The AIr Is Fine! (Or Is It?)

My eyes sting, everything has taken on a slight orange hue, and breathing has become more difficult and unpleasant as diffuse wildfire smoke reaches us in our valley. My body wants to get to cleaner air; that probably involves heading toward the coast. My fellow community member N has the same idea. I look online: the website map.purpleair.com accurately tells us that the AQI (US EPA PM2.5 air quality index) in our area is in the mid-to-high 100s, indicating that sensitive individuals may experience health effects. Curious what it will say, N then asks AI how the air is here in Dexter. "Air quality in Dexter, Oregon is **good** right now," comes the response, followed by a paragraph describing all the ways in which that supposedly unpolluted air is not a risk to health.

Ironically, N's simple search for an answer—one that our senses as well as actual AQI readings immediately tell us is dramatically wrong—inadvertently contributes to air pollution elsewhere. As detailed in several articles in this issue, AI-assisted searches require exponentially more energy and resource use (by a factor of 10 or higher) than conventional online searches, and fuel the proliferation of data centers that foul local environments and communities—often far away from the people enlisting AI's services. As Ben Brownlow points out in our lead piece, "Elon Musk's Grok AI super-facility sucks the groundwater and fills the sky with exhaust, corroding the communities surrounding it near Memphis, Tennessee." This reality unfortunately hits very close to home for another community member, whose friends and relatives in Tennessee are actively suffering significant health impacts resulting from N's request for AI assistance combined with the millions more like it that will happen before either of us can get a good breath of better-quality air.

Even when AI gives accurate answers, it comes with those same costs. Yet it seems that some people—communitarians and non-communitarians alike—elevate it to almost godlike status, both trusting its answers and ignoring its collateral damage. Substantial parts of the population appear to accept it uncritically, even as others have misgivings. And its problematic ethical dimensions go far beyond its high energy demand and its impacts on ecosystems and quality of physical life (including air, water, land, sustenance) for populations that, disproportionately, are already marginalized and trod upon by the modern world. "Move fast and break things" is Silicon Valley's creed, and it seems to have reached its apotheosis in the development of AI—in its creators' disregard of the consequences of their choices, and in their rush to outcompete everyone else in advancing the technology, even if it means throwing caution to the wind (along with much particulate matter, especially in the vicinity of sprawling data centers).

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As I watch AI being promoted and in some cases essentially forced on users of other digital products, often presented as the miracle solution to all that ails us, I can't help but think about how chemical agriculture was presented to, sold to, and often also (via concerted economic pressure and sabotage of alternatives) forced upon farmers in this country and worldwide. The end result has been poisoned and depleted soils, widespread loss of biodiversity, concentration of wealth into fewer and fewer hands, and devastation and depletion of the farming population as farms needed to get larger to have any chance to survive. ("Get big or get out!" was the US Department of Agriculture's mantra starting in the Nixon administration, and most policies since then have only reinforced it.) Consolidation, homogenization, damaged ecosystems, and poverty of nutrition are the legacy of the chemical agriculture revolution. The same threatens to happen on a cultural level with the artificial intelligence revolution, which has many of the same and analogous effects on us and the physical world. Yet, like chemical agriculture, it is depicted as what will save us from our current challenges.

AI's genesis and spread also bears disturbing resemblances to colonialism; among those who look closely, it has become the poster child of cultural, intellectual, linguistic, and resource appropriation. "Everything it sees, it claims ownership of, and resells," is often not much of an oversimplification. It trains on pirated material, assuming for itself the work of millions of people (writers, artists, scientists, researchers, scholars, and more) who will not be compensated for its absorption and regurgitation of their efforts—which now profit

AI's investors, not the original creators. It replaces a more democratic, people-centered and -generated library of knowledge and cultural resources, and all the exchanges and relationships associated with that library's creation, with its own version—using various means, both overbearing and subtle, to funnel attention and profits to itself. In its most virulent form, it steals not only past work but present jobs, exploits whatever it can to achieve its ends, and seems to have no ethical or moral compass. It excels at amassing resources for a few, forcing itself on people, making other options more difficult to access, overwhelming by its omnipresence, and marginalizing those who don't get with the program.

