



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Utopia or dystopia: Can artificial intelligence really be regulated?

We should perhaps turn to Isaac Asimov's fictional 'three laws of robotics' to protect us from robots that are smarter than us



SUDIPTO MUNDLE
is chairman, Centre for Development Studies.



ISTOCKPHOTO

After OpenAI, an artificial intelligence (AI) company, launched ChatGPT in November 2022, followed by ChatGPT 4, a more advanced generative version of its large learning model, AI has taken the world by storm. People at large are confused, awestruck by the immense possibilities outlined in the Utopian narrative. At the same time, they are "a little bit scared," as OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman put it, by the alternative dystopian narrative. Politicians are also confused, it appears, though they pretend to be in control.

In my simple lay person's understanding, generative AI is essentially a family of algorithms—computer programs—which use artificial neural networks to understand language and generate skills to answer virtually any question, based on amassing and mining huge amounts of data. The greater the volume of data they feed on, the greater the capacity of these large learning models. The reliability or adequacy of the answers is, of course, another question.

In the Utopian narrative, these models open up vast opportunities in everything from the creation of literature, music and art to the extension of fundamental scientific knowledge, such as determining the structure of all proteins and consequent breakthroughs in medical science, agriculture and manufacturing. AI will enable new production processes across industry and services with much higher productivity, new forms of mobility and communications, new ways of monitoring and mitigating climate change, and more. In short, it will basically transform the technological foundations of modern human society as we know it.

But there are also threats that come along with these opportunities. *Mint* columnist Anurag Behar recently reported studies on the shocking health consequences among teens of the increasing use of smartphones, the internet and social media: rising frequency of self-harm, hospitalization and suicide (*Mint*, 22 June 2023). He also mentioned the adverse impact of digital reading on attention: shallow reading, reduced comprehension, etc. If that has been the impact of just digital reading, smartphones and social media, how much worse would be the effects of increasing human dependence on AI, especially for education? With such outsourcing of our thinking, would our capacity to think wither away over time?

A *Wall Street Journal* article reported even more frightening consequences for workers in Kenya engaged in cleaning dark content from the masses of text, visual and audio material used to train large language models like ChatGPT. For hours on end, day after day, they were required to review awful material like toxic violent language, videos of rape, beheadings and suicides, child abuse and bestiality. Not surprisingly, a lot of these workers ended up with mental illness and broken families.

These were unintended consequences. But the intended consequences of AI deployment are also deeply worrying. In their just published volume, *Power and Progress*, tracing the 1,000-year history of technical progress, Daren Acemoglu and Simon Johnson point out that technical progress has mostly been driven by the dual goals of maximizing productivity while minimizing the share of labour for the benefit of a small controlling elite. In a candid keynote address at a conference organized by the Institute of Human Development last week, Johnson stated that this dual pattern of maximizing productivity while minimizing the role of labour is being taken to a whole different level by AI. The role of labour will not just be reduced, but possibly eliminated altogether in some branches of production, which would lead to a further increase in inequality.

However, Acemoglu and Johnson are not entirely pessimistic about AI. They feel AI can be directed to augment human labour rather than replace it, if labour organizations and civil society can be mobilized to nudge public regulatory policy in that direction. But therein lies the key question: Can AI be regulated? A global regulatory regime similar to the nuclear regulatory regime is sometimes suggested. This is not surprising, since both technologies pose existential threats. Also, the world has successfully fended off nuclear war for over 75 years. But is that because of its regulatory regime or the fear of mutually

assured destruction? The Cuban missile crisis episode suggests that it is the latter, and in a context where nuclear arsenals were controlled by two rival states. That analogy breaks down in the case of AI, where the technology is controlled by a group of private corporations mostly in the US.

There is also a more fundamental difference that defies regulation. Geoffrey Hinton, known as the founding father of AI, recognized the existential threat that AI poses and he resigned from Google to sound the alarm. He warned that as AI systems develop and become more powerful, they also become more dangerous; "killer robots" is the term he is reported to have used. This is probably also recognized by Altman and the other heads of the AI technology firms. What happens when AI surpasses human intelligence, as is likely to happen in the near future?

When we are lost for answers in the real world, it is tempting to turn to fiction. Most breakthrough inventions were anticipated in science fiction long before they became reality.

