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The Cost of Technological Control: AI, Privacy, and the Erosion of Human Relationships in Black Mirror

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ABSTRACT
In the era of digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) has impacted every aspect of human existence, both overtly and covertly. Nearly every home has smart gadgets like smart watches, refrigerators and robotic vacuum cleaners. Additionally, the field of cinema has also evolved to have an exclusive genre with artificial intelligence as its main focus. This study looks at how AI is portrayed in the Netflix sci-fi anthology series Black Mirror, with particular focus on the episodes "Arkangel" and "Crocodile." The human-AI interaction is examined in both episodes from the perspectives of moral responsibility, memory, autonomy, and monitoring. "Arkangel" questions the moral boundaries of parental monitoring and the psychological effects of relying too heavily on AI. "Crocodile" challenges the commercialisation of memory and questions how privacy, consent, and the use of AI is implemented in law enforcement. By employing textual and visual analysis, the paper investigates how Black Mirror functions as a speculative critique of the unchecked advancements of AI, emphasising the deterioration of ethical standards and the potential dangers of prioritising control and efficiency over human connections and emotional attachment.
Keywords: AI, autonomy, ethics, humanity, memory, privacy, consent

1.INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence, or AI, has become a distinct field as a result of the remarkable advancements in science and technology. The ability of a computer or computer-controlled robot to carry out tasks that are typically carried out by intelligent beings is known as artificial intelligence (AI). It refers to a machine's capacity to carry out the cognitive processes that we identify with human minds, including perception, thinking, learning, interacting with the environment, solving problems, and even expressing creativity (McKinsey, 2024). Artificial intelligence (AI) is the capacity of a system to accurately read external data, learn from it, and apply that knowledge to accomplish specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). Based on their performance levels, AI can be divided into a number of categories. There are two primary variations: narrow or weak artificial intelligence (ANI) and strong or general artificial intelligence (AGI). According to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, there are several specialised intelligence components that make up human intelligence, such as linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intra-personal, naturalist, and existential (Gardner, 2000). This definition of human intelligence is applicable to AGI thus making it on par with human beings. AGI has the capacity to learn and use information, as well as to reason and think, across a range of subjects, rather than just one, like chess, game play, languages, mathematics, or rugby (Pennachin and Goertzel, 2007). Unlike present artificial general intelligence (ANI) systems, which are typically used as tools to support human behaviours, an AGI system would be an autonomous agent with unsupervised learning capabilities (McLean et al., 2023). Humanity is still a long way from being able to harness artificial intelligence. On the contrary, we can observe that first-generation AI apps—also known as artificial narrow intelligence (ANI)—are almost universal and these applications use AI only for particular tasks (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). At present ANI systems include Google's DeepMind, Facebook's facial recognition technology, Apple's 'Siri', Amazon's Alexa, and Tesla's and Uber's self-driving vehicles (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Naudé & Dimitri, 2020; Stanton et al., 2020).

Evolution of Artificial Intelligence

Since the beginning of the computer era, it has been expected that machines would be as intelligent as humans in general, meaning they would have logical reasoning and the ability to learn and plan to solve complicated information processing problems in a range of fields (Bostrom, 2014). Though computers have been popular since the 1940s and artificial intelligence (AI) has been used since the 1950s, it wasn't until the early 21st century that greater processing power and larger datasets, or "big data," made it possible for AI to leave computer science departments and enter the public space. The theory of computation developed by Alan Turing in the 1950s marked the beginning of the field of artificial intelligence. In 1956, a group of mathematicians convened a workshop at

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Darthmouth College to further develop this into a research subject. The ten scientists shared a common interest in neural nets, automata theory and the study of intelligence. John McCarthy, who organised this six-week workshop, is credited with coming up with the term "artificial intelligence." The discussions of the workshop led to a research proposal that was submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation. The proposal stated that the concept that all aspects of intelligence, including learning, can be so accurately described in theory that they can be simulated by a machine would serve as the basis for the research. Over the years, deep learning networks and their variations have achieved remarkable results in a variety of tasks and have even outperformed the expectations of some experts, and these methods are called as "narrow" artificial intelligence. Today ANI has made it possible for Facebook to identify faces in photos and tag users, for Tesla to create self-driving cars, and for Siri to comprehend your voice and respond appropriately (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). Erez Firt in his paper “The Missing G” mentions that “these systems are designed to operate in specific problem-domains following meticulous preparation—usually by being fed predefined models and millions of training examples as input, before they can start working” (2020).

