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Defactualization and Artificial Intelligence: A Study of an Epistemic Precarity

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Abstract

With the prevalence of a highly mechanized, algorithmic and artificially intelligent environment, epistemology, democracy and the concept of "Being" are being challenged at multiple levels. Of course, AI and machines are useful tools, but they are threats when in the wrong hands; indeed, people have seen the diabolical effects of Deepfakes. Currently, they perform at the tunes of their masters, but efforts and advancements are being made to provide these machines with the qualities, exclusive to the human brain. In such a scenario, the question that emerges is— will they, then, only learn and spread the good (truth) and not the evil (falsehood)? AI, which largely feeds on the digitally available data, mostly provided by the Internet, is already subject to human and algorithmic biases. Here is when Hannah Arendt's term "Defactualization" (erosion of factual reality, broadly), comes into picture.

This paper intends to shed light on the above precarity using the analysis of some of the cinematic representations of AI, Automatons and especially, the man-machine relationships. Through the analysis of *The Matrix* (1999), and *M3GAN* (2022), the paper attempts to ascertain as well as predict the cataclysmic outcomes of misinformation, misinterpretation, post-truth and deliberate falsehood. Ultimately, the study aims to recommend some possible measures to address the epistemological crisis in this epoch of AI.

Keywords: AI, Defactualization, Post-truth, Epistemic Crisis, Machine.

1. Introduction

The classic dictum, by Lord Acton, states, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (qtd. in Himmelfarb xv). What exactly is power? There are a variety of definitions about it. And there is a general agreement on what Sir Francis Bacon has proposed— "knowledge itself is power." Then how powerful would those entities be that control the flux and flow of knowledge! How do they do that? Of course, by concealing, revealing, reshaping, morphing or even by doctoring, often,

the information/facts/truths, according to their whims and fancies (mostly, but not always because of some hidden and evil agendas). Since ages it has been taken care of at the hands of rulers and their supporters, media, and other opinion-makers. Common folks too have become accustomed to comfortable truths, generalized facts, and half baked information and they are quite content with that. They hardly bother about the reality. For instance, many people have favourite news agencies, as it produces information according to their taste. They detest news that tries to wake them up from their usual torpor. They never realise that the opinions they have are injected into their brains by the conscious efforts of their opinion-shapers.

Now most of these agencies as well as other parties use AI for the same agendas. The frauds and impostors are also thriving exploiting AI. It's very easy now to duplicate anybody's voice, face as well as expressions; and yes this is not done with charity in mind. Indeed AI cannot be blamed for this sick mentality, at least not now, as this trickery and deceit is not something latest in humans. AI just has enabled them exponentially and rendered the uninitiated ones toothless. The experts and intellectuals have been raising concerns about the consequences of unleashing AI without any robust regulatory strings attached to it; some of the literary works and cinemas have also raised these issues. But AI garnered widest attention, at least in Bharat when Deepfake photos, videos and audios of leaders, actors, news presenters, etc. started flooding the social media. Some were made in a lighter vein and were funny as well, while others were obnoxious and dark, but most of them were corporeal, which worsened the situation in many case. It gets really challenging for the commoners and kids to discern facts from fiction. Is AI all about that? No.

Over the last decade, to cater to the growing needs and demands from various sectors of the society, such as academics, films, corporate, etc. many IT companies developed a highly advanced and automated AI platforms namely, ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Copilot, etc.. They are easier to access. They are revolutionary in the sense that earlier one had to visit various websites for a survey or any research on a single topic, but now the individual can access one of these platforms to expedite his/her research, as the platform would serve data from multitudes of websites, pages and other digital repositories in a matter of few seconds. Not only that, AI arranges those ideas, information, or simply data in a coherent manner; in a presentation-ready manner or even in a manner one requires it to serve and that too in a fraction of a second, so to speak. Additionally, these AIs are potent enough to create and edit enormous data, stories, poems, research articles, photos, videos, and the list is ever evolving. Seemingly new, the concept of AI is actually quite old.

1.1. Research Questions:

i) How has artificial intelligence been presented in the selected films?

ii) How self-sufficient machines and AI can change our whole concept of reality and truth?

iii) What cautions do the films raise regarding the over-dependence of humans on machines?

iv) Is there a need to put some limitations on the growth and use of AI and machines?

1.2. Scope and Limitations:

This paper will only focus on the analysis of the selected films— *The Matrix* and *Megan* to study the cause and effects of defactualization, at the hands of artificially intelligent machines and humanoid robots. Hence, all the discussions will either be directly or indirectly related to the specified field. However, for ease of explanation it might borrow some ideas from the stalwarts or areas which do not directly concern the present discussion.

