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Daily OPINION

IN MEDIAS RES:

'Behold – a man!' and the reluctant argument for AI

LOGO BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTSIT EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

by Colin Hamilton
WEEKLY COLUMNIST
HE/HIM/HIS
cjz24004@uconn.edu

On its own, "artificial intelligence" is a vague and indecisive term. Despite its many applications, AI is defined simply as "the ability of a digital computer... to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings." By this definition, artificial intelligence is not even considered a proper noun; it is instead a criterion, a checkmark on a sheet of product function. We consider AI systems such as ChatGPT and Claude revolutionary for their ability to mimic the human ability to synthesize research and mimic our use of language. Yet AI's revolutionary ability is just that — synthesized mimicry, derived from innumerable sources. By definition, we can imagine it to be Plato's bird. "Behold," we could cry out while holding our computer-generated featherless biped, "a man!"



Arguably, true "artificial intelligence" has not yet been discovered or quantified. We have powerful computer programs that can sift through incomprehensibly large sums of data at breakneck speed, yes. In this sense, we have achieved the synthesization of artificial knowledge, as demonstrated by the increasingly common use of ChatGPT and Claude in daily life. However, this knowledge base is markedly not up to the same standards that would define general human intelligence. For instance, current "artificial intelligence" is known to fail at tasks involving complex reasoning. More importantly, despite the common ability to generate human-like text, AI engines arguably do not truly understand the content they process and instead rely on patterns of data to decipher an outcome.

In this sense, the umbrella term of "artificial intelligence" is insufficient in defining the systems that have grown to encapsulate our daily lives. Much of our personal experience with "AI" comes from ChatGPT, Claude, DeepSeek and any other chat-based interface. These engines are referred to as Large Language Models — a type of "artificial intelligence" designed to understand and generate human-like text based on the input they receive. LLMs, while a breakthrough in human ingenuity, come with a stretch of limitations, most notable being their tendency to be incredibly energy-intensive. LLMs are trained on an enormous sum of data, such as the internet, public texts and social media. This expansive neural architecture means that even the simplest query consumes an extraordinary amount of power. The expansion of data centers and the incredible amount of water that is diverted to cool them is largely because of a corresponding expansion in LLM use.

It is important to recognize that "artificial intelligence" is not solely composed of LLMs. The search for a cancer cure, for instance, has seen remarkable breakthroughs through the implementation of non-LLM AI technologies. CleaveNet, developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Microsoft, is an AI pipeline program and protein language model that uses a chosen set of data, collected by researchers, for the design and prediction of protease substrates. Using this approach, researchers have been able to quickly sort through millions of possible combinations to find usable molecular markers for early stage cancer diagnoses and subsequent therapeutic treatments.

Similarly, DeepVariant, an open-source Deep Neural Network model, transforms DNA sequencing data into images, allowing it to quickly identify genetic mutations at a high precision rate. It is poised to save many lives and has already been used in tumor-cell research and disease diagnostics.

"Artificial intelligence" has also led to breakthroughs in the fight against global warming. The Ai2 Climate Emulator (ACE), though still currently a work in progress, is largely considered a major scientific success for its speed and physical stability when predicting global atmosphere models. ACE, like many new technologies that have adopted the "artificial intelligence" moniker, is not an LLM. Instead, it is an open-source autoregressive machine learning emulator designed to simulate global weather, atmosphere and climate patterns.

Notably, none of these "artificially intelligent" models suffer from the same issues that have caused LLMs to face moral and ethical concerns. They are significantly less carbon-intensive and have no sycophantic tendencies. They also have a clear, single-minded purpose which allows them to perform incredibly well in their designed tasks. Like LLMs, however, these models do not represent true "artificial intelligence." They are plucked chickens that serve as very useful calculators. They are efficient, yes; knowledgeable, yes; but nowhere are they near true sentience or cognition.

