Grace McClellan

Andy Gurevich

Writing 122

June 14, 2023

<div align="center">Don't fear the AI–fear "The Guy in the Chair"</div>

Ned Leeds, after learning of his best friend Peter Parker's alter-ego of Spider-Man in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, assumes for himself the ambiguous, self-proclaimed title of "the guy in the chair," a role he defines as the computer-savvy sidekick to a superhero. Behind the safety of his computer screen, Ned explains, he can provide Peter with geographical omniscience and data from web analytics to aid his friend on his missions–a position he eventually adopts when Peter needs help defeating the movie's villain (Goldstein et al.). While Ned's portrayal of "the guy in the chair" is fictitiously displayed in a light-hearted, comical fashion, the implications of such a role have serious, relevant consequences in a society continuing to incorporate and develop artificial intelligence technology. AI has already established a prominent spot of influence in culture and human decision making, and increasing levels of fear about AI's predicted potential autonomy begs the question of who is really in charge? Who is the guy in the chair directing our future–humanity or artificial intelligence? The extent of the effects caused by AI hinge on this question, because it is the puppeteer directing this powerful, rapidly-advancing technology who will ultimately decide the course of history and the livelihood of the human race. Conclusive analysis suggests that, though AI has the powerful potential of influencing our choices and behavior, it does not have the final control–we should not fear AI, but the humanity in the chair behind it.

To understand how artificial intelligence will impact the future, one must first recognize the increasing relevance of AI influence in everyday life and the ways it is already changing how people operate. In one sense, AI is making life more efficient for human beings utilizing it as a tool in consumerism and the workplace. Quentin André and his associates, in an article in the academic journal *Customer Needs and Solutions,* address how A.I. can aid the consumer by calculating and presenting the specific product options that fit within the consumer's taste and preferences profile, which saves a person time and spares them the stress of filtering through an abundance of choices in our capitalistic market. Additionally, André points out how a consumer may actually feel more satisfied with the product they buy if an AI affirms their choice and tells them they have made a purchase consistent with their personal preferences (André et al.).

In the same way, AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton, in an interview with *MIT Technology Review* writer Will Douglas Heaven, explains the profound ability of AI technology to learn and access an extensive database of information instantaneously, which makes the process of researching and compiling information considerably easier for the individual utilizing it. Consequently, Hinton says, artificial intelligence can fulfill intellectual needs more efficiently than humans, a capability he predicts will only continue to improve and expand with further innovative developments and progress (Heaven). Araz Zirar corroborates Hinton's views on AI's profitability and beneficial uses for humans in an article in the academic journal *Technovation*, describing how AI can assist workers by doing the menial tasks, like categorizing and organizing data, that would otherwise occupy am employee's precious time, allowing them to pursue other types of work. Evidently, AI has the potential to collaborate with humans in a variety of

areas, offering informative consent and analytical abilities to make work and decisions easier.

However, though a helpful tool in some cases, artificial intelligence can also impede on human livelihood and taint our autonomy with its limited ability to approach subjectivity or understand ethical situations. André describes the double-edged sword of AI intervention in consumer choices by explaining the ways tailored suggestions and limited options threaten a consumer's personal responsibility or satisfaction in his or her choices. When a person receives a specially-calculated list of product options composed by an AI based on his preferences, his abilities to act autonomously and think independently are omitted, which André ascribes with feelings of dissatisfaction and a negative sense of self-independence and identity (André et al.). Furthermore, the person is deprived of the chance to invest thought and consideration into his choices, while the AI performs the research and analysis required for informed and wise decision making in his place. This consequence could be seen as a positive since it means less "work" for a person when they make a decision, but André dissuades this belief through research testifying to the dwindling of self-confidence and perceived autonomy in the absence of personal responsibility (André et al.).

Equally consequential, artificial intelligence has had a negative influence on the job market for individuals whose livelihood depended on their writing abilities. Pranshu Verma and Gerrit De Vynck, in a *Washington Post* article, talk about two copywriters, Olivia Lipkin and Eric Fein, who lost their jobs when their employers decided to use ChatGPT–an AI-based composition system–for their writing needs instead of continuing to pay human workers to get the "same" job done. As a result, Lipkin and Fein each had to find new career paths, temporarily settling for jobs like dog-walking to

pay the bills. For Verma and De Vynck, the experiences of Lipkin and Fein seem to serve as examples of the increasing trend in a society where technology is surpassing people in higher levels of efficiency, lower cost to employ, and increasing value to employers. Based on Verma and De Vynck's conclusions, it can be expected that the job market will continue to shrink as more positions are filled by our automated counterparts.

However, AI is not a foolproof system–at least not yet–which presents a simultaneously promising reality for Lipkin and Fein, whose jobs could be restored as employers find mistakes in written works produced by ChatGPT, but also implies a potentially-catastrophic effect of a system that cannot detect its own inconsistencies. Walsh, Mahesh, and Trumbach, in *The Journal of Technology Studies*, an academic journal distributed by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, describe how artificial intelligence, since it lacks a means of discernment for determining credible sources of data, has the potential to cite fake websites, use faulty information, and construe convincing truth claims from erroneous data (Walsh et al.). The implications of such mistakes extend far beyond simple inconsistencies in research papers or school essays and have the potential to delegitimize news stories presented in the media or distort reports of world events.

Though the scope of influence of artificial intelligence extends beyond these few examples, the implications for each can incite substantial, justified fear in individuals observing as the world around them becomes increasingly saturated with and penetrated by AI technology, many of them fearing a robot apocalypse or how computers will "take over the world." And yet, Walsh stresses a critical point in the discussion of artificial intelligence that changes the direction of the conversation, highlighting one fact in particular: AI systems, regardless of their incredible abilities and

applications, are not autonomous. The misconception that these technologies possess unrestrained freedom stems from a convolution of AI-related terminology and the context in which such words are used. Walsh distinguishes between the human-applicable definition of autonomy and the "freedom" often associated with AI using this term. He explains that "the structure of AI systems is such that human designers have programmed goals into such systems and they are not free to make alternative decisions" (Walsh 40), meaning that, like a dog on a leash, AI can only operate within the range of leeway provided by its human creator or programmer. Additionally, André ascribes autonomy with "a foundation of personhood, giving rise to notions of morality, character, ethics, or virtue" (André et al. 29). If AI agents are not autonomous, they cannot be inherently unethical, either, which discredits the fears that AI systems will turn "evil," intentionally act out of selfish gain, or hunt human beings for sport.

Humanity, as a whole, composes "the guy in the chair" and controls the direction of artificial intelligence, which, in one sense, should give us hope for the future and deter our fears of being overrun by intelligent robots. In a perfect world, human control over impressive, transformative technology like AI would improve living conditions, further technological advancements in medical and palliative care, offer creative solutions in the classroom, fill mundane, menial jobs, and allow humanity to thrive off of ingenuity and pursue even greater potential. At the same time, trusting fallible, human minds would be an act of ignorance; our world is *not* perfect, and our future could suffer detrimental consequences if this tech is manipulated and used to the advantage of ill-intending individuals, specifically those in power. Geoffrey Hinton himself, a former Google employee who made artificial intelligence innovation his life's work, expresses how,

though he fears the unknown effects of AI's progression towards surpassing human intelligence, he is more alarmed by the potential for this powerful technology to fall into the hands of corrupt, "bad actors" (Heaven). Among other things, he fears that dishonest political leaders will use AI for nefarious purposes by turning its powerful capabilities into weapons to commit heinous crimes while overlooking ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, the negative effects of AI already evident in our world would only amplify in volume if utilized by ill-willed individuals, which could lead to a dangerous surplus of misinformation.

　　While we should not fear the tool itself, we have ample cause to fear its wielder. In a world where, as English historian Lord Acton put it, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" ("Research"), the influence of AI can extend beyond societal structure or changes in efficiency–the consequences can be great. As much as AI can accomplish good, beneficial purposes, the potential exists that, as a tool to the corrupt, it can cause extensive harm and dangerous outcomes if misused and abused for unethical reasons. As a result, we must be vigilant to defend our autonomy and focus our concerns and attention on the face behind the computer screen, the one controlling the limits and setting the direction for AI development to follow–"guy in the chair." The future of artificial intelligence and how it will affect our world is in *our* hands.

Works Cited

André, Quentin, et al. "Consumer Choice and Autonomy in the Age of

Artificial Intelligence and Big Data." *Customer Needs and Solutions*, vol. 5, no.

1–2, Springer Science+Business Media, Mar. 2018, pp. 28–37.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s40547-017-0085-8.

Goldstein, Jonathan, et al. *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Edited by Debbie Berman and

Dan Lebental, Directed by Jon Watts, unrated, Columbia Pictures, LStar Capital,

Marvel Studios, 2017.

Heaven, Will Douglas. "Geoffrey Hinton Tells Us Why He's Now Scared of

the Tech He Helped Build." *MIT Technology Review*, 2 May 2023,

www.technologyreview.com/2023/05/02/1072528/geoffrey-hinton-google-why-

scared-ai.

"Research Page: Lord Acton Quote Archive." *Acton Institute*, 15 June 2023,

www.acton.org/research/lord-acton-quote-archive.

Verma, Pranshu, and Gerrit De Vynck. "ChatGPT Took Their Jobs. Now

They Walk Dogs and Fix Air Conditioners." *Washington Post*, 2 June 2023,

www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/06/02/ai-taking-jobs.

Walsh, Kenneth R., et al. "Autonomy in A.I. Systems: Rationalizing the Fears." *Journal

of Technology Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, Spring 2021, pp. 38–47. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid,url,uid&

custid=s3707448&db=a9h&AN=156388155&site=ehost-live.

Zirar, Araz, et al. "Worker and Workplace Artificial Intelligence (AI) Coexistence:

Emerging Themes and Research Agenda." *Technovation*, vol. 124, Elsevier BV,

June 2023, p. 102747. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2023.102747.