Artificial Intelligence in Popular Culture

Since the 1900s, the concept of robots having human-like intelligence has appeared in literature. Mary Shelly's Frankenstein (1818) is one of the earliest examples of a man-made creature exhibiting any kind of intelligence. The first book to have the idea of a robot is Samuel Butler’s Erewhon written in 1872. The science fiction term "robot" was first used in the 1920’s Czech drama R.U.R. (Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti). In the 1950’s, Issac Asimov is considered to be one of the most popular science fiction writers. He is credited with coining the term ‘robotics’ as well as the ‘three laws of robotics’. Some of his most popular stories like I, Robot (1950) and The Bicentennial Man and other stories (1976) were loosely adapted into movies later on. In the area of science fiction, there is a close relationship between literature and film, with many of these movies being inspired by, adapted from, or developed in tandem with literary works (Murphy, 2024).

Despite the fact that science fiction themes have long been used in literature and film, the number of audiovisual products in this genre—including films, TV shows, and video games—has increased over the last two decades. ANI is frequently used in popular culture to represent specialised intelligent systems, such as surveillance tools and personal assistants. We are offered services by these systems in specific, preprogrammed ways. These structures consist of an actuator mechanism (such as a voice or robotic motion subsystem), a reasoning mechanism, a short-term working memory subsystem, commonsense knowledge, a perceptual mechanism, a world knowledge database, and a planning ability (Fisher, 2001). For example, in the movie 2001: A Space Odessey (Kubrick, 1968), the artificially intelligent computer HAL 9000 exhibits unpredictable behaviour and murders the majority of the crew before being deactivated because he believes that their refusal to turn him off is endangering the mission. In the Iron Man series (2008-2013) the protagonist Tony Stark has an AI assistant called JARVIS who handles several tasks like designing the iron man suits, managing his day-to-day activities and so on. Several movies in the Sci-fi genre have their narratives set in a dystopian future. In the movie Minority Report (2002), the AI assistant is tasked to predict crimes by analysing large data pool and thus it acts as a surveillance agent. In the movie I, Robot (2004) every household has a N5 series Robot who is equipped to perform all domestic tasks at home. In the movie Big Hero 6 (2006), Baymax is a robot designed especially for healthcare; its task is to diagnose and treat illness. There are either utopian or dystopian elements to this recurring theme of AI in science fiction. Most of these films present a dystopian world in which artificial intelligence poses a threat to human life. The utopian perspective, in which AI and humans coexist together, is rarely explored in films. However, all of these films have added to the recurring subject and potential reality of how humanity may be facing a future that is inextricably linked to artificial intelligence in one way or another.

Black Mirror series

Black Mirror (2011) is an anthology online series that uses a number of stand-alone episodes to show how artificial intelligence impacts the lives of the characters. Although the stories in all of the episodes are horrific and tragic, they are so realistic and skilfully written that we think they could occur in the near future. Created by Charlie Brooker, the series uses the themes of Sci-fi to address contemporary social issues. According to him, “the ‘black mirror’ of the title is the one you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone” (Brooker, 2018). The first two seasons was produced for UK’s channel 4, followed by five seasons aired on Netflix. The series explores the negative aspects of technologies that can provide both positive connections and intimacy and incredible surveillance and exploitation (Gibson, M., & Carden, C, 2021). Despite being frequently linked to the sophisticated technologies of the late 20th century, depictions of surveillance in movies might be considered to be as old as the genre itself. Around 1900, the

