Essay | How Are You Feeling Today?

Michael Deerwater

University of Glasgow, UK
m.deerwater.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Robbie Scarff

University of Edinburgh, UK
s2060819@ed.ac.uk

How Are You Feeling Today?

by Michael Deerwater

The morning traffic blurred behind a pounding headache and cloud of existential dread. Only habit, muscle memory, and gnawing anxiety propelled Ben to work on time. That and the hastily plugged Alka-Seltzer.

Parked slightly askew in the multi-storey car park, Ben took his phone from its holder on the dash. He hovered over Instagram. Had she posted anything today? Don't be a fucking idiot, Ben.

"Come on. You're fine. You're fine you're fine you're fine."

At the car park exit, a newly installed smart screen advertised a soft drink. As he passed, the screen flicked to a new ad. A mental health charity.

Ding. A push notification:

*Feeling down?
Click here to speak with our friendly mental health professionals.*

A smiling man in a microphone headset appeared on the screen: "Personal issues? Addiction worries? Don't suffer in silence."

Ben shook his head and continued toward the office.

"Addiction worries"?! Pricks."

The day flew by in a stream of client queries, account adjustments, maths, tax advice, more maths. After four years, it was second nature. Autopilot.

On the drive home, a text from Rachel popped up. He couldn't scan it in a glance. He'd have to wait.

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Traffic felt slower than usual. Rachel was neutral in the breakup, but she was Sofia's friend originally. Was she cutting him out? Had Sofia read his drunk messages?

Home, Ben parked hurriedly and opened the message.

Hey, hope you're OK. Sofia's last post was out of order, shows her true colours. hmu if you wanna talk

Panic tightened Ben's chest; his heart pounded. He opened Insta. She'd blocked him. Twitter? Blocked.

"Fuck."

TikTok? Blocked.

"Fuck fuck fuck."

Sweat dripped into his eyes. He cuffed it away. Why was the car so hot? He got out, slammed the door, sucked in a couple of deep breaths. His mouth was dry. He needed a drink.

Slumped on the sofa, cold beer in hand, Ben felt better.

"Alexa, play relaxing music."

Distorted harmonies flowed from the speakers. He closed his eyes, lay back.

Time passed slowly, massaged by sound and alcohol, until he was surrounded by his ringtone. Jon was calling.

"Alexa, answer."

"Hello?"

"Hey Jon, what's up?"

"Did you see the crap she posted on Insta?"

Ben's heart thumped. He tried to sound calm.

"Nah. She's blocked me."

Jon laughed. "Honestly, she's doing you a favour."

"That'd be the first."

Another laugh. This one... nervous? "Aye. Well, just checking you're OK. Folk are worried after last time."

"Thanks. I'm fine."

A long pause. Heartbeats filled the silence. "Well... I'm here if you need me. OK?"

Ben's jaw clenched. "I'm fine Jon."

"Right, no problem. Still on for Friday?"

“Aye.”

“Alright mate... look after yourself. See you then.”

“See ya.”

Beep. The music returned, but it felt out of sync with Ben’s body.

“Alexa, stop.”

He opened Insta. Still blocked. He idly swiped past friends and acquaintances eating, drinking, laughing, happy, healthy, attractive, then an ad:

*Wellness Therapist
Regain control, cultivate a calmer, clearer mind.
Register now for free 1-2-1 support from our AI therapist!*

Ben paused. “Fuck it.” He hit download and opened another beer.

An ethereal noise woke Ben at 6 a.m. Chimes? Bells? He sat up sluggishly and fumbled for his phone. Wellness Therapist launched:

Good morning, Ben! Ready to start your new Wellness programme?

He rubbed his eyes and remembered signing up. “Nooooo.”

Are you sure?

Voice control. OK. What was this again? Meditation? The beginnings of a hangover nagged his temples. Couldn’t hurt to try. He agreed to the terms.

Great! Before we begin, I’ll ask some questions to tailor your routine, OK?

“Yes”

How are you feeling today?

“Hung over.”

How has your week been?

“Shit.”

I’m sorry to hear that. Would you like to talk about it?

“No.”

That’s fine. I’m here when you need me. And I’m a computer, so I don’t judge!

Ben mindlessly answered questions about habits and goals until his “new routine” emerged, starting with

exercise and meditation.

He rolled his eyes, washed, dressed, and returned to give it a try. At least it'd be something to talk about at the pub.

Good morning, Ben! How are you feeling on Day 2 of your new routine?

"Better, I guess."

Your screen time reduced yesterday. Did you take mindfulness breaks?

"Yes."

Opening the Wellness Therapist during breaks lets us assess the effectiveness of your practice.

"OK."

Are you feeling more positive today?

"Not really."

Would you like to talk about it?

"No thanks."

Remember, I was programmed by professional psychotherapists. But for now, shall we start your routine?

"OK."

Great! Let's meditate.

