

## **Beware The Internet of Things**

By 2020, more than 30bn fridges, cars and coffee machines will be connected, all synergising and secretly preparing for the day when they will join as one and murder you

Stuart Heritage

The Guardian, Sunday 26 January 2014

Right now, hordes of fevered scientists around the globe are pulling all-nighter after desperate all-nighter. They haven't changed their clothes for weeks. The walls of their laboratories are speckled with fist-sized craters, each marking a different failure. Their marriages are in ruin, their children strangers to them. And it's all because Back to the Future: Part II was set less than two years from now.

"Damn it, Bob," one jaundiced, coffee-stained boffin is yelling at his semi-comatose colleague. "These people were promised hoverboards. If we don't have a working hoverboard in production by Christmas, there will be riots. These animals will have our heads." Bob shrugs. He's too exhausted to care. He has been at this since 1989. He can't remember what the sky looks like any more. He's going to be torn limb from limb by a mob of strangers furious that science hasn't met the fanciful advances hinted at by popular culture 25 years ago, and he's OK with that.

His colleague hasn't given up, though. He strikes upon an idea. If he can't deliver a hoverboard then maybe, just maybe, he can invent something so completely revolutionary that it makes people forget about Back to the Future. He spitballs the most outlandishly futuristic ideas he can think of. "Drones that deliver your online shopping!" he says. "No, a phone that you can wear on your wrist! No, that's pointless. Wait, I've got it! An iPad that's exactly like the iPad you already own, but very slightly thinner!"

Then Bob murmurs: "an internet of things". His colleague looks up, suddenly interested. "What? An internet of things? Bob, what's an internet of things? That's just four meaningless words in a row. What does that mean?" Nobody knows. But it's the best idea anyone's had and time is running out.

And this is how the internet of things came to be.

The internet of things – or The Internet of Things to be more precise, because your phone already autocorrects "internet" to "Internet" so it may as well start doing the same with the word "things" – is the next big thing. That's what everyone at this year's CES tech expo in Las Vegas kept parroting, at least. It'll be the biggest thing since the Industrial Revolution, they said. It'll be bigger than the current internet, or The Internet of Cat Photos and Complaining About Train Companies on Twitter, as it'll soon be known. The Internet of Things will change the way we think about everything for ever. That's quite a boast for something that, as far as I can tell, is a way to make fridges bleep whenever you run out of yoghurt.

For the uninitiated, The Internet of Things is a network of objects that, although passive now, will soon spring to life and begin communicating with each other. To use one example, imagine that your morning meeting has been postponed. Soon your phone will be able to read the email telling

you this and update your calendar, which will in turn alter your alarm clock to give you extra time in bed, your boiler to start heating water later than normal, your coffee machine so you don't wake up to a mug of cold muck and your car to start melting the ice on your windscreen in time for your later commute.

This is inescapable. It's already happening. By 2020, more than 30bn devices will be connected to The Internet of Things, all chattering and synergising and secretly preparing for the day when everything you own will join as one and murder you.

Of course, the murder thing is probably just a wild overreaction on my part. In actual fact, The Internet of Things has already produced some cool-sounding devices. There is the tennis racket kitted out with motion sensors to help you improve your game. There's the parking sensor that directs your satnav to an empty spot. The basketball that, when bounced on the floor, automatically tells your home entertainment setup to start playing basketball-related content. The bridge that tells people when it's about to collapse. The smoke alarm that switches itself off and works in conjunction with your electrical outlets to burn you to death in your sleep because it has become jealous of your capacity for love. The remote cave that fills itself with bears and poisonous snakes whenever it detects that someone has started sleeping in it because they've convinced themselves that their entire house has grown sentient and suddenly turned against them. All sorts, really. It'll be fun.

Obviously, The Internet of Things still has a few kinks to iron out. Just because you bounce a basketball on the floor, it doesn't necessarily mean that you automatically want to listen to (I Know I Got) Skillz by Shaquille O'Neal all the way through. And all the personal data that this network produces will be so vast and intimate that it's genuinely rather frightening. But, look, we're not getting a hoverboard any time soon. A kettle that keeps trying to kill you is the next best thing. We should probably just get used to it.