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Press Release

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Spin-out project to rebuild voices of people who have lost theirs

People who have lost, or are at risk of losing, their voice due to a medical condition are set to be helped by a new spin-out company that will create a personalised synthetic version of their voice.

The company – SpeakUnique – will digitally rebuild the voices of people with conditions that affect speech such as motor neurone disease (MND), stroke, cancer of the throat or tongue and cerebral palsy.

It is estimated that more than half a million people in the English-speaking world could benefit from this technology, with nearly 10,000 people being affected each year in the UK alone.

The spin-out company is the result of a collaborative research project between world-leading researchers in computer sciences and healthcare at the University of Edinburgh. The project was inspired by Euan MacDonald, founder of the University's Euan MacDonald Centre for MND research.

When speech is impaired, people often use a communication aid, such as an iPad or eye gaze machine, to speak for them.

Such devices use generic synthetic voices that many users have reported they find unnatural and can leave them feeling that they have lost a part of their identity.

SpeakUnique allows people to create their own synthetic voice using less than an hour of their speech recorded via the internet. The new voice can then be downloaded for use or banked for the future.

For individuals who have already experienced a deterioration in their speech, such as slowness or slurring, SpeakUnique can repair the damage so their synthetic voice sounds like their previously healthy voice.

The service can also create bespoke voices for people who have lost or never had a voice, with a choice of regional accent, age and gender.

During the research project, more than 1600 people from across the UK donated their voices to assist in the development of the service.

SpeakUnique's service is also based on feedback from more than 180 people with a range of medical conditions and healthcare professionals including doctors, nurses and speech and language therapists.

Euan MacDonald lost his own voice due to the effects of MND. He came up with the idea for SpeakUnique because he didn't want his children to remember him by a voice that wasn't his own.

Euan MacDonald said: "We have been delighted to support this venture and see it grow from an idea to a research project. To be able to formally launch is very exciting, as people with MND, amongst others, will be able to bank their voices and receive the best quality synthesised voice in return. I know the benefits first hand as someone who uses my personalised voice through my eye gaze device every day.

“This is a great example of collaboration between the University and private individuals. I'd particularly like to thank my dad, Donald, for his constant enthusiastic backing of the venture over many years, and likewise my very good friend Tim Campbell for his fantastic support. ”

Alice Smith from SpeakUnique said: “Personalised synthetic voices are valuable not just to the individual, but also to their families as their loved one can maintain a key part of their identity. We are extremely grateful to the 1600 people from all over the UK who donated their voices to the research project, which has allowed individuals to communicate with a voice that is identifiably their own.”

The project was supported by Edinburgh Innovations, the University of Edinburgh’s commercialisation service.

Once launched, you can find out more about SpeakUnique here: www.speakunique.co.uk

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