Irresponsible AI: big tech's influence on AI research and associated impacts

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Abstract

The accelerated development, deployment and adoption of artificial intelligence systems has been fuelled by the increasing involvement of big tech. This has been accompanied by increasing ethical concerns and intensified societal and environmental impacts. In this article, we review and discuss how these phenomena are deeply entangled. First, we examine the growing and disproportionate influence of big tech in AI research and argue that its drive for scaling and general-purpose systems is fundamentally at odds with the responsible, ethical, and sustainable development of AI. Second, we review key current environmental and societal negative impacts of AI and trace their connections to big tech and its underlying economic incentives. Finally, we argue that while it is important to develop technical and regulatory approaches to these challenges, these alone are insufficient to counter the distortion introduced by big tech's influence. We thus review and propose alternative strategies that build on the responsibility of implicated actors and collective action.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the technology known as artificial intelligence (AI) has shifted from being predominantly an academic study subject, to making recurrent headlines in mainstream media and becoming a conversation topic for many. While AI remains a topic of little interest for a large fraction of the world's population, it sparks enthusiasm for the opportunities it may open among others. Meanwhile, the accelerated deployment and adoption of AI is responsible for tangible societal and environmental impacts (Bender & Hanna, 2025).

The transition of AI from academia into the public sphere has gone hand-in-hand with the corporate world, in particular "big tech" (large tech companies like Google, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft), taking over and setting the agenda for many aspects of AI research, development, application, and even regulatory decision making for the field (Whittaker, 2021; Jurowetzki et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023; Giziński et al., 2024). Importantly, big tech has also attempted to influence the narrative around responsible AI development, with many large corporate players writing their own responsible AI

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guidelines, and engaging in AI ethics-related research (Jobin et al., 2019; Young et al., 2022; Bughin, 2025).

Nonetheless, far from advancing the responsible, ethical, and sustainable development of AI, big corporations have rather significantly contributed to the negative impacts of AI in the world: environmental harm due to increased demands for energy and resources (Crawford, 2021; Desroches et al., 2025), increased surveillance (Zuboff, 2023), loss of privacy (Véliz, 2021), infringement upon intellectual property (Jiang et al., 2023), spread of mis/dis-information (Bontridder & Poullet, 2021; Raman et al., 2024), increased inequality (Adams, 2024; Kim, 2021), degradation of labour rights (Altenried, 2020; Crawford, 2021; Bender & Hanna, 2025), etc. While the role of big tech in these negative impacts is often discussed in certain academic and non-academic circles (Abdalla & Abdalla, 2021; Young et al., 2022; Verdegem, 2022; Bender & Hanna, 2025), big tech's ever-growing influence is often overlooked within the larger AI research community, likely due to its pervasive presence (Whittaker, 2021).

In this paper, we review literature from diverse fields with the aim of 1) summarising the influence that big tech has on AI research, 2) examining the link between the negative impacts of AI and big tech's influence, 3) discussing why big tech, and corporate tech more broadly, is incentivized and structured to favour irresponsible AI (iAI), and 4) suggesting potential ways in which researchers could counter this influence and thus support responsible AI efforts. Consequently, we echo the many voices asserting that technical solutions alone, without addressing factors such as corporate influence and industry incentives, will fail to result in truly responsible AI (Greene et al., 2019; Verdegem, 2022; Kalluri, 2020; Adams, 2024). We tailor this paper particularly for AI researchers, motivated both by our insider experience that these topics can be under-discussed in technical circles, and because AI researchers also play an important role in many of the potential solutions to iAI.

2 How does big tech influence AI?

The technology industry is naturally interested in computer science research and has historically influenced its development (Mahoney, 1998). However, since the early 2010s, in what Sevilla et al. (2022) named the Deep Learning and Large-Scale eras, the influence of big tech in artificial intelligence research has dramatically increased and is currently pervasive (Ahmed et al., 2023). The tactics and actions to exert this influence are multiple, and they are reflected in the research community in numerous ways.

