

Opinion

Here’s the worry: AI first requires human intelligence

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH



Grubaugh

Artificial intelligence is seizing the world’s attention, almost as if an unseen force has stepped up to grab us by the lapels. The better we understand the science, the more likely we’ll come to see it is not as fearsome as dire predictions paint it. Instead, it is showing the potential to improve every conceivable facet of life. That’s not an understatement, but it is the bothersome part. “Every facet of life” is a topic around which mere mortals have had a mixed record at best. Humans are now programming the machines that some worry might one day take over their own programming. People are ultimately responsible, but will they always be? Can they cap Pandora’s Box now that it’s been unleashed? The questions have been around for decades. Think back to 1968 when a conversation between a computer and an astronaut unnerved cinema-goers. “Open the pod bay doors, HAL!”

orders the stranded Dave Bowman. “I’m sorry, Dave. I’m afraid I cannot do that,” the computer replies coldly. “2001: A Space Odyssey” came out 55 years ago. So, you see, AI has been a concern for a long time. It’s a frightening proposition to think that a computer can think for itself, execute its own actions, and potentially execute its creators in the process. Evolution’s many unknowns have always had us fighting technology. The horse-drawn carriage was perfectly fine for our ancestors until they discovered the horseless version got them where they were going without having to stop for water. Same thing in more recent years. Remember how the most intransigent among us fought the notion of cyberspace? Imagine life today without smartphones and email. Despite decades of exploration, artificial intelligence in many ways is still in beta mode, that phase of development that requires extensive testing in a quest for perfection. IBM defines AI as the science and engineering of making intelligent machines. It is related to the similar task of using computers to understand human intelligence. However, AI does not have to confine itself to methods that are biologically observable. In other words, AI is all about machines that can think for themselves (which

is pretty impressive, since far too many individuals can’t do the same thing). Despite the human programming foibles, the “thinking edge” has untold applications for solving the most complex problems, from health and medicine to public policy. ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence chatbot developed by OpenAI, has riveted the world since its launch in November, but its accuracy has come under increasing scrutiny. If I had the chance, I would like to ask it: “How do we make peace in our world?” And keep the answer to a single sheet of paper, deliverable to world powers, who are also worried about AI’s reach. The more we ramp up, the more we must consider the peril, and our misinformation-prone society doesn’t need any more disinformation and fakery. Somebody has to stand watch to make sure the modern-day HAL 9000 doesn’t take control of the pod bay. As always, industry will see to the protocols if government officials fail to address them. Europe seems to be ahead of us. Lawmakers there have signed off on the world’s first set of comprehensive AI rules. Observers believe the measures could serve as a model for other countries working on regulations. The EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act will govern any product or service that uses an artificial intelligence system. The act will classify AI systems according to four levels of risk, from minimal to unacceptable.

The riskier applications include such concerns as hiring or technology targeted to children, and those will face tougher requirements, including being more transparent and using accurate data. It will be up to the EU’s 27 member states to enforce the rules. Regulators could force companies to withdraw their apps from the market. In extreme cases, violations could draw stiff fines, including a percentage of a company’s annual global revenue. Companies like Google and Microsoft could get zapped for billions. The spread of misinformation certainly doesn’t require artificial intelligence. Politicians and miscreant media have made a practice of sensationalizing facts since the yellow journalism days of Joe Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the 19th century. It has always been up to the consumers of such information to hold facts at arm’s length. Not everyone has that ability, sadly. With AI, we’ll see an onslaught of fakery during the 2024 election campaign, imagery and information that will seem so real as to supplant our own common sense. So, I say, let’s pool all the human intelligence we can to debate these many applications before AI comes up with its own answers.

• Dennis Grubaugh is the retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.

See you at the groundbreaking

By ALAN J. ORTBALS



Ortals

One of President Biden’s top priorities upon taking office in 2021 was to confront the nation’s dilapidated infrastructure. Despite the fact that the world was locked in the most debilitating pandemic in a century, the Biden administration began work with Congressional leaders to craft a truly historic infrastructure bill. Months of grueling negotiation culminated in Biden signing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act into law on November 15, 2021. The most significant investment in the nation’s infrastructure since the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, the IIJA included:

- \$110 billion for road and bridge repair and replacement.
- \$11 billion for transportation safety projects.
- \$39 billion for mass transit.
- \$66 billion for passenger and freight rail.
- \$7.5 billion to build a national

network of electric vehicle chargers.

- \$73 billion to overhaul the nation’s power infrastructure and transmission systems.
- And \$65 billion for broadband expansion.

So far, \$225 billion has gone out to 35,000 projects. Needless to say, the IIJA has become very popular with politicians. Alabama Senator Tommy Tuberville applauded the \$1.4 billion his state is getting to extend broadband to the hinterland. “Broadband is vital for the success of our rural communities and for our entire economy. Great to see Alabama receive crucial funds to boost ongoing broadband efforts.” Rep. Ashley Hinson from Iowa bragged, “We secured \$829 million in federal funding to upgrade locks and dams along the Upper Mississippi River. This is game-changing for Iowa’s agriculture industry and our Mississippi River communities.” Senators John Boozman and Tom Cotton of Arkansas were likewise pleased with their state’s recent haul—nearly \$50 million for bike trails and road improvements. “Improvements to our transportation infrastructure such as this are crucial to Arkansas’s economic development and enhancing our standard of living,” said Boozman. “Our state is filled with beautiful trails and outdoor spaces that we can and

should continue to utilize and develop. I’m pleased the Department of Transportation awarded this funding for projects important to multiple Natural State communities.” Cotton chimed in. “This funding will go to infrastructure projects that are critical to maintaining roads, trails, and railways in Arkansas,” he said. “I’m pleased Senator Boozman and I were able to secure the grants for these projects.” Rep. Sam Graves of Missouri, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, was delighted with funding one of the cities in his district, Maryville, will be receiving for road improvements. “I’m thrilled to see another project moving forward in Maryville with the help of a RAISE grant,” he said. And Texas Senators John Cornyn and Ted Cruz were trumpeting the \$3.3 billion their state was receiving for broadband expansion. Yes, they are thrilled now but back in 2021, all of them voted against the infrastructure bill. In fact, Cong. Hinson called it, “spending at its worst” and said that the “proposed legislation takes the Marxist ideology that once only existed in textbooks and makes it law in the United States.” And Cong. Lauren Boebert of Colorado dogged Transportation Sec. Pete Buttigieg for funding a \$33 million project in her district despite the fact that she

called the bill “wasteful” and “garbage” and promised to “hold these fake republicans accountable,” referring to her colleagues who voted for the legislation. Lest you think their objections were based on some kind of high-minded philosophical concerns, be aware that people like Tuberville, Boebert and Hyde-Smith also voted against the Science and Chips Act, legislation which was essential to national security, and which has already triggered over \$100 billion in private investment. It reminds me of the song from the 1932 Marx Brothers classic, Horse Feathers. “I don’t know what they have to say. It makes no difference anyway. Whatever it is, I’m against it. Your proposition may be good. But let’s have one thing understood. Whatever it is, I’m against it. Like Groucho’s character, Prof. Quincy Wagstaff, whatever it was, these politicians were against it. But, that’s not stopping them from lining up at the trough and trying to look like they are delivering for their constituents. They’re not ashamed to do that. So, as Biden recently Tweeted at Tuberville, “See you at the groundbreaking.”

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