Ethical issues around AI

People have mixed feelings about AI. Some are worried about how AI might change their lives, while others are excited about the ways AI could make things better. AI also raises important ethical questions—like what is fair or right—and we don't have all the answers yet. Here we explore some of the key ethical issues.

Energy usage

AI systems require a lot of resources because they handle large amounts of data, which demands significant processing power. This high level of processing uses a lot of energy, not just to create the AI systems, but also to keep them running and updated as they continue to learn and evolve.

The increased energy use is a concern because it can contribute to climate change. There are also impacts on the environment where the processing takes place as large amounts of water are needed.

To address this, developers are working on ways to reduce the energy consumption of AI systems. For example, they are developing smaller models that can do the same tasks but use less power. Even with these efforts, it's important to consider the environmental impact of AI and find ways to minimise its effect on the planet.

As users of these tools, we should be aware of this impact and be mindful of how we use certain tools. For example, we know that large generative AI models in particular have high energy usage therefore when we use these, we shouldn't generate lots and lots of content just because we can.

Unfair collection of data

Training AI models requires a lot of data, and in many cases, this data has been collected from the internet without asking the original creators for permission or paying them for their work. For example, an AI might learn by using articles, images, or even songs that people have created and posted online.

Once the AI model has been trained with this data, it's very difficult, if not impossible, to remove that data from the model. This means the AI keeps using what it learned from that data, even if the creators didn't agree to it.

Because of this, many original creators want to be compensated for their work. They feel that if their creations are being used to train AI, they should get something in return. Some creators and companies are even suing the big AI developers. For example, stock image supplier Getty Images are suing Stability AI who make the image generator Stable diffusion. Getty argue that the Stable diffusion model has been trained on their copyrighted images and therefore they deserve compensation.

The rules about AI and copyright are still being worked out, so things might change in the future. Recently, some companies are now signing agreements with AI companies for their content to be used in return for payment.

Some AI companies are also trying to make sure their models don't reproduce content exactly as it was found online. But for many creators, this isn't enough. They believe their work should be protected, and that they should be paid when it's used to train AI systems.

Labour practices

When we think about AI, we often focus on the technology, but behind many AI tools are real people doing hard work, sometimes in unfair conditions. To create these tools companies need lots of data that has to be labelled or organised by humans. This work is often done by low-paid workers who spend hours doing repetitive tasks, like identifying objects in pictures or typing out what's said in audio clips. These workers usually earn very little and often work in poor conditions without much job security or recognition.

Another issue is how some companies use workers to clean up AI-generated content. For example, if an AI tool creates offensive or inappropriate material, people are hired to remove it before anyone else sees it. This work can be tough because they have to look at upsetting things, and they often don't get enough support or fair pay.

There is a need for greater transparency and better working conditions for the humans behind AI, ensuring that they are treated fairly and with respect.

Using AI to deceive

Generative AI content is becoming very realistic, which means there's a concern that it can be used in harmful ways. For example, someone could fake an image and make it look like a real photo, or they could create a "deepfake" video where a person seems to say or do something they never actually did.

One example of how this could be used maliciously is if a scammer uses an AI tool to copy someone's voice. The scammer could then use the fake voice to call that person's family members and trick them into sending money to the scammer's account, thinking they're helping their loved one.

AI-generated content can also make scams look much more believable. We might see AI-created content on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok that is designed to get our attention and might trick us into giving our personal information to a scam website or signing up for a service that doesn't really exist.

The opposite is also a problem: because generative AI exists, people can also claim that real photos or videos are fake. This makes it harder to know what's true and what's not.

There are ways to try to identify AI-generated content, but these methods aren't perfect and as the technology is getting better and better, we can't assume we'll be able to tell what's AI and what's not.

There are also efforts from developers to label AI-created content made with their tools, but these methods aren't common yet and we don't know how well they will work.

For now, we need to be extra careful when we're looking at content and make sure we evaluate it.

Key Points

- AI systems use a lot of energy, which can harm the environment and contribute to climate change.
- AI models often use data from the internet without permission, leading to concerns about creators not being fairly compensated.
- Many workers behind AI tools face poor working conditions and low pay, raising ethical concerns.
- AI-generated content can be used to deceive people, making it difficult to tell what's real and what's fake.