

APRIL 2025 SPEAKER
DR. MARKUS GIESLER
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

“How humans experience Artificial Intelligence, AI, and vice versa in today’s world is two sides of the same coin,” Markus, a Schulich School of Business, York University professor specializing in how AI is used in marketing, told us. “AI shapes who we are, what we can and can’t do and we shape AI by the information its devices collect from us. We should care about this as consumers, Canadians, and human beings.” A world-renowned expert on the topic, he currently is involved in a \$318.4 million joint study by York and Queen’s universities into what AI technology can do and how society feels about it, financed by the federal government’s Canada First Research Excellence Fund. “I’m looking at it as both an economist and sociologist,” he explained. “It’s a Trojan Horse—irresistible experiences that make people susceptible.”

He gave examples from his own life, getting us directly involved by addressing questions to us.. “My wife and I met through the Bumble dating app and fell in love. But does a dating app want you to immediately find the love of your life?” “No,” we answered. “You’re right,” he responded. “That’s how it makes money. It uses AI to keep you searching.

“We have a robot vacuum run by AI. It does a great cleaning job but it also has got to know the floor plan of our home. Who do you think this information would interest/?” Members suggested: “Furniture stores, fitness equipment retailers, Netflix.” “Right,” he said. He pointed out that AI “goes into our most private spaces,” if we let it, using as examples Amazon’s “Alexa” and rival “Google Home,” which answer questions and perform tasks in response to human voice commands.. “At first, people use them for fun. They could limit themselves to this but there are those who come to think of these devices as a member of the family, indispensable, can’t imagine life without them, take them on vacation. But while they’re working for us we’re working for them. They record everything we say, including intimate details, and the data collected is used for marketing. Our privacy is at stake without our realizing it.”

He told us how when he and his wife had their first child Alma, they turned to Instagram to learn from the experiences of other parents in taking care of their newborn. Merchandisers contract social influencers on Instagram to promote their products. For a while drab earthy tones, dubbed “sad beige” by critics, were being flogged as best for baby clothing, the colour of nursery walls, and toys. As a result, a neutral-toned Crate & Barrel baby gym priced at \$229 outsold a colourful \$45 Walmart one. Although he was an expert on the use of AI to shape buying habits, he was as vulnerable as everyone else. The spell was broken by his mother who chastised him for not dressing little Alma in colourful, bright, cheerful clothing. The point of his story, he said, was to show that “We have the choice to distance ourselves from the super captivating.” He quoted famed science writer and futurist Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008) whose stories were the inspiration for the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*: “The perception that the machine is working for humans make people forget that we’re working for it.”

Markus said a major problem with AI is that it is skewed to white people. “There’s so much work to do to make the field more even, to reflect the diversity of the population.”

Susan Goldenberg