
Will Artificial Intelligence Kill Us All?



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Irrational humans have a long history of fearing some bogeyman.

Lately when I give lectures on leadership to various audiences, the **topic of AI** hardly ever fails to come up in the question-and-answer period. From what I hear, many people see AI as an ever-present and very worrisome development.

It's a paradox: On the one hand, plenty of observers are scared by how AI is rapidly revolutionising industries, influencing productivity and shaping our future. On the other, AI has grown to be so ubiquitous that some people do not even notice its presence. Still, whatever people's reactions turn out to be, there's much confusion about what the rise of AI will mean for them.

To many, AI seems like a "black box" in which mysterious things take place. And in the human mind, anything mysterious can easily trigger fear and distrust. In fact, for a significant number of people, AI has been transformed into some dark danger that's lurking about.

What's concerning about AI

One of the biggest fears is **job displacement**. As machines will perform tasks at lower costs and greater efficiency than was previously possible with humans, AI will most likely eliminate certain categories of jobs. The resulting disruption in the labour market could accelerate income inequalities and even create poverty.

Other concerns about AI tend to be more of an ethical nature. These fears revolve around a loss of control. Many people worry that AI will create vast amounts of deepfake data, making it difficult to perceive what's real. As such, AI could easily be used to orchestrate misinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and even the development of **autonomous weapon systems**. True enough, various autocratic regimes, such as **Russia** and **North Korea**, have been exploiting the darker capabilities of AI.

But apart from these realistic concerns, we shouldn't underestimate worries that are of a more existential nature. Many people fear that AI systems will become so advanced as to turn into a conscious organism, surpassing human intelligence. Similarly, there's concern that a self-learning AI could become uncontrollable, with unforeseen, catastrophic side effects, including the mass destruction of life on Earth.

Not our first rodeo

What AI doomsayers don't seem to realise is that AI has been around for decades despite appearing wholly futuristic. They should remember that humankind has encountered **technological disruptions** before. Think automation in manufacturing and e-commerce in retail. History shows that any significant progress has always been met by scepticism or even neophobia – the irrational fear or dislike of anything new or unfamiliar.

A good illustration is the case of British weavers and textile workers who in the late 18th century objected to the introduction of mechanised looms and knitting frames. To protect their jobs, they formed groups called Luddites that tried to destroy these new machines.

When electricity became widespread, potential customers exaggerated its dangers, spreading frightening stories of people who had died of electrocution. The introduction of television raised fears that it would increase violence due to the popularity of shows glorifying violence. In the 1960s, many worried that robotics would supplant human labour. And up to the 1990s, some people fretted that personal computers would lead to job

loss.

AI, the tangible manifestation of our deepest worries

In hindsight, despite some initial dislocation and hardships, all these various innovations **yielded great advantages**. In most instances, they stimulated the creation of other, oftentimes better jobs.

Generally speaking, humans tend to fear what they don't understand. And AI is what keeps people up at night presently. The soil has been long prepared by science fiction writers who introduced the idea that a sentient, super-intelligent AI would (either through malevolence or by accident) kill us all.

Indeed, this fear has been fuelled by many films, TV shows, comic books and other popular media in which robots or computers subjugate or exterminate the human race. Think of movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Terminator* or *The Matrix*, to name a few.

No wonder that AI has become the new bogeyman, the imaginary creature symbolising people's fear of the unknown – a mysterious, menacing, elusive apparition that hides in the darkest corners of our imagination. Clearly, from its portrayal in horror movies, to its use as a metaphor for real-life terrors, this creature continues to captivate and terrify many people.

A universal human experience

Of course, the bogeyman is used to instill fear in children, making them more likely to comply with parental authority and societal rules. In that respect, the bogeyman appears to be a natural part of the cognitive and emotional development of every human being. It evolved from the experiences of our Paleolithic ancestors, exposed as they were to the vagaries of their environment.

Given *Homo sapiens'* history, childish fears about the existence of some bogeyman have not gone away. Consciously or unconsciously, these fears persist in adult life. They become a symbol of the anxieties that linger just beneath the surface. The bogeyman's endurance throughout history is a testament to its ability to tap into our primal fears and anxieties. In fact, if you scratch human beings, their stone age ancestors may reappear.

There seems to be many similarities between our almost phobic reactions towards AI and the feelings of terror inflicted by the bogeyman of our

imagination. Given AI's ability to tap into our deepest fears and insecurities, its presence becomes haunting to many.

Our most serious threat

However, given what we understand about human nature, we'd better face this bogeyman. These irrational fears associated with AI technology need to be dealt with. Let us be reminded that faith in technology has been the cornerstone of modern society.

As mentioned before, all of us have been using various forms of AI for a long time. And the bogeyman hasn't yet come to get us. Like irrational fears about the bogeyman, the fear that AI will overthrow humanity is grounded in misconceptions of what AI is about.

At its most fundamental level, AI is really a field of computer science that focuses on producing intelligent computers capable of performing things that require human collaboration. AI is nothing more than a tool for improving human productivity. And that's what all major technological advances were, whether it was the stone axe, the telephone, the personal computer, the internet or the smartphone.

If we really think about it, the most serious threat we face is not from AI acting to the detriment of humanity. It is the willful misuse of AI by other human beings. In fact, *Homo sapiens* is the one behaving exactly as we fear that AI would act. It is *Homo sapiens* that has become unpredictable and uncontrollable. It is *Homo sapiens* that has brought about inequality and injustice. And it is *Homo sapiens* that may cause the mass destruction of life on Earth.

Keeping these facts in mind, we would be wise to remind ourselves that it is possible to develop AI responsibly and ethically. To make this happen, however, we will need to manage our irrational feelings associated with the bogeyman.

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