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detective, spy, voyeur, and police officer were all well-known characters in movies. (Kammerer, 2012). Moreover, in the current era, it is quite evident that media and culture play a vital role in the development and sustenance of modern societies (Kellner, D. M., & Durham, M. G., 2001).
Each episode is a stand-alone episode and can be viewed in any order. The conflict that emerges in almost every episode serves as a reminder of the risks associated with the naturalisation of technological devices that essentially become parts of the human body. We are compelled to question the moral implications of having access to people's information that jeopardises privacy and also look at possible solutions to deal with them. The majority of episodes examine the detrimental effects of unchecked use of new technologies to manipulate memory, manage interpersonal relationships, or turn every human experience into data (Sorolla-Romero et al., 2021). Indeed, one of the numerous topics it has addressed appears to be especially pertinent in the early to mid-2020s, given its reference to and pioneering of the large language models (LLMs) of the current wave—a veritable explosion—of artificial intelligence (Fisher, 2024). The series also raises a concern that AI could become so autonomous and fast that it could become hard to regulate it in the near future. It is crucial to understand how (media and culture portray AI) our cultural environment works so that we can exercise control over our lives (Kellner, D. M., & Durham, M. G., 2001). According to Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, media just represents reality, often encoding powerful ideologies that is left to the audience to decode as they wish (1997). In the Black Mirror series, AI not merely a tool, it is encoded as a powerful entity that can control society. It is seen a societal norm in the dystopian future.

Analysis

The increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence in modern society has spurred debate on the moral, legal, and psychological ramifications of its application. Charlie Brooker's Netflix series Black Mirror presents a dystopian interpretation of technology progress and its unexpected ramifications. This paper looks at two episodes, "Arkangel" and "Crocodile," to investigate how AI is portrayed in Black Mirror as a powerful tool and a control mechanism that ultimately compromises core human values. The episode "Arkangel" is the 2nd episode of season 4 in the series. This episode explores the negative consequences of parental surveillance. The social practice of surveillance is not new. Although it has long been a part of human sociality and institutional routines, it has perhaps become the most prominent organizing practice of late modernity in the last 40 years (Ball, K et al., 2012). The story opens with Marie giving birth to a baby girl who she names as Sarah. She is a single parent who brings up Sara with the help of her father. When Sara is about three years old, she wanders off in the playground trying to find a stray cat. Marie is traumatized with this incident and signs up for a program called 'Arkangel' – child monitoring system. According to Marciano, "Exploiting parents' imageries of fear and risk, these technologies are promoted as providing parents and children with a desirable combination of freedom and safety, so that children can pursue independence and autonomy…" (2022). The program, which is still in its trial phase, is provided free of cost. Soon, Sara has an implant inserted in her brain and Marie is able to track her daughter's current GPS, her vitals and her audio-visual movements. "The phenomenon popularly referred to as helicopter parenting refers to an overinvolvement of parents in their children's lives." (LeMoyne & Buchanan,2011). Maire is given a tablet from where she can not only monitor but also control what her daughter can see and hear. Marie monitors her daughter's every move and uses the filter to block potentially harmful sounds or images that can cause stress. The urge to keep children safe can occasionally be driven by an overestimation of the dangers or a lack of confidence in a child's ability to handle a given circumstance (Rooney, 2010). For instance, one incident shown in the episode is how Sara is no longer scared of their neighbours' dog. With the filter on, Sara grows up in a highly protective environment unaware of any normal emotions. All the other kids at school bully her for being abnormal. There is one incident where her classmate Trick is showing a violent video clip to his friends, but Sara is unable to see the same. So, she asks him to narrate the same. She comes home and tries to sketch the same, but her visual becomes hazy when she has to colour blood. In an act of desperation, she pierces her finger with a pointed pencil to see the colour of blood. She is not able to see anything again. Parenting that is invasive, overly involved, and highly controlling may have a negative impact on the development of the child (Segrin, et al., 2012). This causes Maire to seek out a psychologist. The doctor after interacting with Sara, advises Marie to switch off the tablet as it is the reason for Sara's psychotic behaviour. Apparently, the intense monitoring has not allowed Sara to experience all the emotions any normal person would do. Sara's personality evolves based on what the chip (AI) allows her to experience, thus creating a complete misrepresentation of reality (Hall, 1997). Maire also learns that the 'Arkangel' program is going to be banned by the government soon. Thus, Maire deactivates the filter, switches off the tablet and puts it away in the attic.
Sara is now fifteen years old and is a normal teenager. One day she lies to her mother about going to her friend's house. Instead, she goes to attend a party with Trick. When Sara does not answer her phone, Marie turns on

