_____

## The Real and the Virtual: An Exploration of Artificial Intelligence and Social Media Engagement

_____

**Dr Sunita Kulkarni,**
Associate Professor,Dept of English,L.J.N.J. Mahila Mahavidyalaya,Vile Parle,
Mumbai.  Mail: coolsun511@gmail.com

_____

**Abstract:**
Human beings always look for labour and time saving devices and create technologies that enable them to devote themselves to the advancement of knowledge and betterment of available technology. Humans have come a long way from the invention of the wheel and discovery of fire, industrial revolution and assembly line production to advanced space exploration and creation of machines based on Artificial Intelligence. Though there may be a negative side to this, so far humans have focused on the advantages, sweeping aside the negatives as collateral damage. Today, humans live in a highly industrialized, urbanized, technology-driven society that depends heavily on machines for communication, entertainment, research, health, education and other areas of life, but with increasingly dwindling human contact. Artificial intelligence, AI, has become an integral part of day to day human life in multiple ways, has helped save labour and time and has enhanced and enriched human life  experience. The present paper attempts to explore the excessive engagement with AI in social media with specific reference to *Be Right Back,* an episode in the sci-fi series *Black Mirror* on Netflix. The paper will be divided in three parts, the first dealing with AI and social media in general, the second with an analysis of *Be Right Back,* and the third discussing some concerns with human dependence with AI and presenting the conclusion.

**Introduction:**
**Artificial Intelligence:**
Defined variously as, "The science and engineering of making intelligent machines"(John McCarthy 1955) and, "A branch of computer science dealing with the simulation of intelligent behaviour in computers"(Merriam-Webster), artificial intelligence is a branch of computer science that aims at simulating or replicating human thoughts, behavioural patterns and language through the use of algorithms.

Some commonly used applications of AI are digital assistants such as Siri, Alexa and Google Assistant; search engines that not only provide detailed information on searched topics, but suggest more as well; writing aids; content creation aids; internet gaming; GPS; e-commerce platforms that internalize the purchase patterns of customers; chat-bots that

_____

assist in communication; face recognition software as well as social media algorithms that process users' most watched, liked and shared content and suggest similar content and products. Apart from these, AI tools are used in more advanced and specialized areas such as space exploration, manufacturing, health industry, translation, self-driving cars, virtual and augmented reality and generative art.

**Social Media:**

Social media consists of platforms that enable people to interact or socialize online. Users or subscribers share their ideas, hobbies, photographs, videos and even their merchandise on them. People who know each other in reality or even complete strangers in remote locations may form online friendships. As the basic premise of these platforms is to socialize, communicate, share and extend relationships beyond face to face meetings, they are called social media platforms. Several popular and widely used platforms are WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, Snapchat, Pinterest and LinkedIn and in recent times, they are used not only to form personal and professional contacts but also to promote and market ideas and products and to share the latest news. Social media has more advantages than traditional print media is able to offer, in terms of reach, usability and speed. All it requires is internet connectivity and a digital device.

Due to increased internet connectivity and rise in the number of cellphone users, social media engagement has increased to large numbers. As it provides constant creation and dissemination of content and can customize content as per the users' preferences, dependence on social media as a source of information, entertainment and income, has reached alarming proportions.

**Black Mirror and Be Right Back**

*Black Mirror* is a British Sci-Fi television series, presenting and commenting on some unexpected and dark side of technology. Episodic in nature, it mixes several genres such as sci-fi, futuristic fantasy, horror, satire and thriller. The very name of the series points to the black screen or surface of some electronic gadget. The stories are based in some future reality that seems very plausible given the technological advances today. The series also tries to sound a note of warning regarding human over-dependence on machines, the need for responsible use of technology and the ethics of AI use.

*Be Right Back* was aired in February 2013, the first episode of season 02, and proved to be very popular. It presents Martha and Ash, a young couple, who move to Ash's childhood home in the countryside. Ash is obsessed with social media and constantly uploads photographs and videos. Unfortunately, Ash dies the very next day, most probably in a car accident and Martha is devastated. A friend who has suffered a similar loss suggests a chat support service to her which she vehemently rejects, but her friend nonetheless signs her in. Discovering that she is pregnant, and alone in her grief, Martha decides to try the service and starts messaging with a chat-bot. Soon messaging is not enough and she wants to speak to him/it. Uploading more photographs and video clips and personal mails of Ash, results in the chat-bot speaking to her in Ash's voice and tone, using his characteristic dry humour. She speaks to him continuously, going on long walks, making the faux Ash listen to her baby's

_____

heartbeats. Realizing her emotional dependence, the chat-bot tells her about a new experiment they are working on which she can buy, so he can always be with her. She buys an android, programmes him and gets a new improved version/replica of Ash. This Ash is not obsessed with his phone, is agreeable, attentive to all her needs, able to modify his body at will, obedient and is even able to satisfy her sexual desires. Ironically, all this, instead of making her happy, irritates her and she tries to send it away and almost orders it to kill itself. However, the resemblance to Ash stops her from doing so. The end shows her with her daughter celebrating her birthday, visiting the Ash android who is now relegated to the attic.

