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# It's Time to Believe the AI Hype

Some pundits suggest generative AI stopped getting smarter. The explosive demos from OpenAI and Google that started the week show there's plenty more disruption to come.



OPENAI VIA WIRED STAFF

 SAVE

Tech pundits are fond of using the term “inflection points” to describe those rare moments when new technology wipes the board clean, opening up new threats

and opportunities. But one might argue that in the past few years what used to be called out as an inflection point might now just be called “Monday.”

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This is an edition of [Steven Levy's \*Plaintext\*](#) newsletter.

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Certainly that applied this week. OpenAI, denying rumors that it would unveil either an AI-powered search product or its next-generation model GPT-5, instead announced something different, but nonetheless eye-popping, on Monday. It was a new flagship model called GPT-4o, to be made available for free, which uses input and output in various modes—text, speech, vision—for disturbingly natural interaction with humans. What struck many observers about the demo was how playful and even provocative the emotionally expressive chatbot was—but also imbued with the encyclopedic knowledge of data sets encompassing much of the world's knowledge. CEO Sam Altman expressed the obvious in a one word tweet: “Her.” That movie—where the protagonist falls in love with a seductive, flirty chatbot—has been evoked endlessly of late. But the reference has a special kick when it comes from someone whose company has basically just built the damn thing like the screenplay was a blueprint. Also crazy was another demo posted by OpenAI that involved one chatbot scanning a scene with a camera and a second chatbot asking it questions. Poor Greg Brockman, the OpenAI cofounder running the demo, had to endure humiliation while the two robots exchanged views on his fashion and decor choices, and even taunted him with songs about it.

On Tuesday, another inflection point. At its annual I/O developers conference, Google announced a raft of AI advancements, including a rollout of a new version of its most powerful AI model, Gemini Pro. It also introduced a new product in development called Project Astra. This multimodal chatbot can—like OpenAI's GPT-4o—process a continual flow of visual and aural information, and converse about what it sees. Since it knows just about everything, it can give you sophisticated answers on anything it lays eyes on, like a bug in a line of code, or what part of a speaker is the tweeter. Or, as in the demo video, if you ask it, “Where did I leave my glasses?” it will tell you just where they are, because nothing escapes its attention. Upon command, it will spin a story or compose a song on anything you point at. Google hinted that Astra might one day be built into smart glasses, which would log your life with a density that you could never

achieve. Then it presumably could answer questions like, “What happened in the conversation I had with that guy in the blue suit last January?” “What was that noise my car made last week?” “Are people being nicer to me these days, or is it just my imagination?”

Not everyone views this movement as transformational. Now that the initial shock of ChatGPT has been absorbed, some cynics and contrarians are having their say. One school of thought even suggests OpenAI and Google are showing us smoke and mirrors—arguing that the progress of LLM’s has plateaued. Yeah, they looked cool at first, goes this argument, but don’t expect much improvement for a while. So stop worrying about an algorithm taking your job.

Others charge that the supposedly world-changing AI movement of the 2020s is an outright sham. *A few months ago we thought that this stuff would kill us—but it can’t even get arithmetic right!* So goes the battle cry of the nay-sayers. The hype argument was nimbly represented this week by an essay in The New York Times by Julia Angwin, an excellent journalist who I predict will one day regret she ever submitted this screed. It could be that “Press Pause on the Silicon Valley Hype Machine” is destined to take its place alongside astronomer turned computer whiz Clifford Stoll’s notorious 1995 guest column in Newsweek where he declared the internet to be a passing fad, scoffing at predictions that one day we would book airline tickets, make restaurant reservations, and read news online. Plus, he said, as his intended coup de grace, if you try to search for the date of the Battle of Trafalgar, you can’t find it! And never will!

I must repeat: I admire Angwin as a tech-savvy investigative reporter. But I’m baffled that she attempts to debunk AI because of an analysis that allegedly shows that GPT-4 can’t really ace the Uniform Bar Exam with a score in the 90th percentile, as OpenAI claims. She found one researcher who says that the chatbot passed the bar by placing only as well as 48 percent of human beings who spent three years in classes and several months studying 24/7 to successfully pass the test. That’s like the story where someone takes a friend to a comedy club to see a talking dog. The canine comic does a short set with perfect diction. But the friend isn’t impressed—“The jokes bombed!”

Folks, when dogs talk, we’re talking Biblical disruption. Do you think that future models will do *worse* on the law exams?

If nothing else, this week proves that the rate of AI progress isn't slowing at all. Just ask the people building these models. "A lot of things have happened—internet, mobile," says Demis Hassabis, cofounder of DeepMind and now Google's AI czar, in a post-keynote chat at I/O. "AI is going maybe three or four times faster than those other revolutions. We're in a period of 25 or 30 years of massive change." When I asked Google search VP Liz Reid to name a big challenge, she didn't say it was to keep the innovation going—instead, she cited the difficulty of absorbing the pace of change. "As the technology is early, the biggest challenge is about even what's possible," she says. "It's understanding what the models are great at today, and what they are not great at but will be great at in three months or six months. The technology is changing so fast that you can get two researchers in the room who are working on the same project, and they'll have totally different views when something is possible."

