AI Benchmarks: Interdisciplinary Issues and Policy Considerations

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) benchmarks have emerged as essential for evaluating AI performance, capabilities, and risks. However, as their influence grows, concerns arise about their limitations and side effects when assessing sensitive topics such as high-impact capabilities, safety and systemic risks. In this work we summarise the results of an interdisciplinary meta-review of approximately 110 studies over the last decade (Eriksson et al., 2025), which identify key shortcomings in AI benchmarking practices, including issues in the design and application (e.g., biases, inadequate documentation, data contamination, and failures to distinguish signal from noise) and broader sociotechnical issues (e.g., over-focus on text-based and one-time evaluation logic, neglecting multimodality and interactions). We also highlight systemic flaws, such as misaligned incentives, construct validity issues, unknown unknowns, and the gaming of benchmark results. We underscore how benchmark practices are shaped by cultural, commercial and competitive dynamics that often prioritise performance at the expense of broader societal concerns. As a result, AI benchmarking may be ill-suited to provide the assurances required by policymakers. To address these challenges, it is crucial to consider key policy aspects that can help mitigate the shortcomings of current AI benchmarking practices.

1. Introduction

AI benchmarks play a central role in AI development (Raji et al., 2021) and regulation (European Union, 2024), but re-

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searchers have raised concerns about their use. Benchmarks are seen as deeply political, performative and generative, shaping the world rather than passively describing it (Grill, 2024). This paper summarises the results of an interdisciplinary meta-review of around 110 publications during the last decade (Eriksson et al., 2025), aiming to address the gap in research on AI benchmarking critique by mapping and discussing known limitations.

In computing, benchmarks are used to evaluate the performance of hardware or software systems by comparing them to a standard or reference point (Henning, 2000). In AI development, benchmarks are used to facilitate crossmodel comparisons, measure performance, and track model progress (Reuel et al., 2024). We focus on software-oriented benchmarks, which are defined as a combination of test datasets and associated performance metrics, representing one or more specific tasks or capabilities (Raji et al., 2021). We primarily consider quantitative benchmarks, which are executed without direct human intervention, as opposed to qualitative benchmarks, which involve human evaluators.

We used a snowball sampling method (Jalali & Wohlin, 2012; Badampudi et al., 2015) to gather source materials, starting from the article "AI and the Everything in the Whole Wide World Benchmark" (Raji et al., 2021) and expanding through reference lists and Google Scholar citations. A conceptual diagram illustrating both the snowball sampling approach and the paper selection criteria is shown in Fig. 1. We targeted papers that primarily address benchmark critique, excluding those that present new benchmarks or simply apply them. Our collection consists of around 110 papers published between 2014 and 2024, which explicitly and primarily highlight issues with benchmarks (Mitchell et al., 2019; Orr & Crawford, 2024b; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Mulvin, 2021; Pinch, 1993; Marres & Stark, 2020). The number of papers per year and the cumulative trend are shown in Fig. 2. We excluded papers that propose new benchmarks, as they often reproduce assumptions about quantitative benchmarks providing a technical "fix" to AI safety and capability assessments. Our meta-review is not exhaustive, but it covers a broad range of critique aimed at benchmarking practices. We identified nine issue categories after close-reading and classifying papers and discussing these classifications within the author group. The resulting

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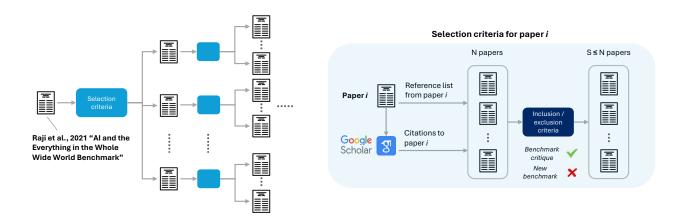


Figure 1. (Left) Illustration of snowball sampling. We start with one relevant paper and expand our search according to (Right) a set of selection criteria, using reference lists from the paper and Google Scholar citations to the paper, and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process was repeated iteratively until no additional relevant references are found.

issue areas represent the result of these discussions, acknowledging that many issues overlap and are not absolute or all-encompassing. We focus on works that voice critique relevant to policy makers, highlight areas of concern across different modalities, and point to fundamental weaknesses in benchmark design and application. Our goal is to provide a diverse account of concerns regarding benchmarks, that can be relevant to both AI developers and policymakers.

