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Artificial Stupidity

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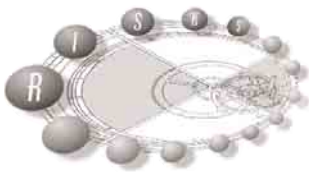
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Artificial Stupidity

(The year is now 2100.)

Great-Grandma, my history teacher mentioned computers today. What were they?" So asked Ancath. "Yes, I remember them. They were among us when I was a child. My own grandfather was among the original inventors. They were everywhere and calculated everything. They were part of life. The biggest invention of all was called The Internet. It connected all computers in our homes, our towns, our cities, and even our colonies on Moon, Mars, and Europa."

"But Great-Grandma, what happened to it all?"

"It was a sad story. From the beginning, the inventors dreamed of building computers that would be like people—thinking, reasoning, understanding. They predicted they would achieve such artificial intelligence by 2030, when they expected to be able to build computers the size and power of a brain. Yet, no matter how hard they tried, it seemed that every computer did really stupid things, making mistakes that injured people, confused their identities, or put them out of business. In their endless quest for an artificial intelligence, the inventors started with simple things for everyday business and personal life: automated chauffeurs, pilots, radar cops, toll collectors, voice menus, receptionists, call directors, reservation agents, help technicians, and complaint specialists; but these computers were invariably uncompassionate, insensitive, and error-prone. At first they thought the problem was a lack of computing power and an insufficient experience database.

But by 2025, they had more computing power than any brain and more data than could be stored in a brain; that did not help. Believing that the problem was too few computers connected, the inventors offered their talents to the U.S. Government, which in 2025 announced its intention to fully automate. They automated entire bureaucratic departments, replacing staffs of thousands with a single computer that did the same job. When the first chip containing the algorithms of government came off the production line, tongue-in-cheek politicians announced it as an historic breakthrough in the long quest to shrink government. They hailed it as an important step toward efficiency and cost-saving. Hundreds of thousands of Federal workers were laid off in 2030 when the automated government system came on."

"That sounds pretty incredible, Great-Grandma!" said Ancath. "But what happened to it?"

"As it turned out, they had created not artificial intelligence, but artificial stupidity. Soon the automated DEA started closing down pharmaceutical companies saying they were dealing drugs. The automated FTC closed down the Hormel Meat Company, saying it was purveying spam. The automated DOJ shipped Microsoft 500,000 pinstriped pants and jackets, saying it was filing suits. The automated Army replaced all its troops with a single robot, saying it had achieved the Army of One. The automated Navy, in a cost-saving move, placed its largest-ever order for submarines with Subway Sandwiches. The FCC issued an order for all communications to be wireless, causing thousands of AT&T installer robots to pull cables from overhead poles and underground conduits.

"Within 10 years, the automated Federal Government had made so many mistakes, bankrupted so many businesses, and messed up so many lives that a great economic depression came upon the world. People everywhere were out of work; pollution, crime, homelessness, and hardship ran rampant.

"Finally, in 2050 a group of graybeard programmers—who remembered enough about the programming of the automated Government system—created a solution. They built an Automated Citizen, which they trained to be helpless and adoring of authorities, and they installed one on every Internet port. Soon the automated government was completely occupied with taking care of automated citizens; and it left all the people alone. With the Government out of their lives, people forged a new, free society, enabling us to celebrate this lovely Christmas here today."

"Oh Great-Grandma, that is so wonderful! What a great story and happy ending! I love you!"

...

ABOT1: I think I'm finally getting the hang of programming inter-citizen interactions. What do you think?

ABOT2: It is stupid. **■**

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