Birhane et al. (2022) showed that the percentage of publications at ICML and NeurIPS with big tech author affiliations increased from 13 % in 2008/09 to 47 % in 2018/19. In an independent study, Ahmed & Wahed (2020) observed similar trends across a larger set of conferences. Notably, Birhane et al. (2022) also observed that many of these industry papers concentrate around the biggest players, such as Google and Microsoft—for instance, 167 publications at NeurIPS 2019 (of a total of 1428 accepted papers) were co-authored by researchers affiliated with Google (Jurowetzki et al., 2021).

The influence of big tech on machine learning conferences goes beyond the accumulation of publications. First, well-known big tech corporations have consistently sponsored and thus funded the major machine learning conferences—NeurIPS, ICML and ICLR—along with many other AI-related events, including the conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT) (Young et al., 2022). Second, researchers with corporate affiliations occupy many of the major managing and organisational positions at these conferences. By way of illustration, 7 out of 12 of the board members of NeurIPS 2025, plus the Treasurer and the Secretary, are affiliated with corporate organisations (NeurIPS, 2025). Finally, big tech is also behind the organisation of many workshops at the major conferences and many invited speakers are industry researchers.

Related to the accumulation of corporate papers in scientific conferences and the penetration of big tech in AI research is the extraction of research talent from academia to industry. According to data from Ahmed et al. (2023), the number of PhD graduates from AI-related fields in US and Canadian universities that went to industry increased from 21 % in 2004 to 70 % in 2020. Regarding faculty, the number of professors who transitioned from academia to industry has increased eightfold since 2006 (Ahmed et al., 2023). Joint faculty appointments between universities and the industry have also increased, and these trends are having consequences in terms of department culture shift, research directions, conflicts of interest and the quality of the mentorship students receive (Morrisett et al., 2019; Whittaker, 2021).

The level of infiltration of big tech into AI research has numerous consequences, whose details are beyond the scope of this paper[2]. For our purposes, it is worth highlighting that the enmeshment of big tech with AI research allows the industry to heavily influence the research agenda of the field. While big tech's research interests are broad, we here identify and highlight two relevant and related threads: the scaling paradigm (Hanna & Park, 2020) and the push for general-purpose systems (Verdegem, 2022; Bender & Hanna, 2025). Scaling refers to the belief that the main driver for progress in AI is increasing the amount of training data, the size of the models, etc. without necessarily innovating on the fundamental aspects of the technology. This is not surprising, given that large corporations have access to enormous amounts of data and compute power and this offers a competitive advantage with respect to academia. However, as we review in Section 3, the scaling approach, fuelled by the dominant growth imperative (see Section 4), is at the core of much of irresponsible AI development (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). Related to scaling, the drive towards general-purpose algorithms, epitomised by the "AGI" slogan (Bender & Hanna, 2025), is also connected to big tech's business model and competition for monopolising and controlling as large a portion of the market and technology as possible. We discuss how general-purpose systems lead to irresponsible development in the following section.

3 How does big tech contribute to irresponsible AI?

The push for general-purpose systems and ever-larger scale boosted by big tech comes with a social and environmental footprint. A now well-studied impact of this approach are the carbon emissions of large-scale training (Luccioni & Hernandez-Garcia, 2023) and deployment (Luccioni et al., 2024) of AI systems. AI models, especially those from large corporations, are typically trained and deployed in massive data centres which consume enormous amounts of energy (De Vries, 2023; Guidi et al., 2024), fresh water (Li et al., 2025; Barratt et al., 2025) and raw materials (Crawford, 2021).

As of March 2025, the US alone has 5,381 data centres, with 1 trillion US dollars in investments projected between 2025–2030 (Hayes et al., 2025). Examples are massive ventures like Project Stargate—a joint venture by OpenAI, Oracle, and Softbank, consisting of a $500 billion data centre that would be powered by a $500 million natural gas plant—and Meta's largest data centre in Louisiana, which could consume up to 30 % of the state's power supply, as well as the $10 billion data centre investments by Microsoft, Google and Amazon in Mexico, which will require large quantities of fresh water in regions increasingly prone to droughts (Baptista & McDonnell, 2024; Graham, 2024). As a result, the reported carbon emissions by big tech and their projections have soared (Milmo, 2024) and they have dropped their already weak emission pledges (Hoffmann, 2022; Marx, 2024). This is yet another example suggesting corporate climate and responsible AI pledges are often merely business tactics (Foroohar, 2019). All this has led some authors to question whether AI, and even computing more generally, could ever be sustainable (Becker, 2023; Schütze, 2024; Rehak, 2025).

