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THE INTERSECTION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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AI's Role in Contemporary Anthropological Studies



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As we reflect on the past years, the rapid evolution of AI across diverse sectors has positioned us at the forefront of a transformative era in which Artificial Intelligence Technology has become an important research domain for anthropologists. The eighth edition of the *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology* presents five articles and a short film, each of which delve into the intricate interplay between artificial intelligence and anthropological studies.

Comprising four researched papers and a thought-provoking short film, this collection offers unique insights into the profound impact of AI on users' consciousness and their perception of newly emerging artificial spaces. These contributions draw upon anthropological and interdisciplinary perspectives on AI's role in shaping human experiences and culture.

The complexity of understanding and governing AI is multilayered. Kate Crawford argues that AI is not a singular 'black box' with a clear secret to uncover. Instead, it comprises multiple intertwined power systems, making complete transparency unrealistic. The key to a better understanding of AI lies in engaging with its physical structures, contextual environments, and political influences as well as recognizing the interconnectedness of these aspects (Crawford 2021). In response to evolving environments, anthropology has undergone a transformative shift. This adaptation has involved the incorporation of new tools and the adoption of varied applied practices. This evolution saw anthropologists working collaboratively as equal partners in multidisciplinary teams, including engineers, designers, marketers, and other social scientists. Such collaboration marks a departure from traditional, narrowly focused roles to a more solution-oriented approach. This change has been pivotal in redefining the developmental process and laying the foundation for a novel, future-oriented anthropological practice. This emergent practice emphasizes intervention and transformative co-creation, which is particularly significant for young anthropologists in applied fields (Sumathi, Manjubarkavi, & Gunanithi, 2023). Therefore, in this 'information age,' anthropology emerges as a vital player in deciphering the complexities inherent in AI.

The topics of this journal vary from a more general theoretical approach about the implications of AI for societies (Maximo, in this volume) to investigations about African AI-Art (Theresa, in this volume). Concrete research on after-life technology (Hansen, in this volume) and the utilization of AI technologies in disaster response and post-disaster management from a visual anthropological perspective (Gökçen, in this volume) offer a deep insight into case studies about AI and human experiences. In their article, Moritz Scheffer, Luis Somasundaram and Pelin Celik introduce their invention of AURA, an AI-powered pill dispenser designed for people with dementia. The last three research topics primarily explore human suffering or trauma, including disasters, illness, and mortality. They investigate how AI can aid in post-disaster management, offer solutions for aging societies, and help create programs for the long-lasting human dream of immortality.

Rafael Maximo's paper introduces the concept of a bias-free world created by Artificial Intelligence and its potential implications for society. Navigating the complexities of bias in human history, Maximo contrasts it with the impartial logic of AI. The study addresses how bias has shaped society and humanity's trajectory by examining historical errors and conflicts identified by AI, such as colonialism, wars, and environmental neglect.

Envisioning the hypothetical scenario of a society built by AI, Maximo contemplates the motivations of humans versus machines, emphasizing humans' willpower versus AI's pursuit of stability and continuity. This exploration prompts reflections on bias, humanity's uniqueness, and technology's transformative impact on human history.

A notable manifestation of the AI trend is observed in generative art. Gaining popularity in late 2022 and experiencing rapid advancement throughout 2023, generative art exemplifies the burgeoning synergy between human creativity and machine intelligence.

Alice Theresa's article "African AI Art – An ethnographic study into the portrayal of Africa in StableDiffusion", critically examines the role of AI in shaping artificial representations of Africa through generative AI art models. Theresa identifies biases and stereotypes embedded in AI-generated African art and questions how these representations influence data and machine learning processes, shaping perceptions of Africa.

Alice Theresa identifies a gap in how Africa is portrayed in synthetic AI-generated media, often as a homogenous and troubled entity unrelated to the actual African reality.

The research, employing both traditional and synthetic ethnography, scrutinizes AI-generated images to understand the perpetuation of stereotypes and the influence of colonial legacies. The findings reveal a consistent narrative of historical violence and colonial impact in these representations, highlighting their role in the process of identity formation in post-colonial African societies.

