Why are we building AI?

A 'Proustian questionnaire' for AI

In light of the frenzy of interest surrounding Bard, ChatGPT and other applications of generative artificial intelligence (AI), there is a pressing need for an inclusive and informed public debate on the future of AI. This debate, accompanied by policy engagement, needs to explore what constitutes responsible AI and assess the risks and benefits of mass AI use in society.

Chatham House has been working towards producing an expert-led and evidence-based series of written and media outputs to highlight some of the most pressing opportunities and concerns around responsible AI development.

This work has focused, among other things, on dispelling common myths and problematic assumptions to counterbalance alarmist and hyperbolic narratives. A related aim is to disseminate practitioner perspectives and policy thinking in this space.

To frame these reflections and wider discussions on AI, Chatham House has developed a set of questions inspired by so-called 'Proust questionnaires' – which look to reveal an interviewee's beliefs. Our specific questionnaire is designed to surface public and policy concerns around the responsible development of AI, and around the relationship between these technologies and society today.

In this questionnaire, AI is to be understood in its broadest sense instead of being constrained to specific applications (unless stated otherwise).

This wide scope is motivated by the desire, from the questionnaire's authors, to spark meaningful and inclusive discussions on relevant technologies and their multi-layered implications across all segments of society.

The questionnaire is an invitation to readers to pause from the usual fast-paced thinking and reflect, individually and collectively, on a possibly revolutionary and transformative technology.

In the months ahead we will look to our experts for answers.

> **'If you were worried about the future of AI, I wouldn't reassure you. I would try to find out what worries you. It's important to recognize that diverse communities will have diverse perspectives on the threats, the risks and the opportunities.'**
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> Milly Zimeta
> Former Head of Policy
> Open Data Institute

> **'The questions that we repetitively ask, the most fundamental ones, are actually the most enduring: what are the possible ways in which this technology is going to change my life? How might it exert control over me? How can I exert control over it?'**
>
> Carl Miller
> Author

General questions

- Why are we building AI?
- How would you describe AI and its purpose to your great-grandparent?
- If I were worried, would you reassure me about the future of AI?
- Some would argue that key questions in AI are the same as those from a decade ago. Are we suffering from a lack of AI imagination?

AI and thriving societies

- What is your idea of an ideal society? And what would be the role and function of AI in it?
- Who gets to benefit from AI? Who might it exploit?
- Does AI cause an asymmetry in powers? If so, what are the building blocks behind it?
- How does AI affect the social contract?
- How unequally will the effects of AI be felt?
- Do we have the right (corporate/research/policy) instruments to build an AI beneficial to society today? If not, what are we missing?
- When would a society become 'ready' for AI? When should we start using AI? At what point would AI become ready for mass adoption?

In this questionnaire, AI is to be understood in its broadest sense rather than as a set of specific applications. This wide scope is motivated by the desire to invite experts to reflect on their personal relationship and beliefs on this technology.

Headlines point to AI radically transforming our societies. But will it do so in a way that benefits all communities? And how can we steward the development and deployment of AI-enabled tools to ensure their impact is positive?

Why are we building AI?

'We need to build AI because we need to advance in our societies and in our lives in different ways. And that means we build it for a lot of reasons. Some people build it because it's the next big mountain to climb. Some people build it because they want to find solutions to some of society's worst problems. And of course, some people build it because they think they can make money out of it.'

Peggy Hicks
Director, Thematic Engagement
Special Procedures and Right to Development Division
OHCHR

'It's partly Mount Everest. Because we can. But people have been thinking about it for so many decades. And we've had this idea that we could build machines that could think like we do. The meaning of that has changed so much over time. And there are a lot of benefits to building systems that can have some form of intelligence to help us do what we want to do. But we're also now beginning to perceive the dangers.'

Dame Wendy Hall
Regius Professor of Computer Science
University of Southampton

'We believe AI has the potential to be a powerful, transformative, and foundational technology that can help people address some of their most pressing challenges, as well as be assistive and complement their problem-solving and creativity, empowering them to do imaginative and incredible things. At the same time, it's also going to allow us to tackle some of society's most pressing challenges, ranging from climate change, sustainability, and even contribute to challenges like the global Sustainable Development Goals.'

James Manyika
Senior Vice President, Research, Technology & Society
Google

‘We need to put in place guardrails that predict against all the ways in which AI may undermine human rights, including the right to work, the right to health, the right to education, the right to artistic achievement, and of course [...] privacy and freedom of expression.’

Peggy Hicks
Director, Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division
OHCHR

AI governance

- Is the 'responsible' development of AI a useful framework for governing AI?

- How would you operationalize the governance of AI technologies? What entities and/or organizational structures are capable of guiding the beneficial development of AI?

- How can multi-stakeholder processes, including those involving states, communities and the private sector, guide the beneficial development of AI?

- Does AI need democracy, or does democracy need AI?

- Who should be accountable for the development, deployment and use of AI? Should end-users be accountable?

