[**Artificial horizons**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758409/artificial-horizons)

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OF late, it has become almost impossible to navigate a Western news outlet without coming across an opinion about the risks posed by generative artificial intelligence (AI), or its potential benefits.

All too often, the dangers are expressed in apocalyptic terms, with the possibility of unregulated AI portending human extinction a common concern among many so-called godfathers of AI. A public letter signed by several tech overlords calling for a six-month ban on advancing AI elicited a withering response from Stephen Marche, who plausibly argued: “Silicon Valley uses apocalypse for marketing purposes: they tell you their tech is going to end the world to show you how important they are.”

Fellow Canadian writer Naomi Klein added sensible nuance: “There is a world in which generative AI, as a powerful predictive research tool and a performer of tedious tasks, could indeed be marshalled to benefit humanity … But for that to happen, these technologies need to be deployed inside a vastly different economic and social order than our own, one that had as its purpose the meeting of human needs and the protection of the planetary systems that support all life.”

Beyond the growing evidence that huma­n­ity appears to be creating the circumstan­ces for its own extinction anyhow, given the half-hearted response to the threats posed by climate change, even a cursory survey of the past serves as a reminder that almost every potentially revolutionary technological innovation has been greeted with dismay by a segment of society.

AI’s role could be beneficial in a different world.

An associated moral panic in almost every instance can also be discerned, going back to the Gutenberg printing press in the 15th century. Almost 600 years later, concerned citizens are still railing against published material, with books being banned in that self-proclaimed bastion of freedom, the US.

The 20th century offered plenty of scope for such worry as radio and TV disrupted the status quo, followed decades later by the advent of the public internet and its multiple offshoots, from email to social media.

The thing to remember is that all these technological innovations, developed through human intelligence or even genius, are merely tools. Whether they benefit humanity depends entirely on how they are used by human beings. The record over the past 100 years leaves much to be desired. Most such tools are both useful to humanity and open to abuse.

For many decades now, both radio and TV have been weaponised to spew hatred and misinformation. Social media has descended from a means of keeping in touch with friends into a tool for disseminating rubbish. For many years now, I have wondered how Facebook’s mysterious algorithms decide what takes priority in my newsfeed, given that it bears no resemblance to what I would like to see first. Twitter has become a key source for journalists, with all too many newspaper outlets annoyingly not only quoting tweets but supplementing them with screenshots.

Chatbots are not the only culprits, but they serve as a reminder that variations of AI have been around for a long time. The latest moral panic was sparked late last year by OpenAI’s ChatGPT, which scours the internet for data and then throws up unverified information. The biggest risk lies in treating its output as the gospel truth, or the sum of all human knowledge.

Advances are constantly being made, of course, and any reliance on AI ought to recognise its limitations without ignoring its possibilities. It’s useful to recall that the Luddites in 19th-century Britain revolted against the automated loom because they rightly feared it would take away their jobs. AI likewise threatens a range of jobs, and the process has already been witnessed, with copywriters being made redundant because of cost-free reliance on AI.

It boils down to what the Luddites were res­p­onding to: the fact that capitalism afforded them no alternative paths to maintaining their livelihood when technology disrupted their workplace. The dynamic was not all that different in the following century, when their des­cendants were thrown out of work beca­use Margaret Thatcher’s regime found che­a­per alternatives to British coal in the 1980s.

Britain’s 1980s may not have particularly been associated with technological advances, but that is not the point. The backdrop is neoliberal capitalism. It will not find too many flaws with AI as long as there are huge profits to be made, much as the fossil fuel industry relies on greenwashing to cover up its continued reliance on gas, coal and oil to generate billions of dollars in revenue, with precious little tax in any jurisdiction.

In a society where essential human needs are taken care of, AI could serve as a phenomenal benefit for those engaged in intellectual drudgery. But such a society remains a dream, and it’s far from clear whether AI will help us get there.

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