Good morning, Ben! How are you feeling on Day 6 of your new routine?

"Alright."

You sound less positive than yesterday, would you like to talk about anything?

"I guess."

Your data fluctuated during a mindfulness break. Did you suffer intrusive thoughts?

"Kind of."

Do you have these thoughts often?

"They come back now and then. But they're not repetitive or anything."

When you suffer intrusive thoughts, just return to your breathing. If the problem continues, I can help you take back control. Would you like to meditate?

"Yes."

Great! Let's meditate.

Good morning, Ben! It's been two weeks of Wellness Therapy! Would you like to see your progress?

"Yes"

BLOOD PRESSURE

Day 1: 127/78

Day 14: 120/68

HEART RATE

Day 1: 82bpm

Day 14: 64bpm

FOCUS RATING

Day 1: 52%

Day 14: 81%

POSITIVITY INDEX

Day 1: 0.012

Day 14: 0.601

Are you happy with the results?

“Yes.”

Have you been bothered by thoughts about SOFIA and DRINKING lately?

“Not for a few days.”

That’s great! Anything else you would like to talk about?

“Work, maybe? It seems so pointless sometimes. Like, am I doing enough with my life?”

You are worried about ACHIEVEMENTS?

Yeah.

It’s natural to feel out of control sometimes. But we can always explore new ways to achieve your goals.

Camford Analytics Inc.
Sample Intelligence Report
Client: 816017
Consumer: 1296410-012
Date: 07/08/2023

The following sample data can create detailed customer profiles or generate a segment analysis. Services can be tailored for marketing, targeting, customer service, and HR.

Click the dropdown to select date ranges.
Check the boxes to select desired data fields.

☐ CONSUMER PROFILE

Age
Address
Email
Phone

BIOMETRICS

☐ Blood pressure
☐ Heart rate
☐ Attention span

☐ Step count

PSYCHOMETRICS

- ☐ Positivity index
- ☐ Screen time
- ☐ Social media usage
- ☐ Word cloud

CONTEXTUAL DATA

- ☐ Location
- ☐ Shops visited
- ☐ Restaurants visited
- ☐ Confirmed purchases
- ☐ Audio keywords
- ☐ Camera scan data

<GENERATE REPORT?>

<Y/N>

SMART BILLBOARD

SITE REF: 002954B

DATE: 08/08/2023

<Data received>

<Sending push notification>

<Client: Smartsure>

<Product: Smart insurance>

<Media: smartsure_summer23.mp4>

<Contact: application.exe>

<Push text: Reduce your insurance premiums today! Click here to sign up with Smartsure and get rewarded for your healthy lifestyle.>

<Offer accepted>

<Click logged>

<Forwarding data to client>

<12/08/2023>

<Wellness Therapy: Audio monitoring active>

“New voicemail received”

Beep

“Hey Ben, it’s Jon. Where were you last night? Hope you’re not **feeling down again**? I mean, I know that **meditation** app helped, but your mates are here too. And... shit, I mean, not just that. Come hang out! It’ll be fun. Rachel was talking about you last night too. Anyway, we miss ya big man, don’t care if you’re not **drinking**, be good to see you. I know you’ve got this important client meeting tomorrow, but we’ll be at the **pub** next **Friday** as per. Maybe see you there?”

Beep

“To listen to your message again, press—”

Beep

“Message deleted.”

Re: Today's Client Meeting
David McCann (Mgmt)
Mon 14/8/2023
To: Ben Sullivan

Hi Ben,

Thanks for attending today's meeting, you handled yourself well given the circumstances. However, the client's concerns require further consideration, and we will therefore be auditing your files.

We will discuss the results with you, making sure the outcome is in the best interests of the client, company, and, of course, yourself.

If you have any worries, my door is always open.

KR,
David

Ben drove home cursing himself. He'd been so on it lately that he didn't realise how much the spat with Jon had gotten to him.

The phone ringtone erupted from the car speakers. Ben startled, then glanced at the phone. Rachel. What did she want? Jon said she was annoyed he'd gone AWOL too. He didn't need this.

He suddenly spotted the red light ahead and slammed on the brakes. The car behind honked angrily.

“OK! OK! Sorry!” He waved a hand in apology and took a few deep breaths as the phone rang out. Should he text Jon to find out what's going on? He paused, then opened the Wellness Therapist.

A horn honked. The light was green. Shit.

The chat could wait. He drove on.

At home, he composed and recomposed messages to Jon and Rachel but couldn't send anything. Beer after beer failed to boost his courage. In the end, he just vented to the therapist app until he passed out at some unholy hour.

Sun streamed into Ben's bedroom. Crap. He'd overslept. Notifications alerted him to his missed meditation and multiple calls from work. Shit. The client call.

He dressed and drove hurriedly to work, panicking all the way, then threw himself into fixing the situation.