In the realm of contemporary anthropology, Amber Parris's "Botoxonotology" film presents a fascinating study at the intersection of artificial intelligence and the human experience. This film delves into the increasingly blurred lines between the material and immaterial worlds, probing the intricate ways individual identities are constructed and expressed in physical and digital realms. Central to this exploration is the examination of personal narratives from individuals who have engaged with cosmetic enhancements, such as Botox and lip fillers.

These narratives provide a unique lens through which we can understand the evolving concept of identity in an age where technology not only allows us to modify our physical appearance but also offers vast opportunities to curate our digital personas. The film's audio is selected from one interview, and the collaborator narrates her experience existing both on and offline and brings to light tensions surrounding the making of the self identity.

At the intersection of spirituality, artificial intelligence, and anthropological study lies the rapidly evolving field of AI-driven 'digital afterlife' programs. Christopher Hansen's paper delves into the emerging AI 'digital afterlife' program industry, aiming to perpetuate an individual's digital persona beyond their physical existence. This paper uses digital ethnographic methods and media criticism to investigate the cultural implications, ethical considerations, and user experiences surrounding digital afterlife initiatives.

By examining user interactions, media coverage, and the evolving landscape of AI-driven posthumous representations, this paper seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between contemporary technology and spirituality in digital afterlives. This paper mainly focuses on three of the most prominent digital afterlife programs currently on the market or in production: Eternime, HereAfter, and Project December. Hansen's research contributes insights to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of artificial intelligence, cultural practices, and the evolving nature of human consciousness in the digital age.

The utilization of AI technologies in disaster response and post-disaster management is a testament to the transformative potential of AI. Gokcen Kavuk's in-depth examination of Hatay, Turkey's cultural heritage in the aftermath of the 6 February 2023 earthquakes, introduces innovative methodologies for documenting and safeguarding historical landmarks. Kavuk employs AI and VR tools, showcasing the cutting-edge Neural Radiance Fields (NERF) technology for scanning cultural heritage sites and transforming them into accurate three-dimensional models for Virtual Reality installations. The research explains the NERF technology's operation, applications, benefits, and potential future enhancements and underscores its role in enhancing our ability to study, preserve, and appreciate cultural heritage sites.

The article from Moritz Scheffer, Luis Somasundaram, and Pelin Celik discusses the challenges of the increasingly aging population, focusing on the complexities of caring for individuals with dementia. It introduces "AURA," an AI-powered system designed to address the unique needs of dementia patients. AURA not only serves as a medication dispenser but also acts as a holistic companion in elderly care. The article emphasizes the significance of AURA in relieving caregivers from the time-consuming task of medication management, reducing stress, and minimizing the likelihood of errors. The development of AURA is presented as a response to insights from medical anthropology, considering the socio-cultural context of dementia care. The discussion on integrating AI into elderly care highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interaction between technology and human factors. In developing AURA to align with user values and expectations, patient attitudes toward healthcare AI are also considered.

References:

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Sumathi, S., Manjubarkavi, S., & Gunanithi, P. (2023). Ethnography and artificial intelligence. In M. Sahoo, S. Jeyavelu, & A. Kurane (Eds.), *Ethnographic Research in the Social Sciences*, Routledge India.



Alice Theresa

Alice is a digital anthropologist, communicator and media producer. Her professional background is centered on the intersection of technology, climate justice and social impact in Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. She is a graduate of M.A. Visual and Media Anthropology (Media University Berlin) and B.A. Literature and Film & Media Production (University of Cape Town). Her research focuses on the sociocultural implications of technology, the epistemological assumptions of AI, and breaking the stereotypes of Africa.



AFRICAN AI ART – AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY INTO THE PORTRAYAL OF AFRICA IN STABLEDIFFUSION

BY ALICE THERESA

In “African AI Art - an ethnographic study into the portrayal of Africa in StableDiffusion,” Alice Theresa explores how Africa, the land and intangible collective, are represented in synthetic images generated using StableDiffusion. Theresa approaches synthetic media as a form of knowledge production where the visual tropes depicted offer a site where complex issues in Africa can simultaneously be interrogated and traced. By focussing on how the generative AI art models represent and misrepresent the world, she places a magnifying lens on the socio-technical dynamics that produce them. Using both traditional and synthetic ethnography, she presents how colonial memory is animated in AI, haunting the present. Through participant interviews, she explores the implications of this on identity formation in contemporary African society.

