

The Robot Eye

By Joe Steinberger

We have all had the experience of being controlled by machines. We stick our credit cards in a machine and we look at the screen and follow the commands. When the machine is done with us it honks, and the screen says "remove card." We comply. It seems harmless, but we must consider the ramifications. They are dire.

I had an experience recently, an interaction with a power-wielding machine, that drained me emotionally and filled me with dread. It was at the airport in Boston on my return from a trip abroad. To get past the border authority, I had to look a robot in the eye.

Its eye was a lens in a box on a post. A sign said "look at the camera." The lens rose up to be square with my eyes. I looked at it, looked it in the eye. It stared back. It did not blink. Some seconds passed, maybe ten, I blinked, and looked away.

A man in uniform came over. "Look at the camera," he said. I looked, and looked, and looked. I felt I was being stared down. Finally, the machine spit out a sheet of paper, my photo, with an x across it!

Now you may be thinking this is a joke, but it was deeply disturbing. By the time the x came, I had recovered my wits, but staring at that unblinking eye was awful. It was not that I thought that anything bad was going to happen to me, but the implications, the possibilities, were scary.

I imagined myself a nobody in a totalitarian state being scrutinized by a robot that would not only use face detection, retinal scan, etc. to identify me, but also use facial emotion readings, pulse detection, sweat detection, odor analysis, blink detection, etc. to determine whether I was loyal, or not. If I failed the test, I would instantly, and automatically, be turned into compost for the beautiful gardens of the ruling elite.

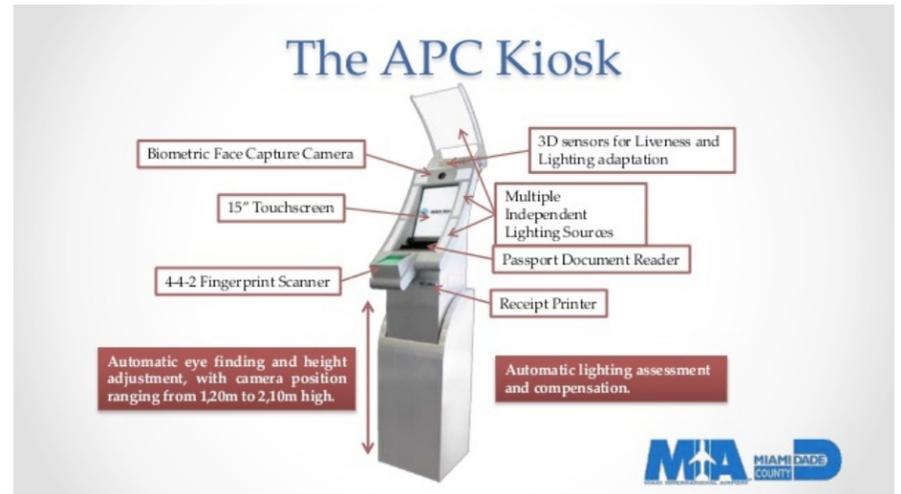
Since the dawn of civilization, the norm has been autocracy and oligarchy, the few living magnificently, while the mass of men were serfs and slaves. Our democracy is a rare and wonderful inheritance.

One thing that has helped the evolution of democracy is the difficulty posed to the few to police a dissatisfied population. A totalitarian police state needs a lot of police and spies among the population. It is expensive to maintain such a force, and its existence creates a constant threat of a coup. As spies and police, robots - using newly emerging "artificial intelligence" technology - can do a great job for cheap, and they are easy to control.

We have already seen that robots can drive cars. Yes, they occasionally run over people, but hey, so what? People had better just watch out. And of course robots can fly airplanes and shoot guns. They can be radio controlled, but they can also be set loose on the population to use their own, programmed, judgment to decide who to shoot.

As spies, robots can be everywhere, hear everything. With emerging computer technology they analyze everything they see and hear - and smell and x-ray etc. When the algorithm says to act, they can act on their own, to kill if that is the program, without hesitation or sympathy. The technology to do all this, and more, is already at a high level, and growing better every day.

Anyway, these were my thoughts as I made my way, for 45 minutes, in the line to see the human agent. By then I had come to the conclusion that the eye had been doing a retinal scan and got lost trying to match it. The agent was friendly as I handed him my passport and the robot photo with the x over my face. He looked at the x, he looked at me, he looked at my passport, he looked at his screen, he looked at me again. "Do you have a residence in Miami," he asked. He seemed quite ready to believe me when I said no. "That stupid



robot," I saw in his eyes. as he passed me through.

Well maybe not so smart yet, but watch out!

The threat is not that foolish fantasy that artificial intelligence might take over from humans. Elon Musk warns of this, but he need not worry. He, and the oligarchy, will run the machines, not the other way around. Humanity might be better off if the machines did take over, but that is not in their DNA. They are simply tools for those who have the means to use them.

One of our Old School fellows recently sent me a link to an article in the Daily Mail: "China says it's on track to launch its dystopian scorecard system that ranks citizens on every aspect of their behaviour by 2020. The system ... is bolstered by a network of 200 million AI-powered surveillance cameras. Citizens' ratings are boosted by buying Chinese goods and community service. Your score is knocked down for fraud, tax evasion or criticising the government."

I don't know that the cameras will help much to expose those particular transgressions, but how about for detecting spitting on the sidewalk, or letting your dog poop in the park and not picking it up, or whacking somebody on the head and taking his money?

There is a good side, to be sure, of this new technology. Anonymity has proven to be bad for good citizenship. In a small city like Rockland we know each other, and look out for each other. In cities of millions it is easier to get away with bad behavior - but maybe not for long. Already, many crimes have been solved by reviewing security camera footage, and the cameras are a deterrent to crime within their view.

But when the eyes and ears of the artificial intelligence service of the government - or of concentrated private power - are everywhere and can analyze not only our identities, but our every word and action, and judge us, and put an x on us, we are in trouble.

This challenge comes at a time, coincidental or not, when the world is in a crisis of failing democratic leadership. With that failure of leadership, and with our divisions, with the increasing power of money to manipulate us, with our security mania, and our increasingly quick and manipulable "social media," we are at risk.

History has its ups and downs, but the power at the disposal of emperors and dictators is getting vastly greater. We are at risk of a fall that could take democracy down, perhaps forever.

It is time to heal our divisions, and to respect each other and the democracy that is ours together. For those of us who have had the opportunity to study history and government, and who have the leisure to follow current events and to consider matters thoughtfully, it is our responsibility to lead our fellow citizens to our mutual benefit, rather than greedily to profit at their expense.

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