

Is it a Wasp or is it a Wasp? The Human Cost of Algorithmic Decision-Making: Why Connection and Judgement Matter

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EXAMINING THE PERILS OF AUTOMATED SYSTEMS IN MEDICINE, EMPLOYMENT, INFORMATION, AND NATIONAL SECURITY

In an era increasingly defined by technological advancement, our reliance on algorithmic decision-making and artificial intelligence (AI) threatens to erode the essential fabric of human connection and judgement. From medical diagnoses made at a distance, to job applications filtered by faceless algorithms, to the spread of fake news undermining trust, and even concerns for our national security, the displacement of human interaction by automated systems has far-reaching consequences. This article argues that the growing disconnection between individuals and institutions, fostered by overreliance on technology, carries risks that must not be underestimated.

MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS: THE RISKS OF OVER-RELIANCE ON ALGORITHMS

Consider the changing landscape of the medical profession. Increasingly, doctors rely on test results and algorithmically-generated recommendations, sometimes making diagnoses without ever seeing the patient in person. A 2023 study published in *The Lancet Digital Health* found that nearly 40% of general practitioners in the UK reported making treatment decisions based solely on teleconsultations and automated test data during the COVID-19 pandemic. While such approaches can streamline care and increase efficiency, they also risk missing subtleties that only face-to-face interaction can reveal. For example, a missed visual cue or an unspoken concern could lead to misdiagnosis or delayed treatment, with potentially serious consequences. The human element—empathy, intuition, and the ability to interpret context—remains irreplaceable in healthcare.

JOB SELECTION: AUTOMATED HIRING AND THE LOSS OF HUMAN JUDGEMENT

The job market is similarly shaped by the ascendancy of algorithmic decision-making. Employers now routinely use automated systems to shortlist candidates, relying on keyword matching and predictive analytics to filter applications. According to a 2021 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), over 55% of UK employers use AI or automated systems in recruitment, with many applicants eliminated before a human ever reviews their credentials.

My friend's recent experience exemplifies this problem. After relocating, she found herself repeatedly rejected for positions within minutes of submitting her applications online. Despite her wealth of experience and glowing references, her CV failed to pass the initial algorithmic filter. She realised that the process valued keyword optimisation over genuine experience and nuanced skills. This system not only overlooks valuable candidates but also fosters a sense of helplessness and frustration, stripping individuals of agency and dignity in the search for meaningful work.

FAKE NEWS: MISINFORMATION, TRUST, AND THE EROSION OF SOCIAL COHESION

The proliferation of fake news, powered by algorithms designed to maximise engagement, represents another dimension of digital disconnection. High-profile incidents, such as the spread of false information during the 2016 Brexit referendum, have demonstrated how social media algorithms can amplify divisive content, leading to widespread public confusion and polarisation. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022 found that only 34% of Britons trust the news they consume, a figure that has declined precipitously in the past decade. This pervasive mistrust undermines a shared sense of reality, weakening the bonds that sustain our communities and our society at large.

PERSONAL ANECDOTES: LESSONS FROM EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

Reflecting on these broader trends, I am reminded of my mother asking, “Is it a wasp or is it a wasp?” Her question, met with confusion and raised eyebrows, and encapsulated a feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness—were we at risk, or not? Without clear evidence or the ability to see and respond, we were left in limbo, unable to take protective action. This sense of helplessness echoes in today’s algorithm-driven world, where opaque decision-making processes leave individuals disempowered and disconnected from the outcomes that shape their lives. Similarly, my own experience with interview panels highlights the irreplaceable value of human judgement. Having written job descriptions, shortlisted candidates, and participated in face-to-face interviews, I have witnessed both the mistakes and the redemptive potential of human error. Sometimes, the ‘best’ candidate on paper turned out to be unsuitable in practice, while an overlooked applicant shone during a real conversation. It is through direct interaction that we gain the insight and empathy necessary to make wise decisions—qualities that algorithms, for all their efficiency, simply cannot replicate.

NATIONAL SECURITY: THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF DISCONNECTION

The erosion of trust and human connection has implications that reach beyond the individual or organisational level. When citizens feel alienated from decision-making processes and lose faith in the institutions that serve them, the foundations of national security are weakened. Disconnected societies are more vulnerable to manipulation, both from internal actors spreading misinformation and from external adversaries seeking to exploit divisions. The resilience of a nation depends not just on technological prowess, but on the strength of its social bonds and the ability of its people to engage with one another honestly and empathetically.

CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING HUMAN CONNECTION AND JUDGEMENT

In summary, while technological progress offers undeniable benefits, we must remain vigilant against the encroachment of systems that sideline our humanity. Our ability to connect, understand, and support one another is fundamental to our wellbeing and to the functioning of society. As we integrate AI and algorithms into ever more aspects of our lives, let us do so with caution—recognising the irreplaceable value of human judgement, and ensuring that our technology serves to enhance, rather than diminish, our collective humanity.

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