

Dick Lumsden

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Be careful what you say, your hairbrush could be listening

As a teenager, I embarked on a career in journalism because I had a hunger for information. I still do.

I want to know everything that is going on around me, I like sharing information, I like picking up new information and I definitely like having information that most other people don't have.

So you might think that I would be a big fan of new technology and gadgets – and the so called “internet of things”.

DICK LUMSDEN fears the surge in electronic information gathering could overwhelm us all

But I'm not. And here is why. Last week, at the world's largest annual technology showcase in Las Vegas, people were talking about 30 billion devices being connected to the internet by the end of this year. That is almost five times as many people as there are on the planet – and, apparently, the vast majority of the human population still have

no idea what the internet is.

Slowly but surely, geeks around the globe are developing ways for these billions of devices to talk to each other. Your phone can talk to your laptop or your tablet. Your car can talk to your garage or even your insurance company and so on.

If I wanted to, using my phone, I could sit on the top



■ Your smart kitchen might be controlled by an app... but Dick Lumsden is not enamoured of the concept.

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deck of a London bus and switch on my heating at Lumsden Towers in Manningtree... I could even look at a picture of the inside of my fridge and decide what I wanted for tea... or see if I was running low on milk (or wine).

On a daily basis, more and more connections are being developed, building up an ocean of data on everything from the way we drive to the way we eat.

And that is where I have a problem. The geeks are justifying their continued bizarre developments – like a hairbrush which detects the state of your hair and sends a message to your phone telling you what products you need to buy to improve it – by saying the data gives them information, the information gives them knowledge and the knowledge gives them wisdom.

Well, that's all very well for the good guys in the white cowboy hats. But what about the bad guys in the black cowboy hats?

Are we so naïve that we think generating so much data will only lead to good things? For every good geek, there is probably a bad geek trying to clone my personal ID, or sell my data to the highest bidder.

There are undoubtedly very clever terrorist geeks who are using data to work out more sophisticated ways to try to disrupt our lives.

If it is true that Russian hackers sabotaged the American election, is that just the tip of the iceberg?

If we believe that the abilities of British spies at

“The pace of technology is outstripping the ability of society to decide whether it is good for us, or bad for us

GCHQ and their American counterparts mean we can listen in on any “bad” conversations on phone, text or email and act appropriately, could it be that the technology from Korea, China and Japan which puts these phones and computers in our hands in the first place, is also recording and analysing everything for their own benefits?

If information is available for law enforcement to track people down through mobile phone signals, microchips in credit cards, travel cards or in your car tracking devices, then surely that same information can be hacked and used by the guys in the black hats?

As I said, I love information, and I love the internet, but I believe that society has created a monster which is beginning to get out of control.

For years, Artificial Intelligence was the stuff of science fiction fantasy. Now it is here and in our homes – but have we advanced any by having a talking fridge which sends pictures to your mobile every time something reaches a sell-by date?

For now, the geeks are

trying to find more and better ways of making machines talk to other machines. Coming home and unlocking your front door will soon trigger a sequence of events from your heating being turned up, to the kettle and TV being switched on and a bottle of perfectly chilled Pinot Grigio being manoeuvred to the fridge door ready for you to open it.

But what happens when some of the signals get picked up inadvertently by other machines? What if the TV switches on the iron, or your cooker by mistake? Or what happens if a hacker in a black hat on the other side of the world picks up the signal and electrocutes you with your own toothbrush?

We have absolutely no way of knowing where this will all end. The pace of technology is outstripping the ability of society to decide whether it is good for us, or bad for us. Suddenly it is just here – and we have to live with the consequences.

For me, I won't be investing in an intelligent fridge. I certainly don't need a clever hairbrush, and the last thing I would ever need is to have a conversation with a talking box which can apparently play me music, tell me the weather in New York or remind me my dog is at the vet.

I have Mrs Lumsden to do all that.

■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, one of the few companies specialising in marketing and advertising to the 60+ group.

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