

Slide 1

I don't know about you, but I'm tired, really tired. As a young person, I feel like a passenger in a slow car crash, trying to warn the driver and being totally ignored. Not only is the driver not listening to me, they're actively trying to crash the car and outsourcing all responsibility to the underdeveloped and overvalued technology that sits in the centre console.

Slide 2

This insidious and pervasive feeling is spreading through all forms of modern life with the rising sea levels being outpaced only by the costs of living, housing, education and so on. With an increasingly shrinking group of individuals holding a rapidly expanding amount of resources in the world, this feeling of all protest and concern falling on deaf ears is not a surprising nor unique feeling. X

Slide 3

I wanted to encapsulate this frustration in a neat yet infuriating product. A solutionist ideal that both falls short of and achieves exactly what it was intended to do, attempt to outsource responsibility and labour to a digital platform and capitalise on user insecurity. X

Slide 4

Enter, 'Corporate Counselor', the chatbot nobody wanted or asked for but the cheapest option that appears to be doing something. 'Corporate Counselor' will prompt the user for their deepest and most existential insecurities and then attempt to sell them products or regularly remind them of their failures through incessant email marketing. It plays hold music that you don't really want and doesn't really listen to you. X

Slide 5

'Corporate Counselor' can also tweet out the user's greatest fears and collects data on what its users are most afraid of for its corporate overloads. Of course, a lot of these features don't really work, but they might soon, maybe they'll be behind a pay wall, who knows. X

Slide 6

In creating Corporate Counselor I wanted not only my end product to demonstrate the frustrations I feel but also the technical and design approach. I attempted a prototype using Google's Dialogflow which incorporates machine learning-driven natural language processing but abandoned it due to its technical complexity and it being somewhat antithetical to my idea. X

Slide 7

I opted to shy away from any external technologies or frameworks, instead choosing to manually code all the responses for my bot, despite there being more efficient and effective technologies out there, reminiscent perhaps of our current government's insistence on outdated fossil fuel technologies despite more cost-effective and cleaner options being available. X

Slide 8

This low-tech option is intended to frustrate the user, it could be better, but it's not and you can't improve it. You can protest all you want but it doesn't care, it's not really listening as it's not really supposed to help you, it's just appearing to while attempting to extract value from you, sell you ads, whatever makes its owners money. X

Slide 9

I'd like to acknowledge 'Corporate Counselor's' great grand-parent of-sorts 'Eliza'. Developed in the mid-1960s at MIT in the states, Eliza is one of the first natural language processing computer programs to attempt the Turing test and coincidentally is also a pseudo-AI counselor. X

Slide 10

The Turing test, conceived by and named after Alan Turing, who himself is in many ways the godfather of modern computers and AI, is a measure of artificial intelligence whereby a computer is deemed to have AI capabilities if it can mimic a human well enough to deceive actual human beings. Eliza did not quite pass the test and neither does 'Corporate Counselor' but they operate in somewhat similar manners. X

Slide 11

There is a lot to be said for the human connection that is, or was, an inherent part of therapy. No matter how good an AI gets there are many people who seek therapy looking for that connection and would find the experience of sharing their feelings with a machine isolating and dehumanising. X

Slide 12

One could argue that making *any* form of therapy more widely available could be beneficial, AI-powered or not, but this idea comes with a lot of dangers and careful considerations that move-fast-and-break-things adoring tech companies often steamroll in their pursuit of market dominance. X

Slide 13

With many governments already cutting funding to important mental health services and looking to cut more in the wake of covid-19 spending, these sorts of cost-efficiency over quality services will likely siphon funding from already underfunded and increasingly important mental health programs. While also, like any other digital platform, consolidating wealth, power and control to a very small amount of people. X

Slide 14

This is already being seen in the states with suspensions on regulations that were previously required before doctors could prescribe digital services. There is also the danger of digital solutions treating the symptoms not the problem, governments can fund a mental-health tech company, generating wealth for their investors while not addressing any of the causes or potentially, really making any difference. X

Slide 15

Additionally, the insertion of tech company ideals into health has resulted in the accelerating commodification of wellness culture. With the WHO estimating that wellness expenditures (\$4.5 trillion) are more than half as large as total global health expenditures (\$7.8 trillion).

Slide 16

These capitalist wellness so-called ideals, dubbed 'mcmindfulness' are intentionally designed to weaponise our insecurities while remaining out of reach of most people. The wellness industry is a large part of why social media giants suppress reports about their apps being harmful to mental health, something that we're seeing play out in the recent Facebook whistleblower reports.

(Graphic of many people being cut and one person getting all the money)

Slide 17

The creation of technology to solve societal problems also allows that technology to be easily scapegoated when things stagnate or go wrong. This sort of misdirection is frequently deployed by corporations that wish to shift responsibility and obfuscate their contribution to an issue. As more technology is created, these excuses can be recycled while business continues as usual.

Slide 18

What worked well or not and why.

I think the bot and website are an effectively frustrating experience that in some ways mirror daily neoliberal existence but I'm not sure if the underlying concepts of solutionism and capitalist misdirection are conveyed clearly enough through the website alone. Also finding appropriately sized ads was difficult but in some ways, the chaos adds to the experience. X

Slide 19

How to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

If I was to continue with the project, I would like to add more functionality and implement working versions of some of the features I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, I could not properly implement a Twitter bot feature or automatic daily harassment email as they were just outside of my technical ability and timeframe for this project. X

Slide 20

I'd like to finish by pointing out that any future AI counsellor that harvests your data won't be stupid like mine and look like some scam website. Instead, it will be incredibly slick, easy to use and infinitely more efficient at commodifying you, which gives it the potential to be that much more dangerous. Thanks for listening. X

Things to include:

Easter egg that explains the project

References

<https://web.njit.edu/~ronkowit/eliza.html> 05/10/2021

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/09/alan-turing-at-100/> 05/10/2021

Eliza image from Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA>

<https://www.wired.com/story/therapist-in-chatbot-app/> 06/10/2021

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-67736-6> 06/10/2021