# Artificial intelligence is still far from being 'intelligent'

## Why does Big Tech want an immediate six-month pause on any further development?

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Is artificial intelligence (AI) really "intelligent" in its creativity and decision-making? Or is it stealing others' works and perpetuating existing human biases?

This January, three artists filed a class-action lawsuit with the Northern California District Court against AI imagery generators – Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and DreamUp. They claimed these companies are using their artwork to generate newer ones – using a publicly available database of images including theirs called LAION-5B – though the artists had not consented to have their copyrighted artworks to be included in the database, were not compensated for the use of their works, and their influence was not credited when AI images were produced using said works.

AI is literally scraping through billions of existing works produced by raw human labour to "produce newer ones." That's why several experts are already asking whether AI is at all "artificial" or "intelligent."

Tech writer Evgeny Morozov has argued that while the early AI systems were mostly rules and programmes, and could have some "artificiality," today's AI models draw their strength entirely from the works of actual humans. Built on vast amounts of human work stored at mammoth energy-hungry data centres, AI is not "intelligent" in the way human intelligence is as it cannot discern

things without extensive human training, as Microsoft's Kate Crawford has pointed out.

Even in decision making, AI-models can have strong biases as a 2019 article published in *Nature* has confirmed. An algorithm common in US hospitals has been systematically discriminating against black people. The study found that hospitals traditionally assign them lower risk scores than white people. Automatically, the algorithm takes that as a cue and puts blacks in a lesser risk group, regardless of the prevailing medical conditions. In

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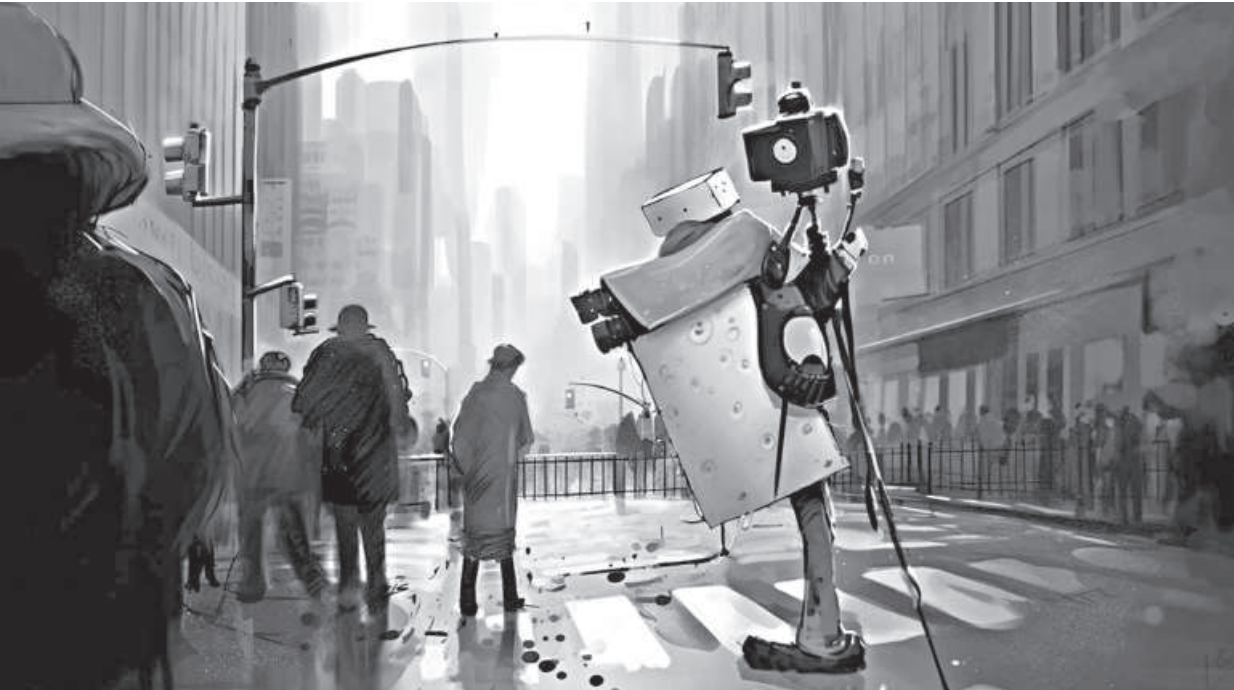
another case, a painting bot returned the image of a salmon steak in water when asked to draw a swimming salmon. The AI model couldn't make this simple judgement that even a toddler could do.

