

# What Does it Mean to be Human?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

BY JAMES MORRIS, GLOBAL HEAD OF MEDIACOM BEYOND ADVERTISING 09 NOV 2015

How do you dramatize the concept of artificial intelligence? By making a lifelike robot a member of the family, of course. James Morris, Global Head of MediaCom Beyond Advertising, gets the inside story from Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley, writers of the new TV hit, *Humans*.

James Morris: *Humans* is a coproduction between AMC and the U.K.'s Channel 4, but it's based on the award-winning Swedish series, *Real Humans*, which explored the blurring of the lines between humans and machines. How have you adapted *Humans* for a U.K. audience?

**Sam Vincent:** Lars Lundström, creator and writer of Real Humans, told us he had always been fascinated by what it would be like to have a “synth” (an android) in the family. We loved this core idea, but were able to add significantly to it, because all the original references and personalities were so culturally specific to Sweden.

**James:** Did you take a close look at the technology and review any research on robotics?

**Jonathan Brackley:** We did a lot of reading, that’s for sure. We also went to technology conferences to understand more about artificial intelligence.

**Sam:** Advances like image recognition and natural language processing – both of which Siri can handle today – made us realize that the concept of a “thinking” synth may not be so far away. Only five years ago, we didn’t have the anticipatory “recommend” capabilities that are now so prevalent on the internet; we’ve gotten used to the uncanny capability that technology has to pinpoint things you might like, or don’t like. We also did research on the other side of the story, which is machine consciousness. Most interesting to us were the sociological aspects: how will our society deal with machines that can do our jobs and are as smart as we are? How will this affect our lives?

**James:** How real is the possibility of machines being able to do our jobs some day?

**Sam:** The assumption is that the manual, unskilled jobs will be eliminated first, which is already happening. When I drive into London, I use the Dartford Crossing, a big toll bridge that’s always been manned by people. Recently, the toll booths and staff were eliminated in favor of a more efficient automated license plate recognition system. That’s just the start. Soon it will be very easy for machines to do white-collar work like legal clerking and contract checking. As a result, all classes of labor will be affected.

**James:** The show is said to take place in a “parallel present.” What balance are you trying to strike between presenting a possible reality and imagining a more sci-fi, futuristic vision?

**Sam:** Synths won’t be in stores tomorrow, but they are definitely in the development phase.

The big question is whether they can take on human characteristics such as thought, emotion and self-awareness. From what we've learned from the very serious world of AI research, nobody can really tell how close that is.

**Jon:** I think that *Humans* is a pretty grounded representation of these technologies. We haven't tried to show anything that's too far-fetched. Synths are servile automatons that perform complex but mostly domestic tasks. They can't fly or anything like that. There is realism in the drama.

**James:** So if the goal was to create a realistic idea of how this might work, how do you create interest and drama without getting too fantastic? Did you do it by focusing on the utopian/dystopian aspects?

**Jon:** From the very beginning, we agreed that we didn't want to make a judgment on whether such a scenario would be good or bad. And we definitely didn't want to show the future as either a dystopia or a utopia. We're conscious of the fact that this is entertainment...

**Sam:** ... We just want to have people sit at home, debating whether they'd want their own synth!

**James:** Has writing the series changed your outlook on the future? Do you feel better or worse about what's coming now that you're more informed?

**Sam:** I'm neither a pessimist nor an optimist, because no one really knows. Twenty years ago, very few people envisioned the rise of information technology. On the other hand, many did predict an incredible transformation in home life and transportation, and those changes have moved very slowly.

**Jon:** In the long run, there is no stopping change. We all know that, and I think it's a little neurotic to worry about super-intelligent machines making us their slaves. It's more likely that machines will continue to improve our lives, but it is true that – for some – those "improvements" may turn out to be undesirable. For now, I am optimistic that the so-called

AI machines and computers will benefit us and remain under our control.

James: Thanks, guys. Now, where can I get a synth?

*Humans has averaged 2 million viewers and 1 million adults 25-54 through four episodes in the U.S. The premiere episode was U.K. Channel 4's highest rated originated drama in 20 years. Humans has been renewed for a second season.*

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