Traditional governance models are ill equipped to address unprecedented and fast-evolving technologies. Questions remain about how to ensure AI is designed, developed and deployed safely and with appropriate oversight.

Ethics and human rights

- Can AI be developed and used ethically?

- How can AI strengthen and not undermine human rights?

- What are the 'less visible' effects and implications of AI on ethics and human rights?

Human rights are central to what it means to be human. They define freedoms and entitlements that allow human beings to live in liberty and with dignity. Yet many sets of AI principles and strategies do not mention human rights at all.

If I were worried, would you reassure me about the future of AI?

'If you were worried about the future of AI, I wouldn't reassure you. I would try to find out what worries you. I think it's really valuable insight and intelligence. I think that it's useful to understand when there's been a miscommunication or a misconception. But it's also important to recognize that diverse communities will have diverse perspectives on the threats, the risks and the opportunities. So it's really important that people can share and express their concerns about AI rather than simply be reassured.'

Milly Zemeta
Former Head of Policy
Open Data Institute

'If you were worried about the future of AI, I think I'd have to share some of those concerns with you. But I think we have to be very careful not to assume the worst. There are all sorts of ways in which AI could make changes that are incredibly beneficial to people. The big concern right now is that we do not have the guardrails in place to make sure that we're pushing AI in that direction, as opposed to more destructive directions.'

Peggy Hicks
Director, Thematic Engagement
Special Procedures and Right to Development Division
OHCHR

'We do have to be worried about the things that we have always worried about with any new technology, which is that it's going to be used for ill by human beings. It'll be used in ways which cause harm, and in ways which are abusive and oppressive. And that's especially worrying when we've got technologies like this that outpace the development of controls and guardrails that we try to put around that self-same technology.'

Carl Miller
Author

'It is much harder to regulate retrospectively than it is to think about the future. Yet this is what we do all the time. Take plane crashes, for instance. We only bring in the regulation after the first plane has crashed. We need to consider what we will do when AI gets really clever and ask itself the questions […] it wants to answer.'

Dame Wendy Hall
Regius Professor of Computer Science, University of Southampton

Narratives and the 'techlash'

- Who gets to set the narrative on AI?

- Is AI the defining technology of our century? Does AI change everything everywhere all at once?

- What's the one thing you hear said about AI that drives you mad?

- If you could put one message about AI on a city centre billboard, what would it be?

AI narratives are underpinned by common assumptions about how AI will contribute to economic, societal and military advantage. But what is the truth behind the stories? What needs debunking?

International affairs

- How should nations collaborate on AI development?

- Will AI disrupt international and regional power dynamics? If so, how?

- Will AI power put big tech companies on par with powerful states?

- Can we 'decolonize' AI?

- Is there such a thing as universal AI? And should AI be universal, or should it be contextual?

AI is often described as a pillar of economic, military and geopolitical power. Put another way, AI is seen as a race with winners and losers. Where is it right for nations to compete? What role should states play in determining the pace of change?

Is the development of AI asking us new questions?

'I think we're actually living through one of the most abundant periods of new questions in history. The emergence of generative AI has transformed the public's recognition of what AI can do. But the new questions shouldn't obscure the old: how might this technology change my life? How might AI swing that pendulum of power from one place to another?'

Carl Miller
Author

'The questions about AI a decade or two ago were very different. At that time, people were wondering whether this technology was ever going to make any progress. Was it going to work?

But the questions now have changed. We've made incredible progress with systems that are capable of doing things that we once didn't think were possible. And so, the questions are now more about how much further can we improve the capabilities of the systems? How do we fully harness their potential? How do we apply them to tackle some of our most profound challenges?'

James Manyika
Senior Vice President Research, Technology & Society
Google

'We're still at the stage where this stuff is very experimental. We risk getting into the 'runaway train' situation. What we need to worry about is how we regulate these systems so that the builders of the systems know what they're responsible for, and so that governments know what they're responsible for. We as citizens also need to know what we're responsible for and where the law lies, where the law and regulation fit into this space. You could argue that with generative AI we are trying to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted by trying to regulate something that already exists. But we've done it before.'

Dame Wendy Hall
Regius Professor of Computer Science
University of Southampton

'Realizing all the benefits that this technology could deliver to people and society will require a combination of the right incentives, regulations and approaches, but most importantly the involvement of everybody. We need to involve ethicists, social scientists and many others who can take a comprehensive view of whether we're pursuing this in the right way and whether it will benefit everyone.'

James Manyika
Senior Vice President,
Research, Technology &
Society, Google

AI research and community

- Who gets to fund AI?

- What makes a good AI research and development team?

- How can the technical and non-technical communities communicate better?

- What is the one key under-studied and under-appreciated area the AI community ought to pay more attention to? And what is the one area of focus the AI community pays too much attention to, and why?

Critical to understanding AI is understanding the people, organizations and interests behind its growth and development. Who should be driving this technology, and what responsibilities do they have?

AI & Society High-Level Taskforce

We invited researchers, experts and practitioners from around the world to help us shape the critical questions that the rapid development and deployment of AI demand.

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