

CONCOURS CENTRALE•SUPÉLEC

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4 heures

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2024

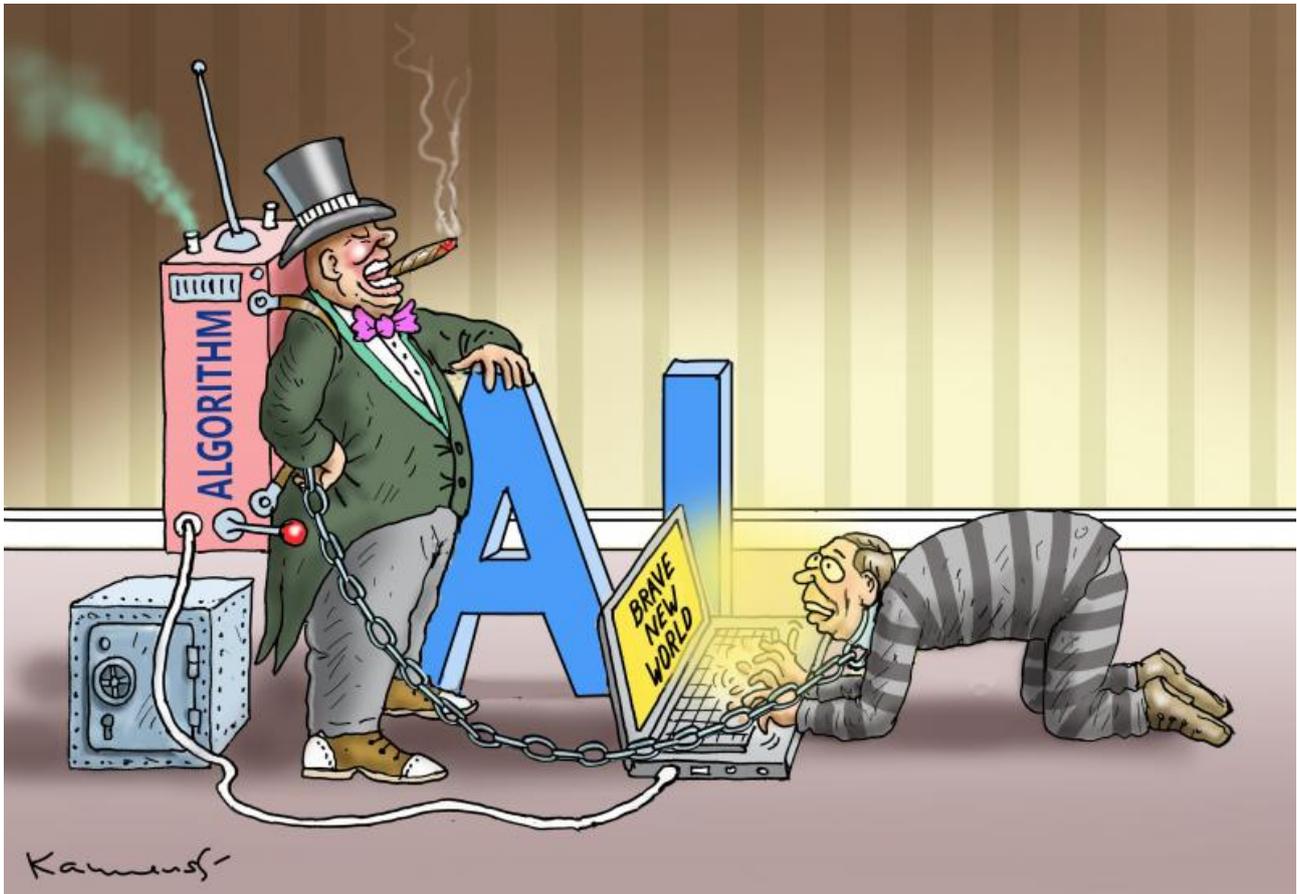
L'usage de tout système électronique ou informatique est interdit dans cette épreuve.

