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AI

Artificial, certainly – but Intelligence...?

Technology has come a long way since the sixties. Computers are smaller by comparison to their predecessors, minuscule in some cases. They are capable of amazing feats: storing masses of data which they collate, file, search and recall in the blink of an eye. They derive assessments from stored information and report conclusions based on probability; considerably time-saving for humans who are much slower and prone to mistakes. Now there is a new friend of the people. Artificial Intelligence some bright spark decided to call it; AI for short. Nearly everyone has heard of it; some actually swear by it; people in general, however; are becoming increasingly sceptical and mistrusting, not to mention irritated, by a phenomenon that is taking over what used to be a normal life.

You may claim it hasn't impacted you personally; at least, you aren't aware that it has; but what about the phone call you had to make to a business or a government department? From the get-go you probably had a taste of AI: "*Welcome to My World,*" a voice said, "*If you have a query about your account press one; if you wish to speak with an operator press two...*" which is what you do. You know, of course, this was just a recording; and as your only response was to press buttons, that was okay. After a long, tedious wait while listening to annoying elevator music you are connected; presumably to a real person who asks you to: "*Please state briefly and in simple terms the nature of your enquiry.*" Maybe you haven't twigged yet and you try to explain what you need to know, only to be requested: "*Can you repeat that, please?*" So you do, and the dim-wit on the other end of the line still fails to understand. Then after the third time of asking you start to realise that he or she never will – what would an Artificial Idiot know about anything?

To be fair, computers do know far more than humans; or it would seem they do; this, however, is "knowing" in a different sense. What do I mean by that? Well, think of a library which holds thousands of books on all sorts of subjects. Pull one off the shelf and have a quick scan. It will relate its subject in a form which solicits any number of intended emotional responses; but it remains an impersonal, inanimate object devoid of feelings or concerns for the reader's real needs. The creators of AI try to assure anyone gullible enough to believe them that they have the answer. Their amazing computer-generated virtual reality is the closest thing to real people, with a voice to match and in some cases a visual look-alike which appears almost human. They can even replicate individuals such as actors and personalities to a degree that is becoming impossible to detect.

No wonder those in the entertainment profession were up in arms, concerned that their very existence was in jeopardy. Imagine the savings for producers who will no longer have to shell out obscene salaries to troublesome egotistical actors; instead, just paying the going rate to a string of computer geeks who can make them a movie with a cast of digital artists that perform exactly as scripted without complaint. They look real, they'll never get old and die; and they can be used again and again for a moderate negotiated

fee to the creators for all eternity. As for the audience, once procedures are refined, they won't have a clue that their favourite stars have been replaced by digital doppelgangers.

Well, I guess progress has to be tolerated and accepted – it's the way of things natural, and particularly unnatural. Sometimes it can be both amusing and irritating - take TV subtitles for instance. We were watching an Australian Rules football game and had the subtitles on. Although most of the text accurately detailed the commentary, some had been rephrased. Fair enough, I thought, considering someone was having to type furiously to keep up with the live broadcast, they were entitled to put in a shorter version which said the same thing. We even forgave the occasional misinterpretation of words like patients for patience; and wurburger for worm-burner (Aussie slang for a ball that skids along the ground); mainly because we thought it funny. As the game continued there were more like these. Football was suddenly irrelevant, we were so entertained by the subtitles that had us in fits. It never dawned on me at the time that it wasn't the work of a real person. Not being a computer myself, I came to this conclusion in my own plodding time and much later...

We are avid fans of the TV quiz The Chase and, like all other shows, we record it so that we can watch it when convenient. Subtitles are on, so we have the advantage of pausing once the question is on the screen. This isn't cheating: it merely gives us time to come up with the answer while exercising our brain-power and memory. Occasionally, when we press Play to get the answer, it isn't what we are certain it should be; so we re-wind to discover that a word or two of the quizmaster's audio have either been misquoted or left out altogether; which totally changes the meaning of the question. More annoying are those times when pausing doesn't help us at all because the answer is tacked right on the end of the question. Maybe that's to do with the editing of the programme; maybe someone out there is getting their own back for us skipping through the commercials; maybe it's simply AI behaving like the mindless eejit that it truly is.

There's a suggestion for its use in schools, maybe for schedules, rosters, planning activities, and even marking. Hey, hang on a tick! What next – a digital image of a teacher on the blackboard? Who'd even bother asking it a question, unless they didn't care about the answer. Do we really need an inhuman motherboard teaching our kids? I know I don't; and if you don't either, my advice to you is: if you want something doing properly, forget the Artificial Idiot and find a real person; if you can...

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