

Advertisement

Senior scholars look to AI future with optimism, dread

Lawrence Brown

Columnist

Imagine a classroom with desks arranged in a wide circle. But instead of kids, imagine a circle of men and women old enough (a few of us) to remember the Second World War.

We're all at the Academy for Lifelong Learning at the college. I've called my course 'The 6 Revolutions that Changed Everything

.'

We are at our last class and the last revolution we've been looking at is the AI (artificial intelligence) revolution. At our age, this is probably the last revolution we'll live to see. So we got into a good discussion about what AI is, how it works, and in the long run, which segments of society will benefit most. In short, what we were really discussing was the future of the country — of the civilization — we've grown up being a part of.

In a revolution, culture, the distribution of wealth and power, faith and even language are all up for grabs. Consequently, we must forgive our earnest group if their dominant feeling was dread.

There's something very interesting about the opinions of old people. We have no skin in the game, in terms of wealth and power. We know we're leaving it for you — and that's where the anguish came into the conversation. We weren't scared for ourselves; we were scared for

you

.

Let me count the ways. There was a concern that the more time we spend in front of a screen, the more at home we are in the screen and the less at home we are in the world. There's something tragic about it: to cram everything there is into something no bigger than a pack of cigarettes ... and then crawl into it and shut the door.

That concern led to another. The more we live inside a screen, the more we conduct our transactions with other people through a screen. There's a real irony here. When I was a boy, back in the old days, the older generation was terrified that their kids might

become sensual beings. If only they had known they could give their kid a cellphone.

Members of the group worried that those wonderful, terrifying, dangerous emotions we can feel with each other when we're swept up in the physical world might fade. Messy as it is, it's an incredibly wonderful gift — and we wouldn't want to think the kids would miss it.

We swerved in another conversational direction. It seems increasingly difficult for anyone to know for sure whether something is a fact, or it isn't. Democracy has a hard time when deliberate and massive deception becomes a political strategy. AI can only make it worse.

In the early days, images could be modified if people knew the techniques. It existed in the days of film and got exponentially easier in the digital age. There will be a point when seeing can no longer be believing. The existence of fake image technology means that not only can you create realistic images of things that never happened, but you can deny images that happen to be true, by simply reminding your listener that nothing can be trusted any longer anyway.

AI-generated fake-but-realistic videos carry the possibility of deception to an even higher level. We worried that people might end up with a shrug, believing what they want.

We worried that in such a politically constipated environment, everybody would be trying to play AI to their ideological advantage, rather than asking themselves what would best serve and protect the public with this enormous technological and economic power. Everybody wanted to see Washington come up with some proper rules for AI. We doubted we'd get it.

So finally I gave the group the choice of being optimistic enough to believe that, as we always seem to have in the past, we'll somehow muddle through ... or they foresee a future for their children and grandchildren in which the best qualities of western civilization unravel all around them. Make of it what you will, but the group was perfectly divided between hope and despair.

Take everything I've just said with a grain of salt because, we're told, even in ancient Egypt 5,000 years ago, it is written in hieroglyphics that kids these days are no damn good. The coming thing is not necessarily our thing. But actually, I didn't hear anybody complain about the quality of the upcoming generations. It was *infrastructure*. It was worrying that economically, politically, socially and environmentally, our progeny might not get what they deserve. It's the perspective love gives, in the end.

And that's actually where our conversation ended ... talking about love. If there was anything we wanted — for our children and our grandchildren and those who come after — is that they

live in a world where love and all its fruits are safe and strong and cherished. Let that be our wish for you in the New Year.

Lawrence Brown is a columnist for the Cape Cod Times. Email him at columnresponse@gmail.com.

You can find the Academy for Lifelong Learning course offerings for next semester at academyll.org. capecodall.org

[Copyright © Cape Cod Times](#)
[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)
