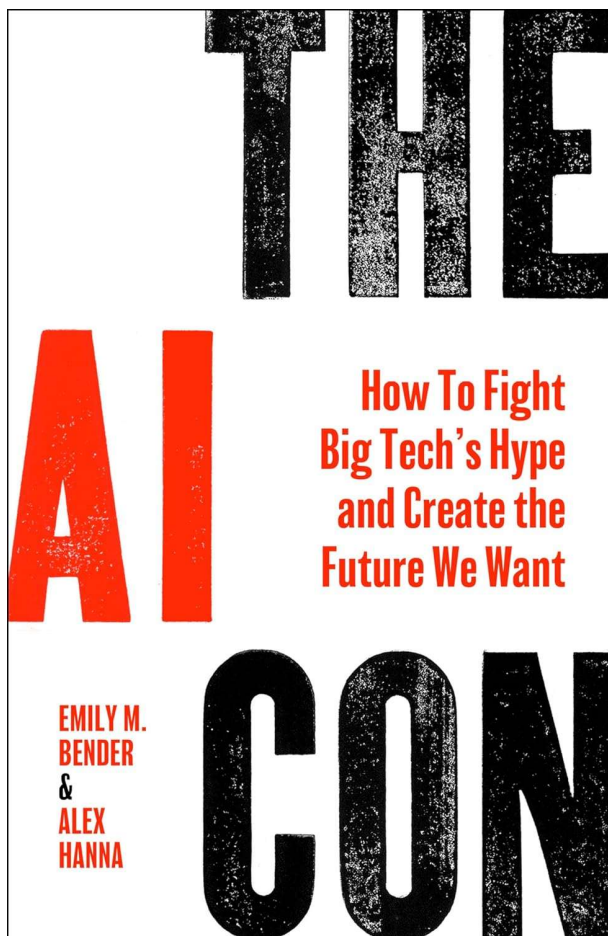


‘The AI Con’ should be required reading on AI fears

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“The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech’s Hype and Create the Future We Want” by Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna. New York, NY: Harper (an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers), 2025, 288 pages, \$32.00 (hardcover).



“This book is the result of a joyful collaboration between a linguist (Emily) and a sociologist (Alex), rooted in a shared drive to deflate AI hype through analysis grounded in our academic fields and pointed humor,” Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna explain at the beginning of “The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech’s Hype and Create the Future We Want,” their refreshingly grounded and ultimately powerful take-down of an emerging industry that will never be able to live up to its audacious promises. “We met online in 2020, participating in broader discussions about the impacts of technologies sold as ‘AI’. In 2020 and 2021, we collaborated (with three other scholars, led by the inimitable Deb Raji) on some scientific papers critiquing the dismal evaluation and data handling practices of the field.”

“Since then, we’ve continued to use social media to take down ridiculous claims of tech boosters as well as bad journalism that fawns over them,” the authors continue. “This work can be trying, since speaking out against people’s favorite toys, tech leaders who appeal to a particular type of nerdy masculinity, and exploitative practices draws all kinds of negative pushback.”

I have no doubt.

“The AI Con” is one of the more extensively researched manuscripts I have reviewed recently, with 58 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the seven chapters that comprise the main text. The literary style is amazingly accessible, especially given the technical backgrounds and academic credentials of the co-authors. There were only a few passages scattered throughout the narrative where I had to consult outside references to fully understand the concepts being discussed.

One of the features of “The AI Con” I found particularly endearing was the way Bender and Hanna back up every critique they make of AI – and they make several throughout this concise compendium of a technology that’s been grossly oversold to the public – with solid evidence and a convincing case that is difficult to refute. To be honest, I have always been skeptical of many of the paradigm-bending assertions by those who seek to benefit financially from the full-scale adoption of artificial intelligence. So admittedly, this addition to the growing archive of efforts to predict how AI will eventually influence virtually every aspect of our lives could constitute confirmation bias.

But I don't think so.

For example, in the second chapter, "It's Alive! The Hype of Thinking Machines," the authors meticulously deconstruct the idea of a machine that can emulate human consciousness. They make the argument that this is only possible if we redefine what it means to be human and then superimpose this forced characterization over what the technology actually seeks to accomplish through increasingly complex algorithms that still operate within the confines of a limited concept of what it means to be human.

"AI hype reduces the human condition to one of computability, quantification, and rationality," Bender and Hanna observe. "If we are just organic versions of computing machines, then we should interact with these software systems as if they were silicon-based life-forms, whether friends or foe. In this line of argumentation, humans can be reduced to our outputs and the ways in which we interact with our environment, with people, and with written and visual production. If we accept that, consciousness can be judged by how it manifests in phenomena that are external to the mind."

"Viewing humans as a kind of machine has far-fetched implications for the field of computing and how AI is hyped up in broader circles," they add.

Exactly.

A Professor of Linguistics at the University of Washington, Bender is also Faculty Director of the Computational Linguistics Master of Science Degree Program as well as an Affiliate Faculty Member in the School of Computer Science and Engineering and the Information School. In 2023, she was included in the inaugural Time 100 list of the most influential people in AI. Hanna is Director of Research at the Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR) and a Lecturer in the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley. Her articles have appeared in the Washington Post, the Financial Times, the Atlantic, and Time.

Without a doubt, one of my favorite chapters was the second to last, "I'm Sorry, Dave, I'm Afraid I Can't Do That: AI Doomers, AI Boosters, and Why None of That Makes Sense." Here, among several issues related to the topic at hand, is one that I'll bet many of those thinking critically about the potential impact of AI on our collective future have not contemplated:

"There's something perverse in the call for those concerned with social justice to subsume their goals and research under the umbrella of AI safety. This reminds me of the idea of color-blind racism – when people in power don't talk about race, they end up reinforcing racism and white supremacy precisely because they don't talk about how existing institutions are harmful for people of color and need to be reformed or abolished. The people working on AI safety, predominantly white men in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, claim to be safeguarding 'everyone', and that therefore their concerns are more existential (and more important) than those raised by people focused on racial and economic quality. Trying to 'join forces' in such a context would mean constantly having to fight for the very validity of the issues we are trying to address, draining time and resources from actually addressing them."

Absolutely. As Bender and Hanna credibly contend, the more you delve into AI and all the avowals being made by its supporters and distractors at all levels, the more you come to realize that AI is just another bandwagon in a long list of bandwagons that have been around since the dawn of civilization. The truth is every technological innovation has always been accompanied by those preaching something to the effect that "this will change everything." And whereas all technological progress inevitably precipitates potentially profound changes, the unintended consequences more often than not outweigh the benefits being espoused and overestimated by its chief proponents.

"Our current hype cycle will end, and this bubble will burst, with luck sooner rather than later," the authors note in the final chapter. "But history shows it's unlikely to be the last. Next time around,

some of the names of the technologies will differ, as will the specific claims about what they can do, but the dynamics of hype are likely to be the same. The more people are prepared to identify and resist the hype, the smaller and less destructive the hype bubble will be.”

I could not agree more. “The AI Con” should be required reading for anyone who thinks the current revolution will lead to either Shangri-La or Armageddon. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.

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