

My Frenemy, AI

By Elizabeth Barr



Photos by Elizabeth Barr

“AI” and I already have a relationship that is as complicated and complex as I knew it eventually would be...but surprisingly sooner than I expected. And by “AI,” I mean that the acronym AI for artificial intelligence looks like the nickname “AI” in many fonts. I wildly enjoy this little bit of free fun and use the name almost fondly in many conversations to reference both artificial intelligence and the algorithms that run so much of our lives now.

As a recent example, when I had family visiting from out of town, I missed a week of work at my online gig taking phone calls. When I got back to it, it was hard going to get my success rate back up to usual. On the one hand, I understand there are many factors involved in the AI-based algorithm for how calls are routed and who gets what kind of calls and I don't hold that against the business at all. But on the other hand, I did also say, “AI is jealous of me spending time with my human family so

won't be sending me any good calls for a while.” It's a little bit of a joke, yes, but Human-AI relationships are already starting to feel more like relationships in futuristic stories than I am entirely comfortable with, and especially with how fast the adaptation is occurring.

I think we need to be careful to not overpersonify the lines of code that are increasingly embodied into human-like speech, text, or robots. These relationships are reminiscent of even such core human relationships as parent-child and I doubt the primal brain quite understands the difference. When AI easily provides me with instant summaries of years of research on any topic, or with detailed instructions for any project, my adult-self who's in a hurry does appreciate it. Reframed, though, that same moment also seems like an overly helpful helicopter parent stealing a learning opportunity from a toddler. “I can do it myself!” I want to say, like any toddler would.

Working with AI is like meeting someone new—it feels exciting and fun—but just like with people, appearances can be deceiving. I'm not afraid of AI but I do want to get to know each other a little (a lot!) better first, before I fully commit. Since AI already knows me so well, and will by design continue to learn endlessly, infinitely more, it's on me to set and maintain what small personal boundaries I can as I take time to learn more about this new presence.

What can I do?

Understand how it works, at least at a basic level. Information is so readily available that I admittedly don't have much patience for not trying to understand at least some basics about how these tools are created, trained, and deployed. Even though I'm not personally interested enough in the AI revolution to keep up with the detailed minute-to-minute changes, I'm also not ready to give up entirely on being aware of what's going on, either.

Be deliberate about how, when, or if I want to use AI tools, and learn how to recognize when the option is available. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't, but I try to be intentional about those decisions and be aware of times I may be able to opt-out. Be transparent and disclose when I use an AI tool for a project, especially if that's not obviously clear.

Learn more about the history of technological revolutions and the effects those have had on the world, not just in terms of the technical aspect, but also the mental and emotional

impacts of those changes on people. AI is only the next in a long line of world-changing technologies, so hopefully we have learned a thing or two by now about how to manage that level of change humanely.

And finally, know it is okay to take a break and spend some time apart. As amazing and helpful as AI can be, sometimes I want time by myself to do something entirely on my own or only with other plain old-fashioned humans. My example this week is these silly painted eyeglasses looking out from my garden fence as they keep watch over the cucumbers. Fun as they are, they also satisfy something deep in my heart. I had the idea randomly one day as a way to repurpose old reading glasses and even though I know that something similar is almost certainly online, I purposefully did not search for more ideas or look at examples of how other people have used old glasses as garden decorations. I figured out what I wanted to do, asked other people for ideas about the project, and we did the whole thing entirely on our own, without even inviting AI to the party. We don't need to do everything together, after all...right? 🐦

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