

/dev/random

No Bots About It

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The term “artificial intelligence” has been lobbed about in the semantic tennis match we call the Internet so often over the past decade that I don’t think it retains any real meaning for most of us. Our TVs, watches, doorbells, thermostats, toasters, and cars are called “smart” now, and “smart” is another word for “intelligent,” so “artificial intelligence” means we can control the crispness of heated bread from the shower. Let us not forget that one of the definitions of “artificial” is: pretended; assumed; insincere. From that perspective, I would argue that much of the recent egregious behavior of our government officials could be termed “artificial intelligence,” although whether the “intelligence” part applies at all is debatable. Maybe “artificial leadership” is more apropos.

I’ve written before (ad nauseum) on the somewhat irrational fear of technologists that the machine singularity will automatically lead to the inevitable extinction of the human race at the appendages of our cold, unfeeling robot overlords. No, if the machines do in fact take over, it won’t be mechanoids or automatons or network-controlled front-end loaders with unconstrained bloodlust that carry out the executions, it will be us. Humanity. We will off ourselves, and we’ll do it because bots drove us to do it.

“Bots!” I hear you sneer, rolling your eyes. What kind of threat are bots? What are they going to do, index your website without permission? Steal your CPU cycles to mine digital currencies that may or may not have any actual value at any given moment? Inflate your popularity on Instagram? I shake my head sadly at your naively myopic techno-worldview. There is so much more bot-related ruckus to be raised, my friends.

Bots, not you, control what you see and do on the Internet. Really. Reactive content, for example—that is, content generated based on current events and news items—is deeply dependent on bot activity. If bots generate ten million views for some useless doodad and you happen to fall in the fake demographic it was spoofing, ads for that doodad are going to get displayed prominently on your social media account, even if nothing in your actual profile suggests you’d have any interest in doodads. If you try turning them off, you’ll get a stern warning that ads cannot be turned off without risking the complete collapse of all the world’s economies. Do you really want that on your conscience? Just buy a stupid doodad, for Pete’s sake. Then, of course, be prepared to see ads for the exact doodad you just bought for several weeks because bots hate you.

Not only do bots determine what ads you’ll see or music you’ll listen to or videos you’ll watch, there is research to suggest they may even control your basic perception of reality. “Emotionally volatile users” (also known as “Everyone on the Internet”) are particularly susceptible to manipulation by the malicious misapplication of personal data. Most people surrender a ridiculous amount of information about themselves to social media sites, and then act all surprised and betrayed when that data is used to target them. Boo hoo.

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Why did you think they kept nagging you to fill out that profile, patting your virtual head as positive reinforcement for every scrap of privacy you gave up? Did you believe Facebook just wanted to make sure to buy you the perfect birthday present? Or that maybe you were in the running for Who's Who among Gullible Computer Users? Every time you accept the invitation by some new application to make use of the "convenience" of logging into it via a social media account, you've just stripped yet another layer off the already pea-sized onion of your privacy.

"Live chat" bots are one of the more ironically named primary growth industries in the bot landscape. Most observers classify them as "benign," but benign tumors can still mess you up, believe me. These chatbots' ostensible purposes are to help you find things on a website, place orders, or engage in some other automatable customer service activity. Just remember that anytime you interface with a bot, you have no real guarantees as to what information that code might be collecting on you from places like your browser history or various caches. Oh, you told it not to look at any of those? Well, that's all right, then: no piece of software has ever been used to engage in duplicitous activity. Crisis averted.

Even without that level of intrusion, the answers you give to its questions will be used to flesh out your all-important marketing target profile. Some of them are subtler about this collection process than others. If the live chat bot you're talking to while getting tickets to the theater starts asking you what kind of socks you wear or whether you prefer stick to roll-on, you have stumbled upon one of the less-subtle varieties.

It is poetic justice to me, then, that a lot of the information supplied to potential advertisers by the various harvesting bots is downright erroneous. Some studies have shown that as much as 60% of all reported ad traffic stems from click fraud perpetrated by bots. Those 2.5 million views of your ad last month? Only six of them were by actual living human beings. Sorry. Would you like to file a complaint? We have a live chat bot for that. It's a good listener and hardly ever interrupts with profanity. And it has 1.2 million likes.

All of this is well and good, you're probably muttering to yourself, but how does any of it contribute to the thesis that bots will be responsible for our downfall as Earth's dominant land-based species? To answer this, let us turn once again to our old nemesis, social media. Is it a coincidence that the generation on whose shoulders humanity's hopes and dreams squarely rest can't bear to be parted from their social media for even one moment or they experience full-on withdrawal? I say it is not. I say the bots have positioned us, and themselves, right where they want us. There's a reason suicide rates have gone up, and it isn't fluoride in the water.

Mood swings, depression, hopelessness, frustration...what's the source of all this negative baggage? In my day it would have been a combination of bills, bad news, academic/job disappointments, errant romances, and possibly a car that doesn't run. These would have been woes of more or less discrete origin, however, deriving largely from face-to-face imbroglios. Digital technology has amalgamated the disparate elements of your misery today and served them up as a homogeneous, quivering mass of shock gelatin.

The genius inherent in this approach is that you can no longer treat one of the symptoms to improve the disease, any more than putting new tires on your car will make you more satisfied with the job to which it conveys you every morning. The bots who feed you your every emotion have seen to that. Do I sound paranoid? It's not me talking, it's the schizobot who intercepts my keystrokes.

You could, of course, avoid bots to some extent by skipping out on the Internet altogether, but if that isn't practical you can try my tactic: fibbing shamelessly. I fill out every survey, answer each and every question I am asked, with complete and utter fiction. I suspect my data is probably archived by cryptozoologists and alien hunters worldwide. After all, I'm a 262-year-old gender-fluid goblin entomological proctologist named Mortallica Lazarkolon who enjoys heavy water sports and harbors a penchant for deep-fried lymph nodes (with fat). Fantasy novelists: we have our uses.