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## When Computers Assess Personality Better Than We Do

Another digital win with the help of Facebook 'likes'



It seems like we humans should be better than computers at detecting social intelligence. But are we? *PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES*

By **ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY**

Updated July 22, 2015 12:37 p.m. ET

**Here are some** of the many things I can't do but computers do well: instantly compile a list of nearby sushi places open after midnight, coordinate takeoffs and landings at Chicago O'Hare, turn patterns of magnetic waves into a 3-D brain image for an MRI.

By contrast, I'm decent at judging people by the firmness of their handshake, the company they keep, the quality of their enemies and the cut of their jib (whatever that is).

We determine social status within milliseconds, detect people's feelings by their

fleeting microexpressions and view the world from other people's perspectives. We assess people's personalities and decide whom we want as a friend, colleague or partner for life.

No

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wonder. We primates have brain regions that specialize in recognizing faces, in perspective-taking, in detecting meaning by tone of voice. We have gigantic frontal cortexes, and primatological evidence suggests that our brains expanded this way to deal with increasing social complexity. So amid all those smart computers, at least we're better at social intelligence. Aren't we?

Two papers—published in 2013 and early this year by Michal Kosinski of Stanford, David Stillwell of the University of Cambridge and colleagues in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences—may provide an answer. And it should further deflate our self-esteem.

The first study involved more than 58,000 active users of Facebook. Subjects provided demographic information about themselves and took a standard test to classify their personalities in five broad categories: degree of openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism.

The researchers then correlated the personality profiles with each person's Facebook "likes," an average of 227 per subject. Humans can readily detect links between a few likes and certain sorts of people—"Hey, have you noticed how this personality type is associated with liking poetry and Klingon opera?"

The computer did all this on a massive scale, comparing the nuances of personality and demographics with the Facebook likes of tens of thousands of people. From this came a mighty impressive computer model: Using the data from Facebook, it could predict a

person's race with 95% accuracy and gender with 93%. The model also accurately predicted sexual, religious and political orientation; intelligence; the likelihood of substance abuse; and personality according to the profiles from the five-category test.

How accurate is the computer model as compared with humans? Another 86,220 subjects took the personality test; the subjects' friends and family then filled out a short personality-profile questionnaire about them. The researchers wanted to find out how many Facebook likes the computer needed before it could make a more precise personality assessment than the people closest to someone.

With just 10 random Facebook likes, the computer could beat an individual's co-workers in predicting personality. With 70 likes, the machine trumped friends. With 150 likes, it crushed relatives. At 300 likes, the computer was better than a spouse. The authors titled their recent paper, "Computer-based Personality Judgments Are More Accurate Than Those Made by Humans." Turncoats.

A defender of humanity might argue that a computer can win this contest only when it is provided with loads of clean binary data, but it will never be able to deal with the subtleties of actual human behavior. Given past digital progress, I have my doubts about this rebuttal. Or one could say: True, the computer can predict your personality from your Facebook likes, but what about feelings? No computer will ever *like* you based on them. But as the subservient robots in the recent movie "Ex Machina" suggest, we don't care if computers actually like us, as long as they're good fakers.

Among all these fascinating findings, the most interesting thing for me is the predictive power of a few minuscule "likes," revealing a person's feelings about a current event, a friend's haircut or a picture of a dancing cat. Remarkably, from these little pixels of disconnected opinion, a pattern-seeking computer can create a detailed pointillist picture of each of us in all our individuality.

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