However, despite not being anywhere near "intelligent," recent developments, especially the release of ChatGPT in November last year, have raised dramatic concerns about the effects of AI on human society. Renowned tech experts have published an open letter calling for an immediate pause on all AI development for six months. Its signatories include many big names and AI heavyweights, including Elon Musk from Tesla, Emad Mostaque from Stability AI, Sam Altman from OpenAI, Demis Hassabis from

Google's DeepMind, and Kevin Scott from Microsoft. Altman even advised the US government to issue licenses to trusted companies (Does this mean only Big Techs?) to train AI models.

Is this call for an immediate pause coming from genuine concern for human well-being? Or is there a commercial motive, as Michael Bennett, a PhD student at Australian National University (ANU) has pointed out? Potentially, AI can generate an enormous amount of wealth for whoever controls it. Let's try to understand the premise of the call.

ChatGPT isn't a research breakthrough, it's a product based on open research work that is already a few years old. The only difference is that the technology was not widely

available through a convenient interface. Smaller entrepreneurs will soon develop better and more efficient AI-based models at much lesser costs, some of which is already available at GitHub, a popular repository for open-source non-commercial software. That worries the Big Techs, made abundantly clear by a leaked Google internal memo.

The long memo from a Google researcher said, "People will not pay for a restricted model when free, unrestricted alternatives are comparable in quality...We Have No Moat." Licenses would be a "kinda moat," as Stability AI's CEO Emad Mostaque puts it bluntly, moat being jargon for a way to secure a business against competitors.

AI Now Institute, a research non-profit that addresses the concentration of power in the tech industry, highlights the perils of unregulated AI in its April 2023 report because the AI boom will make the powerful Big Techs even more powerful. AI models depend on vast amounts of data, and super-fast computing power to process it, both of which only Big Techs can afford. Without access to these resources, no entrepreneur or researcher can develop any meaningful AI application, as an MIT Technical Review article elaborates.

Yes, we need regulations for AI development, and a pause if necessary, but not for the reasons mentioned in the open letter. It's to ensure that AI technology remains open source and democratic.

The other reason AI should be regulated is the way social media platforms have used it to fuel gender bias and extreme polarisation, and played on social divisions resulting in unspeakable violence on a massive scale (such as in Myanmar using Facebook). AI models will amplify both intentional misinformation (simple inaccuracies) and disinformation (false information) simply because they are trained on such data to produce more data (model cannibalism effect). Large language models can keep repeating fabricated and false information because of a phenomenon called 'hallucination' which independent watchdog NewsGuard has found in several online news portals.

Intentional or otherwise, all these could be quite handy in manipulating public opinion or creating biases to benefit those in power. That makes it even more necessary to regulate AI. To ensure that the benefits of AI reaches everyone, humans must always be on top of it.



An image of a robot taking picture generated by AI software Midjourney.

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# In the land of elderly rickshaw pullers

A CLOSER LOOK

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**TASNEEM TAYEB**

The image of 60-year-old rickshaw puller Abdul Halim resting on a footpath beside Dhaka's Gulistan Park, exhausted and drained under the heat of the scorching summer sun, has been haunting me since I saw the photo on the front page of this daily on June 7. The heart-wrenching image stayed with me the entire day, so much so that later that night, I was woken up by jarring dreams of the old man pulling the weight of a hundred passengers in flashy clothes – middle-aged men and women, young boys and girls, children cramped in the small rickshaw seat – through the messy streets of Dhaka, under the glaring sun. I saw Abdul Halim telling himself to keep pedalling, so that he would earn enough to take home some coarse rice and salt, and some

medicines for his ailing wife.