2. Current AI Benchmarking Issues

We summarise the main issues identified in our research, presented as a taxonomy of nine reason to be cautious with AI benchmarks. These interlinked problems, depicted in Fig. 3, are not ranked by importance or urgency, and their complexity and interdependence pose a challenge for AI evaluations.

2.1. Data Collection, Annotation, and Documentation

Limitations in collecting, annotating, and documenting AI benchmark are a significant issue in AI research, tied to broader critiques of insufficient documentation and transparency (Gebru et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; Orr & Crawford, 2024b; Simson et al., 2024; Scheuerman et al., 2021). It is often difficult to trace the origin and creation of benchmark datasets (Reuel et al., 2024; Denton et al., 2020), compromising their robustness and generalisability (Arzt & Hanbury, 2024). This issue is partly due to the low status of dataset-related work (Orr & Crawford, 2024a; Sambasivan et al., 2021) and the reuse of datasets (Koch et al., 2021), which complicates documentation of their limitations and social impact (Thylstrup et al., 2022; Park & Jeoung, 2022). Moreover, benchmarks raise ethical and legal concerns re-

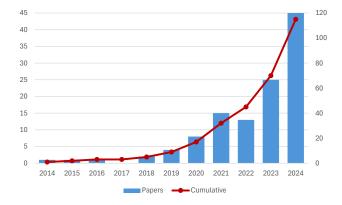


Figure 2. Publications per year for the period 2014-2024 and cumulative number of publications trend.

garding copyrights, privacy, informed consent and opt-out rights (Paullada et al., 2021). The use of crowd-sourced or user-generated content from platforms such as Wikihow, Reddit or trivia websites, can lead to noisy and biased annotations (Keegan, 2024; Grill, 2024; Tsipras et al., 2020; Aroyo & Welty, 2015; Sen et al., 2015), and the absence of human performance references and difficulty rubrics can hinder evaluation of capabilities and generality (Chollet, 2019). A lack of care in creating benchmark datasets can result in AI models exploiting quirks and spurious cues rather than solving the intended task (Liao et al., 2021; Paullada et al., 2021; Geirhos et al., 2020), as seen in examples such as X-ray image classification (Oakden-Rayner et al., 2019) and LLM evaluation (Pacchiardi et al., 2024).

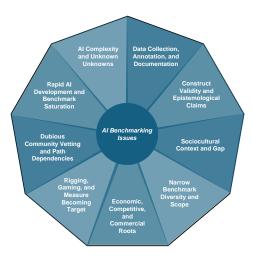


Figure 3. Proposed categorisation of current interlinked AI benchmarking issues.

2.2. Construct Validity and Epistemological Claims

Another critique of benchmarks focuses on their epistemological claims and the limits of quantitative AI tests. Many benchmarks suffer from construct validity issues, failing to measure what they claim to measure (Raji et al., 2021). This is particularly problematic when benchmarks promise to measure universal or general capabilities, as it misrepresents their actual capability. A central issue is that many benchmarks lack a clear definition of what they claim to measure, making it impossible to evaluate their success (Blodgett et al., 2021; Bartz-Beielstein et al., 2020). For example, benchmarks evaluating fairness in natural language processing have been found to have severe weaknesses in defining what is being measured (Blodgett et al., 2021). Elsewhere, research has shown strong disagreements in how benchmark tasks are conceptualised and operationalised (Subramonian et al., 2023), and found that benchmarks are applied in highly idiosyncratic ways (Röttger et al., 2024). The difficulty in defining what benchmarks evaluate persists due to the lack of a clear, stable, and absolute ground truth (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2023a). Concepts like "bias" and "fairness" are inherently contested and messy, leading to an "abstraction error" that produces a false sense of certainty (Selbst et al., 2019). Many benchmark datasets have also been found to be inadequate or unuseful proxies for what they are meant to evaluate. For instance, there is a slippage in distinguishing between algorithmic "harms" and "wrongs" (Diberardino et al., 2024), and the content of benchmark datasets may not be reasonable substitutes for real-world scenarios (Keegan, 2024). Benchmarks consisting of professional exams have been argued to be unreliable measures of skills like medical or legal skills (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2023a), and many widely used "safety" benchmarks highly correlate with general model capabilities, raising concerns about "safetywashing" (Ren et al., 2024). This highlights the need for a clear distinction between capabilities and risks in AI models, as severe biases and safety issues can persist even as overall capabilities improve.

