

Tony Blair on AI

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I just listened to Tony Blair being interviewed on Radio 4.

I can recall the days when Tony Blair, who had apparently never turned on a PC, believed that IT was the solution for every problem in government. Now it seems that he thinks that AI is the answer to every question.

Amongst the problems that he seems to think it might solve will be the junior doctors' dispute in the NHS, because he spoke about AI when asked what the solution was. The implication of his comments was that he does not see the reason for much of what junior doctors do. It would seem that he thinks that the decisions that they make can be made by AI, and lower qualified staff can deliver the services as a consequence. This then solves the pay dispute, by removing the pay grade. He was not as blunt as this, but that is, I think, where he was going, by inference of what he said, and the context of his other comments.

There have been many occasions when Tony Blair has got things terribly wrong. That is because there have always been a very obvious limits to his understanding. This is now the case with regards to junior doctors.

Firstly, junior doctors are not junior. Many of them will have been in the job for well over a decade. They are the backbone of the entire hospital system.

Secondly, AI works on the basis of algorithms, and they need data. In contrast, the whole point about medicine is that it takes seriously incomplete information, the vast majority of it being communicated nonverbally, and interprets that based on the intuitive experience of the practitioner. The weightings provided are those that at the moment when the decision has to be taken (3am at the bedside of an unconscious elderly person with multiple co-morbidities) seem best to the doctor using a combination of all the heuristics that years of experience has provided to them, many of the inputs for which they will never have time to record. It is, in other words, an exercise in the management of risk in the face of extraordinary uncertainty, including very often not knowing what the patient actually has wrong with them.

Good luck in finding any AI system that can process that in a few seconds, including all input time, right now or at any moment in the foreseeable future. It is not going to happen.

So, Blair is wrong, again. I am not saying AI has no uses. It is contextually autocorrecting my typing as I write this, often, but by no means always, getting things right. That's useful.

But when a politician possessed of little wit and even less knowledge, let alone understanding, think AI can undertake tasks like those a junior doctor is asked to undertake two things will follow.

The first would be massive medical errors.

The second would be senior doctors without the experience that comes from years of appraising the human condition. The loss to society would be immeasurable.

But, no doubt, somebody funding the Tony Blair Institute would have profited considerably in the meantime, and Tony Blair would define that as a success.

Please pardon my cynicism, but incomprehension in the face of reality on this scale is very hard to accept when hinted at as if it is a truth by the likes of Tony Blair.