

Book Review

Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna
**The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech's Hype
and Create the Future We Want**
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Scholars, educators, and practitioners alike are debating the long-term societal consequences of artificial intelligence (AI). Will it soon become necessary to declare the humanness of a text in response to the growing volume of AI-generated texts? AI, it seems, is all around us, at times more visible than others. Some posts on social media are obviously AI-generated, while in other instances – for example, when you receive a decision from your insurance company – the involvement of AI might be less obvious. Since the introduction of ChatGPT in November 2022, AI-generated texts and images have been discussed extensively in public and in the field of media and communication studies. Especially critical literature is on the rise, questioning and critiquing the hype fuelled by big tech companies' AI promises. At the same time, an unprecedented number of users (at the time of writing, OpenAI claims to process more than 2.5 billion ChatGPT prompts daily) shows that the big tech industry once again has created a product which is in high demand. But at what cost?

The book *The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech's Hype and Create the Future We Want* by Emily Bender and Alex Hanna examines hype narratives around AI and discusses the invisible and often hidden societal, cultural, and environmental costs of AI. As Bender and Hanna describe it, there are typically “doomers” and “boosters”, the latter supporting the tech-optimist version of AI enhancing human capabilities and the former believing in AI as all-powerful machines resulting in the extinction of humanity. The questions being raised are whether it is possible to find a middle ground and how humanities and social science scholars can oppose ongoing AI developments. Bender and Hanna issue an unequivocal call for collective action, which is no longer optional but urgently necessary. Only then, they argue, the “current hype cycle will end, and this [AI] bubble will burst, with luck sooner rather than later” (p. 195).

The book consists of seven chapters. The first chapter is titled “An introduction to AI hype” and deals with the very nature of AI, its history, and hype narratives. The second chapter, “It's alive! The hype of thinking machines”, examines the demarcation lines between humans and machines. The third chapter, “Leisure for me, gig work for thee: AI hype at work”, engages in the structural dimensions affected by AI, such as hidden labour. The fourth chapter, “If it quacks like a dog: AI hype and social services”, examines different examples of AI in relation to social services. The fifth chapter, “Artificial or intelligence? AI hype in art, journalism, and science”, looks at the challenges AI entails for creative tasks and the creative industries. The sixth chapter, “I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that: AI doomers, AI boosters, and why none of that makes sense”, dissects AI doom and AI boost narratives. The final chapter, “Do you believe in hope after hype?”, deals with the hype scenarios put forth by profit-driven companies and discusses possible ways forward, such as non-use, meaningful regulation, transparency, accountability, data rights, and labour protection.

In their book, Bender and Hanna define AI technologies as “technologies sold as such” (p. 5), thereby approaching AI through a narrative lens. The book furthermore exemplifies

AI as automation processes related to decision-making, classification, recommendation, transcription/translation, and text and image generation. The book suggests to “think about ChatGPT as an illusion, or a magician’s tool” (p. 23), therewith linking AI to cultural metaphors. While this may not be new, it is still original and thought-provoking to think about AI primarily as a hype narrative rather than a specific type of technology. A further strength of the book is the various examples that support the overall easy-to-follow argument. By reading the book, it becomes very clear why it is important to be critical towards current AI developments. Many of the dominant hype narratives seem exaggerated, and oftentimes it remains unclear why AI has achieved such prominence. However, for the European reader, it is important to note that the examples are primarily centred around the North American tech industry, drawing on public debates in the US and Canada. This geographical focus appears at times to be a bit limiting, as some examples seem culturally specific and at times contextually distant from a European perspective.

As an overall conclusion, the book further argues that AI is always about people – in other words, AI is designed by those working in the industry, which clearly points to the embedded aspects of specific interests and power relations. In this context, a specific question that may arise for the critical reader is, if it was that “easy” to defy AI as a hype narrative, why are AI technologies so widely adopted? Why do so many organizations and governments push for the development and integration of AI? Why is there so much “hype” around the hype narratives? While it is the book’s clear goal to foreground the hype aspects in the big tech narratives, it does not go deeper into why so many users are adopting AI technologies and, in doing so, contribute to the further acceleration of these hype narratives. In this relation, empirical studies have shown that especially generative AI is used and adopted bottom-up, not because some management forces their employees to use AI but because of personal curiosity, professional pragmatism or because users feel like they get value out of the conversations (Mahnke, 2024; Mahnke & Bagger, 2024). Consequently, portraying AI as primarily a big-tech illusion may lose sight of the complex socio-technical user practices which are co-constituting such AI hype narratives.

At the same time, many readers will appreciate that the book raises doubts on the supposed inevitability and transformative power attributed to AI, not only by the big tech industry but also by various experts and by many of its users who participate in producing these expectations. The authors write: “Just because you’ve identified a social problem doesn’t mean LLMs or any other kind of so-called AI are a solution” (p. 99). While this echoes critical scholarship, it simultaneously raises a further fundamental question: How can AI be critiqued while taking its rapid normalisation through widespread use into account? In other words, how can scholars in the social sciences and humanities critique AI while acknowledging that many users experience AI as useful, applicable, and even beneficial? Overall, the book offers a well-rounded and accessible critique of contemporary AI developments. AI technologies have become deeply engrained in contemporary societies, permeating institutional settings as well as various aspects of everyday life. I

recommend the book for readers seeking a comprehensive introduction to critical AI debates, ideally as a point of departure for developing their own position and, perhaps, an inspiration to take a stand and actively work towards bursting the AI hype bubble.

References

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