News   Sport   Business   Money   Opinion   Ukraine   Travel   Health   Lifestyle

See all News

Noreena Hertz
AI risks making us all stupid: it's time to act

Could it be that politicians have forsaken their own critical thinking because they've been using ChatGPT too much?

🔖   💬 11   🎁 Gift this article free   ⬆️

Credit: Nathan Laine/Bloomberg

Noreena Hertz
15 February 2025 4:47pm GMT

This week Microsoft published a joint study with Carnegie Mellon which sought to establish how AI was impacting how people think. Their findings

were extremely disturbing. The more people relied upon AI the more they switched their own brains off.

In some ways this shouldn't come as a surprise. How many of us continue to be fluid at arithmetic given our default to a calculator? Or spelling given our reliance on autocorrect? And who nowadays would feel comfortable getting from A to B without the help of Google Maps? We've known for a while that when we replace particular tasks with tech, we erode our ability to perform those tasks ourselves.

Yet on the whole we've been okay about this. Partly because we either don't particularly value such tasks or we were never that good at them. And also because in doing so we've freed up time and lightened our cognitive load. This has enabled us in theory to focus on higher order more productive things, but in practice perhaps simply to scroll more on TikTok and watch more Netflix.

Why the outsourcing of thought to AI is fundamentally different and so troubling, however, is this. It is not just a few discrete areas we are today delegating. Instead from drafting emails to writing business plans, from analysing contracts to assessing financial data, we're increasingly relinquishing more and more of our own independent critical thought. New research by Claude AI owner Anthropic on Monday revealed that over a third of occupations now use AI in at least a quarter of their tasks; whilst Google research from last year found that 93 percent of Gen Z were already using AI at work.

The story is the same at our schools and universities. Colleagues at top tier universities share with me their concern about an avalanche of AI-generated student essays, whilst a recent US study revealed that over a quarter of 13-17 year-old school children now use AI to help them with their assignments.

This all matters for a number of reasons.

First, because unlike our calculators or spell-checkers, AI still gets a lot wrong. Whilst 70 percent of people say that they trust AI summaries of news articles and 36 percent believe that AI is always factually accurate, errors remain pervasive and often hard to detect. Research conducted by the BBC at the end of last year revealed that over half of AI generated summaries of a sample of 100 news stories it had asked ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini and Perplexity to summarise had "significant issues". Even asking ChatGPT simply to "format a

passage to look nice" risks distorting the actual text, as I recently discovered first hand.

This is not the only problem. Our increased reliance on AI presents a more existential threat. Brains like other muscles need exercising, otherwise they atrophy. As we delegate ever more to AI the danger is not only that we will end up thinking critically less, it is that we risk not being able to think critically at all. Given the extent to which AI is already being used this could lead to a mass, global dumbing down exactly when we need our wits about us more not less.

This is undoubtedly true of the workplace where for some time yet human oversight will be essential, especially given AI's limitations and mistakes. Yet the implications are broader still. For we're speeding towards a near-term future in which AI will increasingly be deployed to influence, manipulate and hoodwink us. Adverts so personalised they'll be impossible to discern from a good friend's advice; newsfeeds so convincing they'll be impossible to differentiate from fakes; and healthy democracy itself increasingly at risk from these manipulations.

This is because for democracies to function the electorate needs to be able to interrogate, question and assess what it is that we are told. Should we collectively lose sharpness in these skills the ability for malign interests (human or AI) to manipulate us would skyrocket, especially given how easy it will increasingly be to deceive us with ever harder to discern AI generated dis- and mis- information. The distance between asking ChatGPT for help deciding what to wear at a party and the destruction of democracy is far shorter than you might have thought.

With so much at stake one would have expected that across the globe governments would not only be publicising AI's great potential, but also its limitations and taking urgent steps to reform our education system to ensure Gen Z and Alpha retain their smarts. Especially as in many ways our power to reason and think is our only bulwark as humans against AI eventually ruling over us. Yet instead, punch drunk on the AI Kool Aid, obsessed with growth and suffering major "Fear Of Missing Out", governments are racing in the opposite direction. At the recent AI Summit in Paris the tone was clear: innovation above safety, competitiveness above all else. Could it be that politicians have forsaken their own critical thinking because they've been using ChatGPT too much?

Join the conversation