

What kind of influence will AI have on our future?

(Invited Speech at 2018 CIE Annual Convention)

By Henry David Zhu

On May 8, 2018, Google I/O revealed the mind-blowing Google Duplex, an AI system that can make calls and schedule appointments in full autonomy. It was able to handle a volley of complicated questions and nuances, and it passed the Turing Test, meaning it exhibits intelligent behavior that is indistinguishable from a human. Shortly thereafter, a university professor accused Google of being “ethically lost and rudderless” and that Google should disclose the Duplex to be a bot upfront before engaging any conversation with a human being.

The extraordinary time of AI is not imminent, it has come already.

AI will change the way we live: imagine we are woken up by a digital assistant, eat breakfast cooked by a smart household robot that can both make food and perform all the chores required in a household, take Elon Musk’s Hyperloop to work, use Microsoft’s HoloLens and Holoportation in virtual conferencing and collaboration, take a self-driving car to a gym, and come home, relax, and use AR/VR to meet a doctor vividly to get the right healthcare support timely.

AI will change our industrial and global landscape: a security camera or surveillance system recognizes a face among millions within milliseconds (preventing known terrorists or wanted criminals from entering any airplane), an AI-powered financial agent handles bank and trade transactions and conducts real-time analysis in accuracy and speed, and a weather forecast service predicts with phenomenal precision and saves lives by alerting residents of natural disasters months in advance. What does all this mean? It means that clever machines will be capable of undertaking work currently done by humans, and thus will swiftly eliminate millions of jobs. It means technology powerhouses or leading countries (America and China together have more than 50% of all AI patents in the world) will enlarge their gap with others and have a distinct advantage. This will create an imbalance in wealth, political, and economic power amongst nations—the difference created by AI will be many times large than what was ever created by the Industrial Revolution and any civilization in history.

Consequently, it opens a Pandora’s box of technical, ethical and social challenges, and brings a full spectrum of new problems for us to solve: How do we define justice and ethical values where humans interact and co-exist with machines? What is true security and privacy in the sea of data and vulnerability to hacking? What are the ultimate human rights, equalities, and inequalities?

Albert Einstein once said in deep pessimism: it has become appallingly clear that our technology has surpassed our humanity. I am cautiously optimistic about its opposite: we are at a crossroad where we must choose to let technology meet and create harmony with humanity, we must develop AI that can recognize diversity while avoid replicating human bias and limitation, and we must not only make AI more capable but also maximize its societal and environmental benefit.

Let’s embrace the AI world, life will be beautiful.