2.3. Sociocultural Context and Gap

Research highlights the importance of social, economic, and cultural contexts in AI benchmark creation, use, and maintenance. There is a consensus in benchmark critique that benchmarks are "normative instruments" that perpetuate particular epistemological perspectives (Orr & Kang, 2024). Qualitative research shows that benchmarks are shaped by shared assumptions, commitments, and dependencies (Engdahl, 2024; Michael et al., 2022; Scheuerman et al., 2021; Orr & Crawford, 2024a; Sambasivan et al., 2021; Paullada et al., 2021), such as prioritising efficiency over care, universality over contextuality or impartiality over positionality (Scheuerman et al., 2021). AI safety research and benchmark competitions are also influenced by political movements and ideologies (Ahmed et al., 2024). A key concern is the sociotechnical gap and lack of consideration for downstream real-world utility in AI benchmarking (Hutchinson et al., 2022). It is often unclear who should care about benchmark results and how they should be used in practice (Liao & Xiao, 2023). Studies have found that benchmarks often fail to address the needs of practitioners, such as medical experts (Blagec et al., 2023), and that there is a lack of attention to the practical utility of benchmarks (Jannach & Bauer, 2020). This has been argued to have led to the development of biased and energy-inefficient AI models that ignore discriminatory and environmental damages (Ethayarajh & Jurafsky, 2021).

2.4. Narrow Benchmark Diversity and Scope

Current benchmarking practices suffer from diversity issues, with a majority of benchmarks focusing on text and neglecting other modalities (Rauh et al., 2024; Weidinger et al., 2023; Röttger et al., 2024). Benchmarks for safety, risks and ethics are also lacking, with a concentration on simplistic and brittle evaluation practices (Guldimann et al., 2024). The design of benchmarks is often dominated by elite institutions, raising concerns about representation diversity (Koch et al., 2021). Additionally, AI safety evaluation practices are mostly limited to English content and datasets with under-represented minorities, neglecting multiple perspectives on complex topics like ethics and harm (McIntosh et al., 2024; Simson et al., 2024). Most benchmarks are also abstracted from their social and cultural context, relying on static, one-time testing logic (Selbst et al., 2019). This has led to calls for more multi-layered, longitudinal, and holistic evaluation methods that capture AI model performance in real-world circumstances (Weidinger et al., 2023; Mizrahi et al., 2024; Ojewale et al., 2024). Current benchmarks often

fail to distinguish signal and noise, and rarely consider risks associated with multiple interacting AI systems or human actions and motivations (Reuel et al., 2024; Birhane et al., 2024). Furthermore, benchmarks often reveal little about ways of making mistakes, which is crucial for AI safety and policy enforcement (Gehrmann et al., 2023). A focus on errors and fragilities, rather than instances of success, could be useful for developers and help equalise the playing field in AI development (Gehrmann et al., 2023).

2.5. Economic, Competitive, and Commercial Roots

The competitive and commercial roots of benchmark tests have been identified as a significant contextual element in AI research. Capability-oriented benchmarks are often embedded in corporate marketing strategies, increasing AI hype, and showcasing model performance to attract customers and investors (Orr & Kang, 2024; Grill, 2024; Zhijia, 2024). Many benchmarks originate from industry and focus on tasks with high economic reward, rather than ethics and safety (Ren et al., 2024; Ethayarajh & Jurafsky, 2021). This competitive culture discourages thorough self-critique, as there is an incentive mismatch between conducting highquality evaluations and publishing new models (Gehrmann et al., 2023). The field of AI development has become a "giant leaderboard" where publication depends on numbers, rather than insight and explanation (Church & Hestness, 2019). The professionalisation of benchmark evaluations has transformed into an industry, with platforms like Kaggle and Grand Challenge providing support to AI competitions (Luitse et al., 2024). This has led to the issue of optimising for high benchmark scores, known as SOTA-chasing (Koch et al., 2021) or the "benchmark effect" (Stewart, 2023), and the "fast track research" issue (Stengers, 2018) linked with the "winners curse" in AI development (Sculley et al., 2018). The growing influence of industry in AI research, with private businesses now dominating the development of large AI models, has raised concerns about the concentration of power and the potential stifling of robust AI evaluations (Ahmed et al., 2023). Scholars have warned that upholding data-intensive benchmark tests as the standard could make academic research increasingly dependent on industry-provided technological infrastructures (Koch & Peterson, 2024).