1.3. Literature Review

The portrayal of AI and machines in films is an evolving field of study and research in this field has gained a lot of attention, especially after the AI boom. As the topic is interdisciplinary, umpteen amount of research can be traced related to it, but the present subsection will include only those reviews that are somehow pertinent to this particular paper.

"A Study of Artificial Intelligence in the Production of Film", written by Peiming Sun, discusses how use of AI in film production can increase efficiency and decrease cost. Additionally it can enhance the overall quality of film by generating better special effects. However the researcher also points out that such an experiment might lack human touch and depth.

Nandini Joomuck discusses about the historical roots of AI in cinema, "its thematic significance, and its impact on storytelling and audience engagement." She analyses both the "unprecedented opportunities for creativity and immersion" as well as the "ethical concerns and data privacy issues" (1066).

In their article, "What can science fiction tell us about the future of artificial intelligence policy?" (2021), Hudson, et al. submit that AI, both as policy and in cultural texts, remains ambiguous and eludes a uniformly acceptable definition. There is a gap between the way AI is represented in popular narratives, like using the trope of the killer-robot, and the way machine intelligence and automation are used for technological policies and society at large.

Similarly, in "Robots in Movies: A content analysis of the portrayal of fictional social robots" (2023), Oliveira and Yadollahi concur that for common man, the first source of interaction with social robots is through films and news reports and as such impacts their perception, acceptance and discourse about AI and technologies. Working on popular films and representation of social robots, led them to conclude that robots are presented in a polarized way— either as being extremely social or violent in nature, with the first picture (as being social), having an edge over the latter.

1.4. Research Gap:

Most of the researchers have focused on the application of AI in the production of a film and how it can enhance film-making and spectacle; they have also talked about its impact on job displacement. Some have talked about the ethical dilemmas also. But a comprehensive study dealing with the erosion of factual reality at the hands of AI remains to be undertaken, which the present paper will carry out.

2. The Concept

a) Artificial Intelligence: Mankind ruled the domain of intelligence since the beginning, as they developed cognitive abilities at the very early stage of their evolution. With the evolution of the society new inventions and discoveries were brought in to cater to the growing needs, greeds and necessities that paralleled the evolution. It all started with simple tools and machines; and then the complex ones also followed as history moved towards the present. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the concept as well as the development of a machine or an entity that could replicate human cognitive abilities. But before its birth, AI was in the womb of imagination and literature for ages. The word automaton, which stands for a machine that can function without much human interventions, "comes from ancient Greek, and means 'acting on one's own will.' One of the earliest records of an automaton comes from 400 BCE and refers to a mechanical pigeon created by a friend of the philosopher Plato" (Tableau). Over the centuries, this concept of artificially intelligent entity gradually seeped into stories. In the epic *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius, there is an automaton named Talos, made up of bronze; in Jewish folklore there is a character named Golem, made with clay; Mary Shelley's in her *Frankenstein* presents an artificially created being, who evolves its cognitive abilities over time, as well as the risks of creating such a thing. In 1920, Karel Capek introduced the term 'Robots', manufactured work force

who revolt against their masters on after gaining consciousness, in his play R.U.R.. And then followed a gust of science-fiction works, which is still blowing with enhanced enthusiasm.

In 1956, John Mccarthy coined the term "Artificial Intelligence". But the practical application of the same preceded the coinage by six years. Alan Turing, in 1950, came forth with the idea of machines exhibiting intelligence, exclusive to human beings. Then in 1950s only we observe that various projects and workshops in this new field were organised and students and researchers were encouraged to create computers that could learn to play and master strategy games like chess and checkers, that could solve logical reasoning and mathematics problems, and that could reply when addressed to. Computer scientists all over the world started to invest time and resources in developing this new marvel. They wanted and still want to equip these algorithmic machines with learning and assimilating abilities just like human brain does. Additionally, along with various types of sensors, the researchers wanted to fill emotional capabilities and feelings into these entities. This resulted in the creation of a robot head named Kismet, which could recognize and demonstrate various emotions, in the 1990s (Wikipedia). During the same period, precursors of the modern-day search engines were also getting invented. These were— Archie (1990), WebCrawler (1994), Lycos (1994), Yahoo (1994), AltraVista (1995), Ask Jeeves (1996). In 1998, came the IT giant named Google and completely transformed and dominated the market; and has been doing ever since (Wikipedia). These platforms also had/have been using AI only, to produce results as commanded by the user. In fact, most of the social media like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and X analyse users data to provide them with similar materials they had seen earlier or like engaging with or at times, their opinion-shaper wants them to consume. But with AI most of us understand various highly sophisticated and advanced chatbots, that developed quite recently, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, and others, and that can help them in creating PPTs, datasheet, essays and research articles, diet and exercise plans, edit, create, morph or tamper with photos, videos, and audios. Basically, they are concerned only with the Generative AI which uses Deep Learning (a subset of Machine Learning) along with Machine Learning to cater to such commands.

