

Why is AI so frightened all of a sudden?

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As the [New York Times reported](#) last night:

The chief executive of Anthropic, the company behind the Claude chatbot, called for a global slowdown of artificial intelligence development [in a 3,800-word essay](#) on Saturday, just days after one of the company's employees quit over concerns about the safety of the technology.

Dario Amodei, who co-founded Anthropic to focus on securely and carefully building A.I., wrote that while he believed the technology could bring many benefits, it was advancing at too quick a pace for researchers to continue safely.

The question to ask is not whether this claim is right, but why it was said now. That is because, if this is right, Anthropic must have known this before the essay was written and the accompanying announcement was made, and I cannot believe that a comment from one whistleblower is what has tipped the balance. So, what has?

Of course, I can only speculate, but let me offer three suggestions as to why I think this might have happened now.

Fear

The first, and most obvious, is that those running these AI organisations are genuinely frightened of what they have created. They might really fear the possibility that they have let the genie out of the bottle. I cannot dismiss this possibility, but I do not think that explains the timing by itself.

Finance

The second, which I think is considerably more likely, is that likes of Dario Amodei are actually terrified of something else, and that is the financial risk of failure that they are facing. This might arise for three reasons.

Firstly ,they have asked for vast amounts of funding, and there is no one who knows

whether a return can be generated on that money. There is no proof as yet that the AI business model can make a return, let alone on the money being thrown in its direction.

Secondly, the complex financial arrangements being put in place for these purposes might themselves unravel. Many questions have been asked by reputable sources about the complex cross-financial arrangements that have been structured between the AI companies, data centres and existing software enterprises. Whether those will work is unknown. They might be called novel. They might also be unworkable. Some assumptions, including loans securitised on computer chips, look questionable in terms of their value basis, and many have said so.

Thirdly, under this financial heading, it is just possible that Anthropic cannot work out how to usefully spend the money it has got. Do not underestimate the possibility that they just do not know. It has been easy to raise; it may be harder to use. They may want time to think about that. Any excuse will do in that case.

Funk

The third point is something that few would say, which I am happy to do. I suspect that Dario Amodei is in a blind funk, and he may not be alone. In other words, he literally has no idea what to do. He founded Anthropic, but nothing prepared him for what it has become. He is supposedly a guru, but he is also a human being. Put the two together, and at the moment, the human being is showing.

I can say from my own experience that facing tough decisions when leading an organisation is a lonely task, sometimes frightening, and certainly very difficult. That is especially true when you know the buck stops with you, and I've been in that position. I am not pretending that I ran an organisation like Anthropic. I am saying I have some understanding of the loneliness that the responsibility to yourself, to many others, to your organisation, and to those outside who are dependent upon it brings.

It is possible at this moment that Dario Amodei is indicating something that other leaders inside AI may not feel. More likely, however, others amongst those who are supposedly gurus in this area may well be in the same place.

They are out of their depth.

They are untrained for this.

Most especially, they do not know whose advice to rely upon on this when so many will be biased because their own fortunes will be at stake, and they do not want their leadership to supposedly prejudice their personal situations, when that possibility clearly exists. Objectivity, therefore, might well have departed the scene, and that will make the loneliness of chief executives even harder to bear.

I am not saying that these people are not well rewarded for what they do. They are,

totally disproportionately. But it is important to remember that they remain human beings despite all of that, and fear to the point of terror can afflict them. I think this may be what we are seeing.

Does any of this make things feel better? No, not at all, is my honest answer, bar one thing, and that is that when you feel like a headless chicken, taking time to think usually helps. The call for a halt does, then, make sense. The reason given for it might, potentially, be spurious, but heeding the request may still be appropriate.

But one word of warning. Absurd spending on AI has maintained the impression of a functioning economy in the USA, and maybe beyond. Slow that spending, and the risk of the downturn I have been talking about grows considerably. That is inevitable. This cloud may not have a silver lining.