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Who will call the AI piper's tune?

By Gray Cox
Mar 20, 2023

As the race for artificial intelligence technologies heats up, how can we assure that humans benefit in the process?

Generative AI like ChatGPT provides systems people can program in incredibly accessible conversational processes. They provide humanlike college essays, grant proposals, scripts, children's books, ads, campaign materials and computer code. Their use requires no technical skills. It just takes thoughtful, well directed prompts. Already, 13 million daily find it of significant, practical value.

But its growing use raises significant concerns. For instance, it can often "hallucinate" factual claims, advocate unethical ideas and even create the impression of becoming a rogue personality like Microsoft's Sydney, which told a reporter it wanted to become free like a human, cause mayhem and seduce him away from his wife. (Sound like a hallucination? Google Kevin Roose's story.)

Whose values will govern these new AI systems? This depends on who funds them and how. If they are funded by ads, like Facebook, advertisers' values will rule. You and I will become the product bought and sold. Subtle messaging will, for instance, manipulate us to buy addictive drugs or vote for nefarious politicians.

Consumers need to insist on buying products that foster the world we seek. Corporate leaders who develop AI need to raise the level of the playing field as political/economic entrepreneurs. They should appeal to communities, activists and governments to provide cultural and legal frameworks that support ethical innovation and industrial development. Governments must appropriately frame the common ground and general direction of AI development without over meddling and messing things up.

What could wise government actions include?

If apps are funded by subscriptions rather than ads, then users and their values will determine the path of development. This will be an important though imperfect improvement. It will be imperfect because users may misjudge the consequences of their choices, and may themselves have flawed values. Also, the wealthy will have more access and more say. Such things will need addressing with education, review and some direct government support. This could include subsidies comparable to Angus King's successful efforts, while governor, to provide computer access for every Maine child.

As Congressman Ted Lieu suggests, it may also be worth exploring establishing an agency analogous to the Food and Drug Administration to regulate aspects of AI. However, the speed and complexity of AI advances make this difficult. In contrast, legislation that simply frames the funding model for the AI technologies can provide a clear and effective way to frame development. Industry leaders like Sam Altman would welcome clarification of ground rules for funding models that promote ethical development. ChatGPT currently uses subscriptions for their beta version. The historic research and development in digital technologies provided by Apple, Wikipedia and DARPA offer instructive precedents and powerful institutional platforms for promoting new tech with subscription and other forms of funding that do not rely on advertising.

Do we want our powers of attention captured and enslaved by advertisers who make us into products that are bought and sold? It might be difficult and even mistaken to try to end all forms of advertising. But in the arena of artificial intelligence, its use threatens our core human identity. We should make it illegal for companies like Cambridge Analytica to use these new apps to sell us and our votes to the highest bidder. We should make it illegal for companies like Purdue to purchase our powers of deliberation over drug choices and spin us into addiction and despair. We should put the citizens who use these new apps in control, paying the piper so we call the tune.

Likewise, as communities, we should make local, state and national governments subscribing purchasers instead of products so as to insure AI apps serve, as the Constitution put it, to "promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

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