The episode foreshadows or tries to predict certain possibilities which may prove true in the near future such as Ash listening to the news item describing the successful testing of 'intelligent synthetic flesh' which aims at providing prosthetic aid to amputees; the isolation Martha feels after learning she is pregnant and her sister being too busy to receive her call, her overwhelming desire to speak to someone, but no one to share her news with except a machine; the fact that the more access to one's personal data the AI service has, the more it will look and sound like Ash. Some of these are already happening in a world that is competitive, target-driven and people feeling isolated due to lessening genuine and warm human contact.

**Concerns raised by *Be Right Back:***
- Over-dependence on technology becomes a barrier in the process of accepting death, loss and the natural process of grieving, as it provides an illusory solution/alternative. This leads to a stagnation of emotions that need to be purged in a natural manner.
- Obsession with phone use  is probably the cause of Ash's death, but ironically his excessive social media engagement helps create a digital replica, persona or doppelganger, that may bring some solace from sorrow to Martha.
- Significance of the attic: Ash's mother in the past has dealt with the deaths of her son and husband by removing all their photographs (visual reminders) to the attic. Martha initially turns to the available technological tools  of chat-bot and android Ash for consolation instead of turning to real people. In the end, however, like Ash's mother, she too banishes the android Ash to the attic. Android in the attic reminds us of 'madwoman in the attic' found in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre,* where the madwoman, an embarrassment, is stashed away in the attic, away from prying eyes. Madwoman in the attic signifies a woman, considered an embarrassment to the family, whose agency and autonomy has been taken away due to mental illness, and she is locked away from other residents of the house and kept away from visitors. Similarly, after realizing that though the android may satisfy her physical needs, it can never provide emotional support and companionship of a real person, Martha confines it to the attic, only to be visited on occasion.
- Replacing humans and human relationships with technology based ones will impact personal and societal structure and evolution negatively. Humans believe that machinery can solve any problem and can compensate for any human shortcomings, but this is not true. Martha has technology to help her create an AI programmed

_____

version of Ash as a solution for her sorrow and loneliness. The android Ash is perfect in a physical sense, "Ash on a better day", an exact physical replica that does not tire, will not age or die, does not sleep, is always available, is attentive and obedient, satisfies her sexually, needs no fuel or power source, has no mood swings, does not argue, in short, is the perfect boyfriend. But, though the Ash chat-bot and android seem to bring some solace to Martha initially, she eventually realizes their futility because human beings come as a package with their unique traits, whimsicalities, emotions, illogical behaviour and unpredictability. The consequence of this is that the android Ash is relegated to the attic. She cannot live with him, nor can destroy him, so like unfinished business, he is stored in the attic.

- The episode raises questions of human identity as the liminal space between the real (human) and the virtual is blurred. What is the essence of the human? Is it the soul, as many religions believe or is it the neurological impulses and human behaviour based on them?

- The rise of social media has facilitated connections and communication, seemingly bringing people together. However, these digital connections lack the emotional warmth of human face to face connect. Extended human footfall on social media platforms has brought to our notice the intrusive nature of social media as humans are constantly under surveillance by businesses, advertising and marketing companies and government agencies that gather vast amounts of data about people's incomes, social lives, spending patterns, contacts, financial transactions, food preferences, religious leanings, sexual preferences and other extremely personal, even intimate details. Machines are monitoring us, noticing our digital footprint, our likes, dislikes, shares, predicting our future behaviour and modifying content to it. So, human beings instead of consumers have actually become the product.

- Ethics of AI: Martha resorts to available technology to create an AI programmed version of Ash as solution for her loss and grief. The act of duplicating a person is itself ethically questionable. She also has a satisfactory sexual encounter with it soon after it is delivered which seems distasteful and morally reprehensible.

