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The ugly side of artificial intelligence is all too human

By ANTONELLA GAMBOTTO-BURKE

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Swedish artificial intelligence theorist and sociology professor Simon Lindgren asked an AI program to write the introduction to his new book, **Critical Theory of AI**. He watched as the cursor flashed.

The program then started to write: “In recent years, the field of artificial intelligence has advanced rapidly, leading to significant developments in areas such as machine learning and natural language processing. As AI technologies become more sophisticated and widespread, it is increasingly important to understand their potential impacts and limitations.”

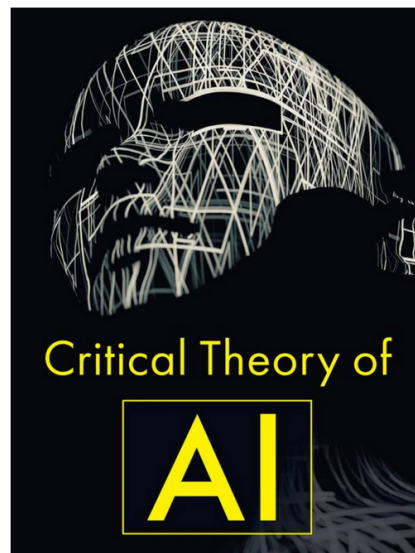
Reading these words, Lindgren experienced a sense of vertigo, wondering if human thought was in the process of becoming obsolete. The lawlessness alone – intelligence liberated from the mind – was disconcerting.

As American computer scientist Jaron Lanier wrote, we must never “accept AI as a coherent and legitimate concept” as it is no more than “a fiction that has overtaken its authors. AI is a fantasy, nothing but a story we tell about our code.”

While that may be true, Uber, the food delivery and ride-hailing service, owns no vehicles. Similarly, social media giant Facebook creates no content, online retailer Alibaba has no inventory and Airbnb, our largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate.

The point Lindgren makes is simple: in certain respects, it is the virtual that is now real.

Approaching this and related issues from all angles, Lindgren – an astute, elegant and provocative writer – begins with the premise that technologies, by definition, are political. The cultural, economic, institutional, legal, political and social contexts in which AI is developed determine both its function and meaning. AI, then, can be driven only by ideology.



Critical Theory of AI examines the sudden and dizzying rise of artificial intelligence programs.

In contrast to Lindgren's equanimity and pragmatism, Elon Musk's predictions about AI ("The risk of something seriously dangerous happening is in the five-year timeframe") start to sound something like British MP Enoch Powell's theatrical promises about immigration ("As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood' ").

While the "several overlapping packages of ideas" on which AI runs are a potent amalgam, it is, in the end, just people ("AI technologies are created by humans. Machine learning draws on data about humans. AI relies heavily on human-in-the-loop architectures").

Lindgren explains AI as an empty signifier, an abstract concept addressed as a concrete thing. "AI reification may lead us to forget its socially constructed character, and instead see it as something with a life of its own beyond our control. AI is not unknowable or inscrutable by humans. Far from being 'magic', it is a constructed machine that can be deconstructed."

Calibrated in its evolution, the book soon becomes almost implausibly engrossing. Lindgren strips back the glamour of AI to expose a neo-Victorian labyrinth of injustice and suffering. At the intersection of AI and human civilisation, he writes, are black holes – "a kind of shadow-layer to the network society" that amounts to a "Fourth World" of social injustice, where for "every winner there are 99 losers". Three-quarters of the planet's AI workers, he writes, live in slums.

In the thick of "a sanitation crisis and an acute lack of clean water", these ghost workers are never the ones who profit from the constant, deadening monotony of their industry. The scope of this exploitation is disorienting – "from indentured labour in mines for extracting the minerals that form the physical basis of information technologies; to the work of strictly controlled and sometimes dangerous hardware manufacturing and assembly processes in Chinese factories; to exploited outsourced cognitive workers in developing countries labelling AI training data sets; to the informal physical workers cleaning up toxic waste dumps".

While distant exploitation is easy to ignore, it becomes harder to dismiss local injustices.

AI, as Lindgren points out, is not only used to co-ordinate, govern and regulate labour but also creates new forms of human labour, involving disquieting questions of dominance, exploitation and power.

The rapidity of technological advances and its subsequent impact on business models makes it difficult for the law to keep pace, resulting in the normalisation of injustice. Digitally enabled platform labour, for example – the "gig economy" of Deliveroo, Fiverr, Uber and others – is characterised by low payments, unfair contracts and an instability that has, in a remarkably brief period, become characteristic of our culture. An increasing number of legal cases concern demands for greater transparency and fairness in relation to platform companies in particular, resulting in employers becoming "more adept at hiding management control in automated algorithmic processes".

The Italians and the Spanish have proved less tolerant of these wrongs. In 2021, a court in Bologna ruled that a Deliveroo algorithm used to rank worker reputations was in breach of labour laws. The court argued that the algorithm “made no difference between reasons for not working that are protected by law – such as being sick, going on strike, and so on – and other reasons for not delivering according to promise”.

That same year, Spain passed a revolutionary provision demanding algorithmic transparency in relation to employment. Workers, it was decided, had the right to be informed about the parameters and rules behind the AI systems or algorithms that affected their working conditions and access to work.

A glittering, powerful and resonant argument for more stringent ethical and legal regulation of the field, Critical Theory of AI takes no prisoners. Potentially, AI can support “humans in making the world a more prosperous, convenient and fair place”, but to do so requires “laws, regulations and other aspects of AI governance will have progressed further to mitigate and counteract as much as possible of the malicious effects of AI applications in society”.

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