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Pelin Çelik

Pelin Celik (she/ her) is professor for Industrial Design and System Design at the HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences since 2017. Her research focuses on Holistic User Experience in Age and Technology, systemic design, and participative design processes. Before being assigned to the HTW Berlin, she worked as a professor at the Hochschule für Kommunikation und Gestaltung in Ulm and as a visiting professor at the Burg Giebichenstein Kunsthochschule in Halle. She has received numerous awards for her work as a designer in international companies.



Moritz Scheffer

Moritz Scheffer is an Industrial Design Student pursuing his Bachelor's degree at HTW Berlin. His educational journey spans several years, including roles as a tutor at the digital laboratory of HTW Berlin, a rescue paramedic with Blauer Stern von Berlin, and significant involvement in artist collectives like Sideviews and Schattenmuseum. His skill set encompasses various graphic design and 3D modeling tools. Moritz's portfolio is marked by his participation in diverse projects and exhibitions, such as "Shaping Patterns" under ERASMUS+ and "Das Archiv – Ein unendliches Universum" at prominent institutions like HKW, Berlinische Galerie, and KW Institute of Contemporary Art. As a dedicated lifeguard with DLRG Berlin, he combines his passion for design with a commitment to community service.



Luis Somasundaram

Luis Somasundaram, an Indian-German designer, is pursuing his Bachelor's in Industrial Design at HTW Berlin. Raised in Berlin, Luis's journey in digital design is driven by his curiosity for technology and passion for integrating digital innovation with tangible craftsmanship. His expertise spans various design and creative disciplines, strongly focusing on human-centered design. In his work experience at Vanmoof and Apple Retail, he has gained valuable insights into customer needs and the potential of design to make an impact. These experiences are directly applicable to his design studies. Luis has further honed his skills through a Scientific Design Thinking Workshop at Charité BIH and by completing a Google UX Design Certificate. As he continues his studies, he is dedicated to exploring the transformative power of design and brings an enthusiastic and innovative approach to every new challenge.



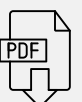
AIN'T FORGETTING. LEVERAGING THE POWERPOWER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ELDERLY CARE

BY MORITZ SCHEFFER, LUIS SOMASUNDARAM AND PELIN CELIK

The global demographic landscape has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, marked by an increasing aging population. This demographic shift poses unique challenges, especially in elderly care. As we witness a growing number of older individuals forced to or choosing to live in single-households, there is an urgent need to address the emerging complexities associated with aging-related conditions such as dementia. Integrating Artificial Intelligence in elderly care presents a novel and promising avenue to empower these individuals, offering them enhanced autonomy and an improved quality of life. In this article, the authors introduce their solution, Aura, an AI-powered system designed to address the unique needs of dementia patients. Aura not only serves as a medication dispenser but also fosters emotional support

and cognitive engagement, thereby enhancing the well-being and independence of dementia patients. This paper delves into the project 'In|Visible', which focuses on catering to the special needs of people developing signs of dementia.

