

New meaning to 'I've got the bot'

Artificial intelligence is a wonderful thing – until it turns on you. I feel for the man who was unable to do the census because his home doesn't exist, according to automation, and he was unable to get anyone to do anything about it – because of automation.

It's a wonderful idea to automate the census, to digitise it. Think of all those keystrokes we now do on behalf of the Census Office, typing what they used to have to do from paper forms we filled out with our scrawls.

Ancestry.com researchers will tell you census-takers of past centuries were responsible for the mangling of many names, as they asked people for information and wrote down what they thought they heard. One family I wrote a book about recently has 19 versions of their surname recorded since the 1600s - and their name has only five syllables, one vowel. Imagine what's happened to polysyllabic or hyphenated surnames.

So, automating the census, making us write our own names, ought at least to get some consistency going. It's the other problems with automation that worry me, and not just with the census. The man who no longer officially exists was also the victim of what has become a common experience, a phenomenon I call the "communications short circuit".

This is when you try to engage personally with a large organisation and find it no longer seems to have humans working for it. They've been replaced by a wall of "options", each with a number to be pressed on your phone or computer keyboard.

With emails, all you get sometimes is an impossibly long, sycophantic, and legal-sounding automated response that tells you why you might have to wait half a century to receive a reply from whomever it is you're hoping to contact. If they exist.

In many cases, you won't know who you're trying to reach. If there are any humans left in the system you're confronted with, they are protected from revealing themselves. If by fluke you reach one, they may have only a pretend first name.

Our non-existent census man consulted the Census website, which told him to call the Census office. When he called the office, its robot said try the website. I'm wondering how many circuits he attempted, and which got him first – dizziness, frustration or anger.

In my case, it's bloody-mindedness. Being an irritatingly curious journalist, I come across circuits every day. I eschew emotional responses and find cunning ways to subvert the non-humans to reach the real ones. They're usually in there somewhere – bureaucratting.

One option is to try the "help chat line" some big corporations have. They give the illusion you've broken through to a real person and can finally ask your question, which inevitably will not be among the lists of "things you might want to ask" that has already been concocted by humans...and automated.

On occasion, I've drawn out chat exchanges over weeks and "talked" with numerous people, because the same person never seems to be on duty for more than one day. Usually, this gets me nowhere, but provides perverse entertainment and column material, which probably says more about me than automation.

Automation has grown more bizarre and all-encompassing as ingenious ways to hide from human contact have been refined by global computer companies, and eagerly adopted by governing and bureaucratic organisations in NZ who are keen to keep time-consuming people at arm's length.

Employment is one casualty, although the men and women who voice automated messages have probably done well out of it – until the day they're replaced by a machine. I doubt Siri gets paid.

The plight of the census non-person reminded me of a confounding experience I had recently with New Plymouth's mayor, Neil Holdom. After I interviewed him for a story, he thoughtfully emailed me some further points. I immediately emailed back thanks, and a further comment. There was no response, but I just assumed he was busy (he is).

Three days later I got an automated email from the "Office of the Mayor", which says if we're expressing a personal view or copying the mayor in on something, we'll hear no more. Ms/Mr Office then assures us the mayor values all correspondence, but if something's outside his responsibilities or operational, it *may* be referred to a council officer, and we *might* get a response "in due course".

Sorry to shortcut, Neil, but just - "thanks". Neil, are you there?