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The Marble Palace Blog: AI Meets 'Brown v. Board'

Friday marks the 70th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision "Brown v. Board of Education." To celebrate the day, AI groups have gathered to bring new life to learning about the case.

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United States Supreme Court

Tony Mauro

Welcome to The Marble Palace Blog. I am Tony Mauro, and I have covered the Supreme Court since 1979 and for ALM since 2000. I retired in 2019, but in 2021 I launched a blog focusing on the court's history and mysteries, its quirks and its clerks, among other topics. I welcome tips and comments at tonymauro@aol.com.

On May 17, 1954, the day when Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the historic civil rights decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the only people who heard him were inside the U.S. Supreme Court. The court's staff did not record the audio of oral arguments until 1955.

Because of that, Jerry Goldman has stepped in to recreate that audio.

He is the longtime founder of "Oyez," a database devoted to making the Supreme Court's cases accessible to the public, especially the audio of oral arguments and opinions. He once told me that "if you want to find the time that Justice Scalia used the word broccoli, you can do that in a few seconds." Goldman is a Northwestern University professor emeritus.

Shaping the audio of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case was a difficult task, because it did not exist. But Goldman, admired by artificial intelligence experts, techies, designers and scholars, gathered them to do something that was not likely possible before: voice-cloning.

They searched post-1954 recordings of Earl Warren and the lawyers who participated in the *Brown v. Board* oral argument, including Thurgood Marshall.

Those snippets captured how the speakers might have sounded in the *Brown* oral argument. They then used voice replication techniques and actors to mirror the voices of the participants. Next, they drew from the paper transcript of the argument to speak the recreated words.

The audio of the oral argument came alive.

I was allowed to listen to the recreated oral argument, and it was remarkable. Typically, the tapings of Supreme Court arguments come out tinny and distant. But listening to the new AI version is easy and smooth. I felt as if Thurgood Marshall were speaking a few feet away from me.

Here is a YouTube hint of how the project all came out: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpBFyPm1OEY. Another website worth seeing is Brown v. Board of Education (1954).

Goldman's goal was to make the importance of the *Brown v. Board* case more accessible in the future.

"We hope this fosters a deeper public understanding and appreciation of this pivotal moment in the fight against racial segregation, especially on the 70th anniversary of the *Brown* decision," Goldman said. "It was a great opportunity to join forces with the Knight Lab, Spooler and Ukraine-based AI firm Respeecher to bring the transcripts to life in the voices of the actual participants."

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