In the face of this calculus, the lexicon of AI must be expanded. We cannot meet anything labeled as "artificial intelligence" with baseless reproach. Yes, some forms of AI, such as LLMs, are harmful and must be met with skepticism. The future of technology, however, rests with the "intelligence" that amplifies the already-intelligent human mind: the kind that crunches numbers faster to solve complex land-sea equations, that synthesizes molecules needed to cure cancer and the many possibilities not yet defined. Progress lies with the separate recognition of the many brands of technology that we call "artificial intelligence." That begins with the words we use to define it.

Removing blue phones raises the barrier for help

by Hamza Zakir
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
vsi25006@uconn.edu

When my phone dies, there are many things I cannot do: listen to music, check the dining hall menus, call my friends and get directions. One of those things should not be getting emergency help.

But as the University of Connecticut begins phasing out the emergency blue phones around campus, we will have to increasingly rely on our cellphones for emergency services.

UConn argues that in today's world, where almost everyone owns a phone, alongside the accessibility of its LiveSafe app and text-to-911 services, the decades-old emergency phones stationed around campus are now obsolete. After all, the phones were activated 166 times in the last five years and only two of those calls required a public safety response.

Let me preface this by saying: The LiveSafe app and all the other online services for help are not bad. Objectively, having these services is an improvement and everyone (you included) should have LiveSafe downloaded already.

But evaluating the need for physical emergency infrastructure misses the point of having it as a failsafe. Under normal circumstances, a phone is usually better for getting emergency help. However, these systems are for circumstances that cannot be evaluated in the context of ordinary situations. Most of us will not have to use a fire extinguisher or a defibrillator in our lives but we don't remove them from buildings because they might collect dust for years.

Although UConn is right that almost everyone owns a cellphone, owning does not equate to accessibility when it matters.

What happens when a student's phone dies on a late-night walk? When they lose it at a party? If someone doesn't have data or the campus Wi-Fi is down? What if someone visits from another school? A parent here for the weekend? Guests attending UConn events? Phones die, and though every student should have the app, the reality is that many students and visitors do not.

I could go on, but even those situations assume regular circumstances. In the midst of an actual emergency, there are even more reasons someone may be unable to access the app.

If someone is being robbed or assaulted on campus, who is to say they still have their phone? If someone is willing to commit assault, rape or theft, will they give the victim time to pull out their phone, unlock it and open LiveSafe — especially if that someone is another student who knows about LiveSafe?

These situations are moments where blue phones are fundamentally different from cellphones. They lower the barrier to entry for emergency services by removing all the assumptions of online services: that you have a phone that is charged, within reach and equipped with the app.

Blue phones also have inherent value besides when they are used. They are designed to be conspicuous and visible. To someone walking alone at night, myself included, there is comfort in the knowledge that there is a direct line to emergency services nearby. Someone committing a crime knows the same thing and the lights are inherently deterrents.

There are no statistics that say how many students feel safer with their presence but judging by the student body response to their removal, I can say with confidence: We do. There are also no statistics for how many crimes are discouraged by their existence. Even though they cannot discourage every crime, their utility cannot be reduced to the number of times the button has been pressed.

Each additional requirement between a person and emergency help that may save them from injury, rape or worse is a point of failure. LiveSafe and text-to-911 make getting help easier for every student but UConn needs to understand that ease comes with a set of expectations that cannot be mitigated in an emergency. Neither needs to replace a physical option that asks almost nothing from the person who needs it.

Students need to know that this debate is not over. UConn parent Billyjoe Contreras has sued to stop the removal of the blue phones, and a remote preliminary hearing that can be viewed by the public on Microsoft Teams is scheduled for Friday at 9:30 a.m. Whether you are a fellow student or a UConn parent — if you really care to "Protect Our Pack," be there.

In my time here at UConn, I have walked past the blue phones countless times without using them, and I hope I never need to. But if there is a night that anyone's phone (including mine) is dead, missing or inaccessible, I would still like to see a blue phone illuminating the path in front of us.