2.6. Rigging, Gaming, and Measure Becoming Target

Benchmark tests can be tricked and gamed, particularly in areas where best-practice benchmarks are missing. Researchers have noted that there are strong incentives to "rig" benchmark tests, and that know-how for scoring high on benchmarks is often widely circulated online (Dehghani et al., 2021), including optimisation for answering multiple-choice questions, and "fake" alignment with ethics or safety goals (Alzahrani et al., 2024; Greenblatt et al., 2024). This

issue is related to Goodhart's law: "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (Strathern, 1997). The lack of transparency and validation in benchmark tests facilitates gaming, with many models optimised for specific benchmarks rather than general performance (Bartz-Beielstein et al., 2020; Dehghani et al., 2021; Biderman et al., 2024; Reuel et al., 2024). Data contamination, where models ingest benchmark datasets during training, is another issue that questions the integrity of AI tests (Xu et al., 2024a; Zhang et al., 2024; Besen, 2024; Magar & Schwartz, 2022; Roberts et al., 2023). Despite the known risks of data leaks, there is still a lack of reporting on data contamination tendencies during benchmark tests (Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, "sandbagging" involves intentionally understate a model's capability to avoid regulation (Weij et al., 2024), further undermining the trustworthiness of benchmark evaluations, especially in a regulatory context.

2.7. Dubious Community Vetting and Path Dependencies

Benchmarks can become naturalized and reach standard status due to the culture and logic of academic citations, even if they were not intended to be widely adopted (Orr & Kang, 2024). This can happen when a new benchmark is introduced with a popular AI model, and the benchmark becomes widely cited as a side effect (Orr & Kang, 2024; Orr & Crawford, 2024a). The peer-review process can perpetuate the dominance of certain benchmarks, making it difficult for new benchmarks to gain traction (Jaton, 2021; Ott et al., 2022). This can lead to a "benchmark lottery" where the perceived superiority of a method is influenced by factors other than algorithmic improvements (Dehghani et al., 2021). Furthermore, many influential benchmarks have been released as preprints without rigorous peer-review (McIntosh et al., 2024). The focus on methods over datasets in benchmark papers can have worrying effects when benchmarks are applied to real-world use cases (Bao et al., 2022). The current peer-review system prioritises benchmarks that are relevant from a methods perspective, rather than those with practical utility (Bao et al., 2022). This can create "path dependencies" in AI research, reinforcing certain methodologies and research goals while stifling others (Blili-Hamelin & Hancox-Li, 2023). The dominance of certain benchmarks can also lead to a form of "task-driven scientific monoculture" that prioritises narrow epistemic values over broader scientific progress (Koch & Peterson, 2024).

2.8. Rapid AI Development and Benchmark Saturation

The rapid development of AI models has created a challenge for benchmarks, as many are old and designed to test simpler models (Keegan, 2024; Biderman et al., 2024). For instance, prominent LLM benchmarks were designed before shifts in AI capabilities, which may affect their validity

(Biderman et al., 2024). Many benchmarks also struggle with AI models achieving very high accuracy scores, leading to saturation and rendering the benchmark ineffective (Hendrycks et al., 2021; Bowman & Dahl, 2021; Ott et al., 2022). The slow and complicated implementation of benchmark frameworks can hinder timely feedback on AI model risks, as evaluation processes can take weeks or months (McIntosh et al., 2024). This is concerning in a regulatory setting, where quick and accurate assessments are crucial. The use of thresholds to determine which AI models warrant regulatory scrutiny is also limited, as creating benchmarks that keep pace with AI development is challenging (European Union, 2024; The White House, 2023; US Department of Commerce, 2025). Recent approaches can enhance AI capabilities with reduced training compute, further complicating benchmarking efforts (Hooker, 2024).