There's universal agreement in the tech world that AI is the biggest thing since the internet, and maybe bigger. And when non-techies see the products for themselves, they most often become believers too. (Including Joe Biden, after a March 2023 demo of ChatGPT.) That's why Microsoft is well along on a total AI reinvention, why Mark Zuckerberg is now refocusing Meta to create artificial general intelligence, why Amazon and Apple are desperately trying to keep up, and why countless startups are focusing on AI. And because all of these companies are trying to get an edge, the competitive fervor is ramping up new innovations at a frantic pace. Do you think it was a *coincidence* that OpenAI made its announcement a day before Google I/O?

Skeptics might try to claim that this is an industry-wide delusion, fueled by the prospect of massive profits. But the demos aren't lying. We will eventually become acclimated to the AI marvels unveiled this week. The smartphone once seemed exotic; now it's an appendage no less critical to our daily life than an arm or a leg. At a certain point AI's feats, too, may not seem magical any more. But the AI revolution will change our lives, and change us, for better or worse. And we haven't even seen GPT-5 yet.



## Time Travel

Sure, I could be wrong about AI. But consider the last time I made such a call. In 1995, I joined Newsweek—the same organ where Clifford Stoll had just dismissed the internet as a hoax—and at the end of the year argued of this new digital medium, “This Changes Everything.” Some of my colleagues thought I’d bought into overblown hype. Actually, reality exceeded my hyperbole.

*In 1995, the Internet ruled. You talk about a revolution? For once, the shoe fits. “In the long run it's hard to exaggerate the importance of the Internet,” says Paul Moritz, a Microsoft VP. “It really is about opening communications to the masses.” And 1995 was the year that the masses started coming. “If you look at the numbers they're quoting, with the Web doubling every 53 days, that's biological growth, like a red tide or population of lemmings,” says Kevin Kelly, executive editor of WIRED. “I don't know if we've ever seen technology exhibit that sort of growth.” In fact, there's a raging controversy over exactly how many people regularly use the Net. A recent Nielsen survey pegged the number at an impressive 24 million North Americans. During the course of the year the discussion of the Internet ranged from sex to stock prices to software standards. But the most significant aspect of the Internet has nothing to do with money or technology, really. It's us.*

*“The Internet mediates human interaction better than any other medium,” says futurist Paul Saffo. “Getting in touch with each other is more fun than the coolest computer game, or the hottest information.” Just look at the various things you can do on the Internet. You use e-mail to zip messages to friends and associates, most often at no charge per letter, sending them across the world in a few seconds. You play elaborate games on role-playing “MUDs,” submerging yourself into the guise of a fantasy doppelganger, and even making virtual love with other people's jerry-built personae. You go on a Usenet newsgroup to flame the scum who disagreed with you on the virtues of last night's episode of “Deep Space Nine.” You use a software browser like Netscape Navigator to cruise the Web, an awesome construct where the publishing efforts of thousands of people are interlinked into a massive seething monument to human expression, enabling everything from shopping for a new car to keeping track of Madonna's biological clock. And when you create your own Website, you enjoy the same access to millions as do powerful entities like Sears, IBM or the U.S. government. In fact, if you didn't start a Website in 1995, your status may be endangered.*

*It's bad news for neo-Luddites: you'll have to put up with a continued fusillade of hyperbole about this new medium. No matter that most people in the United*

*States have yet to log on, let alone net-surf. In 1996, maybe they will. "If this year seemed like a big one for the Net, wait till the next one," says the EFF's John Barlow. "You ain't seen nothing yet."*



## Ask Me One Thing

Jessi asks, "What do you think of David Autor's assertion that AI will be good for the middle class?"

Thanks for the question, Jessi. You are referring to an essay by economist David Autor called, "[AI Could Actually Help Rebuild the Middle Class](#)." He paints an attractive, though admittedly speculative, picture of how AI could empower a population formerly not equipped to make critical business decisions. Good salaries go to those who make such decisions, and smart people who haven't had the opportunities to show their talents will now be able to rise to those posts. As Gemini 1.5 Pro puts it in a summary: "Autor envisions a scenario where AI complements human skills, enabling middle-skilled workers to perform tasks previously reserved for experts in fields like medical care, legal writing, or software development. This would not only create new opportunities for upward mobility but also potentially lead to higher wages and greater job satisfaction." Before I answer Jessi's question, I have to emphasize that *no one* has a handle on the second-order effects of the AI revolution. But that doesn't mean that we're just throwing darts when we speculate. Autor is an MIT economics professor who specializes in labor and inequality issues—one of the experts he talks about who is currently empowered!—so his words should be taken seriously.