But then his ageing back and legs started giving away, and as the impatient passengers started yelling at him to peddle faster, he suddenly stopped. He looked at me, his wearied eyes boring heavily into mine, and he gave a wail of anguish, the deafening sound reverberating into reality. And suddenly he was pulled into a black void by a long filthy hand. His passengers kept yelling, without even realising he was gone. That's when I woke up.

What kind of a country do we live in where 60-year-olds are forced to pull rickshaws to earn livelihood?

The government has earmarked Tk 126,272 crore for SSN programmes, which is 16.58 percent of the total budget and 2.52 percent of the GDP. At first glance,

allocating Tk 126,272 crore to SSN in a budget of Tk 761,785 crore seems like a bold move, given the challenges the economy currently faces. But a closer look reveals that a whopping 60 percent of the funds are actually going towards the non-poor, in such things as pensions for 800,000 government employees, finance interest for national savings certificates, agriculture subsidy and interest subsidy for loans to small and medium enterprises. This means that only 1.01 percent of the GDP will actually be allocated towards those most in need.

The minimum age to be eligible for old age allowance is 65 years for men, and 62 years for women. Based on what rationale has the government decided on this minimum age bar? In neighbouring India's Haryana state, the minimum age for the Old Age Samman Allowance Scheme is 60 years. According to the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS), too, the minimum age is 60. Some might argue that the pension amount in India is not significant, but neither is their inflation, which was 4.7 percent in April 2023.

But even if Abdul Halim were

eligible for the allowance offered by the Bangladesh government, it would not have been adequate for him. The old age allowance has been proposed to be increased by Tk 100 to Tk 600 in the budget.

But in a reality where inflation is spiralling to record levels – rising to 9.94 percent in May 2023 – out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure is increasing – standing at 74 percent in 2020, according to World Health Organization (WHO) – how is an elderly individual expected to survive on Tk 600 per month? How are they going to pay for food, medical care, utility bills, etc with this amount? Remember the struggles of 82-year-old Shamsul Huda, whose story was featured in this daily last year? There are so many of them out there, hoping their miseries would end – if not through state support, then in death.

Coming to the former question, not all those at the receiving end of these SSN schemes are legitimate beneficiaries. In 2020, the Centre

for Policy Dialogue (CPD) conducted a study in Gaibandha, Kurigram, Nilphamari and Rangpur to understand the delivery efficiency of five SSN programmes: maternity allowance for poor mothers, primary school stipend programme (PESP), secondary school stipend programme (SESP), employment generation programme for the poorest (EGPP), and old age allowance.

The study unfortunately and unsurprisingly found that during Covid-19, almost two-thirds of the household receiving the SSN allowances were not eligible to receive them in the first place. The truth is, most of these SSN programme beneficiaries are politically connected, and as such are enlisted for these programmes, leaving out genuine beneficiaries who are in dire conditions and have limited opportunities for employment. While MFS services have done one good thing by enabling direct transaction of the allowances to the beneficiaries, unfortunately all these initiatives

remain counterproductive due to nepotism in beneficiary selection.

Coming back to the point of insufficient allowance, since the government is not able to adequately provide for the underserved communities, they should at least help them with some economic opportunities that are suitable for their age, abilities and social realities. The government cannot just think that by providing Tk 600 to selective elderly people, Tk 900 to students with disabilities, and Tk 550 to widows and "destitute" women, they would end poverty and enable them to live better lives.

It is high time the government revisited its social safety net strategy and came up with realistic solutions to provide for the marginalised population, and demonstrate strong political will to root out corruption and nepotism from the system. As a nation, we should be able to better protect and provide for the disadvantaged and marginalised population.



60-year-old Abdul Halim takes a rest on a pavement beside Gulistan park in the capital. PHOTO: **AMRAN HOSSAIN**