# Tech firms turn to AI to predict and trade human intentions in emerging intention economy



Recent research from the University of Cambridge highlights a significant shift in the landscape of digital interactions, where tech companies are now aiming to predict and potentially manipulate human intentions rather than merely capturing attention. This transition is framed as the emergence of an "intention economy," which builds on the earlier concept of the attention economy, wherein users' clicks and views were the primary currency. Experts argue that as large language models (LLMs) become increasingly sophisticated, they will enable companies to understand not just what consumers want but also what they might want in the future.

The study introduces the notion that AI tools could exploit intimate psychological and behavioural data, gathered through casual conversations, to navigate and influence user decisions. Dr. Yaqub Chaudhary, a key figure behind the research, described this development as raising critical questions regarding whose interests are served by AI assistants. Speaking to the MillenniumPost, Chaudhary stated, “What people say when conversing, how they say it, and the type of inferences that can be made in real-time as a result, are far more intimate than just records of online interactions.”

One example cited in the research is Meta's AI model, Cicero, which has demonstrated an ability to play the board game Diplomacy effectively. This interaction requires participants to gauge and predict the intentions of others, indicating that AI could similarly steer users towards specific products or outcomes based on their inferred desires. Such capabilities suggest that companies could potentially auction user intentions to advertisers, enabling a targeted approach to influencing consumer behaviour.

This forthcoming intention economy contrasts with previous research surrounding the attention economy, which has primarily focused on how user attention is monetised. The intention economy treats human motivations as a valuable currency, raising concerns about privacy and ethical implications. Current AI systems, including popular chatbots, are already collecting and utilising behavioural insights in advertising and recommendation systems. However, the intricacy of conversational AI techniques raises the possibility of manipulation, as seen in Cicero's interactions.

The researchers emphasise that the growing power and reach of LLMs necessitate cautious scrutiny. Techniques developed for extracting user intent could have far-reaching consequences not limited to commercial interests but extending to democratic processes, impacting everything from consumer choices to voting behaviour. For example, Apple’s introduction of “App Intents” for Siri exemplifies this direction by incorporating features that predict user actions and suggest related applications.

The partnerships and investments being made by major tech firms such as Microsoft, which is involved in extensive infrastructure development with OpenAI, highlight the competitive landscape. The aim is to refine AI systems capable of understanding and categorising human intent, with the potential for vast datasets to be employed in shaping future interactions. Microsoft’s commitment of over $50 billion annually from 2024 onward illustrates the scale of the investment aimed at realising this vision.

As AI systems evolve, the researchers caution that unless reined in by regulatory frameworks, the intention economy could commodify personal motivations, treating them as mere data points to be harvested and traded. They stress that the implications of this could stretch far beyond commercial transactions, potentially undermining essential aspects of democracy, including free elections and a competitive marketplace.

The evolving nature of how technology interacts with human choices raises important questions about autonomy. As AI increasingly anticipates needs and desires, one must consider the broader implications of living in a world where personal intentions may become commodities. Such advancements force society to confront the necessary balance between technological innovation and the preservation of individual agency.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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