

Yes, they really are listening to us

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The rise of voice profiling

Amidst all the revolutions that are sweeping the world, from economic to political, the omnipresent Fourth Industrial Revolution keeps powering ahead with no sign of reaching a peak or slowing down.

One aspect of it which receives surprisingly little media coverage and rarely enters discussion is the radical development of voice profiling.

According to Professor Joseph Turow of the University of Pennsylvania, (ref *1), when you phone Shop X to enquire about a product, an Artificial Intelligence company is probably listening on behalf of Shop X. It is standard practice now.

The AI will immediately identify your personality, for instance “chatty and outgoing”, and will match you to the consultant with the best sales record for your personality type. That consultant is the employee most likely to click with you and thus to ‘up-sell’ you to a more expensive purchase. The Professor stresses that “this kind of voice-activated marketing is happening all the time”.

Think for a moment of all the times you’ve heard the soft (always female, but that’s a discussion for another day) voice that says, “This conversation may be recorded for training and quality assurance purposes” or something similar.

Companies may be monitoring their own people, but they are monitoring and recording you and me too... and they don’t really ask for permission, they just go ahead and do it. We’re not given a “do not record this conversation” option, are we? Another stealthy method of tracking us is via smart speakers, which are often literally given away as freebies to us when we purchase other tech; the internet retail giants seem to give them away most often. These speakers are thrown into super-desirable deals and if you’ve already got a house full of these cute ‘n cunning listening devices, you can always pass any surplus speakers to friends or family. What lovely gifts they are after all; who would think that they are surveillance equipment too?

The reason behind being flooded with smart speakers, though, is interesting. The giant tech firms are working on the premise that we’ll all soon be searching via voice rather than by typing, which is why they are ensuring that their speakers are listening to us. The built-in algorithms which analyse our voices develop a deep understanding of our speech patterns, which also reveal the nuances of our personalities in a way no marketers have been able to capture before. With this knowledge at their disposal, retailers know how to push more of the right buttons with us and will be first to secure our business.

In new cars, by the way, the vehicles are even learning to lip-read everything we say.

Wait... that’s my voice!

In another thrilling but perhaps also alarming development, AI is now able to clone our voices. The more data that voice cloning tools are provided with, through recording and listening to us, the more uncannily perfect the results are.

Do you remember when you could tell that a voice was not proper human speech simply because some of the intonations were wrong? Now it might take the ear of a Mozart to tell the difference. Or perhaps no one will be able to tell at all. Google Assistant has become so realistic that it’s nigh impossible to tell what is human and what is AI.

You’ve probably experimented with voice technology yourself, for instance by changing the voice of your GPS, which is an amusing little tweak to make. This experimental use of celebrity voices is something of a failure though. Celebrities don’t necessarily work for the task of giving directions. Billy Connolly, one would think, would be a winner, funny man that he is. However, using Billy to advise on where to turn or change lane is a strangely depressing experience. His comedy, delivered in his heavy Scottish accent, is funny. But his driving instructions are simply, well, deadly dull.

Ripe for abuse

One can figure out at once how fake news and false information are likely to be disseminated with cloned voices that sound like people we respect. And as the adage goes, “If it can be done, it will be done”.

Imagine how shaken we would be if David Attenborough’s velvet voice, one of the most famous on the planet, were to tell us that climate change is a gigantic hoax, and everything really is okay; plastic is not a problem and there’s no fear of mass extinction. Would that not be uplifting news? Who would doubt Sir David?

Once this fake news was disseminated, it would likely go on forever. No matter how many denials were issued by the BBC, the falsehoods would go on and on spreading because as we all know, fake news never dies, it just reappears on social media.

So, how else are our voices being captured and analysed? Through almost every aspect of the technology we’re so wholeheartedly embracing. Think of the all the must-have devices that respond to our voices. Our phones of course. The intelligent screen that comes with every new car. And of course, the ubiquitous call centre, now known to be recording us for much more than ‘quality’ purposes.

Artificially intelligent voice analysis is giving marketers and advertisers an edge they’ve never had before, an ability to read customers and obtain insights that were previously not ‘capture-able’.

In fact, the businesses with which we interact may eventually know us and understand our likes and dislikes better than our closest friends and family do. Through this knowledge, they will have more power to influence us than ever before. Is the true cost of this not just our data, but in fact our privacy and freedom of choice?

Does it even really matter? Will AI simply improve our shopping experiences? Or are the secret spies of dodgy governments using it to stalk citizens?

You decide.

Last Thought

After a visit to the dentist yesterday, where a discussion about the problem of “grinding or clenching” one’s teeth ensued, this writer was astonished to find a news item in this morning’s email. The subject: “Teeth grinding or clenching”.

The only listener who could have picked up on the subject and started spamming me (apart from the dentist) was...my cell phone.

REFERENCES:

*1. Professor Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Media Systems & Industries, University of Pennsylvania, <https://theconversation.com/shhhh-theyre-listening-inside-the-coming-voice-profiling-revolution-158921>

*2. Owen Williams author <https://onezero.medium.com/amazon-and-google-are-practically-giving-away-smart-speakers-heres-why-56f0e50bd95c>

*3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2019/05/06/artificial-intelligence-can-now-copy-your-voice-what-does-that-mean-for-humans/?sh=444581ac72a2>