But even without AI to put me on his level of expertise, I'm skeptical. I think it's just as likely that AI will concentrate decisionmaking power even more in those who currently pull the strings, by giving those technocrats the information they need to expand their domains. It is plausible that AI will allow some people to join that elite, but I don't see AI as creating millions of jobs for a massive new class of decisionmakers. Autor himself says that his vision, which he specifies is doggedly optimistic, will only happen with considerable investments with the goal of making that happen. I wouldn't bet on it. It may well be that AI creates new jobs

that mitigate its disruption of current ones, but I don't see it leveling off income equality in the way Autor suggests. We're in for a bumpy ride.

You can submit questions to [mail@wired.com](mailto:mail@wired.com). Write **ASK LEVY** in the subject line.



## End Times Chronicle

Florida governor Ron DeSantis signs a bill outlawing efforts to mitigate climate change, or even to admit it exists. Who's going to tell the ocean?



## Last but Not Least


Here's everything Google announced at I/O.

Google's full-body AI embrace will change search forever.

How do you shoot down a drone? With laser weapons, of course!

What happens when a middle-aged male reporter goes undercover as an OnlyFans influencer girlfriend.

Programming note: Next week, to kick off the US holiday weekend, Plaintext will take a week off. See you in June.



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[Steven Levy](#) covers the gamut of tech subjects for WIRED, in print and online, and has been contributing to the magazine since its inception. His weekly column, [Plaintext](#), is exclusive to subscribers online but the newsletter version is open to all—[sign up here](#). He has been writing about technology for... [Read more](#)

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— **dkblinux98** 2 weeks ago

Steven, I greatly respect your opinion and can't wait to read your article each Friday. But occasionally, like with this article, it reads as though you're being shielded from some of the available information. And that leads you to sound not quite yourself.

Here's what I mean. GenAI has been clearly shown to hallucinate. The now famous, "add Elmer's glue to your pizza sauce" is illustrative of the legitimate concerns you seem to mock.

Yes it is transformative. Yes it is here to stay. Yes it will get better. But perhaps it is too in the weeds for your weekly article to point out that what these hallucinations demonstrate is that scale won't solve the problem. And that it's a big problem and a barrier to improvement. Under the hood for GenAI there will need to be a new, as yet uninvented approach if it is going to make a leap to actually understand what it's saying.

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— **John** 2 weeks ago

We keep hearing how smart technology is but web pages still can't sign me in without messing up repeatedly. Self-checkouts still do not work. Half the tech in my car malfunctions to the point that I no longer use it. AI chatbots are idiots. Companies using technology and laying off humans to save coin are routinely making enormous mistakes that disrupt lives. High tech in retail just screws up the supply chain.

Here's something nobody will say: Most tech today doesn't work. We're just pretending that it does. The Newton, from 1998, could not understand what the user was writing and output nonsense. The current smartphones are no different. But while the press talked about the Newton fiasco, they are silent about the glitches on my iPhone that haven't been remedied in 10+ years of software updates. The reason is that tech now owns or is in bed with the media that used to cover it, so all the articles are hype. Keep your friends close, as Don Corleone said, and your enemies closer.

Respect Reply Share

Report

— **John** 2 weeks ago

> ...the demos aren't lying.

Funniest comment I've read in months. That's exactly what they're designed to do.

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**Prepare to Get Manipulated by Emotionally Expressive Chatbots**

The emotional mimicry of OpenAI’s new version of ChatGPT could lead AI assistants in some strange—even dangerous—directions.

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## ChatGPT Gets a Snappy, Flirty Upgrade With OpenAI's GPT-4o AI Model

Prepare for ChatGPT to get more emotional. OpenAI demonstrated upgrades that make the chatbot capable of snappier conversations and showed the AI helper picking up on and expressing emotional cues.

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## Chatbot Teamwork Makes the AI Dream Work

Experiments show that asking AI chatbots to work together on a problem can compensate for some of their shortcomings. WIRED enlisted two bots to help plan this article.

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## OpenAI's Chief AI Wizard, Ilya Sutskever, Is Leaving the Company

One day after OpenAI showed off an all-new, emotional version of ChatGPT, the company announced that chief scientist Ilya Sutskever is leaving the company. He had voted in November to fire CEO Sam Altman.

REECE ROGERS

## Astra Is Google's Answer to the New ChatGPT

Google's new voice-operated AI assistant, called Astra, can make sense of what your phone's camera sees. It was announced one day after OpenAI revealed a similar vision for ChatGPT.

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## **Google's AI Overviews Will Always Be Broken. That's How AI Works**

Google rushed out fixes after its AI search feature made errors that went viral. Fundamental limitations of generative AI mean that it will still screw up sometimes.

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## OpenAI Offers a Peek Inside the Guts of ChatGPT

Days after former employees said the company was being too reckless with its technology, OpenAI released a research paper on a method for reverse engineering the workings of AI models.

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## Pocket-Sized AI Models Could Unlock a New Era of Computing

Research at Microsoft shows it's possible to make AI models small enough to run on phones or laptops without major compromises to their smarts. The technique could open up new use cases for AI.

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