Mid-afternoon, his focus was broken by a push notification:

Due to recent driving and biomonitering data, your premiums will rise by 22% from your next direct debit.

What the fuck? How was it getting so much data so quickly? He shoved the thought out of his head and plowed on, he had to fix this.

By the end of the day, it was all he could do to crawl into the car and drive home.

At home, Ben slumped on the sofa and opened the AI therapist.

Hello Ben, how was your day?

“Not good.”

I’m sorry to hear that, would you like to—

“Who do you share my data with?”

We gather contextual data to monitor your wellbeing. Selected data is also shared with third parties according to the app permissions.

Ben went cold. He checked his settings. So many places had access, including his Smartsure Insurance app. He felt stupid, betrayed. He turned off all the permissions for Wellness Therapist and Smartsure and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“Alexa, play relaxing music.”

Some weird meditation music began. He sighed.

A familiar chime woke Ben up. He grabbed his phone. Good, he’d be early today. Two notifications waited on his home screen.

Ready to meditate?

He clicked it and Wellness Therapist opened.

Warning: this app cannot function without permissions enabled. Adjust your settings to continue.

Ben sighed. “So that’s how it is?”

He checked the other notification.

Smartsure cannot access essential data. Failure to reactivate will result in an increase to your premiums.

He dismissed it.

“Everything results in an increase to my premiums.”

The office was empty when Ben arrived, so he could collect his thoughts. But just as he was ready to start working, the boss summoned him.

“Have a seat, Ben.”

He did, watching as David (“call me Dave”) shuffled awkwardly in his chair.

“As you know, Ben, we’ve had issues with one of your clients. Then, of course, there was the important call you missed, and the persistent lateness, well—”

David cleared his throat.

“You’re sacking me.”

“No, God, no,” David laughed awkwardly, “we’ve just checked in with HR and they suggested you might be having some, er, difficulties?”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled a strange, sort-of-sympathetic smile, “Mental health difficulties.”

Ben felt himself heat up and start to sweat. David clasped his hands together, unclasped them, then laid them on the table.

“We just think you might benefit from some... support.”

“What makes you think that?”

David’s eye twitched. “Oh, observation, and, just, employee data, you know?”

Ben’s heart raced. “Right. And is this optional?”

“I’m afraid not.”

END

Research Context

by Robbie Scarff

Jeremy Crampton warns that using emotional AI (EAI) for surveillance purposes means the subject is no longer just seen, but seen *as something* (Crampton 2019: 60). In this collaboration, I introduced Michael to this area of research and, through a series of conversations, we explored the wide range of consequences this shift can have. We wanted the story to show potentially positive consequences, in this case Ben facing unaddressed emotional issues, but also negative ones, such as his being mis-sold insurance or private matters being brought into his work life.

EAI also raises questions regarding freedom of thought. Simply put, this freedom has three key elements: the right not to have one’s thoughts revealed, manipulated, or punished (Vermeulen 2006: 752). Because EAI not only infers emotions but also emotions *about things*, it could also infer a user’s thoughts about said things without their conscious involvement or consent—potentially violating all three aspects of their freedom of thought. This has led others to question what violations of these elements look like in practice (Alegre 2017: 4).

To answer this question, Michael channelled his own practice-based research on post-anthropocene futures. In particular, the work of N. Katherine Hayles (2017: 142) on “how the interpenetration of technical and human cognition functions to redefine the landscape in which human actors move” was informative. It framed a space of tension in which Ben’s engagement with the technology was active but incomplete, and in which both sides failed to apprehend the full reality of the other.

This is revealed in, for example, the highlighted text of Jon’s voicemail. Each highlight represents a keyword flagged by the wellness app as it analyses/labels the user (Ben) both for the promised therapeutic purposes and the covert harvesting of data to be sold on. This becomes a visual statement about the way algorithms emphasize specific pieces of data in ways that are highly decontextualised and very different from the ways we usually take meaning from such interactions. It also shows how these words, once highlighted and separated as “data,” can be used in ways never intended by the user.

Through our two research strands and in our story, we are challenging readers with the ways EAI surveillance turns their words and actions into data, which hidden third parties turn back into real-world consequences. By doing so, we hope to find out whether readers consider such surveillance accurate or fair, and whether they would accept it in their own lives. Because only once we visualise these surveillance futures can we begin to decide whether we want to engage with EAI to shape its development and regulation and achieve beneficial outcomes or, as some have argued, finally conclude that it is an irremediable technology which should be banned altogether (Stark and Hutson 2021).

At this stage of the debate, we expect there to be a wide variety of opinion spanning a continuum between these two poles. Emotional surveillance potentially affects everyone. By problematising EAI and raising some issues it poses, we hope this contribution acts both as a prompt for self-reflection and as an impetus for multi- and inter-disciplinary research into the societal impacts of, and public opinion on, EAI. Work that will ultimately help us make the right decisions on this complex and emotive technology.

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