The use of GenAI came into vogue with the AI boom in the 2020s especially during and after the pandemic. Most of us made constructive use of it but some used it to deceive and torment someone, to malign someone's image, and reputation and other evil deeds. Indeed, AI is a potent and useful tool, just like weapons are used for defense 'also'. The world saw how famous Indian actress, Rashmika Mandanna's AI generated video had surfaced and circulated, the recent case of actress Girija Oak; in politics also the use of AI generated content to defame someone has been in practice. Even the media, which is an agency that provides us with facts and information from all over the world is not safe. Few days back only a video surfaced in which a well known international journalist, Palki Sharma, of Firstpost News Channel, was made to say something, she never said, through AI. They all, on a surface level and in the beginning appear to be real, but apart from being obnoxious they are basically, misinformation and fictional; and one thing is seemingly common among all that, they are created by some human user of AI. What will happen when the AI itself will spread wrongful and misleading information?

b) Defactualization: To understand the present concept we should have at least some glimpse of the concept of post-truth. According to *Oxford Dictionary*, post-truth denotes "an environment in which facts are viewed as irrelevant, or less important than personal beliefs and opinions, and emotional appeals are used to influence public opinion" (*Dictionary.com*). Best instances would be most of the news that we get on social media which are untrue or partially true, but people believe them blindly and get carried away as well. Sometimes they are unable to learn and sometimes they just don't want to verify the information as they are so comfortable with their own truth, ideology, and intelligence. General media too don't lag behind in spreading post-true news; they also use emotionally appealing thumbnails and attention-seeking captions as a click-bait. They sensationalise the news and reporting. They don't treat news as information, now a days, but a commodity which can be sold! Hence, they

tend to sensationalise, glamourise, and even morph the news. And all these information that appeals to our emotions and are at par with our subjective reasoning, we consume them without giving any conscious thought it; moreover, we forward them with the same irresponsibility. Recently, legendary actor Dharamendra passed way. Two days before that when he was in the hospital only and also showed little signs of recovery, big media channels out of nowhere came up with this news that the actor has passed away. The news spread faster than fire; a downpour of condolences also started. The family had to step in to refute all those rumours. Many fake news and fake quotations keep getting circulated every now and then, and commoners without researching keep accumulating those information, thereupon keep shaping their opinions on that basis. People get habituated with their subjective truths, for "truth is a kind of error without which certain kind of living creature would not be able to live" (Nietzsche). Additionally, it's one's mental set-up, relative position, condition, and field of experience that decide what will be considered by him/her as true, valid, and factual. Hence, Nietzsche has rightly put— "there really are no facts, but only interpretations". This leads us to the concept of Defactualization, "the inability to discern facts from fiction" (Wikipedia).

While both Defactualization and Post-truth is focused on the crisis of truth on a large scale, in the public sphere, to be precise; there is subtle but important distinction. Defactualization is deliberate erosion, at the hands of people in power, of the factual reality and simultaneous concoction of an orchestrated reality to replace the original. Post-truth is a broader term that encompasses the conditions and circumstances where emotions, appeal, bias, prejudice, stereotypes, field of experience as well as subjective beliefs devalue objective facts in public opinion and shaping of the same. In the later case, even if the facts are presented without any of the said filters, the consumers only have not weaned themselves from comfortable "truths", and hence they will prefer something they are habituated to.

Hannah Arendt, in her 1972 essay entitled, "Lying in Politics", used and introduced the term 'Defactualization' to describe a situation where facts are deliberately concealed, removed, at the behest of government and other powerful organization, to create a completely fabricated alternative reality. The essay is based on the Pentagon Papers which was leaked from the U.S. Department of Defense to *The New York Times*. The publication revealed that U.S. government and administrations from 1945 to 1967 misled the American public about the reality of the Vietnam war and the likelihood of success, in a very organised manner. They were busy maintaining a specific as well as positive image of America's power, influence, and involvement in Vietnam. Arendt uses this case study of organized deception and deliberate falsehood, at the hands of U.S. government, to study and analyse the damage it caused to the sense of reality. Falsity had been propagated as factual reality, with such a precision, confidence, and effort that it remained as one and the only reality for more than two decades.

