

PROTECT IDENTITY. PRESERVE HUMAN PRESENCE.

EXPLORING AUTHENTIC ANONYMITY IN DOCUMENTARY FILM THROUGH AI

A collaboration between:
The University of Inland Norway and Reimagine AS,
supported by MishMash Centre for AI and Creativity



THE AIM

Explore whether AI can anonymise identities while preserving more of a participant's human expression and presence than conventional methods.





THE PROBLEM

Conventional anonymisation often removes the human expression, emotion and context that give documentary footage its meaning.





THE METHOD

Test selected AI-based approaches and compare them with conventional methods in a controlled pilot with real documentary material.



SUMMARY

This artistic research project explores whether artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to anonymise real people in documentary footage in a way that protects participants' identity while preserving perceived authenticity in embodied expression, emotional meaning and human connection, within ethically and legally responsible frameworks.



THE CHALLENGE

Our experience of documentary footage depends on how we read faces, voices, gestures, movement and relationships. But when participants must remain unidentifiable, conventional anonymisation methods often remove exactly what makes the material meaningful.

Blurring, pixelation and strong voice distortion can obscure facial expressions and body language, reduce emotional credibility and create distance between the viewer and the participant. They can also introduce visual and cultural associations with crime, danger, victimhood or shame that may be misleading in other documentary contexts.

The challenge is therefore not simply how to hide a person's identity, but whether it is possible to do so while preserving their human presence on screen.



RESEARCH QUESTION

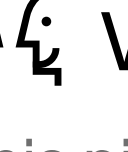
Is AI-based audiovisual transformation a viable and ethically responsible approach to anonymising documentary participants while preserving more of their human expression than conventional anonymisation methods?



POTENTIAL IMPACT

If AI-based audiovisual transformation proves to be a viable and ethically responsible way to protect identity while preserving more of a participant's human expression and presence, it could provide documentary filmmakers and researchers with a meaningful alternative to conventional anonymisation techniques.

The longer-term ambition is to contribute to a new ethical and cinematic approach for documentary practice: one that protects participants' identities while preserving perceived authenticity and the human qualities that give documentary footage its meaning..



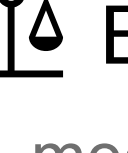
WHAT WE EXPLORE

This pilot explores whether AI-based audiovisual transformation can offer a more nuanced form of anonymisation, closer to the authentic expression.

We will investigate whether selected AI methods can transform identifiable characteristics while retaining important aspects of the original material, including:

- ✓ Facial and vocal expression
- ✓ Movement and gesture
- ✓ Interactions and relationships
- ✓ Environmental context
- ✓ Perceived authenticity and human presence

Rather than developing a complete anonymisation system, the pilot will test the feasibility and limitations of different approaches.



ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

AI-mediated anonymisation raises important questions around privacy, consent, data protection, participant agency, third-party AI services and the risk of re-identification.

Within this pilot, these issues will be identified and documented in relation to the methods tested, rather than investigated comprehensively.

The findings will help define the legal, ethical and societal research questions for a potential larger interdisciplinary project involving expertise from fields such as law, philosophy and ethics, AI and computer science, documentary practice and audience research.



EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The pilot will result in:

- ✓ An overview of promising AI-based approaches to audiovisual anonymisation
- ✓ Practical experiments demonstrating their possibilities and limitations
- ✓ A preliminary anonymisation workflow
- ✓ One or more proof-of-concept examples
- ✓ An initial mapping of relevant ethical and legal challenges
- ✓ A clearer understanding of which questions require further research
- ✓ A framework for a larger multidisciplinary research project



APPROACH

We will:

- ✓ Map and test a limited selection of existing AI-based anonymisation and transformation methods
- ✓ Conduct preliminary experiments with visual and audiovisual transformation
- ✓ Compare selected results with conventional anonymisation techniques
- ✓ Examine how well expression, gesture, interaction, voice and environmental context are preserved
- ✓ Identify technical limitations and challenges
- ✓ Identify key ethical and legal questions raised by the methods
- ✓ Develop a preliminary workflow and proof of concept
- ✓ Formulate research questions and directions for a larger multidisciplinary research project

The pilot is not intended to resolve the broader legal, ethical and societal questions surrounding AI-mediated anonymisation. Instead, it will establish whether the approach has sufficient technical, artistic and research potential to warrant more systematic investigation.



CONTEXT

The pilot draws on extensive video recordings from an ongoing artistic research project on role-play and embodied methods in documentary practice and education at the TV School in Lillehammer. The recordings are rich empirical data, but they cannot be published without proper anonymisation. In this case conventional methods will remove exactly what makes the material meaningful to the research: facial expressions, body language, emotional intensity and relational dynamics. They also introduce stigma and distance, often associated with crime or shame, which misrepresents ordinary learning processes. This provides a concrete use case through which the possibilities and limitations of AI-mediated anonymisation can be explored.



Role-Playing for Documentary Filmmakers

The project explores how role-playing can be used as a method in artistic and pedagogical development within the field of TV and documentary film production, to help participants develop both themselves and the productions they work on.