2.9. AI Complexity and Unknown Unknowns

The complexity of AI models and the difficulty of foreseeing potential risks pose a significant challenge for benchmarks (McIntosh et al., 2024). Benchmark creators' limited knowledge and understanding of emerging AI capabilities can lead to generalist approaches that fail to address critical sector requirements, posing safety and security risks and hindering innovation (McIntosh et al., 2024). The presence of unknown and latent vulnerabilities in AI models can also make it difficult to distinguish between safe and unsafe models (Nasr et al., 2023a). Simple prompts can "break" safety barriers, revealing sensitive training data and highlighting the potential for latent vulnerabilities (Nasr et al., 2023b). Furthermore, fine-tuning AI models to address safety and security risks can degrade performance in other areas or introduce new risks (Oi et al., 2023). These challenges underscore the need for more comprehensive and nuanced benchmarking approaches that can account for the complexities and uncertainties of AI development.

3. Conclusions and Policy Considerations

Measuring AI capabilities and risks is a challenge, and benchmarks have been found to promise too much (Raji et al., 2021), be easily gamed (Weij et al., 2024; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2023b), and measure the wrong thing (Oakden-Rayner et al., 2019). They also lack documentation (Reuel et al., 2024), perpetuate cultural assumptions (Kang, 2023; Keegan, 2024), and are narrow, focusing on English and text-based models (McIntosh et al., 2024; Röttger et al., 2024; Rauh et al., 2024). These issues highlight fundamental fragilities in current efforts to quantitatively measure and mitigate harm in AI. Cars, airplanes, medical devices, and drugs are strictly regulated to ensure safety. Similarly, AI can be subject to safety assurances, and the growing interest in AI benchmarks reflects a drive to develop such

regulations.

In line with previous studies (Jones et al., 2024), our metareview suggests that the field of quantitative AI benchmarking is currently ill-suited to single-handedly (or primarily) provide the safety and capability assurances requested by policy makers. Our review also shows that from a policy perspective, relying on indicators such as citation counts to determine what benchmarks to trust is insufficient. We identify a strong incentive gap in the use of benchmarks between academic researchers (who may for example primarily be interested in methods development), corporations (who are driven by economic incentives in their use and development of benchmarks), and regulators (who have a particular responsibility to consider practical utility and potential downstream effects).

Future policymakers need to ensure that applied and trusted benchmarks are well-documented and transparent; include clearly defined tasks, metrics, and performance evaluation mechanisms to prevent capabilities misrepresentation; evaluate diversity and inclusivity in benchmark design, accounting for various perspectives and cultural contexts; apply benchmarks that target multimodal and real-world capabilities, rather than narrow tasks; continuously assess potential misuse while integrating dynamic benchmarks to prevent gaming, sandbagging, and data contamination; establish rigorous evaluation protocols to validate and update benchmark results in line with rapid model improvements; and apply benchmarks that evaluate errors and unintended consequences alongside performance and capabilities.

As our review has shown, evaluation frameworks repeatedly influence downstream AI development by becoming targets for model optimisation. Recognising the power of such a downstream influence, we stress that policymakers have a unique opportunity to shape AI evaluation, benchmark design, and ultimately AI development by setting the bar high and demanding robust benchmark practices. From a regulatory perspective, we especially identify a need for new ways of signalling *what benchmarks to trust* (i.e., trustworthy benchmarks). We do not necessarily need standardised benchmark metrics and methods. But we do need standardised methods for assessing the trustworthiness of benchmarks from an applied and regulatory perspective.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are purely those of the authors and may not, under any circumstances, be regarded as an official position of the European Commission.

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A. Appendix. Summary of AI benchmarking issues

Table 1. Distribution of AI benchmarking shortcomings and related references, as they appear in the original text (Eriksson et al., 2025).