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Arkangel to find Sara and Trick have sex for the first time. This triggers Maire to monitor her daughter again. This time Marie sees her daughter try cocaine with Trick's help. Marie is able to track down Trick and threatens him to stay away from her daughter's life. Simultaneously she mixes an emergency contraceptive pill in Sara's smoothie when she gets an alert from Arkangel that her daughter is pregnant. Sara vomits and learns from the nurse at the hospital about the pill. An extremely irate Sara returns home to confront her mother. To see what her mother has been seeing, she locates the tablet and clicks on the rewind button. This portrays how "the use of surveillance technologies (whether intended or not) carry with them a judgement about trust, even if the exact target of this activity remains unclear or ambiguous to those under the gaze" (Rooney, 2010). Clearly, Sara sees this incident as a breach of trust and is deeply hurt. When Sara tries to take the tablet from her mother, the filter inadvertently activates during the struggle. Unaware of the harm she is doing, Sara uses the tablet to beat her mother unconscious. The tablet breaks and the filter deactivates. Upon realizing what she has done, Sara runs away from home and hitch hikes a ride from a truck driver. The last scene shows Marie running on the streets calling out her daughter's name.

The episode criticises parental overreach made possible by artificial intelligence. Because of Marie's well-meaning attempt to shield her daughter, Sara's independence and ability to comprehend reality are undermined. Sara cannot genuinely consent to ongoing monitoring because she is still a minor, which brings up the ethical question of informed consent. The most common example of overparenting is arguably helicopter parenting, which is when parents are too protective and concerned with their kids and prevent them from reaching the appropriate levels of independence and autonomy for their age. (Segrin et al., 2012). The Arkangel system prevents Sara's emotional and psychological development by screening traumatic stimuli. This false sanitization leads to resentment which ultimately leads to violence. As a result of her addiction to the monitoring data, Marie reflects contemporary worries about the overuse of algorithmic parenting and parental tracking tools. She learns that not all surveillance technologies offer a practical means of protection, either because they are ineffective or because they are trying to regulate things that are actually impossible to do so (Rooney, 2010).

The next episode titled as "Crocodile", begins with an accident and follows the consequences thereafter. Driving drunk from a party, Rob crashes a cyclist on a mountain road, killing him. Rob is assisted in tossing the body into a lake from the cliff by his friend Mia Nolan. Fifteen years later, Mia is a successful architect, married, and has a child who is nine years old. She delivers an important presentation at a hotel where a sober Rob meets her. After reading a news report claiming the victim's wife never moved on, he plans to write her an anonymous letter, but Mia is worried the message will be lead the victim back to them. After a fight, Mia kills Rob by breaking his neck. As she stands thinking of how to dispose Rob's body, she sees a self-driving pizza delivery truck collide with a pedestrian outside the window. Finally using the room's pornography as an alibi, she disposes Rob's body.

Insurance investigator Shazia visits the pedestrian and uses a "Recaller" (an electronic device that can project images onto a screen) to observe his memories on a screen as accurately as he can remember them. The device accesses and interprets memories using a tiny, needled chip on the witness' temple before displaying them both visually and audibly. A pair of earphones and what appears to be an antiquated cathode-ray tube monitor are used to access the device's output. According to Zuboff "The commodification of human behaviour operationalized in the secret massive-scale extraction of human-generated data is the foundation of surveillance capitalism's two-decade arc of institutional development" (2022). Here, the Recaller technology is used by the insurance company to extract memories from witnesses before settling the insurance claims. The Recaller here acts as a two-pronged weapon – one to commercialise memory as a commodity and two, act as a surveillance tool. As Weller observes, that "technology has been an important driver for change, social and cultural acceptance of the information, or surveillance, state has long been influx as citizens have continued to debate the balance between efficiency, power and administration of state functions, against personal privacy, transparency and individual autonomy" (2012). Moreover, the institutionalization of the tool reaffirms that representation is deeply linked to power structures (Hall, 1997).

The pedestrian is able to recall the memory of a woman he passed by on the street just before the accident. Shazia meets this woman who points her in the direction of a dentist who witnessed Mia viewing the accident from her hotel room. In each instance, Shazia helps them remember by playing a song in the background and letting them smell beer from the local brewery. Shazia plans to meet Mia in hope of getting a bonus pay check for a quick probe. She desperately wants to go home but she must make the long trek to Mia's home in order to interview her as a witness and get her statement in memory form to support the testimony of the other witnesses. So, she calls her husband and informs him about her decision.