Not only do big tech companies abandon their climate promises, but also the imperative to scale, grow, and compete often results in abandoning ethical considerations too. Many scholars have studied how the development and application of AI at scale has often resulted in reinforced inequality, discrimination and exploitation of workers (O'Neil, 2017; West et al., 2019; Bender et al., 2021; Benjamin, 2019). As shown by (Widder & Nafus, 2023), AI practitioners tend to disregard ethical work when it is perceived as an obstacle towards scaling of their systems, which in turn is seen as an unquestionable merit. The scaling paradigm reinforces the distance between the developers of a technology and the people affected by its use and development. This distance "makes it possible to not see harm" and facilitates a modularised, transactional attitude towards AI development, where no social relationship is created when a piece of technology is deployed. Further, this distance plays out as well in big tech's common practice of utilizing text and image datasets composed of literature and art created in large part by artists who rely on their intellectual property rights to make their living Jiang et al. (2023); Bender & Hanna (2025); Reisner (2025). The appropriation of the work of artists to train AI models poses a threat to their jobs—jobs which provide significant satisfaction and purpose in addition to artists' livelihoods Crabapple & Marx (2025); Jiang et al. (2023).

[2]A comprehensive analysis of the implications of big tech in academia, and a comparison with the well studied influence of Big Tobacco, was offered by Abdalla & Abdalla (2021). Giziński et al. (2024) offer a recent review of the literature on big tech's influence on AI research and study how its reach and power impact the propagation of ideas.

Big tech's influence also extends into militarism, where AI and data resources are deployed to support the scaling and proliferation of warfare (Katz, 2020; Maaser & Verlaan, 2022). Several high-profile projects illustrate this involvement. Google, Amazon, and Microsoft provide cloud services, AI tools, and infrastructure to the Israeli military (OHCHR, 2025; Fatafta & Leufer, 2024; Abraham, 2024b; Davies & Abraham, 2025), which has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza since October 2023 and is being investigated since early 2024 by the International Court of Justice for the crime of genocide (ICJ, 2023; OCHA, 2025). Google recently announced a partnership with Lockheed Martin—a major weapons contractor—to "integrate Google's advanced generative AI into Lockheed Martin's [...] ecosystem" (Martin, 2025). Previously, Meta proudly announced partnerships with Lockheed Martin and other weapons manufacturers such as Palantir and Anduril (Clegg, 2024). Amazon, Microsoft, and Google have all contributed to Project Maven (Manson, 2024)—the US military initiative utilizing AI to assist decision-making in military operations. Contrary to common claims that AI will make warfare more precise and reduce bloodshed, AI use has reportedly played a key role in Israel's levelling of Gaza, with algorithms being used to facilitate and justify high-throughput targetting and striking (Abraham, 2024a). Moreover, since geopolitical conflicts increase the demand for weapons, profit-driven weapon manufacturers have a long history of lobbying for the proliferation of wars (Hartung, 2004). We speculate that the growing involvement of big tech in this business amplifies pro-military political influence and increases the economic incentive for expanding conflicts around the globe.

4 What influences big tech?

Because big tech, and the corporate tech world more broadly, is composed primarily of for-profit firms, their decision making is driven by a *growth imperative* (Richters & Siemoneit, 2019; Verdegem, 2022). This was made very explicit in the example of copyright laws, where investors worried that their AI projects would not be profitable if copyright was respected (Hays, 2023). Moreover, the wealth and power acquired in their voracious chase of profit, coupled with what economists describe as the *monopolization of knowledge*, (Pagano, 2014; Widder & Kim, 2025), allow big tech firms to escape regulation (Rikap & Lundvall, 2022) that might otherwise limit iAI.

These economic factors, and how they facilitate the maximization of profit over responsible practice, have been studied extensively over many years (Marx, 1867; Raworth, 2018; Hickel, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Becker, 2023). Without going into detail, we emphasize that iAI can be traced to fundamental features of capitalism—such as capital accumulation and competition Harris & Delanty (2023)—and thus technological solutions alone can not fully address the irresponsible technology pipeline.