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One thing I enjoy most about reading communications within an intentional community—whether they're internal notices, meeting notes, or public newsletters—is seeing the individual personalities expressed within them, each unique. I tend to read them to learn not only about their nominal contents, but about the human beings who created them, to appreciate their diverse means of expression, their personality quirks, their own forms of charm, humor, and seriousness, the ways they think and feel, the distinctive fonts and text color they may choose. Even a message about the driest subject matter can contain clues to the world of the person who documented it.

Yet more and more frequently, AI is being enlisted to "save time" and "make things easier and more consistent," in the process also robbing these communications of the very things that make them pleasurable to read, the humanity that created them. Instead, we are increasingly awash in flat, predictably formatted, formulaic, robotic messages—all the more painful to read when they transparently simulate (and fall flat on) coming from an actual person. As machines take over our communications and are enlisted to represent us, who do we become? How do we relate to one another when we are just a collection of avatars, increasingly fine-tuned—although sometimes embarrassingly muddled and turned into word

salad—by AI? What remains of us when we no longer form our own thoughts, feelings, insights, intuitions into our own words, and when even our art is computer-generated?

I far prefer the journey of imperfect, distinctive, idiosyncratic, authentic human communication to the destination of sanitized, perfectly character-less, cyber-generated communication. In that same way, to return to farming and gardening (I highly recommend it), I would always choose the diversity of organically and regeneratively-raised produce to be had at a local farmers' market—even if some of it is misshapen, unfamiliar, not-by-the-book, and/or accompanied by cryptic wisecracks from the farmer—to the monotony of industrial, chemically-raised produce from a supermarket.

Likewise, just as Big Ag constricts options not only in the present but in the future (including through consolidated seed companies that discontinue heirloom and open-pollinated varieties in favor of fewer, uniform, patented hybrids and GMOs), Big Tech, through tools such as AI, also threatens to diminish future intellectual and creative possibilities by constructing a homogenizing bottleneck in the present. It does this by encouraging tech-reliance, dependency, and attrition of our own capacities in favor of the ease of instant answers—effort we no longer need to make, thinking that we no longer need to do.

A few questions worth considering: Even when AI comes up with apparently cogent answers, might the data set its evident omniscience is based on be the same data set, the same deep-seated assumptions, that got us into our current global pickle? Or more perniciously, might it even be a deliberately distorted data set serving a particular political/economic agenda? (See Albert Bates' exploration of this in "The Algorithm Blues.") And might we be prone to surrendering our personal agency to AI in the same way that some of our ancestors (and contemporaries too) have surrendered it to their ideas of "God," or to political leaders who are "right about everything"?

Is AI helping us all to "grow up"? Or are we reenacting a childhood need for security, searching for a parent who will make everything right? Can this parent be relied upon? Or is it a mirage?

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In preparation for this issue, wanting to understand better the effects of AI and Big Tech, I started reading articles about them that I came across, compiling the links into a list for future reference. AI's potential impacts soon began to seem overwhelming in scope. I found it helpful—though only a little—to organize the articles into categories: Environmental and Social Costs, Resource Extraction and Wealth Concen-

tration; Competition, Force-Feeding, Dehumanizing; Theft from Creators, Job Loss; Impacts on Thinking, Writing, Education, Work; Contributions to Accelerated Pace of Life, Stupidity, Loneliness; Information Control, Power Consolidation, Surveillance, Oppression; Apocalyptic Scenarios, Future Possibilities, Weaponization; AI as Religion; and (perhaps most promising, after all that) Not Living Up to the Hype.

While not all intentional communities are equally conscious about their food choices, it is easy to find communities that are committed to producing and consuming food grown with organic, regenerative practices, that essentially boycott Big Ag in order to support and participate in an alternative instead. A similar ethical lens applies to many other areas of community life—groups, especially values-driven groups, often strive to develop a keen awareness of the ecological, environmental-justice, and social impacts of their daily choices, and to take actions that align with their values, that represent the world they would like to help usher into being. Not everyone will agree, and some group members will be more hard-core than others, but "drawing the line," at least *somewhere* (for example, no disposable water bottles at group events; no commercial television blaring in the main lodge; no fast food served in throwaway containers for dinner), is the norm rather than the exception.

