The dangers of AI's allure

"Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means pain, effort, difficulty…." Over the past few months, AI has proven itself an antithesis to Theodore Roosevelt's words. Though many were originally skeptical, wary of AI's ability to become smarter than the beings that created its algorithm, large-language models (LLMs) such as OpenAI's ChatGPT are now widely embraced by society at large. Previous doubts were discarded for the seemingly sky-high limit of potential. I admit: I was one of those idealists… but not anymore.

As a freemium user, I found interactions with AI exciting, spending nights when I should have been studying trying to get the "infallible" algorithm to spit out something it was purportedly prevented from saying. But even then, in those innocent days, I had begun to see the darker side of AI. In response to many of my prompts, ChatGPT fed me with falsified information; when I requested citations, it generated random sources. Despite this, I found myself purchasing the paid subscription. Like others, I smothered my doubts with hopeful lies, telling myself it was for the best and would be helpful in better preparing for exams and understanding assignments. But it would prove to be a terrible — and harmful — purchase.

I began using premium ChatGPT last semester. Weighed down by a heavy course load and a dozen extracurricular jobs and commitments, I sought help from my chatty friend. Thinking it would save me time, I began using it to work through assignments and review practice problems for tests. At first, it worked like a charm. I flew through homework like never before, and I somehow mustered strong performances on exams during a hellish midterm week. But all things perfect must come to an end, and ChatGPT was no different. Where it had previously provided me with working code on programming assignments, it was now mocking

me with bugs that took hours to fix. Even worse, it sometimes refused to provide me with code — no matter how I phrased the prompt — instead feeding me inactionable, useless tips. I quickly deleted my subscription in spite, knowing an algorithm can't get its feelings hurt but hoping it would somehow feel the pain of my absence. Little did I know how grateful I would become for this moment.

Without ChatGPT's help, I was forced to return to my normal grind, leaving behind the few hours of free time that my AI friend had spared for me. Everything felt twice as hard, twice as effortful, as it had before; it was during this painful slog that I realized, in the short amount of time I had used GPT 4, I had become reliant on it to go about my day as a functioning human. And my brain, now a little mushy, had rotted from disuse in the process. In the days that followed, I worked to regain my mental clarity, rediscovering how to communicate and absorb and understand, without the aid of AI. With it came a new wave of appreciation for hard work, for an achievement well deserved and fought for. And then the fear…

From my own struggle, I realized how easy it is for anyone to fall into the same trap I had been ensnared in, to look for an easy way out when you're overwhelmed with a mountain of work in front of you. Now more than ever, there is much potential at our fingertips to destroy ourselves, to melt our brains and our humanity from the inside out. But we cannot give in to that temptation. Just because AI is available to us — heck, even if an LLM does respond with the exact answer you were looking for — does not mean it is good for us. Though AI may be of benefit in the short run, it threatens our ability to think and reason, filling the holes it creates in our brains with an addiction to its measured responses.

Going forward, we must find ways in which AI can sharpen our minds, not blunt them. Rather than prompting an LLM to write an entire paper for us (I confess), for example, we can

instead leverage it to generate ideas, revise grammatical errors, or even restructure our writing. In this way, we maintain our humanness — the empathy and voice that distinguish us from AI's flat tone — while speeding up the more laborious, less thoughtful aspects of the writing process. And this is just one example: There are many other applications in which we can employ AI to help us become more productive, without sacrificing the integrity and originality of our work. It is our job, as we continue to navigate the evolution of AI and, more broadly, technology, to determine these applications and define safe usage of such a powerful tool. Otherwise, we may end up no more human than a chatbot.