Varnette? Are You Out There Varnette?

By George Cunningham

Some people think that computers are taking over the world, and maybe they are right. We humans have made a fine mess out of things. Maybe it's time to see if computers can do a better job.

But I remain skeptical.

Even though computers are very smart in a limited sort of way and can churn through tons of data in mere milliseconds, that doesn't mean they are ready to match wits with irrational and deeply flawed humans. The human brain may still in the beta phase. It may be susceptible to all sorts of conflicting emotions and motivations. Yet, it has something that computers will never have.

Common sense.

Here's an example:

We used to have a newsletter on ports called The Cunningham Report, which was sent by email to customers across the United States. There came a time when we started getting complaints from folks, who said they had not received their issue. It turned out the reason was that the newsletter contained a notice of a professional education class entitled "Global Logistics Specialist."

A human being would have said, so what. But the computer was able to see that inside the seemingly innocent word "Specialist" there was imbedded the word Cialis – a drug used to enhance male performance in the boudoir. The computer made an executive decision and promptly sent our newsletter to the subscribers' spam bins.

Now I admit, I have during my life met some humans who have made equally stupid decisions, but with humans you can yell at them, embarrass them and threaten them until they finally come to their senses. That's impossible to do with a computer.

A lot of folks worry that in this age of computers with their almost endless ability to store and access data, that the privacy that humans once cherished is now at an end. I worry about that too.

But what I worry about even more is the computer's ability to store and access flawed data. I don't mind that much if there are data banks full of information on what kind of car I drive, what kind of movies I like, what soda pop I drink, and whether I like chunky or creamy peanut butter. It's none of anybody's business, but I have nothing to hide.

(The truth is I like both chunky and creamy, but if I had to pick one or the other it would definitely be chunky.)

What is more worrisome, however, is all the erroneous information about us that is stuck away in various servers on the Internet and in corporate and government computers.

For instance, when I recently checked my credit report, one of the three major credit rating agencies still had me employed at the Orange County Register, even though I haven't worked there since 1978. Meanwhile, data-compiling organizations keep sending Web Crawlers – spiders, bots, web scutters and ants – to mine and interpret the data that may be available on us, whether any of it is true or not.

That's why when we ran The Cunningham Report we would often get letters addressed to people we had written about. Some computer application somewhere had concluded that those people – some of them elected and appointed public officials – actually worked for us.

But the most mysterious and longest running of the computer-generated mistakes we have experienced is Varnette. For several years now, computers all over the world have been sending Varnette's email to me.

Varnette may be a real person that some computer confused with me back in the early 2000s when two electrons collided somewhere in cyberspace and were diverted from their original paths. Or maybe Varnette is just an imaginary person, invented by a mischievous computer acting out in a darkened back room at some corporate, multi-national marketing organization somewhere.

I doubt that, because computers – even those at the very top corporate levels – seem not to have any imagination and absolutely no sense of humor or whimsy. No I think Varnette actually exists and when I find him or her I have some messages. Most of them I have not read. I have just looked at the subject line, but if you are out there Varnette and if you are reading this, here is a small selection of the thousands of emails I have received in your name and saved for you.

- Dinner at Outback Steakhouse on us for Varnette - Please Respond ASAP
- Varnette Action required to receive your loan
- Varnette Got a Structured Settlement? Get Cash in One Lump Sum.
- Varnette, relationships are in bloom this Spring time.
- Become a Teacher, Varnette
- Varnette 48 Hour Notice - Fund Deposit Pending
- Varnette: Free Insider Career Guide
- Large Pizza Hut Pizza for Varnette - details inside
- Hey Varnette, what are you doing tonight?
- Varnette Begin a new career in the field of teaching
- Are you up to the challenge to invent Varnette?
- We hanging out tonight Varnette?
- Air Conditioner Deals Varnette

- Varnette Your New Credit Card Is Here. Details Inside.
- Varnette I am Horny and Lonely Want to Chat

Please Varnette, if you are out there just give me a call and pick up your messages. And please, try to stay out of trouble. I don't want to start being blamed for things that I didn't do.