

The Man and the Machine

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DATA OPINION TECHNOLOGY

BY SIGNE WANDLER 12 NOV 2015

Artificial intelligence can provide the data points and analysis we need to optimize our lives and decision-making processes. But how far should we allow such intelligence to actually direct our lives? BLINK's Editor-in-Chief, Signe Wandler, spoke with Chris Dancy, self-proclaimed 'Human Cyborg' and possibly the most connected human on earth, who monitors every element of his life from diet to sleep to brainwaves, to see if AI has reduced the gap between man and machine.

[Chris Dancy](#) is talking to me from his walking treadmill desk in Tennessee. While we

converse, his brainwaves are on display across the room. His heart rate is 81 beats per minute and he's speaking at about 77 decibels. He's also recording our call or, more specifically, his contribution to it. Great soundbites, he warns, may get recycled. Given that he is connected to up to 700 systems at any given moment, this seems like the least of what might be re-processed at a later date. Chris Dancy is the tracking man, the ultimate quantified self, an individual determined to keep hold of what matters most in his life. It's a quest Dancy began in 2008, the year he became fascinated by the idea that today's avalanche of data might lead to the human race hitting its attention limit. "You only have so much time and attention, and how you manage both defines your lifestyle, your health... everything," he says. "Just consuming mountains of information creates problems, and may distract you from the things you care most about." And so, at the age of 40, Dancy set out to make sure this didn't happen to him: to make sure that he was in charge.

Getting Started

Dancy describes tracking as layers of the atmosphere, with each level yielding different information. Internal metrics, such as biometric information and behavioral data, are held in the earth, with information from the outside world represented by the sky. He started the process by scraping his social media profile to get a sense of what he was sharing online. Then he moved on to other aspects of his existence. "One of the barriers to tracking is that it takes a lot of work. If you've used Jawbone or other wearables, it's easy to just forget to turn them on," he says. And as for all the apps currently available? "Some of them are pretty abusive, either yelling or beeping at you for not walking or for overeating. That's not likely to be very motivating." The most important behavior that Dancy tracks is his sleep, so that he can be sure he's getting enough rest to function at his self-defined best. According to Dancy, every human in the world has struggled with sleep. He uses feedback loops like home lights that automatically switch on and off at pre-set times to help keep him on the right road.

It's All About Me

In addition to the work it takes, Dancy argues that tracking requires us to pay more attention to ourselves, which can be hard for those who may view such behavior as navel-gazing or,

worse, self obsession. Naturally, Dancy doesn't see it that way; what he's doing helps him keep in touch with who he really is so he can develop a stronger, faster and smarter self. His "data-driven lifestyle" has, in fact, helped him lose one hundred pounds. He began by simply taking pictures of his meals on Instagram to identify what he was eating as well as geo-tagging his credit card to see where he was splurging on food. And having recorded nearly every bit of his life, he was able to comb through thousands of events that seemed to trigger unhealthy eating over time: the people he'd met, the phone calls he'd taken... even the specific music and TV shows he'd consumed prior to unhealthy binges. Once he detected patterns in the data, Dancy was able to make positive changes, reducing the temperature at home in response to evidence that higher temperatures encouraged greater indulgence, as well as restricting his behavior by blocking credit card purchases at his favorite fast food joints.

Man vs. Machine?

There's an unsolvable tension in Dancy's work, in that it requires more and more technology to track his very human behavior and activity. He encourages individuals to do things the old-fashioned way whenever possible. You might be able to ask an app or Siri about the weather but, sometimes, it's easier to just look out the window. Become too conditioned to talking to machines, Dancy says, and you forget to use your own innate abilities. "Artificial intelligence will never be able to use our senses and, at this point, at least, it won't be able to love for us," he says. We need to guard the precious things that make us human.

On Privacy

With so much of his life in the public domain, Dancy has an understandably nuanced approach to privacy. Too many people, he says, will trade away privacy in the name of convenience, loyalty cards and home utilities savings. Privacy, he argues, is so much more complicated than the simple check box of all or nothing that most of us are offered. Some data is appropriate in some cases and not in others. The reality is that what most of us would like is a privacy slider to allow us to permit some things for those close to us but less

for corporations and companies. The truth, he says, is that depending on

where you go, the very idea of privacy can mean different things. In Europe, he says, privacy tends to refer to the individual's ability to protect him or herself against large government or corporate bodies. The EU's "right to be forgotten" is a good example, but he also questions whether it might ultimately put businesses in the region at a disadvantage because they don't have access to the same information as their competitors elsewhere. Privacy is more than a binary on or off decision. It's become even more critical in 2015 as privacy issues move beyond financial, population or statistical information into activity tracking and potentially fulltime biological tracking. "Selling that level of information to retailers is a road we can't turn back from once we start. You don't want to be remembered at your memorial service through your heart rate coupons from the grocery store," he says.

In the Future

Dancy is resigned to a highly quantified future. Even if workers reject an increasing level of corporate monitoring, individuals – looking for ways to stay ahead of machines – are likely to use self-tracking to identify and act upon opportunities to better

themselves. The trick is finding the right balance. Dancy has learned to meditate, quieting the gadgetry and returning to a more human place. "For me personally, any tool that augments my ability to be kind, generous or see a connection to other humans in a way that gives me added perspective is clearly augmenting our humanity. Tools at this level add to our collective 'human-kind-ness'," he says. "Tools that force us into a relationship with information that is controlled by algorithms, tools that don't allow for choice, flexibility or even make us see information we may not like, that's what's killing us, slowly, with every click we take." The bottom line is that for all the help that technology and data can provide and help us manage our lives better, it's up to us to ensure that we retain what makes us human.