The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1xPuswC

THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED COLUMNIST | NYT NOW

Silicon Valley Sharknado

JULY 8, 2014

Maureen Dowd

WASHINGTON — Mostly, this July, I'm worrying about the jumping sharks jumping the shark.

But Syfy's "Sharknado 2" trailer, this one about a shark storm hitting Manhattan, just went up and features chain saws buzzing, the Statue of Liberty's severed head whizzing, Tara Reid kvetching, and Robert Klein barking "This is the Big Apple! Something bites us; we bite back!"

So things look pretty promising.

That leaves me free to worry about rampaging robots.

And I'm not the only one.

In a recent interview with CNBC, Elon Musk, the C.E.O. of Tesla Motors and Space X, which hopes to rocket us to other planets, said he invests in artificial intelligence companies not to make money but to "keep an eye" on them in case of "scary outcomes," like a "Terminator" scenario of psychopathic robots that could chase us off the Earth and up to Mars.

(Interpolation: How has Elon Musk not invented his own fragrance?)

In "Terminator," Musk said, the humans who created the replicants did not expect the machines to turn evil. "It is sort of like that Monty Python thing: 'Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,' " the 43-year-old inventor and mogul said, warning: "But you've got to be careful."

Silicon Valley brains have been predicting that robots will usher in a radically superior world.

Ray Kurzweil, Google's 66-year-old director of engineering, is running a Manhattan project to push A.I. to match human intelligence by 2029 and achieve

his vision of "the singularity" — the moment when computers overtake human brains — by 2045. The robots will even be able to flirt, he says, and, unlike Siri and Scarlett Johansson in "Her," they can easily have a curvy virtual form and be "lovable."

Computers will be able to read every word on the web and every book ever written and offer up matching patterns.

I.B.M.'s Watson has read 200 million Wikipedia pages, Kurzweil told The Observer of London, but "it doesn't understand that if John sold his red Volvo to Mary that involves a transaction or possession and ownership being transferred." So Kurzweil and Google will try to encode that information to "really try to teach it to understand the meaning of what these documents are saying."

Since I come from a family of Irish maids, I'm not looking forward to servitude under my iPhone.

And Kurzweil should be more worried that he'll suffer the fate of genetic designer J.F. Sebastian in "Blade Runner," who is killed by his replicants after telling them, "There's a part of me in you."

Vinod Khosla, the Sun Microsystems co-founder, has predicted that algorithms and machines will replace 80 percent of doctors in years to come, making medicine more data driven and less like "witchcraft."

In a rare joint interview last week with Khosla at his Silicon Valley summit, Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page talked about their A.I. hopes.

"You should presume that someday," Brin said, "we will be able to make machines that can reason, think and do things better than we can."

They have always been interested in robots — they named their operating system Android — and are running "the brain project," described by Brin as "really machine-learning focused." In January, they acquired the British A.I. developer DeepMind, founded by Demis Hassabis, a game designer, neuroscientist and former child chess prodigy.

They know people could be thrown out of work. As Page said, "90 percent of people used to be farmers," so "it's not surprising."

Page predicted a "time of abundance," when human needs could be more easily met and people would "have more time with their family or to pursue their own interests."

Of course, when we get more free time, we'll simply spend it staring at our

iPads, so all roads lead back to Big Brother.

Jaron Lanier, the computer genius and author of "Who Owns the Future?," dryly notes that our looming overlords may not be robots but the Google founders.

"The only person with a secure job will be Larry Page," he laughingly told me. "He owns the damn Cloud computer."

He said that, despite a fantasy that dates from the mid-20th century, nobody has yet figured out how to make a robot that can think for itself.

"In a way, it's not being honest," he said. "We're still pretending that we're inventing a brain when all we've come up with is a giant mash-up of real brains. We don't yet understand how brains work, so we can't build one."

When machines translate from one language to another, they are leeching from live translators, taking matching phrases from aggregated data. If tech companies could gather similar data on doctors, that information could theoretically be matched up to make a simulated doctor.

"People are unwittingly feeding information into the Cloud for automated services, which they're not being paid for," Lanier said. "I don't like pretending that humans are becoming buggy whips. You have this fantasy that it's machines doing it without people helping. We are throwing people out of work based on a fantasy."

In a digital update of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," Silicon Valley is siphoning and pilfering human intelligence to feed Mr. Roboto to replace us. That's the scary bravado of real sharks.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 9, 2014, on page A25 of the New York edition with the headline: Silicon Valley Sharknado.