When Shazia arrives, Mia is reluctant to comply with her request. Shazia informs her that noncompliance will lead her to complain to the police which will only complicate things further. So, Mia is forced to let Shazia into her house and Shazia uses the device to extract information. Mia makes an unsuccessful attempt to distract herself

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from Rob's death, while Shazia recalls both the murders. Despite being characterized as a gadget that reads just subjective memory associated with the specific incident, Mia's efforts to conceal her recollection of her previous incidents ultimately fails. Both the women realise the consequences of what just happened. Shazia realises that she has unintentionally witnessed two murders and rushes to get out of the house. Mia realises the potential danger brewing from her extracted memory and she runs after Shazia. Unfortunately, Shazia's car has a breakdown, Mia smashes the window, knocks her unconscious, and ties her up in a shed. Despite Shazia's assurance that the information would be kept private, Mia utilises the Recaller to discover that Shazia had disclosed her location to her spouse Anan. She kills Shazia and drives down to the location and kills her husband too. As she unmasks herself and is walking out of the house, she hears a baby in the next room. Not wanting to leave any witnesses she murders the baby too. The police arrive at the crime scene and begins looking for evidence. They find the family's pet guinea pig which has witnessed the last murder. The last scene shows the police walking into Mia's son's school to arrest her. This depicts that recaller was able to retrieve the recent memory from the guinea pig. This AI driven technology reflects the concerns of human memories in reality. It questions the autonomy of our memories and the concept of consent.

By frequently removing memories without appropriate authorisation, the Recaller technology infringes against cognitive liberty. Even though human remembering is unreliable, the gadget assumes that memories are accurate. The episode deprives memory of its emotional depth and context, presenting it as facts. AI becomes a corporate surveillance tool, illustrating the sinister side of predictive policing. Human dignity may be sacrificed in the name of justice by the AI tool. The Recaller's efficiency-driven use disregards the psychological damage that repeating memories can cause, particularly for victims of crime. Mia's turn towards violence reflects the increasing moral detachment made possible by AI's neutrality as a mechanism. Ironically, a guinea pig's memory condemns her at the end of the episode, highlighting the ridiculous extent of surveillance. "Crocodile" is a cautionary tale about the moral ramifications of unbridled electronic surveillance and symbolises the growing concern that, as technology develops, individual autonomy and privacy can be sacrificed for the sake of control and truth. It also highlights the significance of critically evaluating how new technology may alter social norms, ethical practices and communication styles.

CONCLUSION

Dystopian fiction acts a powerful prism to study the concerns related to the over dependence on technology. This scary depictions of a dystopian world driven by unusual technological advancements is portrayed well in the episodes. According to Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, meaning is constructed and negotiated through language, cultural practices, and power dynamics rather than being inferred from things or symbols (1997). "Arkangel" depicts how representation has dominance over what is seen, whereas "Crocodile" depicts how representation has dominance over what is to be believed. The devices used in "Arkangel" and "Crocodile" are not just instruments of speculative technology, but they represent the growing anxiety of the society regarding privacy, consent and parental/institutional control. AI is discussed in both episodes as a control mechanism that eliminates human judgement in difficult moral and emotional situations. "Crocodile" concentrates on institutional applications of AI, whereas "Arkangel" addresses its usage in familial connections. "Arkangel" makes us question the intentions behind using surveillance technologies to protect or care for children. we must consider whether this is a practical form of protection and whether the technologies are actually denying children the chance to gain competence and confidence in skills that would enable them to better assess and manage risks in a variety of life situations (Rooney T, 2010). Whereas "Crocodile showcases how AI's possible risks include the application of the new systems in the workplace, in education, in defence and combat, and, more broadly, as a tool for discrimination, control, and monitoring by law enforcement, the judiciary, and hiring managers (Hyland, 2024). However, both show how AI might exacerbate rather than lessen human weaknesses when it is separated from empathy and ethical supervision. AI is portrayed in Black Mirror as a reflection of human needs for efficiency, safety, and control rather than as intrinsically evil. As warning stories, "Arkangel" and "Crocodile" challenge us to think about not just what AI is capable of, but also what it ought to be able to do. Thus, the distinction between justice and invasion, protection and tyranny, becomes dangerously hazy in the absence of strong ethical foundations..

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