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The Downside of Hearing Whoopi at the Mall

By ROBERT H. FRANK

ITHACA, N.Y. -- In the early 1980's, a friend's wife paid a voice impersonator to tape the greeting for her husband's answering machine as a gift. "Well, John's just not home at the moment," the tape began, in a voice eerily like former President Ronald Reagan's. "But if you'll leave your name and number, Nancy or I will have him get back to you as soon as possible." Last week AT&T announced a breakthrough in synthesized speech software that will put many voice impersonators out of business.

The new approach uses fragments of sounds culled from recordings of a subject's voice to recreate speech from printed text. In time, this software will render a lifelike facsimile of someone's voice saying things that he or she never actually said. Archival recordings will even make it possible to reproduce the voices of people long dead. Assuming that AT&T perfects its process and that people retain rights to their own voices, who will be the ultimate winners and losers?

Voice cloning is just one of many technologies that expand the market reach of the economy's most able performers. These technologies increase our national wealth, but they also cause it to be distributed far more unequally. The invention of movies, for example, enabled a small cadre of highly talented stars to displace thousands of less talented stage actors in local theaters.

The new synthetic voices will replace the voices currently used in applications like car navigation systems and message systems, and clones of celebrity voices will be used in radio and television commercials.

The voices of noncelebrities will not command high prices, since there is a large number of people who could supply the voice templates for them. Still, the technology will make it possible to use only the best voices for these purposes. People with less perfect voices who are now in this line of

work will be displaced. This is a net gain, since we will get announcements of higher quality and the displaced people will be freed up for other useful tasks, but most of them will probably earn less, since for most of them a recording job was their best option.

The changes from celebrity voice cloning promise to be more sweeping. Increasingly, advertisers are using the voices of celebrities in national radio and television commercials. So far, however, the expense of taping messages specifically tailored to each location has mostly excluded these voices from local commercials. Voice cloning will change that. The voices announcing this week's sales at neighborhood supermarkets, for example, could soon be those not of unknown local employees, but of, say, Tom Hanks or Whoopi Goldberg.

Some celebrities command far more viewer attention than others. That explains why sponsors pay someone like Michael Jordan as much as \$40 million a year while most celebrities are of little or no value in the endorsement market. No one yet knows whose voices will prove most effective. But once the winners are identified, intensive bidding to acquire rights to their voice templates will begin.

In short, voice cloning, like other similar technologies, will create a winner-take-all market — one in which even small differences in performance give rise to large differences in economic reward. Technologies like this one have been rapidly transforming the American economic landscape: authors of the best tax- advice software have displaced thousands of local tax accountants, and the best Internet auction site has displaced thousands of local retailers. In countless arenas this phenomenon of duplication and distribution enables the best performers to serve ever broader markets.

Since cloning frees up resources while giving us services of higher quality, society benefits. But the downside is that the monetary value of these gains is distributed so unequally. The spread of winner-take- all markets helps explain why almost all recent gains in income and wealth have gone to a relatively small number of people atop the economic pyramid.

In the 2000 presidential campaign, Al Gore was unable to persuade a sufficiently large majority of American voters that

tax cuts for top earners make little sense in such an economy. But once AT&T clones Franklin Delano Roosevelt's eloquent baritone, Democratic strategists will have a new weapon. In our era of sharply rising inequality, would Mr. Bush's razor-thin margin have withstood an updated series of F.D.R.'s fireside chats questioning the wisdom of massive tax cuts for the wealthy?

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