

United States Senate
Written Statement of Jennifer DeStefano
Abuses of Artificial Intelligence
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Good Afternoon Senators, it is my great honor to speak with you today and to share my experience of how artificial intelligence is being weaponized to not only invoke fear and terror in the American public, but in the global community at large as it capitalizes on and redefines what we have known to be as “familiar”. I would like to take this moment to thank Senator Ossoff for inviting me to be here today. I would also like to thank Senator Blackburn for your concern on this ever evolving topic and community threat. AI is revolutionizing and unraveling the very foundation of our social fabric by creating doubt and fear in what was once never questioned, the sound of a loved one’s voice.

What is “familiar”? How many times have you received a phone call from your child and asked them to verify who is calling? How many times has a loved one reached out to you in despair and you stopped them to validate their identity? Did you hang up on them? Did you require to call them back to make sure you are speaking to the correct person? The answer is more than likely, never. Never have you stopped your loved one and questioned if the voice you are speaking with is really them. The sound of a loved one’s voice is often never questioned. It is designed by nature, it is designed by God, as a unique identity, as unique as a fingerprint. This familiar identity is how a mother knows if it’s her child crying in a room and it is how a newborn child instantly recognizes their mother.

It was a typical Friday afternoon for our family kicking off a weekend of races and rehearsals that often divide our family across the state. As the parents of four children close in age, we tend to have to “divide and conquer”. My husband was with our older daughter Brie and our youngest son in Northern Arizona training for ski races. I was with our older son and youngest daughter Aubrey in the valley as she had rehearsal. Ski racing is a high risk sport and Brie had not raced in years. At age 15, she promised me she would take it easy and not hurt herself by pushing to hard. When I first received a call from an “unknown” number upon exiting my car, I was going to ignore it. On the final ring I chose to answer as “unknown” calls can often be a doctor or a hospital. I answered the phone “ Hello”, on the other end was our daughter Briana sobbing and crying saying “mom”. At first I thought nothing of it, she had run into race gates and bruised herself before, not to worry. I casually asked her what happened as I had her on speaker walking through the parking lot to meet her sister. Briana continued with “mom, I messed up” with more crying and sobbing. Not thinking twice, I asked her again, “ok what happened?” Suddenly a man’s voice barked at her to “lay down and put your head back”. At that moment I started to panic. My concern escalated and I demanded to know what was going on, but nothing could have prepared me for her response. “MOM THESE BAD MEN HAVE ME, HELP ME, HELP ME!!” She begged and pleaded as the phone was taken from her. A threatening and vulgar man took over the call “Listen here, I have your daughter, you tell anyone, you call the cops, I am going to pump her stomach so full of drugs, I am going to have my way with her, drop

her in Mexico and you'll never see her again!" all the while Briana was in the background desperately pleading "mom help me!!!"

With my shaking hand on the door handle to the studio, I put the man on mute, flung open the door and started screaming for help. The next few minutes were a parent's worst nightmare. I was fortunate to have a few moms at the studio who surrounded me, hearing all of the vulgar threats the man was making. One mom ran outside and called 911. Our 13 year old daughter Aubrey stood paralyzed in fear. I needed her help, her sister was in trouble and we had to find her. Another mom ran to her to aid as they started making calls to her dad, her brothers, anyone that could help us figure out what happened to Brie. The kidnapper demanded a million dollars. That was not possible and so the kidnapper decided on \$50,000, in cash. At this moment, the mom who called 911 came inside and shared with me that 911 was familiar with an AI scam where they can replicate your loved one's voice. I didn't believe this was a scam. It wasn't just Brie's voice, it was her cries, it was her sobs that were unique to her. It wasn't possible to fake that I protested. She told me that AI can also replicate inflection and emotion. That gave me a little hope but still was not enough. I proceeded with the negotiations. I asked for wiring instructions and routing numbers for the \$50,000 but was refused. "Oh no" the man demanded, "that's traceable, that's not how this is going to go down. We are going to come pick you up!" "What?" I shouted, "You will agree to being picked up in a white van, with a bag over your head so you don't know where we are taking you. You better have all \$50k in cash otherwise both you and your daughter are dead! If you don't agree to this, you will never see your daughter again!" he screamed. I had to stall, I asked the mom on the call with 911 to send police, I needed