- Techno-consumerism: Martha's grief is exploited as she is lured step by step into the trap of techno-consumerism. Her interaction with the virtual Ash, mimics the stages in human courtship. Chatting via messages, long conversations on phone, and finally, a physical/sexual contact. Once she becomes obsessed with speaking with the chat-bot, and feels scared of losing this last shred of connection to Ash, she is cleverly manipulated into buying the android replica of Ash.

- Utopian and dystopian sides of technology: technology was developed to assist humans in tasks that would be too time-consuming or taxing for them. Thus, we have labour-saving gadgets, nanotechnology, digital assistants and countless other aids that make life easier. However many people are concerned with the power, ability and infiltration of machines in human life and fear the enslavement of humans at the hands of the very machines they created.

- Humans as Godplayers: The episode brings to the fore the human tendency to always try to better or conquer the natural with assistance from the technological. There are

_____

already technologies available that achieve this easily such as the enhancement and upgradation of the human using technologies such as cosmetic surgery, organ grafting, prosthesis and medically and technologically assisted human reproduction such as in vitro fertilization, cloning, synthetic biology encompassing biomaterials, biotechnology, genetic engineering and evolutionary biology. Francisco Rudiger, a Brazilian scholar and philosopher in his *Martin Heidegger e a Questao Da Tecnica: Prospectos Acerca Do Futuro Do Homem* calls this, "an illusion of human omnipotence".

This tendency has been brought forth in literature and films such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* the 1927 film *Metropolis,* a pioneering sci-fi film that presents a futuristic dystopic scenario where a human-like robot brings about chaos and destruction and several modern-day films such as *Her, Ex Machina* and *Bladerunner* that also predict the possible downfall of the human at the hands of the mechanical.

- Will Machines be able to replicate themselves and gradually transcend human limitations becoming the masters? Will 'the singularity', meaning a moment in the future when synthetic intelligence or AI will be beyond human understanding and control, when machines will be smarter than humans in every way really take place? Will humans remain pure humans or become trans-human or post-human?
- Uncontrolled technology may be harnessed by some unsavory power-hungry despot or business conglomerate that would control the world via technology.
- There are various applications of AI that have provided humans with shortcuts to accomplish certain tasks. GPS, Chatbot, Gemini and others like Generative AI are commonly used tools today, which has raised concerns about the possibility that humans may, in time, lose their abilities and skills such as creativity, imagination, linguistic creativity, spatial visualization, memory and retention, calculation and sense of direction and depend on machines for the same. With so much dependence on technology in all spheres of life, will humans retain their core intelligence, abilities, foresight, emotion and instincts, in short all that is positively and gloriously human that has preserved and enhanced life or lose it to high intelligence but cold logic and deduction of machinery? Will humans be reduced to the status of the Eloi and fall prey to the Morlocks of machinery as visualized by H.G.Wells in *The Time Machine*? Like the demon Bhasmasur from Indian mythology, will machines attain power and total control over humanity?

**Conclusion:**

It is gratifying as well as disturbing to note that a single episode in a television series can raise so many questions, ethical and philosophical concerns and sound warning notes regarding the obsessive and addictive use of AI and social media. In spite of the ethical conundrum of replicating or duplicating human beings through technology, the episode is not all pessimism and warning as it contains a note of optimism as well.

The virtual lives of humans, the doppelgangers seen on digital platforms or the robotic android replicas, however human-like, are not 'real' persons, they are 'constructed' entities which lack the essence of the real human being. Just like the Frankenstein creature that is an amalgamation of several human body parts stitched together and dead matter re-animated

_____

through a secret scientific process, the Ash android is a biosynthetic doll, activated and programmed by the virtual presence of the real Ash, 'brewed' in a bathtub filled with nutrigel, strengthened by electrolytes. Neither can be completely 'human' as both, in spite of having human bodies or physical attributes, abilities and knowledge of certain human things, lack what is essentially human. Though the Frankenstein creature feels emotions such as empathy, suffering and later vengeance and bitterness and a strange kind of love-hate for its creator, the Ash Android has no emotions, no memories, no history and thus no humanity. One can only conclude that in spite of the reassuring optimistic note, human beings need to be cautious about obsessive engagement with artificial intelligence as well as social media platforms.

**References:**
Lacerda, Ingrid and Mattos de Ribeiro Thamires. Be Right Back: Humans, Artificial
       Intelligence and Dasein in Black Mirror
Kaput, Mike. What Is Artificial Intelligence for Social Media?
Oleszkiewicz, Anthony. Simulation in Black Mirror's 'Be Right Back'