

Chatbots, self-checkouts and the human touch

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Like many people, I am concerned about the rapidly disappearing human element in our day-to-day interactions (Billionaires yearn for a life free of human contact – and they are imposing this on the rest of us, 30 July). For every bank branch that's closed and every checkout that becomes self-service, the tide moves ever further away from the disenfranchised individual. If you have problems with sight or hearing, are frail or elderly, or in one of the countless groups of people who can't, won't or choose not to use modern technology, then the world can be a lonely and bewildering place. For many people who live alone, a friendly chat with a cashier at the supermarket may be the only social interaction they have for days. Are we so obsessed with cost-cutting and progress at any price that we are at risk of losing our humanity? I have to act as an advocate for an elderly relative who needs multiple regular medicines because the contact methods used by his surgery are unfathomable to him. He's put off trying to make appointments or ordering medicines because of the ordeal of getting through on the phone, only to be told to go online. He has family to help him negotiate the system. God help anyone in his situation who doesn't have anyone to act for them. Jayne Ryle Bolton, Lancashire • It was interesting to see Emma Beddington's piece on the dehumanisation that has seeped into most aspects of our lives. As a non-user of mobile phones, I have looked on aghast as technology chips away at the very essence of human society. Social media interactions, with their pathetic and meaningless "likes" and "dislikes", are no substitute for human contact and conversation. The likely loss of railway ticket offices and the many benefits they provide for the people who need them is just the latest in a long line of digital intrusions into social intercourse. Self-checkouts in supermarkets, contacting the GP, accessing pensions or benefits and automated phone-answering systems – it seems that it is all about penny-pinching and reducing the options for human interaction. The world was a much nicer place when these roles were filled by people, and provided employment. Martin Coult London • I can completely understand and respect Emma Beddington's preferences as an obvious extrovert. It would be nice if extroverts recognised that many of us non-wealthy folks are introverts who strongly prefer fewer touch points. I, for one, love the ability to complete a banking transaction by myself in a matter of seconds that would otherwise mean me having to wait in a long line at a bank, and then having to stand in that line again because I realised afterwards that the rude, overworked banker carelessly entered my information wrong. I hate having to talk to a real person on the phone who I can barely hear, whose accent I can't understand, who obviously doesn't care about my issue and who gives me incorrect information to get me off the phone as quickly as possible to enhance their performance metrics. Self-service please! Cory Fryling Ontario, California, US • Isaac Asimov's science fiction novel *The Caves of Steel* describes the environment we might achieve by continually decreasing the touchpoints in our lives. Wealthy isolates deal with others remotely and find in-person interactions stressful, unnecessary, and even repugnant. We may have started on that path with Covid, Zoom and

working from home, and we may continue on it by admiring and emulating the billionaire lifestyle. But please stop! We must not forget we are part of humanity only when we keep and maintain our touchpoints with the rest of humanity. John McBain Los Gatos, California, US • Have an opinion on anything you've read in the Guardian today? Please email us your letter and it will be considered for publication in our letters section.