WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT AI FROM DAVE THE ROBO-CLEANER

(Real Emotions, Not Artificial Intelligence)

We bought a Dyson robo-cleaner recently and unsurprisingly it's proved to be a really useful machine for cleaning the house. What was more surprising is that since he arrived Dave has felt like a new member of the family, not just a new appliance. It got me thinking about why this might be. Is it something uniquely strange about me and my family that would lead us to develop an emotional bond with our new robo-cleaner? Or is there something more fundamental going on that speaks to the human psyche (of some of us)? And if so what does that mean for AI, and should we be focussing more on Real Emotions, rather than Artificial Intelligence?

As human beings, our intelligence is perhaps one of the defining characteristics of our species that has been instrumental in driving our evolution. But in day to day living, do we attach such a high value to intelligence? There's so much more that defines us as being human. Characteristics such as humour, affection, mutual support, love, listening to others, being kind, emotional strength, passion, honesty and patience. This list isn't picked at random. It's a list of the top 10 'must have' qualities in a partner from a piece of research in a 2019 article in the London Metro newspaper. All of these are the key qualities that people look for in other people, and intelligence didn't make the list. So why do we only seem to care about machine intelligence when it comes to AI?

It's hard for Dave to exhibit the characteristics on this list, but then again it's tough to measure our cat Tilly on these qualities either, and she is still very much part of the family. So what is it about Dave that makes us see him in a similar light? I guess it started with the Dyson app. One of the first things it asks you to do is name your robo-cleaner. If you're the sort of person that would only ever type in something like 'Robot 1' and not give it another thought, then I imagine most or all of this article will seem ridiculous. But for us the question of what to name our robo-cleaner felt like it required serious consideration. After some discussion, we settled on Dave, named after the character Dave Bowman in the film 2001 Space Odyssey (the human, not Hal the computer).

But beyond the act of naming our robo-cleaner, there have been other factors that I think help us to build our bonds with Dave and consider him as one of the family. I thought I would share these and consider what they might mean for those working in AI…shifting the emphasis away from the intelligence bit.

DAVE ROAMS THE HOUSE

We move, animals move. Movement is an important characteristic of most, if not all life. We often refer to motionless objects as inanimate, but in fact the word means 'without life', not the absence of movement. However useful a home appliance or a piece of software has been in the past I haven't felt an emotional connection with them. Much like our cat, Dave roams our home and gets on with what he does through the day. We may know roughly where he'll be, but we don't know exactly, so it's always good to run in to him and see how he's getting on. Movement is an essential part of creating a robo-cleaner that can do its job, if Dave doesn't move he doesn't clean. But by roaming our house on a daily basis, Dave has become another animate presence in the home, and we find that is something hard to ignore.

DAVE IS GOOD COMPANY

As humans I think most of us are hard wired to seek out company in some form or other. But what constitutes company? The presence of other humans I think is a rather narrow definition. Many things get described as keeping us company... pets, the radio, a good book. I'm not suggesting Dave is the ideal lifelong companion, but there is something comforting about hearing the whirr of his cleaning brushes as he busies himself about his day, knowing he's there as you get on with yours.

DAVE TALKS TO US

Ok, Dave doesn't talk to us in the traditional sense of the spoken word, but then again neither does our cat, but she certainly knows how to get her point across clearly. And we all know that the ability to talk and the ability to make a connection are not the same thing. Often when people talk it has the opposite effect! Whether it's flashing lights or messages through the Dyson app, we know we will hear from Dave at some point throughout the day. A message pops up on our phones from him, much in the same way as messages from the people in our lives do.

