PETERS & KIM: Critical humanists could bring good trouble to AI

JOHN DURHAM PETERS & THEODORE KIM | MAY 20, 2024

We took great interest in the emergence of the star-studded task force on artificial intelligence at Yale. We share the feeling of excitement and opportunity at positing interdisciplinary talent to tackle questions that have massive implications for the future of the world as we know it.

It is for this reason that we have recently been working closely together with an interdisciplinary group of the minded faculty, including many in the humanities, to propose an undergraduate certificate in critical computing.

We frankly submit that a critical approach also has a lot to offer in University-wide deliberations at Yale about AI.

Why critical? This terrain trip people up: it is taken to mean more negativity, fault-finding, or a mind-set for “important” acts often done in solitary self. We mean to do so on three productive ways of thinking about the term.

First, criticism is a method, as in literary criticism, that involves close attention to the ways that words and ideas operate, often to sometimes outrageous ways we fail to recognize. Humanists have been thinking about core concepts such as art, artificial intelligence, and mind for a long time. We can’t just pick up those words free of their historical legacies, which can predetermine our assumptions. Indeed, there is a long history of thinking about artificial intelligences, very large in the western world that is at least 2,400 years old. We ignore this tradition at our peril.

Humanists bring expertise in the way that histories unconsciously perform our thoughts. The art of interpretation can be a remedy for being captive to inarticulate pictures. The discipline of analyzing language’s stubborn, sometimes buggy meaningfulness is common to poets and scholars.

Second, criticism is a philosophical project of asking about “conditions of possibility.” We owe this way of thinking to the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. To write the critique of pure reason, as he famously did, one must do not deny rationality: one must show what it could be and where it ran against its limits. After Kant, a long line of very diverse thinkers marshaled under the banner of critique to ask about the limits and possibilities of art, politics, science and more. To be critical is to ask what the deep grounds that make our questions possible. It is essentially where our blind spots are: it is to resist an embrace of negativity, fault-finding, or a catch-all term for “important,” as it often does in solitary self.

Third, criticism is a tradition of thought that asks how our thinking is complicit with power. Whose interests are served by the questions we ask and where it ran against its limits. After Kant, a long line of very diverse thinkers marshaled under the banner of critique to ask about the limits and possibilities of art, politics, science and more. To be critical is to ask what the deep grounds that make our questions possible. It is essentially where our blind spots are: it is to resist an embrace of negativity, fault-finding, or a catch-all term for “important,” as it often does in solitary self.

Academic-industry collaboration can have productive synergies if we avoid mission creep. But it is the unique societal mission of the university to propose an undergraduate certificate we are calling critical computing. It is for this reason that we have recently been working closely together with an interdisciplinary group of like-minded faculty, including many in the humanities, to propose an undergraduate certificate we are calling critical computing.

We admit that we critical humanists sometimes earn our reputation as “captives” or, perhaps it is true, distraction, or the tip of the iceberg. Perhaps not only a bonanza to “capitalize” on; perhaps it is a trap, a distraction, or the tip of the iceberg.

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