Rédiger en anglais et en 500 mots une synthèse des documents proposés, qui devra obligatoirement comporter un titre. Indiquer avec précision, à la fin du travail, le nombre de mots utilisés (titre inclus), un écart de 10% en plus ou en moins sera accepté.

Ce sujet comporte les 4 documents suivants :

- un dessin de MARIAN KAMENSKY publié sur le site *cartoonmovement.com*, le 9 mai 2023 ;
- une retranscription d'un entretien télévisé de l'écrivain ALDOUS HUXLEY, diffusé sur la *BBC*, le 30 juillet 1961 ;
- un extrait d'un article de MATTHEW SYED publié sur le site de *The Sunday Times*, le 2 mars 2023 ;
- un extrait d'un article publié sur le site *The Economist*, le 20 avril 2023.

L'ordre dans lequel se présentent les documents est arbitraire et ne revêt aucune signification particulière.



A cartoon by MARIAN KAMENSKY, *cartoonmovement.com*, May 9, 2023.

Transcript of an interview of Aldous Huxley by John Morgan

BBC Television, July 30, 1961

JOHN MORGAN (interviewer): In your *Brave New World Revisited*¹, which was published [...] about two years ago, you did claim that much of what you forecast had come true. I mean, for example, the use of drugs and this instance of people having their thoughts directed while they were asleep, through music being played or messages being played through their pillows and so on. In which societies do you think that most of what you forecast has mostly come true?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: ...

JOHN MORGAN: I mean, is it in America, Britain, Russia, China?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: Well, it seems to me this is not so much... you can't say that it's a question of national peculiarities, or even entirely of political peculiarities. I mean, I think when the technological and applied scientific means are developed, they just tend to be used. I mean, I think one can say that the whole history of recent times in relation to science and technology shows that if you plant the seed of applied science or technology, it proceeds to grow and it grows according to the laws of its own being. And the laws of its being are not necessarily the same as the laws of our being. I mean, hence [...] this sense which so many people have, and which I think one sees in so many societies, [...] that man is being subjected to his own inventions, that he is now the victim of his own technology and the victim of his own applied science, instead of being in control of it.

JOHN MORGAN: How could he be in control of it?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: Well, this is the problem. I mean, I think this is perhaps one of the major problems of our time. How do we make use of this thing? I mean, after all, [...] technology was made for man and not man for technology. But unfortunately, the development of recent social and scientific history has created a world in which man seems to be made for technology rather than the other way round. And we have to start thinking about this problem very seriously and seeing how we can re-establish control over our own inventions.

JOHN MORGAN: Suppose that this rather frightful prospect comes about, I mean, are people going to be happy under this kind of regime?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: Well, I think you could. I mean this was one of [...] the messages of *Brave New World*, that it is possible to make people contented with their servitude. I think this can be done. I think it has been done in the past, but then I think it could be done even more effectively now, because you can [...] you can provide them with endless amounts of distractions and propaganda.

JOHN MORGAN: This all raises, I think – it does to me anyway, this question of how much one really does value freedom or really how free one feels oneself to be. I mean someone like myself, say, who has grown up since the war, I mean, do you believe that I am less free than someone who was brought up in the twenties or in the eighties of the last century or in the 18th century?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: Well, it depends entirely who you were in the eighties of the last century or in the 18th century! I mean, if you were a country gentleman with an income, you were remarkably free, but if you were a peasant on his estate, you were remarkably unfree! I mean, it seems to me maybe the word freedom is perhaps too vague a term in this sort of context. I think what we have to ask is what sort of a social pattern and what sort of a political regime is best calculated to help the individuals within the society to realize the maximum extent of their desirable potentialities. [...]

JOHN MORGAN: Do you have any clear idea of how this could be done, and what kind of society it would be?

