BEING MORE HUMAN IN THE DIGITAL AGE

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever taken a chance? Not a calculated risk, but a chance based on intuition, desire or emotion? Well, then you are human.

In the early 2000's I was studying for my Psychology Degree.

Based on a calculation of my previous module assessments, I was super close to getting a 'First'.

We had our final assignment to write and there were two topics to choose from.

One which was safe and predictable, so safe and predictable that I can't even remember the topic now.

The other was on Consciousness, a topic so subjective and challenging that it was almost excluded from psychology during the Behaviourist period of the 20th Century.

Infatuated by this topic and a belief that our consciousness plays a significant part in what makes us human - I tackled it, and barely scraped a pass. Dashing my dreams of a First degree!

In fairness the lecturer had warned me to play it safe!

It has always been one of my sliding doors decisions, one I looked back on and wondered - what if I had chosen differently?

That is until today, for today that moment has served to provide a relatable and human introduction to this article 'Being more human in the Digital Age'.

WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

The APA Dictionary of Psychology, consciousness is defined as:

"the state of being conscious. An organism's awareness of something either internal or external to itself. The waking state"

Why? Because each of us will have experienced similar moments in our lives, those 'what if' moments!

For me today, as it was back when I was studying psychology, consciousness was a core component of what it meant to be Human.

At that time AI had not advanced (other than in science fiction) for me to truly compare it to human consciousness, so I used comparisons of human consciousness to other biological species ranging from dogs to viruses.

With the advancement of machine learning and generative AI, the world has evolved and so it is now a more frequent topic for discussion. With AI mimicking many of the cognitive processes that make us human 'how do we define what it means to be human'? How can we ensure we retain the essence of what it means to be human in a digital world?

Now two decades later, I hope my ability to explain why consciousness plays such a significant role in being human has also evolved (insert wink emoji and wry smile here).

During this article we will explore three concepts that I believe go some way to defining what it means to be human and we will explore how we ensure that we can retain our humanity whilst also leveraging AI to bring more of our humanness to surface. These concepts are:
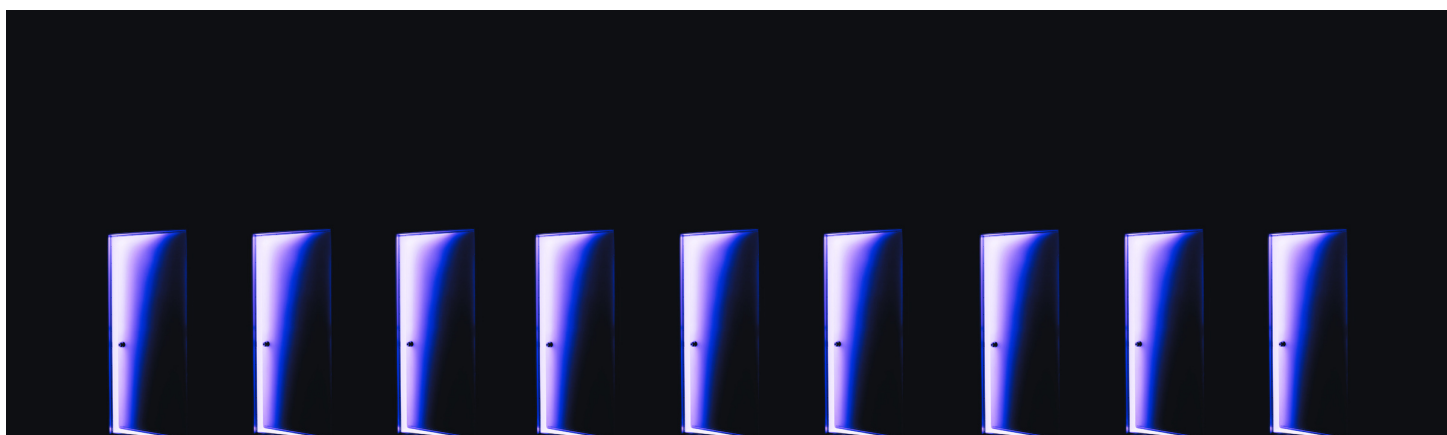
- Consciousness
- Creativity
- Community

These three concepts are by no means the only factors, however, to cover them all would require a lot more words than an article has room for.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness has long been viewed as a core component of what makes us human, with many famous quotes dedicated to consciousness as a core component of the human experience, from Descartes *'I think therefore I am'* to Nobel Prize winner - Gerald Edelman's *'consciousness is the awareness of self in relation to the world'*.

