How OpenAI interim chief Mira Murati helped launch AI into the mainstream

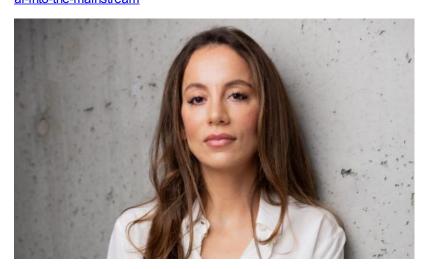When Mira Murati made an appearance on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah last October, OpenAI was just a month away from releasing ChatGPT. Murati, as the company's chief technology officer, had been in charge of leading the teams that were pushing out the artificial intelligence chatbot that would throw AI technology – and the debate over its usage – into the mainstream. On his show, Noah asked Murati how she grappled with the implications AI has for jobs. Murati said the technology not only has an effect on society, but society also "can and should shape it". "There are a ton of questions that we're wrestling with every day," she said. Little did anyone know that a year later, a person whose job would be affected would be Murati's boss: Sam Altman. Now, Murati has replaced the rising Silicon Valley star as CEO. In a surprise statement, the company's board of directors said on Friday that Altman's departure "follows a deliberative review process by the board, which concluded that he was not consistently candid in his communications with the board" and that it lost "confidence in his ability to continue leading OpenAI". Questions remain over exactly what happened between Altman and his company's board, which includes respected technology researchers and business leaders. But the board said that Murati can provide the company with a smooth transition as it looks for a permanent replacement. Murati joined the company in 2018 as vice-president of applied AI and partnerships, positioning herself to play key roles in the company's development of its AI chatbot systems and Dall-E, which uses AI to create artwork. She was promoted to senior vice-president of research, product and partnerships in 2020 and to chief technology officer in 2022. "Given her long tenure and close engagement with all aspects of the company, including her experience in AI governance and policy, the board believes she is uniquely qualified for the role and anticipates a seamless transition while it conducts a formal search for a permanent CEO," the board said in a statement. Born in Albania, Murati moved to Canada when she was a teenager to study at an international school on Vancouver Island. She got a mechanical engineering degree from Dartmouth and eventually made her way to San Francisco, where she would lead product and engineering teams at Leap Motion, which was developing a computer system that could track hand and finger movements. During a brief stint at Tesla, she played a key role as a senior product manager in the development of the electric car maker's Model X. Murati told Fortune magazine earlier this year that growing up in Albania was a formative experience for her, as was working at Tesla as she went "through the whole experience of design and deployment of a whole vehicle". Murati in interviews often emphasizes that OpenAI was a non-profit when she joined in 2018 and operated more like a research lab than a typical Silicon Valley startup company. "I'd already been working in AI applications at Tesla," she told Fortune. "But I was more interested in general intelligence. I wasn't sure it was going to happen at that point, but I knew that even

if we just got very close, the things we would build along the way would be incredible. "I wanted to be a part of that." Murati has often spoken publicly about AI's power as a tool, echoing sentiments expressed by Altman, a key champion of AI technology in a world that has grown skeptical about the company's technology. "There are a lot of hard problems to figure out," she said to Time magazine earlier this year. "How do you get the model to do the thing that you want it to do, and how do you make sure it's aligned with human intention and ultimately in service of humanity?" Satya Nadella, the chief executive of Microsoft, which has pumped $13bn into OpenAI in a key partnership managed by Murati, wrote in Time magazine in September that Murati has "demonstrated ability to assemble teams with technical expertise, commercial acumen and a deep appreciation for the importance of mission". "As a result," he wrote, "Mira has helped build some of the most exciting AI technologies we've ever seen." In what is a tumultuous period for OpenAI, Murati on Friday urged staff to remain focused on the company's "core values". The company is currently in talks over a new round of funding, which could push its valuation up to at least $80bn. "We are now at a crucial juncture where our tools are being widely adopted, developers are actively building on our platforms and policymakers are deliberating on the best way to regulate these systems," she wrote.