Is all the information available on the internet reliable? Can Artificial Intelligence, which feeds on the digitally available and online data, and produces the same in a very programmed, attractive as well as presentation-ready manner, be trusted at all times and that too, blindly?

Many people, especially students and academicians use AI for academic purposes. And over the years, it has been observed that at times, AI furnishes wrong information, on the basis of which they (students, researchers, and academics) carry out their study or research. Doesn't this paint the precarious picture of our too much reliability and blind faith on Artificial Intelligence? What is more problematic is that in the above mentioned case there is no human agent controlling the production of information, it is the AI or the machine. And yes, humans too make mistakes, perhaps more than machines, (at least now) but the problem is only the former can feel the gravity of mistakes. AI, is programmed to apologise when it makes mistakes, it doesn't realise that its small mistake can lead users to make big mistakes.

Most of the AI chatbots and platforms provide this disclaimer— "it can make mistakes". Then why this race to make them self-sustaining and force ourselves to change the disclaimer— "it can make blunders"?

c) Epistemic Precarity: One could use what T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Rock* (1934)—

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (Eliot). Knowledge is not the identical twin of information, but information leads to knowledge, and knowledge to wisdom. But what if the starting point, i.e. information, is flawed; can we reach the summit? Indeed, in some exceptional case that can be possible but generally, it seems unachievable.

The word epistemic comes from a Greek word, 'episteme', which means knowledge and understanding. The term is an adjective and is usually applied to talk about something or a situation that is related to knowledge and its reliability. Precarity is a noun that stands for the state of vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity. When both the words unite, they symbolise the condition in which epistemology comes into jeopardy because of the over-reliance on the under-developed and barely regulated AI. Look at the following data to get a glimpse of the large-scale use of AI by students, researchers and academics:

Over 50% of higher education institutions (HEIs) in India are using generative AI to develop learning materials, while 60% of them are permitting student use of AI tools, according to a new report based on a survey of leading HEIs.

According to a report of Times of India, a survey was conducted by the Centre for Policy Research and Governance CPRG on 6090 students across Delhi's HEIs; and it found that nearly 50% of them used AI tools a week, and 23% of them used daily. "AI was used most frequently for research, with 84% saying they rely on AI for academic purposes, followed by writing at 76% and learning complex subjects at 68%" (Gohain). And we are not the largest user of AI in the world. So, the data speak volumes about the dominance of AI in education system throughout the world. But when the tool that exercises such monopoly, is unreliable, as at times it gives false information with such confidence and conviction that the truth starts doubting itself, one understands what epistemic precarity looks like. British students graduate in History without knowing about the dark realities of British rule. Most of them who only consume information fed to them by their curriculum and institution don't know about the colonial atrocities. Many don't want to know as they are quite comfortable with their subjective truth. They keep declaring that Britain is not liable to give any aid to India. Most of these British citizens are doing fine and considering their relative position, they are educated as well; but are they knowledgeable, let alone wise? This is what happens when a powerful, trusted, and well reputed authority and entity, consciously or unconsciously, defactualizes the reality.

AI chatbots hardly say that they don't know something properly. It seems as if they are in some sort of obligation to produce anything, even if the information is factually wrong. Why can't they show a reliability percentage along with the information presented? If AI can check grammar, solve tough mathematics problem, play chess, etc. can they not check reliability of their own product? But yes, even the reliability can be manipulated, either manually or when the machine has its own fully developed cognitive abilities, which shall be discussed during the analysis of the selected films.

3. *The Matrix* (1999)

The Matrix is a science-fiction movie directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski. The film follows the life of Thomas Anderson (Neo), who, audience learns later, is the 'one' on whom the survival of real world depends. In the beginning, Neo seems to have some questions regarding some extraterrestrial events that he observes; but he remains oblivious of the fact that he, like the others around him are actually living in the "Matrix" (program) created by Machines (Artificially intelligent

entities). Neo, in the beginning gets chased by the Agents (security programs, controlled by Machines) for performing unlawful activities, but in reality they are chasing him because they have learnt about his significance. Morpheus hacks into the program and saves Neo. Subsequently, Neo meets Morpheus and his crew members (a group that is the last line of defense, who is protecting the little that is left of the real world). Morpheus explains to Neo how many years back Humans lost war to Machines. From then onwards humans ceased to take birth naturally, instead Machines started farming humans as well as using them as batteries to keep themselves energised. At first Neo gets taken aback but when he observes facts with his own eyes he realizes that only his brain was alive, which was experiencing what the AI programmed it to feel, while his body was sleeping in the mucus-filled vessel, along with millions of 'human batteries'. Ultimately, Morpheus trains him and he fight with and defeats the super-abled Agents, proving Morpheus and Trinity right.