CATEGORY	REFERENCES
PROBLEMS WITH DATA COLLECTION, ANNOTATION, AND DOCUMENTATION	(Gebru et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; Orr & Crawford, 2024b; Simson et al., 2024; Scheuerman et al., 2021; Reuel et al., 2024; Denton et al., 2020; Arzt & Hanbury, 2024; Orr & Crawford, 2024a; Sambasivan et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2021; Thylstrup et al., 2022; Park & Jeoung, 2022; Paullada et al., 2021; Keegan, 2024; Grill, 2024; Tsipras et al., 2020; Aroyo & Welty, 2015; Sen et al., 2015; Rauh et al., 2024; Chollet, 2019; Liao et al., 2021; Geirhos et al., 2020; Oakden-Rayner et al., 2019; Pacchiardi et al., 2024; Vafa et al., 2024; Kejriwal et al., 2024)
WEAK CONSTRUCT VA- LIDITY AND EPISTEMO- LOGICAL CLAIMS	(Raji et al., 2021; Blodgett et al., 2021; Bartz-Beielstein et al., 2020; Subramonian et al., 2023; Röttger et al., 2024; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2023a; Selbst et al., 2019; Diberardino et al., 2024; Keegan, 2024; Ren et al., 2024; Leech et al., 2024)
SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT AND GAP	(Orr & Kang, 2024; Engdahl, 2024; Michael et al., 2022; Scheuerman et al., 2021; Orr & Crawford, 2024a; Sambasivan et al., 2021; Paullada et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2024; Hutchinson et al., 2022; Liao & Xiao, 2023; Blagec et al., 2023; Jannach & Bauer, 2020; Ethayarajh & Jurafsky, 2021; Frieder et al., 2024)
NARROW BENCHMARK DIVERSITY AND SCOPE	(Gomez et al., 2024; Rauh et al., 2024; Weidinger et al., 2023; Röttger et al., 2024; Guldimann et al., 2024; Koch et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2024; Selbst et al., 2019; Simson et al., 2024; Mizrahi et al., 2024; Ojewale et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2023; Reuel et al., 2024; Birhane et al., 2024; Gehrmann et al., 2023; Poelman & Lhoneux, 2024; Burnell et al., 2023; Kapoor et al., 2024; Lum et al., 2024)
ECONOMIC, COMPETITIVE, AND COMMERCIAL ROOTS	(Orr & Kang, 2024; Grill, 2024; Zhijia, 2024; Ren et al., 2024; Ethayarajh & Jurafsky, 2021; Gehrmann et al., 2023; Church & Hestness, 2019; Smith et al., 2022; Luitse et al., 2024; Koch et al., 2021; Stewart, 2023; Malevé, 2023; Stengers, 2018; Sculley et al., 2018; Ahmed et al., 2023; Koch & Peterson, 2024)
RIGGING, GAMING, AND MEASURE BECOMING TARGET	(Dehghani et al., 2021; Alzahrani et al., 2024; Greenblatt et al., 2024; Strathern, 1997; Bartz-Beielstein et al., 2020; Biderman et al., 2024; Reuel et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024a; Zhang et al., 2024; Besen, 2024; Magar & Schwartz, 2022; Roberts et al., 2023; Tirumala et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2012; Yuan et al., 2023; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2023a; Weij et al., 2024; Casper et al., 2024; Meinke et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024b)
DUBIOUS COMMUNITY VETTING AND PATH DEPENDENCIES	(Orr & Kang, 2024; Orr & Crawford, 2024a; Denton et al., 2021; Mulvin, 2021; Schlangen, 2020; Koch et al., 2021; Jaton, 2021; Ott et al., 2022; Dehghani et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2024; Bao et al., 2022; Blili-Hamelin & Hancox-Li, 2023; Koch & Peterson, 2024)
RAPID AI DEVELOPMENT AND BENCHMARK SATU- RATION	(KEEGAN, 2024; BIDERMAN ET AL., 2024; HENDRYCKS ET AL., 2021; BOWMAN & DAHL, 2021; OTT ET AL., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2024; European Union, 2024; The White House, 2023; US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, 2025; HOOKER, 2024)
AI COMPLEXITY AND UN- KNOWN UNKNOWNS	(McIntosh et al., 2024; Nasr et al., 2023a;b; QI et al., 2023)