The same is true of smarter-than-us robots. In a landmark short story titled *Runaround*, published in 1942, Isaac Asimov spelt out three laws of robotics to protect human beings from robots smarter than themselves. Can we conceive of such laws to be built into the foundation of all large learning models or is that just a lay person's desperate imagination?

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

We don't know how AI adoption will impact the world but we must nudge policy in a direction that makes it aid rather than destroy jobs. The big question though is: Can we actually regulate AI?

Analogies of AI regulation with nuclear weapon control regimes are flawed but we could take a cue from Asimov's prescience and formulate a basic set of rules aimed at protecting people.

India's rice export curbs could prove too myopic for its good

It weakens the country's claim to leadership of the Global South



MIHIR SHARMA
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



India is the world's top rice exporter with a 40% plus share of shipments ISTOCKPHOTO

Global food markets have been thrown into some chaos yet again—not only because of Russia's decision to pull out of the Black Sea grain deal, but also India's announcement that it would ban the export of many varieties of rice. The partial exit of the rice market's largest trading nation, with about a 40% share of exports, has led to fears that food inflation will race out of control, particularly in countries of the Global South that are already struggling with very high debt levels and inflated food and fuel bills.

Even if it is soon lifted, the export ban is a big mistake for India, both economically and geopolitically. It dramatically undermines Indian leaders' recent claims that this country is the natural and responsible leader of the developing world. [India's share of worldwide rice shipments stands out; at a little over 40% in 2022-23, it exported a great deal more than Thailand, which had a share of just over 15% last year, and Vietnam, which accounted for a little more than 13%.] New Delhi's justifications for its decision are familiar: rising food prices at home, with general elections looming next year. Low food inflation has traditionally been a crucial determinant of electoral success in India—and domestic prices for rice have risen over 10% in the past year. The Indian government has placed some of the blame on ballooning exports of the commodity.

What's not clear to most Indian economists is why export bans are the best answer for domestic consumers when the government is also sitting on vast stocks of rice that it could easily distribute to poorer Indians or release into the open market to cool down prices.

The fact is, for control-minded bureaucrats in New Delhi, export bans [now seem like] the first, not last, response to rising domestic prices. Just a few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine rolled wheat markets last year, for example, India shut down wheat exports—once again, increasing food insecurity in the emerging world just when it was at its most vulnerable.

Indian bureaucrats like to claim—including at the World Trade Organization—that their restrictive trade policies are meant to protect our millions of subsistence farmers. In practice, however, farmers are probably the last thing on the minds of policymakers. If agricultural income was really the government's top priority, it would not shut down exports just as prices are rising and farmers have an opportunity to make a rare profit.

If India is to take on a leading role in the world, its administration must understand that its decisions have global ramifications. Even in richer countries such as the US, consumers—many from the Indian diaspora—have stampeded supermarkets in attempts to hoard various Indian varieties of rice.

Indian policymakers have their defence ready against such complaints. We have seen it all before. They will likely point out that the ban doesn't extend to the most popular Indian variant, basmati. This will be little consolation to Indians abroad, particularly those from South India, many of whom prefer shorter-grain varieties. They could also, with perfect truth, point out that in spite of the ban on wheat exports announced last year, India actually shipped out almost twice as much wheat during the summer of 2022 as it had the previous year. This wasn't because of leakages in the system. Partly, it was because contracts signed before the ban were still being fulfilled. But it was also because other governments could lobby Indian officials to make exceptions for specific wheat shipments. A similar system will probably now be put into place for rice exports.

That would be India trying to have its cake and eat it too. It wants to hold onto its grain while also casting itself as a bountiful provider of nutrition to the rest of the developing world.

I'm not sure this trick will work more than once. It's one thing to buy Indian grain in the open market; it's another to have to go, hat in hand, to Indian diplomats and ask for rice or wheat because you are worried about food riots.

More likely, India's short-sighted decision will build up resentment over time. In fact, anger might grow rather quickly if global rice prices hit a 10-year high and the developing world blames shortages largely on the Indian ban.

The central prong of India's case for leadership to the Global South was always that, unlike the West or China, it saw other developing countries as equals. Indian policymakers should rethink arbitrary export bans that leave those nations feeling like supplicants instead. Global leadership requires taking on responsibility for the world, too.