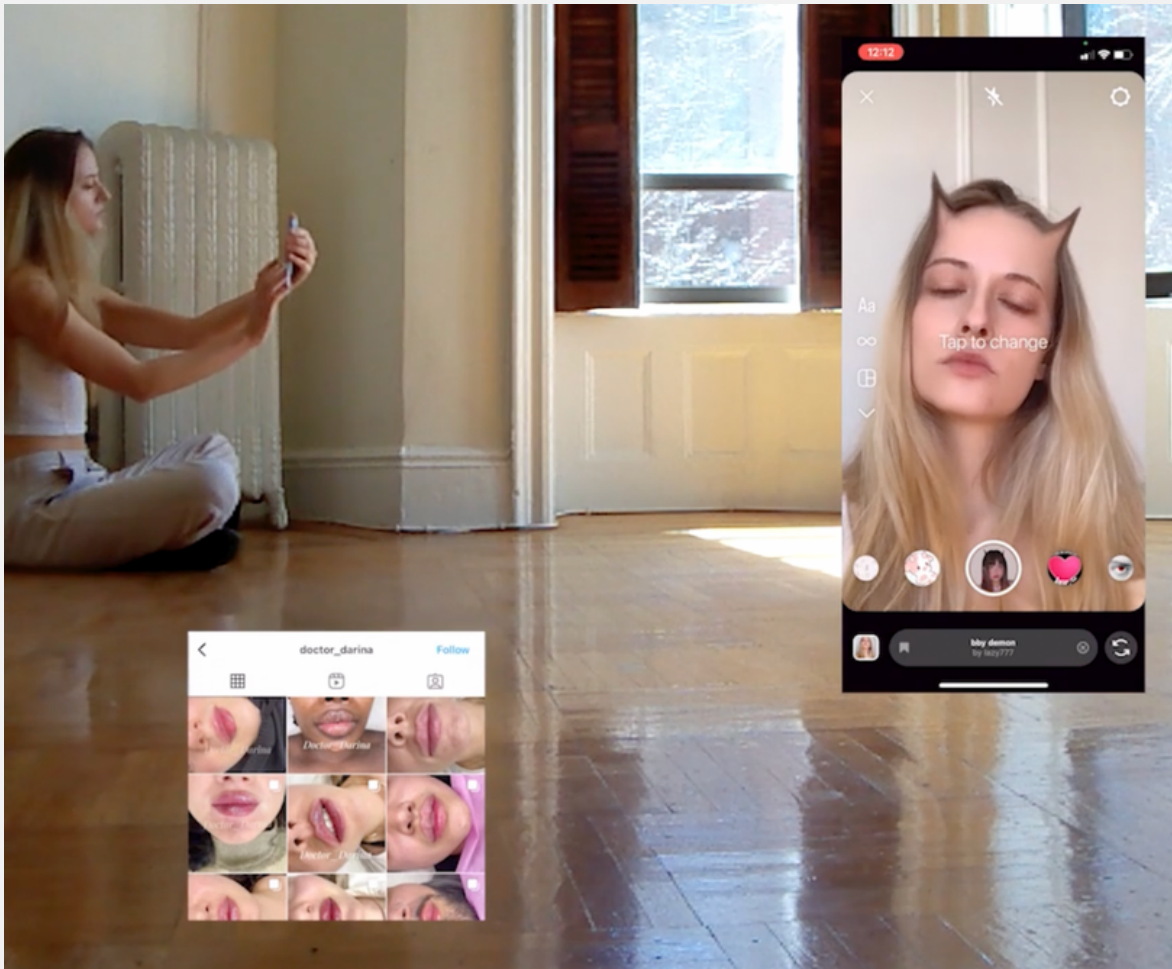
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Amber Parris

Amber Parris is an artist and researcher based in New York. Her work addresses themes of interdependence—unraveling dichotomies and exploring the intersections of identity, ecology, and the internet. Her research on identity and online performance, relationships between the digital and material, and community and place culminate in writing, films, and other visual forms. With a focus on technology and its relationship to the earth and the body, digital media and methods inform her practice. She is also passionate about youth education, public space, and embedding ecological and social histories and futures into her work.



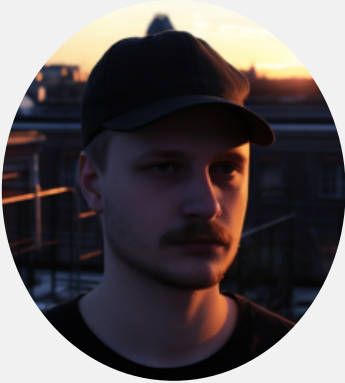
-BOTOXONOLOGY-

BY AMBER PARRIS

‘Botoxonotology’ examines the overlap between the material and immaterial, exploring how the self is constructed on and offline as the boundaries between these spheres blur and cease to exist. Through conversations with collaborators who have undergone cosmetic procedures (Botox and/or lip filler), the research sought to reveal how we understand identity when we can select and change what we present about ourselves—artificial intelligence technology allows us to enhance our physical faces as well as to curate artificial selves. The film’s audio is selected from one interview, my collaborator narrating her experience existing both on and offline and bringing to light tensions surrounding the making of the self. Visually, the film positions screen recordings so that they are superimposed into their material environment, transfiguring the layered experience of social media and digital performance.

