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Can you prove you're *not* a machine?

By Christine Boese
CNN Headline News
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(CNN) -- Sounds like something out of "The Twilight Zone," doesn't it?

I've been thinking about something called the "Turing Test" lately because some of my personal e-mail has come back undeliverable. Evidently the servers, in an attempt to screen out machine-generated spam, think that my e-mail is spam, too.

I hate spam as much as the next person, but I resent being censored and unable to communicate certain ideas in online discussions. Sometimes I like to make jokes about how spammers think everyone on Earth is a potential customer for Viagra. But if I use the word "Viagra," my e-mail bounces.

Alan M. Turing was a mathematician and a co-founder of computer science and cryptography. He developed the Turing Test. Turing postulated that in developing a thinking machine or "artificial intelligence," the machine shouldn't have to duplicate human thinking processes exactly. All that should be required of a thinking machine is that it be able to "pass" as a human.

The Turing Test imagines a questioner and two unseen correspondents, one human and one machine. The machine would pass the Turing Test if the questioner couldn't correctly guess which of the two was the machine.

Josh Berman and Amy Bruckman at Georgia Tech created an online interface in the late 1990s that played with another aspect of the Turing Test: a gender test that went beyond gender to guessing all kinds of identities -- religious, ethnic, etc. Their work involved studying how people negotiated identities, made assumptions and acted or lied to outfox the questioner. It illustrated both how fluid online identities are and also how hard it is to lie about who we are.

Josh Berman and Amy Bruckman at Georgia Tech studied how people negotiated online identities, made assumptions and tried to outfox questioners.

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The other day I wrote an e-mail describing a favorite actress and her movies as part of a fun online film discussion. On one film in particular, I said this actress played a "sexpot." I think that is a perfectly fine discussion point about the kinds of two-dimensional roles that are available for women, but with the word "sexpot," one server kicked back my e-mail and banned me from sending e-mail through that server ever again.

Actresses are still playing sexpots, but talking about them playing sexpots is *verboten?!*

The servers (machines) suspect that I am a machine. The question is, online, how can I prove that I'm not?

In the future, how much of my daily energy will have to go into acting sufficiently un-machinelike just to be able to "pass" as human?

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More recently, AOL (a division of Time Warner along with CNN Headline News) informed my friends with AOL accounts that they're banned from sending or receiving posts to a private mailing list I own. Our group of about 40 women discusses wide-ranging current events. We don't go out of our way to cuss, but we don't censor our language either. Our virtual air is hardly blue.

What's going on here? I'm less likely to blame a culture of rigid morality than I am to blame spammers and pornographers who allow their machines to monopolize certain words, preventing the rest of us from using them in normal conversation and not be suspected as a machine by machine culture.

What other words are being removed from our shrinking online vocabulary? Will we be able to write about breast cancer awareness, or will the word "breast" lead to e-mail bouncing?

Now I wonder if anyone will be able to read this column because I've used the taboo words. At the very least, parental filters will block it. These are *dangerous* ideas after all.

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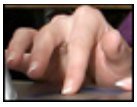

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