ALDOUS HUXLEY: Well, I have ideas! I don't know whether they're valid or not. As a matter of fact, I've just finished a kind of utopian fantasy² which is the opposite of *Brave New World*, which is about a society in which a serious effort is made to help its members to realize their desirable potentialities. And I've gone into... I mean, this is an attempt to write what may be called a practical utopia. Nothing is easier of course than to enunciate ideals and to say, well, wouldn't it be nice if everybody were good and kind and loving, etc., etc.? Of course, it would be very nice, but the point is how do you implement these ideals? How do

¹ In his 1958 essay entitled *Brave New World Revisited*, Aldous Huxley demonstrated that the world was fast becoming like the world he had imagined in his 1932 dystopian novel, *Brave New World*.

² Aldous Huxley is referring to *Island*, his final work, published in 1962. *Island* is the account of Will Farnaby, a cynical journalist who is shipwrecked on the fictional island of Pala and discovers “a third alternative,” between barbarism and dystopia.

you fulfil your good social and psychological intentions? And when you come down to this problem, you see it's a very complex problem of organizing family life, organizing education, organizing sexual life, organizing social and economic life. I mean, there are endless factors involved in this. And to try to work out what all these factors should be is, I must say, what I found a very interesting job, so far as I was concerned – I don't know whether anybody else will find it interesting.

THE TIMES

It's not Big Brother I fear but Huxley's world of mindless trivia

MATTHEW SYED, *The Sunday Times*, March 2, 2023

We've never had so much information at our fingertips – and so little wisdom to do anything useful with it. In the time it takes you to reach the end of this paragraph, 15 million emails will have been sent, 30,000 tweets and three million Facebook updates. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of blogs, Instagram posts and news articles will have been added to a running total measured in billions. During the biblical flood the world was supposedly overflowing with water; today we are drowning in gigabytes.

You may say: well, with this column, Matthew, you are adding to the deluge, and you'd be right. But, at the same time, perhaps we can all acknowledge that this torrent of information – which we once believed would be liberating for culture and society – has not had the desired effect. Indeed, I think we need to accept that, as a species, we are changing in ways we never predicted, never voted on and, perhaps worst of all, are losing the capacity to stop.

Two great dystopian visions of the 20th century were put into words by Englishmen, as different in style and psychology as one could imagine for individuals inhabiting the same slice of history. George Orwell, much the more famous these days, was fearful of censorship. His anxiety – understandable given that he was writing at the high point of Stalinism and just after Hitler – was that governments would limit access to information, thus placing rigid boundaries around the space of human thought and inquiry. These fears rapidly coalesced into an apparition hovering over western societies, and it is rare to go a week without someone fretting about cancel culture or the editorial strictures of tech companies.

I still think Orwell has much to teach us, but the more I reflect upon our times, the more I come back to that other British visionary, Aldous Huxley. In *Brave New World*, published in 1932, his fear was not that information would be limited by a sinister state but that we would be deluged by so much of it that we would find ourselves thrashing around in an ocean of unnavigable size. We would struggle to find truth amid swirling currents of data and become ever more sidelined by waves of triviality. As Huxley said in a series of remarkable

essays in 1958, we should never underestimate “man's almost infinite appetite for distractions.”

In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the cultural critic Neil Postman teases out the fundamental differences in these two competing visions. “Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture” [...].

In his remarkable book *Human as Media: The Emancipation of Authorship*, Andrey Miroshnichenko notes that the two information revolutions of history overturned the social and political order. The first was the development of phonetic script in ancient Egypt, which caused “palaces and temples to lose their monopoly over the production of information”. The second occurred with Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century, which brought in its train the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution and birth of the modern world.

What we are seeing today, though, is arguably more consequential. [...] With limited attentions spans and endless distractions, we may be moving into a new phase of history envisioned by Huxley when he wrote of societies “whose members spend a great part of their time, not on the spot, not here and now and in the calculable future, but somewhere else, in the irrelevant other worlds of... mythology and metaphysical fantasy”. The metaverse, anyone?

