that looks just like Bendiksen’s work to me; fascinating new book and I can’t wait to see it.”

There have always been fakers in the news business. I know it’s hard to believe, but journalists are actually just mortal beings. They have the same desires and ambitions as everyone else. And the world is full of people who let those desires and ambitions steer them into lies and fakery. It’s unfortunate, but true.

Interestingly enough, Bendiksen’s “Veles” is all about the manufacturing of “fake news,” which really seemed to start in earnest around the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It seems this explosion of fake news was largely fueled by our incessant use of social media.

Social media has been nearly indispensable to our lives over the last few years. It seems as if everything we do is **tethered** to it, from finding lost connections to buying cars — it’s all possible on the Internet. The Internet even holds out a promise that it will bring you financial spoils if you just generate enough traffic.(...) It’s no wonder that people have turned to churning out fake news if it can be so profitable. That’s understandable. It’s also terrifying to think about.

This is precisely what Bendiksen’s book is doing, or trying to do. It is trying to terrify us, to wake us up. By creating a book of photojournalism that would not be questioned on its face by some of the most **stalwart** people in the business, Bendiksen is asking a very tough and necessary question.

And he has used his own rarefied position as a highly respected and decorated person in photojournalism to make the point. I would argue that’s yet another question the work brings up: Why do we give certain people a pass when it comes to believing what they do is valuable? Is it because they have won the right awards? Is it because they are members of the right club or group of people? Bendiksen’s book seems to make those ideas sort of laughable.

If Bendiksen can make a book that his own colleagues and some of the biggest titans in the photojournalism world will believe at face value, how secure can we feel about our ability to **suss out** the truth? The answer to that question has very real implications for what course life on this planet will or can take.

Kenneth Dickerman, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2020