THE POWER OF INEVITABILITY: HOW OPENAI CONFIGURES THE FUTURE

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Introduction

When OpenAI launched ChatGPT in December 2022, an immediate frenzy followed that has yet to die down. With a mixture of awe and fear technologists have professed that the era of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) is nigh. Journalists, on their part, cheered on the new AI overlords, while tech critics have sounded alarms. Subsequently, academia, philanthropy, and government have upended any 5-year strategic plan to demand that everyone focuses on AI. Mixed in with both the celebrations and the doomsday predictions is an overwhelming sense that a future centered on AI is inevitable. This prompts the question; what discursive and institutional work is inevitability doing — and for whom?

To answer the latter questions, we examine the maneuvers of the San Francisco-based company OpenAI – the developers of ChatGPT – to understand their role in creating and sustaining the ongoing conversations that revolve around AGI's inevitability. We focus on this company because its by now famous executives have been at the forefront of steering debates about the future of AGI. Our efforts are in dialogue with similar attempts to critically engage with the discursive work done by US-based tech executives. For example, media and communication scholars have unpacked the oftentimes contradictory statements by tech executives in either their role as founders (Dror, 2015; Nam, 2020) or when speaking to the different constituencies they serve –

users, advertisers, legislators, and investors (Hoffmann et al., 2018). In our specific case, we are witnessing attempts by OpenAI executives and their US-based political allies to discursively configure a more favorable political economic landscape for their company.

Analyzing OpenAI's inevitable corporate rise

In building our argument, we analyzed a corpus of 44 texts, including long-form journalism in US mainstream reporting (i.e., *The Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, and *Wired*); popular podcasts (i.e., *Joe Rogan Experience*; the *Lex Fridman Podcast*); and documents that routinely serve as corporate discourse, including: OpenAI's official communications (e.g., blog posts and PR statements), congressional testimonies, leaked emails, lobbying efforts, patents, litigation, and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman's media and conference appearances.

What we discovered through these publicly available and influential texts is that OpenAI's leaders wish to position the company as AGI's creator and gatekeeper. To establish these positions, OpenAI's discourse taps into overlapping socio-political anxieties which are marshalled to forward the company's ideology and optimize their position in tech culture. First, there is an organizational orientation to national security that understands a new Cold War emerging between China and Western democracies, which is framed as a particular threat to the US' (digital) sovereignty. Second, Silicon Valley ideals such as "freedom" and "openness" (Marwick, 2017) are juxtaposed against anxieties that counter them, such as the looming threat of superintelligence. Third, although OpenAI started as a non-profit organization, its vision of itself as neutral infrastructure is to enable a free-market future that is built on top of heavily managed and monetized AI. Finally, executives build on popular ideas in Silicon Valley of human exceptionalism and effective altruism (Gebru & Torres, 2024) by forwarding multiple, sometimes contradictory, visions of how to solve global problems – all of which involve AI, AGI and other advanced technologies.

Discussion

What, then, is the impact of this grab bag of contradictory ideas? We argue that OpenAI is actively configuring the discursive conditions which give it political, institutional, and cultural power. In OpenAI's discourse, this is referred to as the "optimal path" (Fox, 2015) — we read it as their best or most effective route possible to power. Rhetorically, this approach works because it is defined against the perceived inevitability of various negative outcomes, positioning the company as the "technological fix" (Johnston, 2020). How OpenAI tunes its corporate structure is designed to optimize its moral position within the tech sector. OpenAI began as a non-profit "research and deployment" company with a commitment "to save the world from a dystopian future" (Fox, 2015). Soon, the future success in this mission became the justification for corporate restructuring. To make its operations sustainable, a portion of OpenAI became a commercial entity. Regardless of the business model, the moral framing of AGI as inevitable remained, with the company continuously positioned "to ensure advanced AI benefits all of humanity" (OpenAI, 2023).

OpenAI is also strategically seeking self-beneficial constraints. From its corporate inception onwards, the ethos of the company is that a democratic process to create governance frameworks is needed (Zaremba et al., 2023). The company has regularly called on democratic governments to help regulate its technology. However, OpenAI's view of *who* is capable of constraining such powerful technology often shapeshifts. "Because the upsides are so tremendous, the cost to build it [superintelligence] decreases each year, the number of actors building it is rapidly increasing, and it is inherently part of the technological path we are on, stopping it would require something like a global surveillance regime, and even that isn't guaranteed to work. So we have to get it right," the company writes on its blog (Altman et al., 2023).

The future of humanity

The future regulation of AI may be inevitable; and the aim is to set its ground rules. The corporate discourse we encountered speaks to the previously mentioned anxieties by conjuring looming threats (real and speculative). Thus, by defining "AI safety" and national security as the dominant threats that must be overcome, OpenAI attempts to define the ideology of the future: "There's an estimated $175 billion sitting in global funds awaiting investment in AI projects," OpenAI claims, "and if the US doesn't attract those funds, they will flow to China-backed projects—strengthening the Chinese Communist Party's global influence" (OpenAI, 2025). In this way, threats are operationalized to have a direct impact on the present (Hu, 2017). Taken together, by doubling down on threats and anxieties, the company holds the power to define the solutions and regulations their business model prioritizes.

Sociologist Ruha Benjamin (2024) encourages us to make visible and challenge the powers that are shaping how we understand the "future of humanity." The inevitability of AGI claims build on media deterministic views where technology is a "self-acting force" that shapes and creates the conditions for life (Williams 1974, 14). In the OpenAI discourse we analyze, humanity is at the center, and humanity's tech problems are shaped so that the problem-defining company can solve them. Yet, no one can know all the possible choices, options, and courses of action – conditions required for inevitability claims (cf. Basumatary, 2023). Thus, the inevitability of AI is less a statement of fact and more fundamentally an object of desire. In this paper, we render visible - and challenge - OpenAI's discourse and their strategy to define the optimal set of constraints and objectives to achieve AGI, highlighting the mechanisms they are using to define futures in a way that benefits the company the most.

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