

The AI we should fear is already here

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Alarm over the rise of artificial intelligence tends to focus too much on some distant point in the future, when the world achieves Artificial General Intelligence. That is the moment when — as AI's boosters dream — machines reach the ability to reason and perform at human or superhuman levels in most activities, including those that involve judgment, creativity and design.

AI detractors have focused on the potential danger to human civilization from a super-intelligence if it were to run amok. Such warnings have been sounded by tech entrepreneurs [Bill Gates](#) and [Elon Musk](#), physicist [Stephen Hawking](#) and leading AI researcher [Stuart Russell](#).

We should indeed be afraid — not of what AI might become, but of what it is *now*.

Almost all of the progress in artificial intelligence to date has little to do with the imagined Artificial General Intelligence; instead, it has concentrated on narrow tasks. AI capabilities do not involve anything close to true reasoning. Still, the effects can be pernicious.

Narrow AI is already displacing workers. My [research](#), with David Autor, Jonathon Hazell and Pascual Restrepo, finds that firms that increase their AI adoption by 1 percent reduce their hiring by approximately 1 percent. And of course narrow AI is powering new monitoring technologies used by corporations and governments — as with the [surveillance state](#) that Uyghurs live under in China. It is also being used in the U.S. justice system for [bail decisions](#) and, now increasingly, in [sentencing](#). And it is warping public discourse on [social media](#), hampering the functioning of modern democracies.

The labor-market effects of AI may be the [most ominous](#). The U.S. economy once created plentiful good jobs — paying decent wages and providing job security and career-building opportunities — for workers with all kinds of backgrounds and skills. From the end of World War II to the mid-1970s, the United States witnessed not just robust employment growth but also rapid [wage growth](#) for both high-education and low-education workers.

This growth stopped long before AI. From the 1980s onward, median wages stagnated. Men with less than a college degree started experiencing [sharp declines](#) in their real earnings.

During that period, [automation](#) and corporations' off-shoring jobs to other countries drove the declines. But now AI is accelerating the trend, approaching or sometimes even exceeding human productivity in some very specific tasks in offices, warehouses and elsewhere. Many employers, focused on cost-cutting, will jump at any opportunity to eliminate jobs using these nascent technologies.

[Some economists](#) think fears of automation and AI displacing workers are overblown. [They argue](#) that as work becomes more AI-automated, the resulting productivity gains will spearhead labor demand in other parts of the economy, and sometimes even in the same firms doing the AI-driven automation.

If AI technologies were truly spectacular in the tasks they performed today, the argument would have some validity. Alas, current AI technologies are not just far from general intelligence; they are not even that good at things that are second nature to humans — such as [facial recognition](#), [language comprehension](#) and [problem-solving](#). This means a double whammy for labor, because AI technologies displace labor and don't generate any of the labor-demand boost that would have resulted if the technology had delivered more meaningful productivity gains.

Other applications of AI are likely to exacerbate the growing power of corporations and capital over labor, adding to these troubling trends. AI enables much better [monitoring](#) of workers — for example, in warehouses, fast-food restaurants and the delivery business.

The applications of AI in government decision-making, most importantly [in the criminal justice system](#), are no less worrying. Existing evidence suggests that algorithms are inheriting and sometimes [intensifying](#) existing biases and inequities.

Then there is AI's damage to democratic discourse and politics. This is not only because of [algorithmic misinformation](#) in social media but also because the growing ability of companies and governments to [monitor and manipulate](#) the behaviors of millions of people, which is fundamentally inconsistent with true democracy.

Every new technology creates challenges, necessitating critical decisions that determine who benefits and who loses out, and whether the benefits justify the damage.

This is doubly true for AI, and not just because of its pervasive effects throughout society and impacts on areas typically untouched by other technologies, such as human judgment. It is also because there are many different ways in which the future of AI can be shaped: Will AI be allowed to work increasingly to displace and monitor humans, or steered toward [complementing and augmenting](#) human capabilities, creating new opportunities for workers?

These choices need oversight from society and government to prevent misuses of the technology and to regulate its effects on the economy and democracy. If the choices are left in the hands of AI's loudest enthusiasts, decisions that benefit the decision-makers and impose myriad costs on the rest of us become more likely.

The best way to reverse this trend is to recognize the tangible costs that AI is imposing right now — and stop worrying about evil super-intelligence.