©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

It's often more than a buzz that the rich get from risk

SWARA SHAH



is a graduate in psychology and writes about social sciences, gender, and pop culture.

Would you spend \$250,000 to venture into the deep, uncharted territories of the ocean? Would you want to "Become one of the first few to see the *Titanic* up-close"? That was how OceanGate advertised its *Titan* submersible tours. Previous voyagers described it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. What happens when such thrill-seeking, bizarre excursions end up becoming an eerie reminder of the risks associated with it? The last voyage of *Titan* didn't end any better than the *Titanic* did. In recent years, a growing trend has emerged among wealthy travellers of seeking high-risk adventures, such as exploring the *Titanic* shipwreck or embarking on space trips. These danger-filled pursuits appeal to a specific segment of society, and the underlying motivations behind them have attracted the attention of psychologists and researchers. Several psychologists have sought to explain and analyse what drives affluent individuals to seek extreme travel

experiences. Social class, status, degree of control and an unrelenting accumulation of wealth all have roles to play in it. Let's look at some of the reasons that contribute to such high-risk decisions.

Thrill of the unknown: As Harvard psychologist Patricia Robertson explains, the human brain is wired to seek novelty and excitement. For wealthy individuals who have experienced the best that life as usual has to offer, these perilous adventures provide a unique opportunity to escape the mundane and experience something extraordinary. The sense of venturing into uncharted territory and the adrenaline rush associated with dangerous activities can become addictive for those seeking an escape from their predictable routines.

Risk-taking as a status symbol: Travelling to dangerous or restricted locations often involves significant cost and exclusivity. For the ultra-wealthy, participation in such activities becomes a status symbol. It reaffirms their elite position and sets them apart from the average tourist. This need for distinction aligns with social identity theory, which suggests that individuals seek to establish positive self-concepts by affiliating with prestigious groups or engaging in

unique experiences. Becoming members of an esteemed group or undergoing an enriching experience aids in elevating the self-concepts of the wealthy. They are motivated to take on high-risk adventures not just to showcase their being a class apart, but also to affirm as much for themselves.

The pursuit of self-transcendence: The *Titanic* tragedy and other historical sites hold a certain allure for those seeking to connect with something larger than themselves. Sarah Anderson, a renowned psychologist, emphasizes that self-transcendence is an innate human yearning to find meaning and purpose beyond individual accomplishments. As also seen in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which places self-actualization on top, it has to do with a desire for something unfathomable or greater than oneself. Engaging in high-risk trips allows the wealthy to grapple with existential questions

and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

The narrative of resilience and mastery: High-risk adventures present individuals with a challenge, providing an opportunity to overcome fear and demonstrate their ability to conquer adversity. The psychological reward of mastering such situations and emerging unscathed reinforces their self-confidence and instills a sense of accomplishment. This narrative is closely tied to the notion of an internal locus of control,

where individuals perceive themselves as having control over their destinies even in perilous situations.

Escaping the paradox of affluence: The immense wealth that affords these travellers every luxury may also be a source of discontent. The well-known 'paradox of affluence' suggests that excessive material abundance can lead to a sense of emptiness and lack of purpose. Seeking

high-risk adventures becomes a way for the wealthy to fill this void; they can experience genuine excitement and fulfilment.

The dark side of extreme travel: While the cognitive motivations behind seeking high-risk adventures are intriguing, psychologists also caution against the dangers of glamorizing risk. Psychologist Mark Thompson argues that romanticizing danger can lead to reckless behaviours and jeopardize personal safety. Extreme travel experiences must not be taken lightly, and participants must be well prepared and aware of the potential risks involved.

A surge in wealthy travellers seeking high-risk adventures highlights the fascinating interplay of psychological factors. These extreme travel choices are driven by a complex web of motivations and understanding them sheds light on the allure of danger. It helps us appreciate the diversity of human experiences in an increasingly globalized and affluent world. Nonetheless, it is essential to approach extreme travel with caution, acknowledging the potential risks and prioritizing safety above all else. We have seen eccentric experiences of the wealthy this year, and OceanGate's *Titan* sure makes you wonder what is to follow.