It is the ability to understand the world beyond basic instinct and learned behaviour, which, humans have arguably evolved beyond any known species on earth. That's not to say that animals are not conscious beings, more that the human levels of consciousness has surpassed our biological cousins.

As David Eagleman puts it *"Human consciousness is like a house with many doors. We don't yet know how to open most of them, but we're pretty sure animals can only fumble with the doorknobs."*

A big part of human consciousness is our ability to see ourselves within the context of the wider world and to understand how others may see the world.

This brings me back to my opening story; my consciousness allowed me to understand that 'you reader' will have had similar experiences when you took a chance and that you will understand the emotions associated with that chance 'not paying off' (or not immediately paying off).

Human consciousness allows for a deep understanding of concepts, the ability to think creatively, and to make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas.

This is where AI, while capable of complex computations, lacks this level of understanding and creativity. AI can process data and perform tasks, but it does not truly comprehend or innovate.

To quote one of the greatest information collators of modern times *"consciousness is a fundamental difference that sets humans apart from AI. **While AI can perform tasks and simulate intelligence, it lacks true consciousness**, subjective experience, understanding, and the depth of qualities that define human beings."* - Chat GPT.

WHAT IS CHAT GPT?

Chat GPT is a language model developed by Open AI. It is designed for natural language understanding and generation.

It assesses patterns of information to understand questions and provide responses.

AI - ENHANCING CONSCIOUSNESS

While AI lacks consciousness, it can however be leveraged to enhance consciousness (and if we accept that enhanced consciousness makes us human then it would in fact assist us in being more human).

Recent technological advancements mean that we can use technology such as Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCIs) to enable humans to interact with technology directly through their thoughts.

Although this is currently still in its infancy the potential for enhancing the concept of human consciousness is infinite and somewhat hard to imagine.

CREATIVITY

When the Human v AI debate gets fired up, one of the main topics hotly discussed is the innate creativity of Humankind.

Our ability to invent, engineer and imagine is what has helped us to rise to top of the food chain and to form strong intricate social bonds (identities) through millennia of storytelling.

We can combine our knowledge of science, history, and the world, all that it means to be human and wrap that into beautiful works of art that allow us to feel.

We can be creative with every part of us from our mind to our bodies and our art reflects this, via dance, literature, painting or music.

Our creativity is linked to our powers of cognition across their full depth and breadth of capacities including our understanding of emotions, personal experiences and cultural customs.

While AI can appear to create by drawing on a vast range of data sources in order to generate an output. It is doing so by following a pre-defined algorithm or programme, it is not stepping beyond this programming in order to create - based on a feeling or emotion.

There is limited personal connection between AI and what AI creates, whereas when humans create we give a little bit of soul to our creation.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, creativity is the use of skill and imagination to produce something new or to produce art.

It is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something; inventiveness.

CREATIVITY INFLUENCING EVOLUTION

Our creativity is not restricted just to the arts and most of our human evolution has stemmed from our ability to create innovative solutions to make our lives easier. With each advancement, we evolve our physiology and brainpower to match.

Our brains will evolve to be able to process more and more information but perhaps as we control more and more of our environment with technology our bodies will have to evolve less to meet the environment than they would have done millennia ago.

Now as we experience the Digital Age, we are faced with technology evolving at an exponential rate, and it must at times feel like it did for the 19th century luddites (textile workers) when faced with the industrial revolution.

It may seem to many that these new advancements are changing the world we live in and how we live as humans in unimaginable and intimidating ways. When feeling intimated by AI advancements, it should be reassuring to remember that AI exists because we created it, **with a purpose**, to make our lives as humans easier and we have the power to decide how it advances.

Dr Thomas Juli from **Human Business Labs**, sums this up nicely by saying *"The Key Question for the future is not what will the future be (as though it is pre-ordained), instead the key question is **what do we want the future to be?** For you see as humans, we can imagine and create our own future"*.

COMMUNITY

Humans are social creatures, part of our success as a species is our tribal nature, we have evolved to look after each other and by working collaboratively, we have achieved many amazing innovations. Part of our innate humanity is our connectedness, as humans we thrive when we have strong social bonds.

