

The Promise and Peril of AI

There are four scenarios for artificial intelligence—the *best* one is where humans and machines learn together to advance human society, not corporate profitability. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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Ever since John McCarthy first coined the term, “artificial intelligence,” back in 1959, humanity has been anticipating its arrival with a tense mixture of trepidation and exhilaration. Will AI provide us with a Jetson-like lifestyle where the drudgery of work is eliminated by technology or will we end up engaged in a war with Terminator-like robots in order to preserve our very humanity? Well, it looks like we are about to find out!

The Internet we access to seek information and connection has evolved into a pervasive “immernet” that monitors and monetizes our every move online. Today, we are living in a synthetic digital ecosystem of our own making, where our online behavior is constantly being analyzed, tuned, and optimized to command our attention and control our consumption.

As we use the technology, the technology uses us to learn how to turn our virtual behavior into real dollars. Left unchecked, this progression path of digital dementia will culminate in one of three unsavory scenarios for our species:

In the **Extinguished scenario**, the immernet connects and amplifies the unanticipated consequences of our collective action far more quickly than we anticipate, leading to the eradication of life on Earth much sooner than any us could have imagined. In this scenario, given the global epidemic of mindless digital distraction, humanity becomes an unfortunate casualty of our collective inability to anticipate and avert a catastrophic global collapse.

In the **Enslaved scenario**, technology continues to limit, bound, and attenuate the fulfillment of human potential to maintain control of our collective consumption. We reduce ourselves, and maybe our dreams, to fit the current form factor of technology, surfing in the shallows of the Internet and eroding our contemplative and introspective cognitive abilities. In this scenario, our immernet dwelling dumbs us down to a point where we become IT laborers living a life of indentured digital exhaust-generating servitude to server farm owners who mine our data for dollars.

In the **Enmeshed scenario**, technology redefines the notion of the fulfillment of human potential in a post-human sense. Today, we increasingly are embedding technology into our bodies. To date, we have integrated technologies such as cochlear implants, knee replacements, and artificial hearts to improve and extend our life experience. In the near future, we will be faced with the choice of using Crisper technology to edit the genomes of our unborn children to avoid deadly diseases and deciding whether or not we want to download our complete carbon-based life experience into a synthetic digital avatar that “lives” forever. In this scenario, the meshing of human and machine creates a new range of post-human fulfillment opportunities, but the price of entry is that we give up our uniquely human identity.

THE BEST CASE SCENARIO

Avoiding these three unpalatable scenarios will require a fundamental paradigm shift in our understanding of the role AI technology can and must play in fulfilling human potential on a global scale. With this broader perspective, we can imagine a future scenario in which machine learning and human learning are harmonized, synchronized, and optimized to fulfill our collective potential:

In the **Empowered scenario**, technology expands, augments, and amplifies the quest for human fulfillment. The immernet is no longer tuned to maximize commercial profitability but instead to maximize human opportunity. The technology serves as a fulfillment service to help each of us achieve our biggest and boldest dreams.

In his most recent book, “Team Human,” Douglas Rushkoff makes a compelling case that technology cannot continue to be leveraged to simply maximize corporate profit or drive economic growth; instead it must be leveraged to fulfill human potential.

I'm joining Team Human. What about you?

For more on this topic, check out my TEDx Duke talk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcdqEuZvCgw>