



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The Fulfillment Machine

If you don't know, artificial intelligence, AI, is creeping inexorably into our lives. From facial recognition technology to autonomous vehicles, from drone swarms to Siri, from Tesla to Pandora's "Musical DNA," AI and machine learning are among the incredibly powerful — and largely invisible — forces driving our next cultural revolution.

There are even reports that shopping carts at the grocery store will soon be outfitted with AI, so that grocers, and presumably whoever else can afford to buy the data sets, can learn more about the habits of customers inside a store.

The commercial study of human behavior isn't new: Human beings have been studying other human beings for their commercial predictions since we started trading arrowheads around the campfire — but something in the invisibility, and intrusiveness, of AI feels new. It also feels dangerous, like a wood

chipper is dangerous, and I'm not so convinced that the desired end state — ease and convenience and, eventually, the utter absence of personal responsibility — is finally worth what we may be giving up.

I don't want to be studied in the grocery store. Or anywhere else.

In Baltimore, Amazon has constructed a one-million-square-foot distribution warehouse called, ominously, a "Fulfillment Machine." The Fulfillment Machine consists of over 11 miles of conveyor belts, chutes, ladders, and AI pickers and packers that retrieve items from the shelf, drop them in a box, seal the box, and scoot them out the door into a waiting van. No humans required. AI also controls the inventory, deciding what items should be placed where, so that a human walking into the Machine with a clipboard and a pocket protector would probably not be able to find anything.

The computers run the show.

The *Wall Street Journal* — one of the last bastions of adult news on the planet — writes that Amazon requires "one minute of human labor to get a package onto a truck, but that number is headed to zero. Autonomous warehouses will merge with autonomous manufacturing and delivery to form a fully automated supply chain."

It's also possible that in the near future that package could be delivered to a fully automated brothel, now that the sex-robot industry is an

actual thing.

Call me folksy, but that's just weird.

It also spurs the curious to wonder about all of those jobs Amazon promises to create, a thing they do to win enormous tax concessions in deals that almost always crater in the long run. Christopher Atkeson, a robotics professor at Carnegie Mellon, told the *Wall Street Journal* that even that one remaining minute of human labor is in danger because "a robotic arm capable of replacing Amazon's warehouse workers will be available within five years."

Just think of it: no unions, no workman's comp, no healthcare plans, no retirement required.

Oh, and here's one that might get your attention: both Amazon and Walmart "have patented blimplike warehouses that will float 1,000 feet in the air, armed with drones ready to deliver toothpaste and toilet paper to your doorstep as if they were files."

Drone swarms carpet-bombing cities with rolls of toilet paper would almost be worth watching.

It remains to be seen what kind of influence AI and machine learning will have on elections, though over in China the government has been working on gene-editing babies and — more ominously — by 2020 every Chinese citizen will be receiving a report card under a scheme known as the "social credit system." Under this perfectly progressive idea one is graded on

one's behaviors by the government. It has been reported that some "nine million people with low scores have been blocked from buying tickets for domestic flights," and "three million people are barred from getting business-class train tickets."

And so on and so forth.

At present, some of these "social credit systems" are controlled by city councils, and others are "scored by private tech platforms which hold personal data." As we continue the transformation of human beings into little more than data-farmed credit cards with feet — remember that shopping cart? — this sort of thing seems to be the inevitable direction of humanity.

But resisting that sentiment is officially frowned on, at least in China, whose official slogan for social credit scores is "keeping trust is glorious and breaking trust is disgraceful."

It's unclear whose trust they are meaning, but given that the "exact methodology" for determining one's social credit is a state secret, we can probably guess. And, back in the arena of free elections, we probably shouldn't overlook Nicholas Carr's cogent

observation that, "As society becomes ever more computerized, the programmer becomes its unacknowledged legislator."

Which may not be the best world we can create. That's especially true as we continue to guarantee that our descendants will inherit a financial disaster of a republic, given that "by 2033 Social Security, health care spending, and interest on our national debt will consume every dollar of federal revenue."

That's known, in some circles, as the The Great Baby-Boomer Dine and Dash, but we probably shouldn't lament. After all, we will have toilet paper falling from the sky, Black Friday blowouts and Fulfillment Machines to ease the pain of the new American normal: super-efficient generational poverty.

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