

A Gig Too Far

Is technology overstepping the mark?

Although many have not read George Orwell's 1984, most know about the Big Brother syndrome and its control over the common people. Technology is an asset in our modern society and it does make life easier. The Internet especially provides access to information almost in an instant; day-to-day business transactions are speedier; financial institutions embrace it readily; and government departments wouldn't be without it. One would assume then that we are all better off in this digital age. Being honest, I have serious doubts.

Let's talk about security. Data bases abound in almost every facet of modern life. Companies and institutions hold details of anyone who conducts business with them. They claim this information is safe and will not be passed on to a third party, so privacy is ensured. Then we learn that a particular system has been hacked and suddenly the information of millions is available to cyber criminals. They now have access to bank accounts and particularly personal identification which can be used to impersonate an individual, in effect become them. So much for security!

Proving that someone is actually who they say they are is no longer simple. Producing documentation such as driver's licence, passport and an ID card means nothing when these can be replicated and details changed to suit whoever now claims to be that person. Someone came up with the idea of eye recognition because an eye is as unique as a fingerprint; or what about a person's voice? They can both be copied digitally, along with a replica of the entire person, thanks to Artificial Intelligence. You've probably seen images of famous people which look and sound exactly like the real thing, but they aren't!

These stunts are often perpetrated by criminals; but what about governments and law enforcement agencies – they wouldn't sink that low surely...? Well, our police in Australia are suggesting that facial recognition via strategically placed cameras in public places like shopping precincts would enable them to locate "persons of interest" among the thousands they've taken shots of; and that, my friends, includes you! They wouldn't, of course, pass these on or store them on a data base for future reference; and they maintain those photos of ordinary people would be deleted. I'm not convinced.

Should you doubt Big Brother is watching, think again. You know those door buzzers equipped with cameras that show whoever is on the porch? Well, the house owner can see that image via their smart phone even when they are off somewhere else. That's good from a security point of view; or is it? Many of these devices, especially the cheap ones, are made in China and it is suggested that they transmit whatever or whomsoever the camera sees to...? I wonder where that would be and how the images would be used - for no honest purpose most likely. Same with the camera on computer and laptop monitors. If left uncovered they provide criminals and shifty agencies with a good picture of the person sitting in front of it; and the room when they are not. And if you are actually using the camera for a video chat, be it personal or business related, can you be certain that no-one else is tuned in? As for mobile phones, you probably believe the messages

sent from and received on your device are secure...? We've seen televised proof that they aren't and can be accessed by a third party on the other side of the world!

Just recently a snazzy new item is being advertised – smart glasses. Worn like ordinary spectacles they are equipped with small cameras and recording devices. Manufacturers claim they can be used to record videos and take photos of whatever the wearer is looking at, activated by simple voice commands. Because the frames are thicker than normal glasses to accommodate small computers and batteries they should be easy enough to identify by someone close enough. Some modern frames, however, look like ordinary glasses and are harder to spot. Apparently they do have indicator lights which flash when a recording is being made; but they can be physically modified to dim or block these lights. It seems when we are out and about we should take more notice of anyone wearing glasses. Sounds paranoid I know, and who cares if someone is taking photos of us and listening to our conversations? After all, we're not spies; but are they...?

You may have seen the movie "I Robot". The story is quite disturbing, but maybe not so when you remember it is science fiction. Well, it used to be. Robots have been used by manufacturers in numerous industries for years to make the parts for things such as cars, then assemble them. There are also prototype robots that common people can buy to help around the house, wait on table and serve drinks in hotels. These are pre-programmed by humans to perform specific tasks and don't need to think for themselves like the robots did in the movie. At least that was how it used to be. I learned the other day that there would come a time when robots could not only talk to each other, but would have the capacity to think like humans. Another news clip I watched showed a whole bunch of robots having a race against human athletes. Admittedly there were a few problems with the odd one losing direction and ramming into walls, but once the geeks have ironed out the glitches these automatons would be a powerful force. Imagine what an army of them could achieve...!

And how would it be if these robots were made to look and speak like ordinary people? You could be rubbing shoulders with them and you wouldn't know. The prospect is quite unnerving. It seems to me our basic freedom is being eroded by machines that are faster, more efficient and capable of replacing us, maybe to the point where eventually the human race would be surplus to requirements. Make no mistake, Big Brother is already here; watching, listening, spying, manipulating and taking over our lives.

Where, I wonder, is all this leading to? In truth, I really don't want to know; and I only hope that I won't be around to see it.