[Watch the video](#)





Christopher Michael Hansen

Christopher Michael is an anti-disciplinary artist focused on spirituality in virtual worlds. His work has explored topics like the emerging field of digital afterlife technologies , transcendent experiences in virtual worlds, the connections between the American New Age movement and digital spaces,dreamwork and virtuality,the spiritual implications of contemporary technologies. The emergence of posthuman forms , among other things. He is currently a Junior Contributing Writer for Clot magazine and a Program Lead with Six Minutes Past Nine. He is pursuing his PhD with the University at Buffalo's Media Study Department.

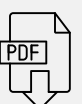


IN THE END WE BECOME OUR AVATARS: AN EXPLORATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITAL AFTERLIVES

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL HANSEN

This paper delves into the emerging industry of AI ‘digital afterlife’ programs, which aim to perpetuate an individual's digital persona beyond their physical existence. Employing digital ethnographic methods and media criticism, this paper investigates the cultural implications, ethical considerations, and user experiences surrounding these digital afterlife initiatives. Through an examination of user interactions, media coverage, and the evolving landscape of AI-driven posthumous representations, this paper seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between contemporary technology and spirituality in the realm of digital afterlives. This paper particularly focuses on three of the most prominent digital afterlife programs currently on the market or in production: Eternime, HereAfter, and Project December. This research contributes insights to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of artificial intelligence, cultural practices, and the evolving nature of human consciousness in the digital age.

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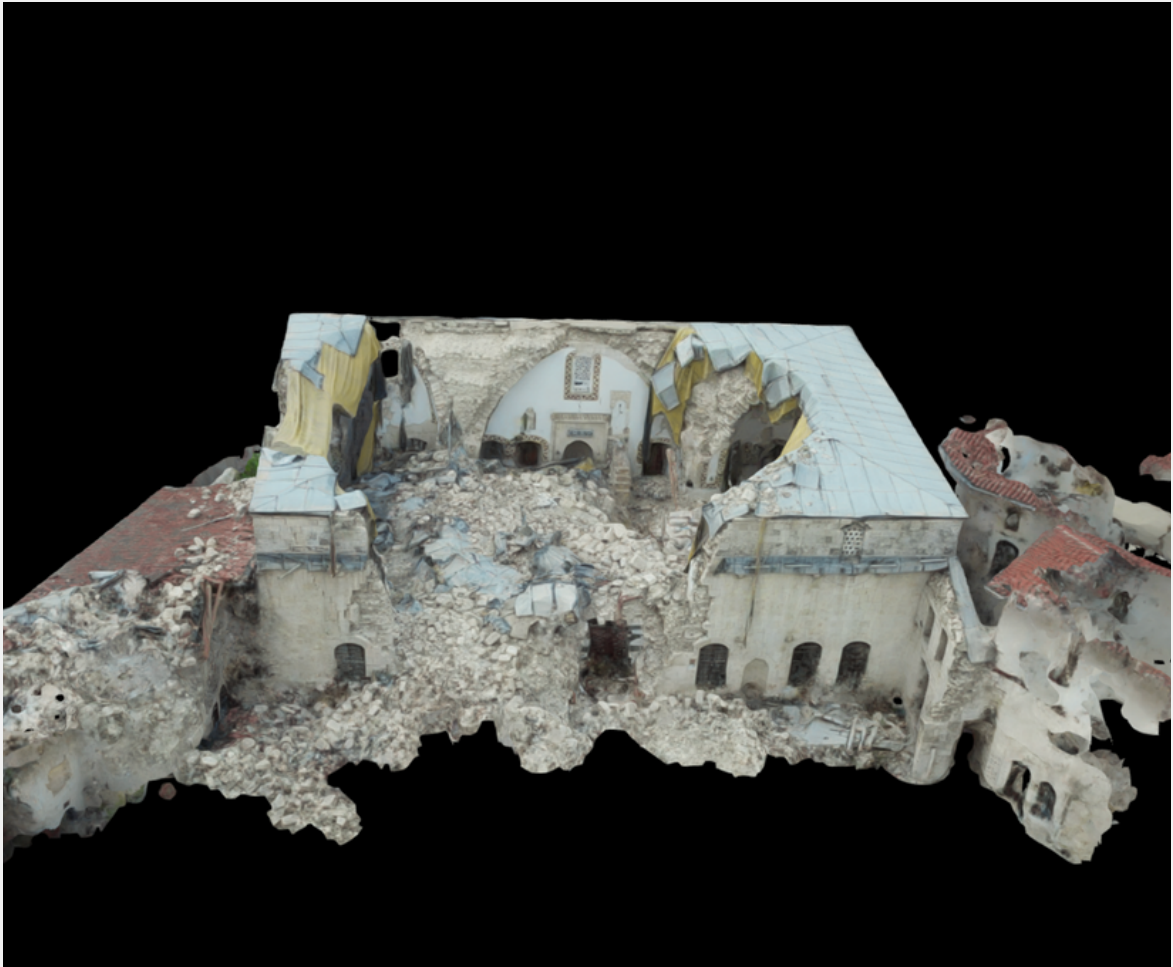




