Mood Mathematics

New algorithms make machines more human than ever.

September 2, 2019 By Kate Ferguson

I've read a number of interesting articles recently about devices that use artificial intelligence (AI) to assess people's emotions. We're talking wearable tech that can determine whether a person is happy, sad, aroused, bored or experiencing some other state of being. How cool is that? Or is it? Maybe, like me, you're not sure whether this is a good or bad thing.

A lot of companies are intrigued by the edge this technology might give their businesses. After all, compiling and evaluating consumer data is key to reeling in more customers and racking up more sales than the competition.

In law enforcement, hypothetical devices that can read thoughts, faces, body language and other clues conjure up visions of a future where crimes might go uncommitted because the perpetrators would be busted before they even broke the law. (Does this possibility ring a bell? Think of Minority Report, the film in which Tom Cruise played a cop in a futuristic police unit that uses AI to help stop crimes before they occur.)

Interestingly, in this make-believe version of society, technological advances in surveillance rendered privacy obsolete. AI was responsible for the safety and security of residents of the state.

Currently in its infancy, artificial intelligence is already having marked effects on the world as we know it. Digital assistants such as Amazon's Alexa and Google's Assistant now share our homes alongside our family members. Duplex, a chatbot by Google now in limited public testing, can even realistically mimic human speech.

Will Duplex one day assume our identity and deceive others? No one really knows, but it's enough of a possibility that Google has promised to build disclosures into Duplex to ensure that people will know they're speaking to a robot.

And here's another thing. What will happen to our privacy? Alexa and Assistant are already like strangers living in our homes. Then again, at some point, people may start to think of them as invisible friends who are at their beck and call 24/7.

Might they take the place of human companions? At least there'd always be someone—a voice? a

presence?— to talk to. Maybe these assistants could help ward off the loneliness and isolation some folks feel when they lack family or friends in their lives.

Taking things one step further, perhaps the day will come when machine learning allows AI to evolve to such a degree that these high-tech companions can actually compete with human beings for space on this planet.

Right about now, maybe you think I sound crazy. But just let me know whether you agree that the possibilities are indeed mind-boggling.

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