



Artificial influencers and the dead internet theory

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In the evolving landscape of social media, a significant transformation is unfolding, marked by the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This development, characterized by the emergence of AI influencers, represents a profound shift in the ethos of social media platforms. Once heralded as bastions of human interaction and connectivity, these platforms are increasingly becoming conduits for AI-driven content, prioritizing consumption over authentic social engagement. This trend necessitates a critical examination, particularly in light of its broader implications on societal well-being and the integrity of digital communication.

The advent of what is here referred to as “AI influencers” signals a paradigm shift in social media, transforming it from a space for genuine human interaction to a sophisticated domain dominated by consumption-driven algorithms. This transition, while remarkable for its efficiency in content creation and audience targeting, raises concerns about the diminishing essence of authentic human connection in the digital sphere. In short, social media is becoming less about connecting humans to other people but about consuming content and getting hooked by deliberately targeted dopamine hits in our brains, leading to a multiplication of online addictions and behavioral difficulties (Levy 2021). An emerging problem of this shift is encapsulated in the so-called “Dead Internet Theory”, which posits that the internet is predominantly populated by AI-generated content, relegating human activity to isolated instances. Ten years ago, the theory used to be rather speculative, but with the wake of generative AI, it can now be observed first-hand, and it

highlights a disturbing trend: the blurring lines between human and AI-driven interactions. As AI proliferates in generating content, it increasingly shapes user perceptions and behaviors, directing the digital narrative toward its algorithmically determined objectives, often at variance with the inherently unpredictable nature of human discourse. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many may have difficulty discerning between “real” and “fake” data (or, for that matter, “human-generated” and “AI-generated” ones). Hence, the emergence of deepfakes, a by-product of AI’s advancements, presents challenges to digital trust (Walter 2022). These AI-driven tools, capable of creating highly realistic yet fabricated content, pose a significant threat to the integrity of information online, propelling misinformation and eroding the foundation of trust essential for healthy digital interactions.

Extending beyond social media, this infiltration of AI is evident in the retail industry, where AI bots function as “live streamers”, selling merchandise with a life-like presence. This trend, further exemplified by initiatives like Meta’s full management of AI influencers, marks a concerning convergence of consumerism and artificiality in spaces once dedicated to human expression. One of the most pressing consequences of this AI-dominated landscape is its potential impact on mental health, particularly among young people. The transformation of social media into a platform primarily for consumption, driven by non-personal AI entities and governed by dopaminergic business models, fosters an environment where superficial interactions replace meaningful connections. This shift, especially in a domain where the younger generation spends considerable time, may contribute to increased rates of depression (Babu and Kanaga 2021). The question then arises: how should we navigate this AI-influenced digital terrain? The solution lies in a balanced and ethical integration of AI. Users, businesses, and politicians alike should be mindful of these developments. It is not a call to eschew technological progress but to guide it in a manner that respects and upholds human values and societal health. Prioritizing digital literacy, developing tools for AI detection, and setting ethical standards for the use

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of AI are critical steps in preserving the integrity of online environments.

This implies that as we traverse the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the imperative for a human-centric approach in digital interactions becomes increasingly evident. While the integration of AI into social media introduces novel avenues for engagement and efficiency, it should not eclipse the fundamental need for authentic human connection. As members of an increasingly digital society, we bear a collective responsibility to ensure that technological advancement enhances, rather than detracts from, the human experience in the digital domain. We have originally developed the internet and social media to help us find good information and to stay connected to one another. As such, we shall make sure that it says this way.

Curmudgeon Corner Curmudgeon Corner is a short opinionated column on trends in technology, arts, science and society, commenting on issues of concern to the research community and wider society. Whilst the drive for super-human intelligence promotes potential benefits to wider society, it also raises deep concerns of existential risk, thereby highlighting the need for an ongoing conversation between technology and society. At the core of Curmudgeon concern is the question: What is it to be human in the age of the AI machine? -Editor.

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Declarations

Conflicts of interest None to declare.

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