Gökçen Kavuk

Gökçen Kavuk is a photographer and visual anthropologist with a deep passion for storytelling, particularly in natural disasters, emerging technologies, and society. Her academic and research interests span a wide range, extending from the study of media and social movements to the burgeoning fields of generative art and text-to-video productions.

Her master's thesis is a pivotal work that centers around the innovative use of AI and VR in preserving Turkey's earthquake-damaged cultural heritage sites. This project, viewed through an anthropological lens, represents a technical endeavor and critical cultural initiative. Kavuk's work in this area exemplifies her broader research focus: to unravel the complex relationships between cultures, their disaster response mechanisms, and the role of emerging technologies in these scenarios. Furthermore, her commitment to this interdisciplinary field has led to significant contributions in understanding how technology can be leveraged to not only safeguard cultural legacies but also to foster resilience and recovery in communities affected by natural calamities.

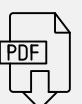


REDEFINING POST-NATURAL DISASTER CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION: THE AI REVOLUTION IN 3D MODELING AND VR

BY GÖKÇEN KAVUK

This paper explores the innovative use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and visual anthropology in documenting and restoring cultural heritage sites impacted by the 2023 earthquakes in Hatay, Turkey. It specifically examines the application of advanced 3D modeling and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies, such as Neural Radiance Fields (NERF), to create accurate digital representations of damaged sites. The study highlights the importance of these technologies in preserving not only the physical aspects of cultural heritage but also its intangible elements, ensuring a comprehensive approach to heritage conservation in the aftermath of natural disasters. The integration of AI and VR offers a novel way of engaging with and understanding the cultural significance of these sites, facilitating their preservation for future generations.

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Rafael Maximo

Rafael Maximo, is a Hispanic Brazilian, M.A. Student on the Visual & Media Anthropology Program at Media University. He graduated in Communications, from University Anhembi Morumbi, focused in Advertising and Marketing. During his 17 years of professional experience, he has Specialized in Digital and Social Media Marketing, Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence, developing educational resources for the latter. He has delivered lectures and trained more than 8000 media professionals, in Latin America, United States, and Spain. Notably he has been featured as speaker in industry events and institutions such as ADWEEK, IAB University Forum and Endeavor, Miami Dade College, and National University of Cordoba. Proud Member of the American Anthropological Association, the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, serving as judge for The Webby Awards, contributing his expertise to recognize excellence in digital media. Currently he centers his studies around media anthropology and consumer behavior, looking to leverage the knowledge of entrepreneurs, professionals and students.



SHAPING SOCIETY WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THROUGH HUMAN HISTORY AN ANALYSIS OF A HYPOTHETICAL HUMANITY BUILT BY AI

BY RAFAEL MAXIMO

This paper presents the idea of a bias-free world created by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its potential implications for society. It navigates the complexities of bias in human history and contrasts it with the impartial logic of AI. By examining historical errors and conflicts identified by AI, such as colonialism, wars and environmental neglect, the study addresses how bias has influenced the development of society and the trajectory of humanity. Exploring the hypothetical scenario of a society built by AI, contemplates the different motivations of humans and machines – emphasizing human willpower versus AI's idealization for stability and continuity. Envisioning a world free from bias, the article discusses the potential for peace, tolerance and sustainability, while also considering how humans might respond to this reality. Ultimately, it reflects on the immutable nature of the past and the transformative impact of technology on human history, provoking thoughtful considerations about bias, the uniqueness of humanity, and the evolutionary relationship between technology and social evolution.

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