INSIGHT 10

AI COULD RESHAPE OUR WAYS OF RELATING TO OTHERS

AI tools could mediate more social interactions — in public or professional settings, or in private with friends, family or romantic partners. These tools could be used to flag suspicious or harmful behaviour, and help avoid social blunders — but they could also assist in manipulating and preying on others.

TODAY

AI already plays a large role in mediating our relationships with strangers, friends, and family in online spaces. Recommender algorithms act as a social filter, determining which content a user sees, from which people, and in which order.[1] These algorithms can encourage users to engage with influencers and content creators who provide a high level of apparent access to their lives.[2] For some users, such "intimacies" can develop into parasocial relationships, where individuals feel emotionally connected or attached to total strangers.[3]

AI devices mediate an increasing number of professional and personal interactions. For example, doctors are already using AI to help diagnose or monitor patients.[4] People are using AI to help write profiles[5] or messages[6] on dating apps. AI can even analyze and flag the tone that individuals use in messages to one another, for example in apps used to mediate communication in difficult coparenting arrangements.[7]

Wearable devices which introduce AI into new aspects of our lives can blur the lines between real and digital spaces. These devices can use virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and a combination of AR and VR known as mixed reality (MR).[8] Research suggests that immersive environments can be more emotionally impactful than traditional online spaces.[9] Collective experiences in VR can provide a new type of enriching social gathering for geographically distant groups. Harms in VR, such as assault, can have psychologically similar effects as the offline equivalent.[10]

Individuals can develop emotional connections with AI companions. Millions are turning to AI companions to alleviate loneliness, access therapy, get advice, and for romantic connection.[11, 12, 13] When an AI model produces text, speech and images that are indistinguishable from those made by humans, it is easy to anthropomorphise the model by attributing motive and intent to its responses.[14]

Users of popular platforms live in increasingly personalized and private worlds as AI curates the content they see. Social media algorithms often offer users content that suggests they "know" them better than even close friends might. Over time, however, consuming AI-curated content – as opposed to content shared by friends – may warp representations of the self.[15] As they scroll through content alone, users can enter what researchers call a trance-like state.[16]

AI is changing how parents relate to and engage with their children. AI tools can allow parents an unprecedented level of visibility and control over the apps their children use, the content they consume, and the messages they write, as discussed in Insight 7. Smartphones or trackers can give parents real-time, 24/7 information about their children's whereabouts.[17] These tools can erode children's autonomy, privacy, and independence as they grow and mature. Similar tools used in romantic relationships can facilitate abusive behaviour and stalking.[18]

FUTURES

In the future, AI could play a larger role in mediating professional interactions, limiting scope for forming new friendships. AI could improve the efficiency of communication between a company's customers and employees and change workflows between individuals and teams. Workplace culture could become more impersonal, with fewer opportunities for socialising.

AI tools could also mediate more personal social interactions, even in the home among family members. Such tools could include AI agents, platform algorithms, or wearable devices, such as AR glasses. More information about and visibility into the inner lives of people, whether physiological or psychological, could become normalized. This could improve communication in relationships. It could also shift relationship dynamics in new ways, leading to lower trust and autonomy and more mental health issues.[19]

Individuals could increasingly turn to AI for companionship or answers to personal problems. AI could help socially isolated individuals to connect with others.[20] AI therapists could provide tailored mental health care for populations that lack access: apps such as Black Female Therapist, for example, use AI trained to highlight the importance of systemic racism.[21] On the other hand, AI companions could further isolate individuals if they replace relationships with humans. Individuals who come to prefer synthetic relationships to real ones could end up disconnected from community, though not necessarily lonely.

Some individuals could seek human connection by sharing and comparing their media feeds. As media experiences become increasingly personalized, there could be increased interest in understanding the distinct worlds that people inhabit. This could include "feed analysis" in therapeutic settings, sharing feeds in the presence of friends, or even public feed-sharing events.[22]

In the future, it may become impossible to distinguish between humans and hyper-realistic AI agents when interacting in online spaces. AI technology could be used to create digital replicas of deceased or estranged loved ones, or celebrities and influencers. AI agents could be perceived as exhibiting human emotions such as empathy and love. Individuals could have what feels like an intimate relationship with a person but is in fact a parasocial interaction with a chatbot. This could entirely replace human social connections for some vulnerable or lonely individuals.

IMPLICATIONS

- AI could **help reduce inequalities for those who face language barriers** or difficulties navigating complex social interactions
- Relationships with AI companions could feel indistinguishable from human connections, or even easier or better, for some people
- **AI companions or therapists could have more influence on an individual's behaviours** than their family or close friends
- **Social skills could atrophy**. Skills such as listening and empathy could be eroded if users lean too heavily on AI assistance for social interactions or customize AI agents to reflect their needs and preferences
- Marriage rates could decline and loneliness could increase
- The experience of selfhood could change. Earlier and more frequent self-monitoring, and the application of predictive analytics to biological and mental processes, could lead to **new ways of understanding and optimizing the self**
- **New forms of abuse and virtual crime could emerge**, potentially challenging definitions of assault and harassment
- **Predators could more easily gain the trust of children and adults**, leading to greater risk of fraud, harassment, or other abuse
- **Using AI tools to communicate with people could shift language** over time, potentially towards greater homogenization and sterilization
- **AI tools could flag suspicious behaviour**, report abuse as it is happening, and help individuals navigate toxic or dangerous relationships
- **Bullying and harassment could become more omnipresent** and damaging to mental health if it occurs in realistic immersive environments or with the use of generative AI

Endnotes

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