Techno-optimists will dismiss this analysis, arguing that Luddites³ have always feared the latest invention. They will argue that we will develop ways to harness opportunities while filtering out threats. I myself regard this as dangerous hubris. Ask yourself: are we becoming a wiser species? Are we becoming more capable of dealing with our challenges? Or are we struggling with the very complexity we invented [...]? I don't have a solution, but I do think the crucial first step is diagnosing the disease. [...]

³ People opposed to technological innovation.

The Economist, April 20th, 2023

“Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop non-human minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart... and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilisation?” These questions were asked last month in an open letter from the Future of Life Institute, an NGO. It called for a six-month “pause” in the creation of the most advanced forms of artificial intelligence (AI), and was signed by tech luminaries including Elon Musk. It is the most prominent example yet of how rapid progress in AI has sparked anxiety about the potential dangers of the technology.

In particular, new “large language models” (LLMs)—the sort that powers CHATGPT, a chatbot made by OpenAI, a startup—have surprised even their creators with their unexpected talents [...]. Such “emergent” abilities include everything from solving logic puzzles and writing computer code to identifying films from plot summaries written in emoji.

These models stand to transform humans’ relationship with computers, knowledge and even with themselves. Proponents of AI argue for its potential to solve big problems by developing new drugs, designing new materials to help fight climate change, or untangling the complexities of fusion power. To others, the fact that AIs’ capabilities are already outrunning their creators’ understanding risks bringing to life the science-fiction disaster scenario of the machine that outsmarts its inventor, often with fatal consequences. [...]

Experts are divided. In a survey of AI researchers carried out in 2022, 48% thought there was at least a 10% chance that AI’s impact would be “extremely bad (eg, human extinction)”. But 25% said the risk was 0%; the median researcher put the risk at 5%. The nightmare is that an advanced AI causes harm on a massive scale, by making poisons or viruses, or persuading humans to commit terrorist acts. It need not have evil intent: researchers worry that future AIs may have goals that do not align with those of their human creators.

Such scenarios should not be dismissed. But all involve a huge amount of guesswork, and a leap from today’s technology. [...] Imposing heavy regulation, or indeed a pause, today seems an over-reaction. A pause would also be unenforceable.

Regulation is needed, but for more mundane reasons

than saving humanity. Existing AI systems raise real concerns about bias, privacy and intellectual-property rights. As the technology advances, other problems could become apparent. The key is to balance the promise of AI with an assessment of the risks, and to be ready to adapt.

So far governments are taking three different approaches. At one end of the spectrum is Britain, which has proposed a “light-touch” approach with no new rules or regulatory bodies, but applies existing regulations to AI systems. The aim is to boost investment and turn Britain into an “AI superpower”. America has taken a similar approach, though the Biden administration is now seeking public views on what a rulebook might look like.

The EU is taking a tougher line. Its proposed law categorises different uses of AI by the degree of risk, and requires increasingly stringent monitoring and disclosure as the degree of risk rises from, say, music-recommendation to self-driving cars. Some uses of AI are banned altogether, such as subliminal advertising and remote biometrics. Firms that break the rules will be fined. For some critics, these regulations are too stifling. [...]

What to do? The light-touch approach is unlikely to be enough. If AI is as important a technology as cars, planes and medicines—and there is good reason to believe that it is—then, like them, it will need new rules. Accordingly, the EU’s model is closest to the mark, though its classification system is overwrought and a principles-based approach would be more flexible. [...]

This could allow for tighter regulation over time, if needed. A dedicated regulator may then seem appropriate; so too may intergovernmental treaties, similar to those that govern nuclear weapons, should plausible evidence emerge of existential risk. To monitor that risk, governments could form a body modelled on CERN, a particle-physics laboratory, that could also study AI safety and ethics—areas where companies lack incentives to invest as much as society might wish.

This powerful technology poses new risks, but also offers extraordinary opportunities. Balancing the two means treading carefully. A measured approach today can provide the foundations on which further rules can be added in future. But the time to start building those foundations is now.