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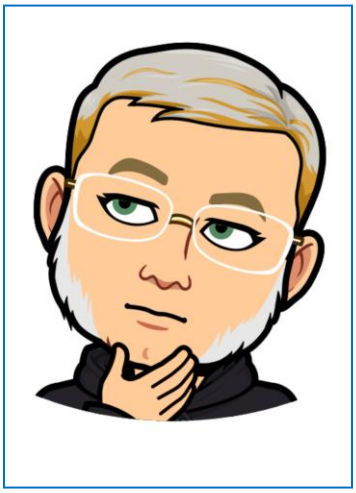
Vintage Voice

Is there a stye in our AI?

By Rick Dana Barlow



SCHAUMBURG, IL (November 1, 2025) – Unless you've nestled snugly in a bubble for the last few years you may have heard about a little technological wonder called artificial intelligence (AI). The youngsters have been raving about it for years now as this little friend of theirs has helped them skate through schooling, particularly during those pesky pandemic years when strict educational rules and standards about learning, researching and writing papers and testing were stretched out and relaxed like a wool sweater on a mid-summer sweltering day.

Not to be outdone, the adults have jumped on the bandwagon, too, marveling at how AI can make their lives so much easier by doing things for them that they are more than happy to delegate to "virtual assistants."

Perhaps the dialogue in an October 26, 2025, "Betty" cartoon sums it up most acutely, if not whimsically. Betty's son asks AI in his smartphone, "A.I., explain what you do and why people need you." A.I. happily replies in the third person, "A.I. exists to solve problems, answer questions, process data, make recommendations, do repetitive tasks and enhance human qualities." Betty's son thinks that's so cool, but Betty's not so sure. She laments in the final dialogue

bubble of the last panel, “Since most of my human capabilities have been taken over by my phone, those things were what I had left.” Rim shot, mic drop.

Alas, blockchain laments its fate as well, having thought wistfully it would have enjoyed its buzzy popularity on the corporate fad-o-meter a few years longer. To the oh-so-15-minutes-ago popularity discard heap for you, blockchain!

In fact, we haven’t seen such excitement since the dot-com bubble about a quarter-century ago – and some of that was fueled by the Year 2000 “crisis” that motivated Chicken Little to turn the tables and poke fun at humans. Of course, millions and billions of dollars sloshed back-and-forth through the online arteries and veins, pumping the heart of the global economy until it finally burst. We all returned to catching our breaths after riding along the unchained euphoria of a digital roller coaster.

Some analysts, observers, pundits and talking heads are burning down the house, claiming that AI is nothing more than another “once in a lifetime” bubble on the “road to nowhere.” No apologies to David Byrne fans.

Still, all the debate, discourse and dilly-dallying around AI makes for great media exploration – social, traditional or otherwise – even the “fictual” (fiction-based facts) for conspiracy theorists and cultural echo chamberphiles.

Let’s be frank. AI seemingly, purportedly and in a number of ways, demonstrably can do a lot. Much of it is productive and useful with good intent and purpose even as a growing amount of it is counterproductive and nefarious with evil intent and purpose.

Rather than highlight the good, the bad and the ugly, let’s tiptoe around the fascinating, the dubious and the “ohmigosh, really?” elements. Disclaimer: Certainly, any technology can be abused and used for malevolence as well as for improvement, AI being no exception. Unfortunately, the creatively inventive minds and the innovatively devious minds playing within this new digital sandbox are blurring ethical boundaries even to the point of stepping through legal fencing, courtesy of some well-placed governmental and judicial wire cutting.

What can AI do

Media reporting is rife with examples of how AI can build apps to do what prompt engineers and general users want to varying degrees.

AI can be used to provide directions, share advice, summarize notes, track conversations, numbers and tasks and translate languages in real time.

AI can be used to "doctor" old grainy grayscale and sepia-toned photographs as well as blurry video recordings. Now you can see what Uncle Hobart from the 1850s actually looked like in full color. AI also can animate him to dance and to sing you that contemporary hit, "Pop Goes the Weasel."

Ideally, AI is designed to help humans with much of what they need or want to do, occupying the digital space between clinical decision-support software from the late 20th century to the famed computer on the fictional Starship Enterprise in the 23rd century.

Students in elementary school, junior high/middle school, high school, college and grad school have been using AI to "assist" in completing homework assignments; taking exams; researching, outlining and/or writing essays, term papers and theses; calculating challenging math problems – both real and theoretical – and also creating computer code for programming. Essentially, AI replicates itself or sires digital offspring in a way, which probably should generate some alarm.

Still, some don't consider any of that "cheating" in the same way that Captain James T. Kirk viewed his reprogramming Starfleet Academy's computerized Kobayashi Maru "no-win scenario" character test for him to win as ingenuity. But there are long-term consequences to such actions. Even before the dawn of AI, kids and adults alike accessed "cheats" for video game progress as an electronic crutch. This likely should make us ponder whether this next generation or two – GenAlpha or GenBeta – as future adult consumers will have developed the ability and interest to mull and solve the challenges of life, which is a hallmark and an underpinning of the academic experience. In short, if they don't mature intellectually that will have negative consequences on society and its progressive development.