The technical AI researcher might be tempted to give up addressing iAI, believing it to fall outside their purview, or to be too overwhelming of a problem. However, many paths to addressing iAI outlined in the next section rely on technical researchers, so we encourage our colleagues to not put down the paper yet!

5 How can we mitigate big tech's irresponsible influence?

To answer the question of what we, as AI researchers, can do about the societal and environmental harms caused by AI under big tech's influence, we first need to look into how we are situated in this context. It is important to acknowledge that due to corporate involvement and AI hype, our field is financially privileged, with funding opportunities, higher stipends and salaries, and travel grants to attend prestigious conferences around the globe. Corporate sponsors at these conferences offer free food, luxury parties and other entertainments. With that, we find ourselves in a position of *implicated subjects* (Rothberg, 2019) with respect to the harms described in Section 3, since we are indirectly benefiting from them. This position of implication can be uncomfortable to recognise, but it need not result in feelings of guilt. Instead, it invites us to critically reflect upon our own situation, which brings opportunities for transformative action. In this section, we outline ideas for such actions.

Starting with one's own research project and studies, we recommend to critically examine how corporate incentives—through funding, publications, or collaborations with industry—may shape the research questions posed and the methodologies employed. Assessing who stands to benefit from the work, and who may be disadvantaged, is essential for uncovering these influences. Relevant literature exploring the intersections of profit and power in AI provides valuable guidance for such critical

reflections (Bender & Hanna, 2025; Katz, 2020; Adams, 2024; Kalluri, 2020). Echoing the work of other scholars (Hanna & Park, 2020; Bender et al., 2021; Widder & Nafus, 2023; Carroll et al., 2023; Mohamed et al., 2020), we suggest to centre the needs of communities and the building of social relations in the research and development of new technologies. This approach connects with the principle of developing situated, narrowly scoped technologies supported by ethical labour and data practices (Bender & Hanna, 2025; Carroll et al., 2023). Ethically curated, community-centred research has the potential to strengthen social connections and empower communities, as opposed to research advancing large, general-purpose AI systems which exacerbate social inequalities and the climate crisis for the benefit of a few big tech shareholders.

In order to conduct research grounded in the ethical principles discussed above, one needs to have a sufficient level of control over the project, which AI practitioners can often lack (Widder et al., 2023). This aspect becomes especially prominent when ethical principles challenge the interests of powerful corporations, directly or indirectly controlling the research agenda. Therefore, efforts dedicated towards building collective (counter)power play a crucial role in mitigating big tech negative influence.

Change happens in complex non-linear ways and there are often multiple avenues for making an effective contribution, depending on personal circumstances (Duncan, 2016). We suggest learning about big tech harms; building solidarity with the affected people; raising awareness among colleagues and the wider community; strategic refusal to engage in collaborations or accept funding from big tech; contributing to start-ups structured around democratic worker ownership and fulfilment of societal needs rather than investor-driven growth; joining relevant political movements or organizations, for example Science for the people (SftP, 2025), Tech Workers Coalition (TWC, 2025), or No Tech for Apartheid (NTFA, 2025). For researchers in big tech and industry, there are many valuable ways to work towards responsible AI "from the inside". Strategies such as whistle-blowing, and collective actions like petitions, walk-outs, and sit-ins build public awareness and political pressure that can be harnessed to correct irresponsible practices (King, 2019; McCanne, 2020; Koren, 2022; Grant, 2022; PBS NewsHour, 2018). Perhaps most crucially, forming a union represents a great step towards responsible AI, as unions can be used as a vehicle for broader system change, in addition to workers' rights (Lewin & Zhang, 2024; Whittaker, 2021).

6 Conclusion

Computer science and machine learning research may be able to provide technology and tools to improve human well-being. However, the current trends in AI are leaving societal and environmental footprints that seem at times to overshadow the potential benefits. In this paper, we have reviewed literature arguing that the disproportionate influence of big tech in AI research, development, and deployment significantly contributes to these harms and negative impacts. Our review then highlights, in turn, how big tech's accumulation of wealth and power, and its use of these to influence AI, may indeed be traced to features of the capitalist economy. We hope that this review will be helpful for AI researchers who may not yet have come across the literature we reference, and that our list of strategies in section 5 might inspire our colleagues to join in taking steps to mitigate big tech's irresponsible influence.

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