

Did AI Win After All?

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December 13, 2024

1 Introduction

We live in a society dictated by technology. It consumes our daily lives and there has been a rapid rise in technology dependence over the past two decades. A time when humans could function without the use of technology now seems like ancient history. Our dependence on our digital devices has grown so strong that a new question is being raised, “Did AI Win After all?”

This course, IST 402 Emerging Issues and Technologies, focuses on the algorithmic exploitation of our data, or AI colonialism, a term coined by Karen Hao, who’s texts had a significant impact on discussions throughout the semester. Our readings throughout the semester raised some alarming points about how AI continues to have increased control over vulnerable communities and countries that have previously been victims of historical colonialism. Not only are vulnerable countries at bay, but also residents of technologically developed countries who live in blissful ignorance of the data that they unknowingly give away everytime they shop online or like a post on social media. As people become exceedingly more immersed into their devices, they lose focus on the outside world around them. They are blinded by the inside operations and motives of the large and powerful technology corporations that dominate the technology industry today, what we referred to in this course as “Big Tech” companies. In Professor Fonseca’s text, “Did AI Win After All?”, he touches on the topic of a competitive social space. Big Tech companies exploit the human instinct of competition and use it to create applications for miniscule daily tasks such as drinking water. The goal is to make everything a digital competition to add users to their app. The addition of leaderboards is a common scheme amongst application developers to increase traction and drive people to score higher than their friends and other users.

If we as a society continue to allow our devices to consume us, we will continue to fall into the overarching data schemes of the tech industry. In “Seeing like a driver: How workers repair, resist, and reinforce the platform's algorithmic visions”, Rida Qadri and Catherine D’Ignazio talk about the lack of empathy Big Tech corporations have towards their users. The authors revealed that an executive of the company Gojek, a rideshare and delivery service platform, admitted that he viewed their drivers as mere sources of data to be cultivated rather than human beings. They furthered this point by saying that “when drivers are merely

represented as dots on the map, one cannot see the rich repositories of situated intelligence drivers carry nor the hurdles they have to navigate every day to get their work done”(Qadri & D’Ignazio, 2022). Many times, Big Tech companies implement changes in their platforms only if they believe it will lead to financial gain. They ignore the human rights of their employees, which forces employees to either suffer in silence or band together and fight the system.

Similarly in Venezuela, Big Tech companies are abusing their power and taking advantage of the desperate situations of their employees. After an economic collapse in Venezuela, educated people were forced to flee, many of them like Oskarina Fuentes Anaya, were then forced to resort to gig work like remote AI-labeling. This left many Venezuelans vulnerable to the manipulation of Big Tech companies who pay nickels and dimes for hours of work. When touching on this situation in “How the AI industry profits from catastrophe” by Karen Hao, she says that “for the majority of other Venezuelans, leaving the country was an impossibility. Those who turned to data annotation did so not just because they’d lost other jobs but because a wave of crime from increasing instability trapped them within their homes”(Hao & Hernández, 2023). Whether it is an economic crisis, crime, or illness, these Big Tech companies see no empathy for their employees, they prefer quantity over quality and refuse to abide by ethical worker’s rights.

2 Did AI Win After All?

In sharp contrast to the overbearing control that AI algorithms have over vulnerable communities, there are situations where AI does not have the power. This follows the digital preservation of the native language, te reo of the Māori people, who had been previously colonized by the British and slowly stripped of their culture over time. A Māori man who was devoted to preserving his native language in a technology driven society, started a huge open-source data collection of Māori transcribers and speakers in order to collect a significant amount of data to preserve and continuously improve the digital language of te reo using AI language tools. By using open source software and the voices of Māori people, a data license was able to be created that will “only grant data access to organizations that agree to respect Māori values, stay within the bounds of consent, and pass on any benefits derived from its use back to the Māori people”(Hao, 2022). Although this process was long and extraneous for those involved, it paid off in the end. The Māori people were able to save their culture for generations to come without the possibility of having their own data used against them.

Another situation that mimics the success of the Māori people of New Zealand is the employees of an app-based delivery company known as Shipt. After they noticed a decrease in their pay, they banded together in an effort to fight for their rights and figure out the truth behind this pay data exploitation. The data scientist and author of “The GIG Workers Who Fought an Algorithm: When Their Pay Suddenly Dropped, Shipt’s Delivery Drivers Dug into the Data”, Dana Calacci brought up an interesting point about “information asymmetry”, a term, in this case describing the secrecy of pay data that many corporations keep hidden away. She makes a fantastic point when she says that “there’s no technical reason why these algorithms need to be black boxes; the real reason is to maintain the power structure” (Calacci, 2024). Dana worked with thousands of employees collecting pay data in order to get a full collection of transparent pay information that these employees could then use to advocate for themselves. These Shipt

employees took a huge leap forward into setting an example for others who are currently experiencing pay exploitation and will in the future on how they can work together and overcome the powerful influences of AI.

3 Conclusion

As a society I feel that we are currently experiencing a rude awakening when it comes to realizing that technology has more control over our lives than we would like to think. As we've seen from the Māori people of New Zealand it is possible to create and own your own data. I think educating the public on examples such as this one is the key to protection against AI exploitation. There is hope that we can prevail and defeat AI. Humans have abilities that AI cannot be trained to mirror even with extensive data collection. We can use our own data to reverse the effects of data exploitation like the Shipt employees are working to do. As long as we wean off of technology overtime and lessen our extreme dependence on it, we will continue to stay in control of AI.

4 Reflection

I personally found this course and its main topic of "Did AI Win After All?" to be super thought provoking. The discussions and texts we read over the course really opened my eyes about the reality of data exploitation and how ignorant many of us are. Before this course I did know that we were being digitally exploited to a certain point based on digital market schemes, app tracking, and unread license agreements, but I had no idea how far of an extent the exploitation reached. I was very surprised and saddened to see how Big Tech companies preyed on the vulnerabilities of distressed countries such as Venezuela. It furthered my belief that these companies do not care about people, but only revenue. They are quick to exploit the desperation of gig workers such as Oskarina Fuentes Anaya, who migrated to Columbia after the economical crisis in Venezuela left her with no job opportunities. The real-life experiences ranging from ride-share service drivers in Indonesia to gig workers from Venezuela, made me realize that anyone could fall victim to the control of Big Tech companies and the algorithms they create.

References

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