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AI is 'beating' humans at empathy and creativity. But these games are rigged

MJ Crockett

Research pitting people against AI systems gives AI an edge by asking us to perform in machine-like ways

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📷 Some scientists claim AI can already outperform humans, even in domains previously thought to be exclusively human. Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

Techno-optimists are evangelizing a vision of “superhuman” [artificial intelligence](#) (AI). Dario Amodei, the CEO of the AI company Anthropic, [predicts](#) within a few years, AI will be “better than almost all humans at almost everything”. [Elon Musk](#)’s so-called “department of government efficiency” (Doge) is [proposing](#) replacing government workers with chatbots in the name of efficiency. And some scientists are claiming that AI can already outperform humans even in domains previously thought to be exclusively human, such as empathy, creativity and conflict resolution.

It’s true that in several prominent studies, researchers have staged “competitions” in which AI technology appears to outperform humans in these very human areas. But a closer look reveals that these games are rigged against us humans. The competitions do not actually ask machines to perform human tasks; it’s more accurate to say that they ask humans to behave in machine-like ways as they perform lifeless simulacra of human tasks.

It’s no wonder we lose.

Take, for example, recent studies claiming AI expresses empathy better than human [doctors](#) and [therapists](#). In these studies, researchers asked [OpenAI's ChatGPT](#) to generate written responses to posts on Reddit about physical and mental health struggles. Next, they compared the chatbot's responses with those of human doctors and therapists responding to the same Reddit posts. Across these studies, the chatbot's responses were rated as more empathetic than those of the human doctors and therapists.

So, should we all turn to [ChatGPT](#) the next time we seek a sympathetic ear?

The problem with this logic can be illustrated by a simple thought experiment. You've had a horrible day. Your boss yelled at you, your brother just filed for divorce and you're waiting on results from a stressful medical test. You're desperate for some support to help you deal. What do you do?

■ ■ All that these examples show us is that machines are better than humans at performing empathy and creativity in machine-like ways

You're probably not logging into Reddit to receive a generic written response from a stranger - even one who is expertly trained to respond empathically to strangers. You want support from people who care about the story of your life and know the characters involved: your work buddy who's

also clashed with your bummer boss, your best childhood friend who was at your brother's wedding, your partner who held your hand at the doctor's office.

Tests of AI empathy typically don't compare a chatbot's cold comfort with the kind of socially embedded care that truly nourishes us. If they did, the chatbots would lose.

Or consider a recent [paper](#) claiming that AI can produce more novel ideas than human experts. In this case, the researchers asked computer science PhD students and postdocs to compete with a modified version of Anthropic's Claude AI model. Their task: to come up with new research ideas. Each competitor was assigned a research topic (such as how to reduce bias in AI systems) and a template for writing out their ideas (to mask stylistic differences between human and AI writing). All the ideas were then judged by another group of PhD students and postdocs, who didn't know whether the ideas came from AI or humans. The judges rated the AI-generated ideas as more novel, and in some cases more exciting, than the human-generated ideas.

This seems impressive until you consider how scientific research actually works. Although stereotypes of scientists as lone geniuses persist, there is overwhelming [evidence](#) that science is a team effort and more diverse teams do more creative and impactful science. We're most innovative when we draw on communities of knowledge, thinking together through complex problems. But that's not the test that the researchers chose to pit humans against machines. The humans in the study had to come up with their ideas alone. Once again, the AI victory rings hollow when we consider that the humans in this game had to leave their best talents behind - in this case, their collaborative relationships.

The same is true of a recent [paper](#) claiming that AI outperforms humans in resolving political disagreements. Researchers at Google invited small groups of British citizens to privately share their opinions on divisive issues like immigration and Brexit. The team built an AI system to act as a mediator, generating "group opinion statements" designed to maximize consensus among group members. They also trained human volunteers to perform the same task. The citizen groups reached more consensus when guided by AI mediators than human ones, rating the AI-generated statements as more clear, informative and fair than their human counterparts. Commentators suggested AI might hold promise for bridging our deepest political divides.

But a closer look reveals how the study's methods disadvantaged the human mediators. All communication took place over an online chat interface. Anyone who's ever tried to resolve a disagreement by texting knows how much crucial information vanishes across a digital divide. Effective mediation involves attuning not just to *what* people say, but *how* they say it: their tone of voice, facial expressions and body language are vital cues that help us distinguish grudging acceptance from hearty agreement. AI mediators might have an edge in online discourse that excludes these cues, but that's no reason to assume they're superior tools for healing our political rifts - not least because online discourse [contributed](#) to those rifts in the first place.

All that these examples of so-called "AI victories" show us is that machines are better than humans at performing empathy, creativity and conflict resolution in machine-like ways. Considering why these tests are unfair helps us better appreciate our distinctively human talents. We build relationships thick with meaning and forge new knowledge out of trusting social bonds. We find common ground reflected in our faces, voices and postures, perhaps because embodied communication helps us recognize our

shared mortality. No chatbot can achieve these feats, because chatbots don't have bodies, and aren't embedded in our social worlds the way our loved ones are.

Techno-optimism is more accurately described as "human pessimism" when it assumes that the quality of our character is easily reducible to code. We can acknowledge AI as a technical achievement without mistaking its narrow abilities for the richer qualities we treasure in each other.

MJ Crockett is a cognitive scientist at Princeton University.

At this dangerous moment for dissent

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you close this tab, I wanted to ask if you could support the Guardian at this crucial time for journalism in the US.

When the military is deployed to quell overwhelmingly peaceful protest, when elected officials of the opposing party are arrested or handcuffed, when student activists are jailed and deported, and when a wide range of civic institutions - non-profits, law firms, universities, news outlets, the arts, the civil service, scientists - are targeted and penalized by the federal government, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that our core freedoms are disappearing before our eyes - and democracy itself is slipping away.

In any country on the cusp of authoritarianism, the role of the press as an engine of scrutiny, truth and accountability becomes increasingly critical. At the Guardian, we see it as our job not only to report on the suppression of dissenting voices, but to make sure those voices are heard.

Not every news organization sees its mission this way - indeed, some have been pressured by their corporate and billionaire owners to avoid antagonizing this government. I am thankful the Guardian is different.

Our only financial obligation is to fund independent journalism in perpetuity: we have no ultrarich owner, no shareholders, no corporate bosses with the power to overrule or influence our editorial decisions. Reader support is what guarantees our survival and safeguards our independence - and every cent we receive is reinvested in our work.

The Guardian's global perspective helps contextualize and illuminate what we are experiencing in this country. That doesn't mean we have a single viewpoint, but we do have a shared set of values. Humanity, curiosity and honesty guide us, and our work is rooted in solidarity with ordinary people and hope for our shared future.

It has never been more urgent, or more perilous, to pursue reporting in the US that holds power to account and counters the spread of misinformation - and at the

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Betsy Reed

Editor, Guardian US



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