to stall until I had police with me. Then the mom who was making calls with Aubrey was able to get my husband on the phone. He frantically located Brie resting safely in bed. Brie had no idea what was happening. As I was negotiating the arrangements of the abduction of myself to save my daughter, the mom came to me and told me she found Brie and that she was safe. I didn't believe her. How could she be safe with her father and yet be in the possession of kidnappers? It was not making any sense. I had to speak to Brie. I could not believe she was safe until I heard her voice say she was. I asked her over and over again if it was really her, if she was really safe, again, is this really Brie, are you sure you are really safe?! My mind was whirling. I do not remember how many times I needed reassurance, but when I finally took hold of the fact she was safe, I was furious. I lashed at the men for such a horrible attempt to scam and extort money. To go so far as to fake my daughter's kidnapping was beyond the lowest of the low for money. They continued to threaten to kill Brie. I made a promise that I was going to stop them, that not only were they never going to hurt my daughter, but that they were not going to continue to harm others with their scheme. After I hung up, I collapsed to the floor in tears of relief. When I called the police to pursue the matter, unfortunately I was met with this is a prank call. That it happens often and that I am probably not in harm's way (although not a guarantee). I was offered to have a police officer call me from another "unknown" number if it would make me feel better as law enforcement numbers are also blocked. That certainly did not make me feel better. Bottom line was no actual crime had been committed, no one was physically kidnapped, and no money was transferred, period, the end.

But that wasn't the end, it couldn't be the end. If it was the end, then this nightmare would never stop. I stayed up all night paralyzed in fear. Do they know where I am? Do they know where my daughter is? How did they get her voice? How did they get her crying, her sobs that are unique to her. She is not a very public person. Are we being cyber stalked? Targeted? So many questions that I could not leave unanswered, so I turned to our community and the response was overwhelming! Friends and neighbors came out of the woodwork with their stories. Kidnapping phone calls coming from their children's phones, bags of money being driven halfway to Mexico, even voices of young children nowhere to be found on social media and who do not have phones, the stories kept pouring in. Even my own mother received a call with my brother's voice claiming to be in an accident and needing money for the hospital bill! My mother is hard of hearing and quite spunky. After having the caller repeat the request multiple times, she realized the language used was not something my brother would say. She told the caller to call their real mother and hung up. The common response the victims received from authorities was that nothing could be done. In fact, one mother I know personally shared with me how she was even mocked by her son's school and security officer. She called his school frantically trying to locate her son when she received a call from him that he had been kidnapped. He even used his unique nickname during the call to self identify. Fortunately he was safe in class and she was told "this happens all the time" as her fear was dismissed. "It's the most frustrating, maddening, scary and invaded I've felt...my fear is that it is only a matter of time until someone actually follows through with the threat", she told me as she has been living in fear and concern for her son's safety ever since.

Money scams have been around for thousands of years. We have all heard of "snake oil" and remember the days of "swap land" sold as paradise in Florida. This is entirely

different. This is terrorizing with lasting post traumatic stress. Even months later, sharing the story shakes me to my core. It was my daughter's voice. It was her cries, her sobs. It was the way she spoke. I will never be able to shake that voice out of mind. It's every parents' worst nightmare to hear your child pleading with fear and pain, knowing that they are being harmed and you are helpless and desperate. The longer this form of terror remains unpunishable, the farther and more egregious it will become. The thought crossed my mind before I hung on the "kidnappers" to follow through with the physical abduction of me. Was that what would it take to bring an end to this? Was that what it would take in order to have a pursuable criminal offense?

As our world moves at a lightning fast pace, the human element of familiarity that lays foundation to our social fabric of what is "known" and what is "truth", is being revolutionized with Artificial Intelligence. Some for good, and some for evil. No longer can we trust "seeing is believing", "I heard it with my own ears" nor even the sound of our own child's voice. This concept redefines and rewrites what the very meaning of "familiarity" means. Familiarity is defined as "the quality of being well known or knowledge of something" and further is defined as "relaxed friendliness or intimacy between people." Familiar and family share the root word "Famil" which establishes strength of a relationship between one person and another. I ask you, when your mother calls, are you going to hang up and call her back to make sure it is really her? When your child calls you in need of help, will you disconnect the call and say I don't believe its really you? Is this our new norm? Is this the future we are creating by enabling this abuse of Artificial Intelligence without consequence?

I want to thank you for your time and attention today. Congress has a large and looming task ahead. How do we move forward as a community with this haunting reality that is plaguing us? If left uncontrolled, unguarded and without consequence, it will rewrite our understanding and perception what is and what is not truth. It will erode our sense of “familiar” as it corrodes our confidence in what is real and what is not. This is a non-partisan matter and I have seen the hands reach across the aisle in unified concern. That gives me great hope. How to contain the ever evolving Artificial Intelligence and its unknowns, is not an easy task. My sincere thanks and humble appreciation for your time and attention today. I thank all of you, and especially Senator Ossoff and Congress at large, for tirelessly taking action to keep our community and world safe from the hands of evil. I am one person, one story, but I am not the only one and I certainly will not be the last one unless action is taken. I wish you God’s speed.