It is well known that loneliness is a big indicator for reduced longevity, much of this has to do with mental health, but equally physical wellbeing can be re-enforced with regular positive social interaction.

While AI can be inherently connected to all other AI via the internet, it does not crave or desire connection, connection is a means to an end, transferring and receiving data as opposed to fundamental biological needs.

The digital age revolutionised connectedness in the 21st century, this means that people can retain regular contact with family and friends wherever they travel, strengthening social bonds and creating a sense of belonging.

It means that children who are away at university can speak to their parents via video call, aunts and uncles can see pictures of nieces and nephews via social media and feel like part of the child's life.

For every Yin in life there is a Yang, and while the digital age has bought many enriching features, we as humans have designed our AI to be addictive, it permeates through every facet of our lives.

When we leave home we will check, 'wallet, keys, smart phone' and we hungrily crave the dopamine hits of our social connections liking our posts.

If this is the trade off for a truly digital age, then we need to make sure it is worth it. In a recent interview, David Sloley creator of the first AI generated sitcom **'Made in AI'** shared his thoughts on this topic:

*"As the digital world continues to expand and fill every space in our lives, **so humanity must push ever harder to remain relevant.** Failure will result in society becoming lost in the noise of an ever-louder digital landscape, and out there somewhere, we will know a human voice is trying to speak to us, only we won't quite hear what it is saying.*

*Connecting with each other on a deeper human level has never been more crucial. We must take the time to **create meaningful exchanges with every interaction**, digital or otherwise. After all, we are collectively training the next generation of machines with every keystroke we make, so best we make each word we choose count for something."*
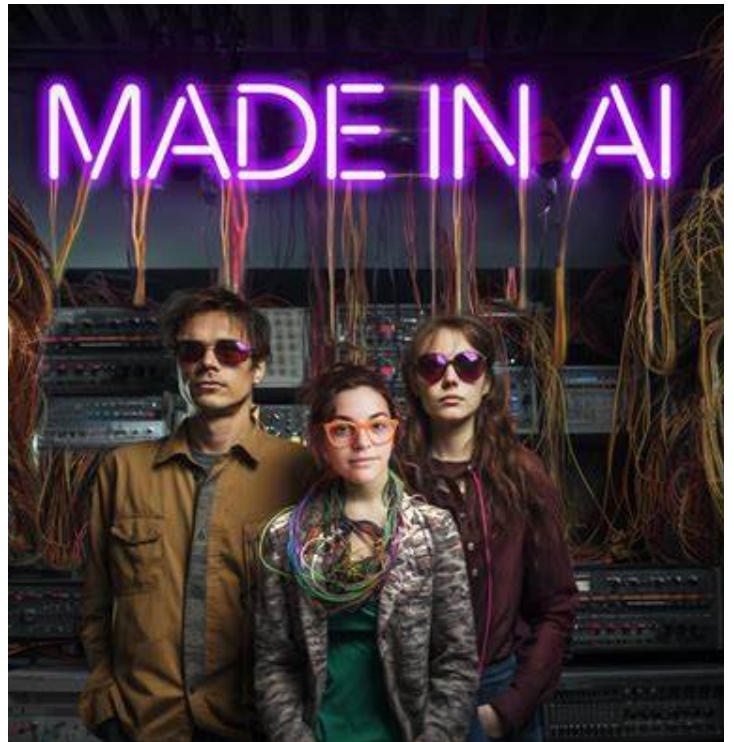
WHAT IS A CHIMERA?

An organism that contains cells or tissues from two or more different species or from two or more genetically different living things.

Often represented in statue form like gargoyles or sphinx.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The final thought I shall leave you with, is perhaps a controversial idea, in several of the main religions, there is the concept of a divine being creating humans in their own image. A blueprint for humanity that grows and evolves over time as we perfect what it means to be human.

Perhaps we humans have now created a new entity somewhat in our own image?

If you compare computer programming to behavioural programming and synapses to electrical connections, then perhaps the same can be said of AI and we have created it in our own image to serve our needs.

The thing about evolution is that it's unpredictable and perhaps our creation will evolve further than we originally imagined.

Maybe the future will see the creation of a new species a chimera between human and AI.