

Why am I so worried by AI?

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We already have a massive problem with data overload in our society, with most people having little training in how to use the information they are given. AI creates new risks. It also requires that we understand that human decision-making remains key to the process of generating human well-being.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRhe0ljE30w&si=77esgDAY-oGvCQXM>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=8zdkt-1729792-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

I have many things to worry about, and AI is one of them.

Artificial intelligence is, when it comes down to it, all about the management of giant databases. It takes in vast quantities of data, it processes it and sorts it, it asks certain questions of that data, and spits out all sorts of answers.

Now, we've been used to doing that for a long time. For example, accounting is all about the operation of databases. Now, once upon a time, those databases were manual. They were called the general ledger of a business. And they were literally

written up with quills, followed by ink pens, followed by biros, followed by whatever.

And then they were computerised. And now those general ledgers of companies can be enormous. Because, of course, we have enormous companies all around the world. But it doesn't change the fact that accounting data is simply a database recording the transactions and estimates that are used to manage a business and to record them in a certain way so that information can be pulled out to answer specific questions that managers, shareholders, stakeholders, and other users of data might ask of the entity that produces the information in question.

But, and I make this point very strongly, very few people seem to understand the answers that accounts provide to them. I include senior management in that in many cases, because frankly, they're not trained in how to interpret accounting data, or how to produce it, and to therefore understand the weaknesses inherent within it.

I include most shareholders in that because all they're interested in is apparently the profit. But profit is a totally malleable number in any set of accounts, capable of manipulation in the way that management wishes to try to produce a result to achieve an outcome that may not be altogether true and fair, even if the auditors try to correct the view along the way.

And we do know that far too many companies have failed in recent years without the auditors giving any warning. And that's because those auditors themselves don't seem to understand the output from these databases.

And we most certainly know that politicians do not understand the information they get from their databases because, after all, the government also has a general ledger. It maintains accounting systems, and the information put out from it by the Office for National Statistics is, frankly, in most occasions, completely rubbish, and the politicians misinterpret it.

Why does this worry me? Well, it is because we have had decades and centuries and lifetimes of opportunity to understand accounting information, which is so core to our well-being. After all, if we think that economics is the art of best-allocating resources for the well-being of society as a whole, then accounting information is pretty fundamental in the way in which we make decisions about that allocation process. I would have thought that's obvious.

And yet, companies, and politicians, and others who are tasked with those decision-making processes very rarely seem to understand the data they are given. Nor do they understand the weaknesses in it, nor do they understand the inherent logics which are used to produce it. And also the flaws in that logic many of which are all too obvious if only they took the time to work them out.

Now, if we haven't done that with accounting data, and I don't believe we have, which

is why ignorance of it is so widespread, how on earth are we going to manage the information that comes out from AI, which is much more complex in many cases and more broad-reaching?

AI is going to be used to decide upon, apparently, healthcare and medication.

It is already being used to decide about credit rating.

It is most certainly being used to vet job applicants, wholly inappropriately, I suspect, in most cases, and with a bias towards those who are normal against the rest of the world.

And it is being used for many other tasks, which I think frankly require the human touch.

Of course, I'm saying there are benefits to AI, just as I actually would say there's benefits to accounting data. Accounting data does produce figures which do, for example, let us tax companies, and that's good news. AI data can also manage information in some fields in ways that we could never do without it.

I am not pretending that AI is not going to contribute, for example, to medical research, because clearly it could, and that will be true in other areas as well. But it does require that the person who eventually sees the information and has to make a decision about it does understand how that information is produced, what it really means, what the flaws within it are, and what the gaps in the understanding of the system might be so that they can exercise their judgment to choose between the options that are actually available to them, one of which is to ignore the data that the database has produced and to use their intuition instead.

That is what worries me. I know that people have blind faith in economic and accounting data, which is wholly unsuitable for use and produces wrong consequences. I'm worried that AI could do the same. If that's true, we're heading for difficulties.

We have to teach people about how to properly understand data, whether it is accounting information or anything produced by AI if we are to have a good future. It's not good enough to say, "The computer came up with this answer." The computer didn't come up with an answer. The computer used an algorithm that somebody had created to predestine that answer in too many cases.

We must understand the limitations of what the computer does, or, as a human race, we're in trouble. So, of course, AI worries me because I can see how little we understand data already. If we have more and more data, we could end up being flooded by it and overwhelmed by it, like the apprentice in The Sorcerer's Apprentice, completely overwhelmed as he was by more and more brooms spreading more and more water. So, we could be overwhelmed by more and more data, overwhelming us with more and more information which we don't know how to use.

This is a crisis for our time and one we could solve, but it requires us to understand that human decision-making remains key to the process of generating human well-being.