This same kind of communal insistence on an ethical, bigger-picture lens has lagged in relation to digital technologies, which have taken over our world and become inescapable today even more than the products of Big Ag. It is certainly easier to grow your own garden than to find substitutes for all the ways we now depend on digital technology. (Most of us use at least some digital and online tools; for creating and distributing this magazine, they've become essential.) Yet AI, with its exponentially larger impacts, has upped the game. Within the last few months, I have become unable to open up pdfs of the latest article or issue layouts to proofread without having the text space cut into by the less-than-helpful message, "This appears to be a long document. Save time by reading a summary," followed by a link to "Generative AI User Guidelines" and by an "AI Assistant" that sometimes occupies a third of my screen. There's no universal setting to disable those; each time, I need to click on an "X" or two to proceed.

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As annoying as much of this is, and despite the dismay and even outrage it is easy to feel when reading about what's "behind the curtain" of AI, things are al-

most never as black-and-white as strong expressions of opinion might imply. Articles in a separate category on my list document "Possible Benefits"—and there are some notable ones, in targeted applications.

I read about AI-guided robot weeders that could replace chemical herbicides on a massive scale; a research project to use AI to decipher dolphin language; potential medical applications, from diagnosis to finding cures for currently untreatable diseases using drugs we already have; an effort to use AI to revive a nearly-extinct native language; ways that AI can assist some handicapped populations. In these cases AI may assume an entirely different role than simply being a crutch, a substitute for real human effort. Here, its deployment appears to be more noble than exploitive in motivation—and plausibly, at least when considered in isolation, a "net positive."

When it comes to AI and digital tools more generally, how are we to distinguish the frivolous, the corrosive, and the dangerous from that which may be worth the impacts, and truly helpful? And is "the truly helpful" something we can count on into the future, or are we indeed headed for a collapse in which all of these tools that we have come increasingly to rely upon disappear, leaving us to fend for ourselves without them? These are the kinds of questions people in community are well-positioned to discuss—not in online flame-out sessions, but face-to-face.

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To issue a blanket condemnation of all digital technologies in the pages of this magazine would be akin to taking a private vehicle on a nationwide road trip to speak on local radio and television stations in protest of the existence of private vehicles, roads, radios, and televisions. It could be done, but it might not be convincing.

Instead, anyone writing for or reading COMMUNITIES likely occupies some middle ground—willing and wanting to engage in the world we currently exist in, to recognize the nuances and paradoxes, contradictions in our own lives, the tightrope walk between attempting

to adhere to strongly-held but perhaps overly-rigid values, and compromising those values, possibly too much, in the interests of survival (an important element of survival being our ability to co-operate and in some way fit in with diverse others who may see certain things quite differently).

If I were to rephrase this issue's theme, it would be **CommunITy AND DystopAIa**, because it's obvious that information technology has a major role to play in community life and in the communities movement today. Its uses and benefits feature in many of the articles herein—along with the downsides of overuse. No one decrying the omnipresence of screens in this issue actually boycotts screens entirely; and most of AI's greatest skeptics herein seem to have chosen to engage at least in a limited way with AI even after recognizing its resource and other impacts. Whereas I myself haven't done that, I also didn't turn down the several instances of AI-generated graphics submitted, nor the one partially AI-generated article, which a hard-line purist might have. And we also include a number of "pro-AI" stories, which, while sometimes acknowledging reasons for caution, present AI breakthroughs as overall a good thing for community, humanity, and the world. Anyone looking for a "party line" will need to look elsewhere. We each contain multitudes—as does this issue.

No matter how clearly we may see things through our own individual lenses, I believe every other lens is worth looking through, to weigh how it can inform our own understanding and choices, and to help us engage in the conversations we need to have about the role of digital tools in our lives. Hopefully we can do that with compassion and caring, rather than by "moving fast and breaking things" (including relationships) whether that's through unbridled techno-optimism or through a techno-pessimism that prevents us from stepping, even for a moment, into one another's (virtual) shoes. ❧

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Further Reading

(clickable hyperlinks also available online at gen-us.net/air)

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