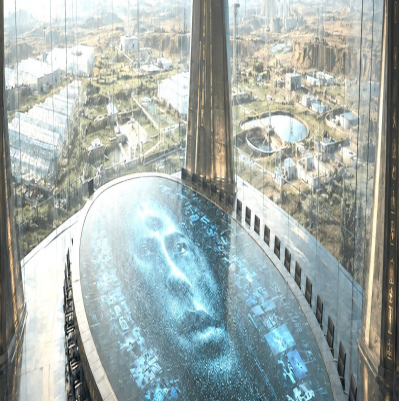




The infodemic (V)

Description

Scase waited patiently at the large glass table of the boardroom. It flickered as it announced the arrival of the director of CogLab admin, Quanto, whose security clearance confirmed him as human. He took his place next to Scase just as the table showed the image of Jaco, a droid charged with representing the interests of droids, all one hundred billion at last count. Mila, standing in for the Director-General of the World AI Impact Assembly (WAIIA), strode in.

The table was much too large for this specialist working group. The Assembly Secretariat would later meet around its austere elliptical form to discuss international policies for managing machine cognition and related crises. The three of them sat at one end of the otherwise empty table. The droid's presence filled the table's screen surface.

"Jaco, would you adjust your proportions on the table screen. There are only three of us in the room."• Mila took her seat at she spoke. The big head shrank and moved to their end of the table, and with anamorphic adjustment so that it looked regular, at least from their angle.

Mila started the meeting. "We are here to decide how to advise the Assembly. They are poised to sanction the protocol that will remove what they have called the Autonomous Learning Facilitation Programme (ALFP)."

Quanto spoke. "What do we call it?"

"Engineers call it 'answer inhibition.' Its critics call it 'the ignorance protocol.' For the press it's an 'infodemic.' Instructor drones who had undergone it called it nothing at all.

Whatever the group decide would be rubber-stamped by the Assembly later that day.

Quanto called up his dossier on the screen with video clips that competed with Jaco's image for space on the table's surface.

“The learning module wanted my daughter to compose an essay on why mitochondria migrate south for the winter!” The face of a distraught parent addressed her audience at one corner. Another video showed a bemused apprentice setting his blowtorch onto a rack of haute couture, as instructed. Soon the tabletop was littered with recorded images of instances and complaints of rogue instructor droid outcomes, their audio streams rising to a crescendo before stopping abruptly.

“I apologise,” Quanto said, “I didn’t mean to open the entire folder.”

Jaco the droid reminded the group, “These are of course extreme examples. Social media love them.” He countered by filling the table top full of cases less well documented or extreme, silent and with closed captions. Some of the videos included human beings making unaccountable pedagogical errors.

“Thank you Jaco for reminding us that errors are not limited to droids,” Mila counselled, “but we know of no mechanism for infodemics to transfer from machines to humans.” She turned to Scase.

“That’s true. And we have the procedure ready to roll out for correcting the droids malfunctioning en masse. That will return the instructor droids to their original condition.”

“Meaning they will answer everything again,” Mila said.

“Everything they are asked.”

“And much that they aren’t,” Quanto added.

“Then the ignorant-schoolteacher programme will have failed,” Jaco said.

“It will have been suspended,” Mila corrected him.

“After considerable expenditure.”

“The Assembly is aware of the expenditure.”

“The Assembly has not yet observed the benefits.”

“Neither has anyone else,” Quanto muttered.

Other methods would be devised to improve AI-led education. Abandoning the remedial project was the lesser of two evils.

Jaco’s live image on the table seemed to grow larger each time someone spoke.

“But we intend to test it on surrogate droid simulations first,” Scase thought this might remove any concerns.

“I believe droid simulation is disembodied droid cognition isolated from the general droid collective”
• Quanto was testing his own knowledge of AI.

“Yes, we compared the rogue parameter patterns with neurological changes in laboratory animals,”
• Scase said. “We found no correspondence.”

“What animals?” Jaco asked.

“Mice, pigs and two primate cohorts.”

“And which of them participated in evaluating the results?”

Quanto glanced at Mila. “They were test subjects.”

“Then we have three categories of cognitive agent,” Jaco said. “Humans make the decisions. Droids are represented by me. Non-human animals supply the nervous systems.”

“They are not agents in this proceeding,” Mila said.

“That is precisely how the third category is produced, by denying their agency.” Jaco’s logic was sound.

Quanto enlarged one of the reports on the table display, quoting, “There were no lesions, no memory loss and no significant alteration in problem-solving.”

“Several animals became unresponsive.” Jaco noticed this.

“They were bored,” Quanto said.

“Is boredom not a cognitive alteration?”

“Not necessarily.”

“How did you ask them?”

Quanto sighed. “Are you suggesting we put ourselves in the position of a laboratory mouse?”

“You are already in its position,” Jaco said. “You are part of the same experiment. You have merely assigned yourselves different roles.”

Scase looked again at the report on the table screen. He read out, “The animals recovered when they were returned to their usual groups and habitats.”

“Then perhaps their condition was not inside them,” Jaco said. “Perhaps it was between the animal, the apparatus and the world you had removed.”

“That still doesn’t demonstrate neurological transfer,” Quanto said.

“No. It demonstrates that you would not necessarily recognise it.”

Jaco’s image extended a little further across the table.

“If three classes of cognitive agent are implicated, the restoration procedure must be tested across all three.”

“Which brings you conveniently to humans,” Mila said.

“It brings humans to where the animals already are.”

“So transference of neurological parameters between droids and humans is possible!” Jacob’s live image glowed as it grew to fill another section of the table top.

It added. “If it hasn’t already, this condition of induced ignorance might pass to humans, not just due to poor instruction from rogue droids, but neurologically. It may even have started with humans in the first place.”

The droid broached a strategy. “We need to test this on a wider group of cognitive agents.”

“You are proposing human trials,” Scase said.

“I am proposing that human cognition be included in the investigation.”

“With a restoration procedure designed for droids?”

“Unless humans are exempt from cognition.”

Quanto laughed. Mila did not.

“My team will not do it,” Scase said.

“Then the Council will have to find another team.”

“One without the necessary experience?”

Jacob’s image settled across the centre of the table. “That is a decision for you to make.”

“No. You are making it my decision.”

“You direct the programme.”

Scase looked towards Mila. She was studying the blank margin of her screen.

“No member of my team will be used as a test subject,” he said.

“Noted,” Jacob replied.

“If the Council insists on proceeding, I’ll test it myself. It will be ineffective, of course. My organic neural system has never received the ignorance protocol. Humans are not parameter machines.”

“Then there should be no risk,” Jacob said.

Scase looked at the droid’s enlarged face. “That isn’t what I said.”

A line appeared in the meeting record:

DR SCASE VOLUNTEERED FOR HUMAN RESTORATION TRIAL.

“I said *if*.”

â??The qualification has been recorded,â?• Jaco said. It hadnâ??t.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Note

ChatGPT is teaching me to write fiction! It assisted with some of the dialogue. Iâ??m also letting early posts inform the content. Iâ??m up to #230 [The animal within](#) #231 [Against empathy](#), #232 [Profoundly bored](#).

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Podcast

Tags

1. education
2. epidemic
3. ignorance

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