

Shannon Vallor: “AI won’t invent the future we need, they’ll steal it from us”

The technology philosopher urged the packed audience at Penn State’s Flex Theater to join the resistance against the AI-powered future investors want.

As AI continues to creep its way into all facets of daily life, many people have still not bought into the idea that the technology is a seamlessly positive step forward for society. Vallor, an author and technology philosopher at the University of Edinburgh, has an equally strong opinion on the topic.

The Boston College graduate took to Penn State’s main campus on October 10th to give an extensive breakdown of how AI is a bigger threat to human nature than it is a gift. “Today, we’re at risk of losing ourselves in our AI mirrors,” said Vallor, who frequently likened the results that AI produces to a theoretical mirror’s false reflection of ourselves.

Those who have used models like ChatGPT and OpenAI have likely experienced receiving comically incorrect answers because of algorithmic errors. Vallor, however, warned of the more distorted and believable results that may exacerbate the spread of misinformation, citing several search results containing stereotyping, fake news stories, and baseless recommendations. AI’s inability to distinguish between right and wrong due to its outdated database makes many search results useless and, in some cases, flat-out dangerous.

Not only is it unreliable to the average user seeking an answer to a question, but AI also poses the threat of replacing the creative, open mind of humans with a generic, predictable one. The human mind has no match due to an ability that Vallor referred to as “auto-fabrication,” which she borrowed from 20th century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. While AI only works

with what has already been achieved, auto-fabrication allows us to use both the past and present to further advance future ideas, a skill we cannot afford to lose.

This concept of “horizon,” as Vallor called it allows everyone from authors to scientists to come up with ideas that AI considers inconceivable. The perfect dream that investors and companies profiting from the technology are attempting to sell does not take any of these drawbacks into consideration. “AI companies very much want you to fail the mirror test when you look at their products,” said Vallor to the audience composed mostly of students.

Despite her strong opposition of AI’s overuse today, Vallor does not consider the invention completely useless. During the closing segment of her speech where she opened the floor to questions, she reminded the audience that we are still in the beginning stages of AI. “Technology is a tool to care for life,” Vallor said, emphasizing that society can make progress once we change our understanding of what innovation actually looks like. Although the theme of the day seemed to be a cautionary one, Vallor made it clear that she had not lost hope. “We can demand better, but first we have to want better and believe we deserve it.”