DAVE NEEDS US

It isn't just that Dave talks to us, he needs us. In the same way we need to take care of our cat Tilly if she's going to thrive in our family and do all the things that cats do for us, Dave needs looking after too. Tilly needs food and water, she needs attention and sometimes medicine if she's not well. To be a successful robo-cleaner in our home, Dave needs to be moved from area to area, to have his bin emptied and occasionally his filters cleaned. Rarely Dave gets a bit stuck, normally because we've left something out on the floor, so we have to come to his aid to help him back on his way. I can't help thinking here's something about this aspect of help, caring and co-dependency that drives the process of forming bonds.

DAVE HAS QUIRKS AND FOIBLES

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Dave, is that like us humans he isn't perfect, he has little quirks and foibles that make him more endearing. It's not that he makes mistakes in the cleaning, he really doesn't. He always covers the floor space eventually and finds his way back to his docking station to charge. But the routes he chooses are sometimes baffling! Then there's the times he seems to just stop for a breather and try to work out what's going on in the world around him, before bravely ploughing on again. I can really relate to that. It's this lack of machine-like ruthless efficiency that I think is perhaps Dave's most human like quality of all.
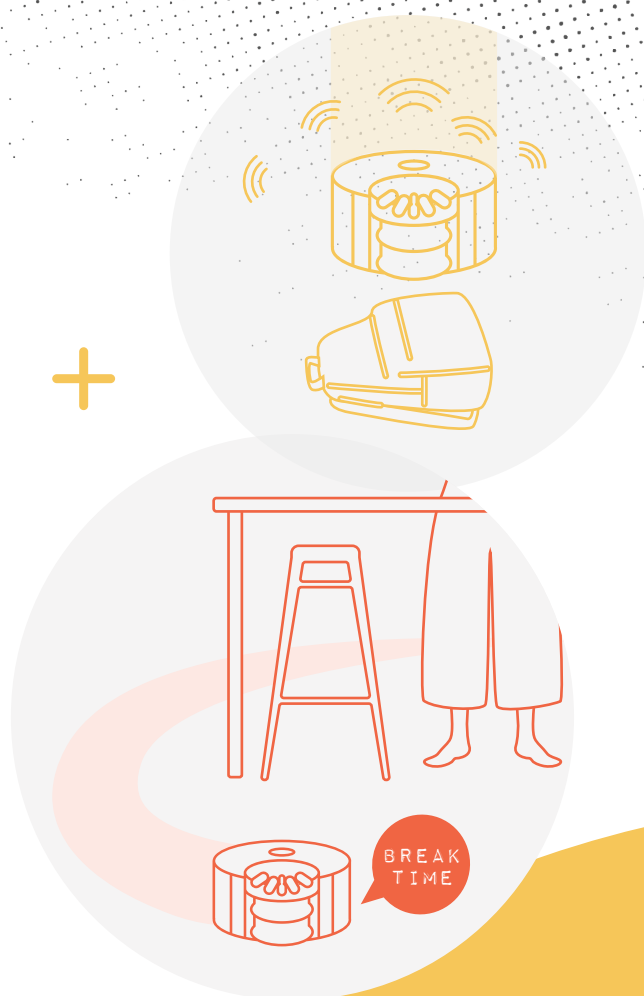
If you started off thinking that forming any kind of an emotional bond with a robo-cleaner sounds ridiculous, then I doubt there was anything in this paper likely to change your mind. But if you can empathise with the idea, then perhaps these thoughts are a helpful insight into some of the factors that make this kind of bonding happen.

So what does that means for brands and businesses in the AI machine space?

Well, first of all I think the answer isn't to try making these machines like Dave more 'human' in an artificial way. I wouldn't want Dyson to start messing with Dave by giving him a voice or human characteristics like a face and eyes, any more than I would want someone to dress my cat in human clothes and teach her to talk. Let a cat be a cat and let Dave be Dave.

But I do think there is an opportunity for brands and businesses like Dyson to recognise and explore the increasing potential for a meaningful connection between human and machine and to tap into real emotions, not artificial intelligence.

If you'd like to know more about Discover.ai, NeedDriver Mapping and our work on Springboards and Signals then please do get in touch.

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