

## **AI: Three Emerging Thoughts from a Public Policy School**

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*"The theory of economics does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy. It is a method rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, a technique for thinking, which helps the possessor to draw correct conclusions."*

- John Maynard Keynes

*The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, 1922*

I have always been particularly fond of this quote from Keynes. In a world thirsty for answers to large, often imponderable questions, it reminds us that sometimes there are no answers, just better questions that emerge from sharper thinking and superior mental toolkits.

This certainly applies to the revolution in artificial intelligence (AI), which has been intensifying since the potential of generative AI became increasingly clear with recent iterations of ChatGPT. The world has seen technological fads before, including Web 3.0 and the metaverse, and bitcoin/cryptocurrency before that. With the caveat that this next sentence may not age well, I shall venture the observation that the ferment around AI seems more substantive – not least because big business has noted the potential for severe disruption of their existing commercial models, unlike in the case of predecessor technologies, and called for a moratorium on its development. Nothing focuses the mind quite like a concrete and eminently realisable threat.

In the same spirit as Keynes, this essay does not pretend to present stable or immutable (and, likely, wrong) observations about AI. Rather, it suggests lines of inquiry that might allow us to think more clearly about AI, drawing from emerging efforts to teach these issues (and how governments use digital technology more broadly) at the Blavatnik School of Government in Oxford and from conversations with colleagues at other global policy schools.

### **AI as Triple-Edged Blade**

It is something of a truism that AI presents both challenges and solutions to the problems it creates – but truisms are worth repeating as they are often easily forgotten or ignored. This particular truism is especially critical for those of us interested in the policy ramifications of AI. Governments and large companies developing the rules of the game for AI need to remember that they must balance among three competing concerns: *enabling* the growth and innovation of AI in the gamut of potential use cases that could enhance human welfare and prosperity if the technology is well used;

*regulating* the risks and harms that might arise from pernicious applications; and remembering that governments, businesses and citizens alike are also *users* of AI, who need appropriate and sufficient literacies, knowledge and expertise for such use to be positive. Countries with fully articulated national AI strategies – from Canada and Israel to Singapore and the United Kingdom, for instance – have incorporated this range of concerns.

This triplet of aims means that those responsible for making policy on AI need to adopt multiple mindsets. Enabling policies would involve promotional strategies like grants, incentives and support with talent development. Regulation requires an awareness of harms and an ability to address these harms surgically, neither over- nor under-responding to the challenge at hand. Being an intelligent user of AI involves experimenting with use cases, learning from them, pivoting and realigning in an agile manner. Each of these involves a distinct set of skills, difficult to find in a single person, so recruitment will need to focus on different skill-sets and personality traits. Organisational leaders who receive recommendations from enabling, regulating and user teams – many of which can be in tension with one another – will need critically to manage the trade-offs and tensions between these different but equally legitimate aims, living up to the ideal set out by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his short story *The Crackup*: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing thoughts in the mind, and continue to function.”

### **Human Augmentation, Not Substitution**

AI also presents trade-offs in terms of human capabilities, replacing some of the more mechanical and rote aspects of research (like fact-finding, synthesis and, increasingly, even drafting). Subscribers of the substitutionist hypothesis that AI (and technology more generally) will edge out the role of humans, possibly to the point of being an existential risk to humankind, will find ample evidence in ChatGPT for their beliefs. Except that the hypothesis is predicated on the assumption that humans remain static in the face of such technological evolution.

If, instead, we assume that humans also evolve – because we are learning rather than stagnant beings – then the defeatism of the substitutionist hypothesis becomes much less certain. AI will keep evolving, certainly, but so can we, and we can augment ourselves through the enabling effects of AI, while retaining certain tasks not easily replicated by current AI algorithms: handling emergent situations, for instance, or instances where linguistic manipulation needs to be non-linear to recognise nuance, irony, metaphor and other aspects. When DeepMind’s AlphaGo defeated leading Go player Lee Sedol in 2016, one key conclusion was that while AI alone would beat humans working alone, AI alone was highly unlikely to beat AI and humans working together. In most of my policy lessons, we have reached similar conclusions – that there is still room for significant roles by humans, even in the age of AI and pervasive digitalisation.

### **Transformation or Entrenchment of the Status Quo?**

Many articles on AI focus on whether it is catalysing a “revolution”, a “transformation” or some other large-scale change. But this assumption deserves much deeper interrogation. Is it also possible

that AI might be applied in ways that reinforce rather than transform existing mindsets, culture and modes of work? Consider companies or government services that use AI-powered chatbots to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs) – simply replacing a role previously played by humans, rather than using AI to more fundamentally redesign and re-engineer business processes to use administrative data and circumvent the need for FAQs in the first place.

Scholarship on digital government abounds with such examples – social media being used in ways that buttress centralised government approaches rather than creating more distributed communications processes, or technical skills being developed in ways that reinforce the prevailing culture of either collaboration (or lack thereof) in a national public administration system. As more and more of us jump on the AI bandwagon, it is worth asking what successful use of AI would look like for us – and how much meaningful change is actually involved in that vision of success.

### **A Long and Winding Path**

As AI is deployed more broadly and deeply in our polities, economies and societies, we should bear in mind that the positive and normative value of its applications and effects are far from foregone. We will continue to need rigorous tools to discern between the salutary and the dangerous, because the path to Keynes's "body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy" is likely to be long and winding – if we ever get there at all.