Media outlets have reported AI “making up stuff” and misrepresenting summarized news items as well as respond to queries with wrong and even politically incorrect answers. Does that capability owe itself to the whims of the programmers or prompt engineers or something else?

AI also has cited non-existent – as in fake – references, studies and surveys as part of its response to queries and support for decisions.

AI can analyze your own work – whether you’re an artist, author, business person or entrepreneur – and replicate it in style for distribution.

AI can capture your voice – even individual words – and can use that to recreate your voice for charitable donation requests, sales and marketing calls and even conversations with friends, media outlets and relatives. Further, your recreated voice can be used within photo animations of your likeness.

There’s even an AI app that can analyze a photo of you and remove your clothing. Consider this going beyond simply splicing your head and placing it atop a person’s body that’s in a compromising position.

Media have reported that some are using AI for therapy to help them deal with emotional and mental issues. In this way, AI serve as a thoughtful “clinical” companion to humans, sort of a super-charged Teddy Ruxpin channeling Stuart Smalley.

Media also have reported that some men have developed emotional relationships with AI that extend beyond virtual dating and into virtual matrimony – not necessarily in place of human companionship or nuptials either (as their “accepting” dates and mates are shown rolling their eyes). Further, AI code can be manipulated to provide certain directed responses – like the guy who reprogrammed an AI bot to favor him and his point of view whenever his spouse asked the bot for advice. Another AI bot (one with a programmed conscience?) declined to say anything that could be perceived as negative when someone asked culturally sensitive and provocative questions for fear of inciting violence.

AI also can complicate environmental and sustainability concerns. Data centers occupy significant real estate, consume considerable amounts of energy and power (electricity generated by fossil fuel no less), emit a great of heat and

require a significant amount of water (and other “immersion” fluids) to ensure the technology remains cool.

Used wisely, AI can be a valuable tool to expand your capabilities for success. Used malevolently and nefariously, it can be downright dangerous, particularly in the realm of cybersecurity where breaches and hacks can steal and manipulate data and information for their own ends and to ruin reputations.

What AI cannot do

Just as Superman possesses weaknesses, such as exposure to kryptonite (a variety of colors over the years) and a vulnerability to magic, AI contains its own shortcomings. They include foundational legal challenges and intellectual property issues, producing prompting snafus, generating first-person original experiences and playing “Mad Libs” without nuanced programming.

By and large, AI cannot really create anything from scratch. It only curates, imitates and modifies. AI can be trained on blueprints, constructs, frameworks, standards and structures, but not necessarily in how to use language creatively, humorously or satirically in illogical or unorthodox ways as humans do to create specific feelings or moods that seem nonsensical. The perfect example involves playing a game of “Mad Libs” where you’re asked a random set of questions for single-word-or-phrase responses that then are inserted into the blank spaces of unrelated narrative designed for laughs. Roughly three decades ago, IBM’s Deep Blue supercomputer may have dueled and outdueled world chess champion Garry Kasparov, but don’t expect AI to perform audience-prompted live improv … at least not yet.

You can program it to write science fiction like Isaac Asimov, cultural/political commentary like George Orwell, crime stories like Raymond Chandler or even spy stories like James Bond creator Ian Fleming, but that’s only because AI can reference the (pre-loaded?) published texts by these individuals and mimic their respective styles.

AI also collects and curates material from other websites (not always with proper attribution) without checking accuracy, reliability and validity even though some may provide weblinks for you to double-check, akin to Wikipedia. Does this

additional step not tarnish the “efficiency” argument?” AI has been found to “hallucinate,” as in “fabricate” content, too.

Intellectual property violations linger as a particularly thorny issue in AI’s development as media reports surfaced early on highlighting much of AI’s initial programming and learning protocols were based on posted, printed and published materials protected under copyright and trademark laws. Hence, those who were creating AI bots for revenue and profit generation needed to rely on content already in the public domain or obtain expressed written consent from the content owners and/or invest in licensing deals for compensated access. Otherwise, technically, that’s considered plagiarism, which is illegal.

This raises a domino effect question: If an organization uses AI that stems from illegally obtained and used material, then how might that organization fare in court? Might content creators and distributors saddle AI companies with litigation for years for their use of copyrighted or trademarked material to program their bots until some compromise or settlement is reached?

What’s curious is that some judges have shown a willingness to relax and soften intellectual property shackles because the violations actually are working toward the common and public good, paving the way for enthusiastic ethical, legal and moral debates.

Adapting one of the most famous quotes of Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) in the 1987 film, “Wall Street,” for AI in place of greed, “The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that AI, for lack of a better word, is good. AI is right. AI clarifies, cuts through and captures the evolutionary spirit. AI, in all of its forms – AI for life, for money, for love, knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind.”

When you think about it, if an organization uses robots so that it doesn’t need to employ as many workers, then if that same organization uses AI does it need as many management types – lower, middle, upper, senior – if AI can make many decisions for them?

Let’s be honest. AI can do a lot. This listing scrapes the surface of possibilities and what’s been explored and being explored in the media. But all of this proves one thing: Just because something can be done doesn’t necessarily mean it should or

needs to be done – particularly without guard rails, legal protections and secular controls that empower society to learn and proliferate safely.

Let's be honest: It's high time to start tilling the AI garden – from its roots to its shoots – so that it can help humans lead the way toward future progress in culture, healthcare and society.

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