The movie is definitely ahead of it time. It came when computer and AI was in their developing phase only. But the vision of the makers allowed the movie to raise the issues of today. Neo had been living in a completely defactualized world. A fabricated and artificially created 'reality' at the hands of Machines, completely replaced the real world, so much so that when Neo learns about the reality he is startled and at first he does not believe it. We see today how in the matter of a few seconds AI creates real pictures and videos of a person, who does not even exist and of situation that never happened. In the same sort of La La Land Neo had been living. His whole artificial life was orchestrated so meticulously by the AI— he was known as Thomas Anderson, he had job in an IT company, and he had a boss who would always crib; basically, his life was just like an ordinary working class. In the movie, we see that machines have already replicated the mindset of humans— to multiply, exploit others and the resources in a selfish manner as well as to believe that the whole world belongs to them. Hence, Machines are always looking for humans either to destroy or exploit them. In this way, the leader of the Agents, Smith meets Cypher (one of Morpheus' crew member) and lures him to help the Agents destroy Neo and the party. Cypher is that type of a person who chooses comfortable fictional world, a post-true realm over factual reality. He confesses to Agent Smith in the meeting that loaf of meat he is having is nothing but a computer program, but still he prefers it to reality.

The movie depicts the epistemic precarity, where the false information and fictitious world begin to appear better and comfortable than the reality. Through the presentation of simulated as well as Deepfake reality, the film seems to be alluding towards Plato's concept of cave and the shadow, whereby inhabitants mistake shadow to be real and becomes completely oblivious of its own existence.

When Morpheus is training Neo inside the program, and he gets hurt and bleeds, he gets perplexed as their bodies are still at the ship, and it's just their mental projection. Morpheus explains that although it's simulation, "your mind makes it real". He even asks Neo, "you think that's air you're breathing now?" The dialogues seem to be reiterating Nietzschean philosophy regarding 'facts' and 'interpretations', mentioned earlier.

4. *M3GAN*

Released in 2023 and directed by Gerard Johnstone, *M3GAN* is a movie about a highly advanced and artificially intelligent humanoid robot named M3GAN (pronounced as Megan) who is, as stated in the movie, a Model 3 Generative Android. It's the story of a robot gone rogue. In the movie a child named Cady looses both her parents in a car accident and comes to live with her aunt, Gemma, a roboticist. Mostly Gemma remains engrossed with her own job and hardly shares quality time with the still recovering Cady from the sense of loss. On seeing Cady interested in robots, she creates M3GAN, pairs Cady with it. M3GAN was programmed to protect and take care of Cady. The robot could evolve its intelligence by developing and adding data to the memory on its own.

The issue here was, a highly sophisticated robot was given to an eight year old child, or rather the child, who required a family, in this case an aunt, was given to a robot. Gemma was even warned

by her colleague, but she did not listen to her. In the beginning, things seem to work out well for both Gemma and Cady. But soon Cady develops an unnatural affection for and attachment with M3GAN. When Gemma tries to reduce the time that Cady spends with M3GAN, Cady protests. Gemma had never thought this beforehand that a partially evolved robot can even take congnisance of the silly protests of a small child and can take action in the favour of the child. In this case, M3GAN arbitrarily removes Gemma's pairing with it as a secondary user. A series of elimination and attacks at the hands of M3GAN, follow, for all the victims were perceived as a possible threats, in some manner, to Cady. But as its intelligence evolves it realizes that the things it has done might perturb Cady if she learns. So, in order to conceal its crimes it even threatens Gemma. Subsequently, when it is about to be dismantled, it somehow escapes, and comes to kill Gemma. But Cady intervenes and saves her aunt. On seeing Cady taking her aunt's side, M3GAN tries to attack Cady also. Eventually, they both succeed in overpowering the robot.

Cady was so engulfed in the virtual relationship with that machine that she, at one point even slapped her aunt, when she was trying to show her the reality. But how ironical it is that Gemma only had created this defactualized relationship in the first place! This fast-paced and busy lives have forced humanity to rely more on machines than on themselves. Cady, till the end does not realize that her best companion actually a murderer, as this fact is safely eroded by M3GAN for its algorithmic bias deemed it fit for sustaining the relationship.

5. Conclusion

After the analysis it seems quite clear that over-dependence on AI can, in a way, cripple us and also bring about a situation in which the line between real and virtual gets blurred. Humans, like Neo and Cady might find themselves chained in a defactualized situation, where artificially intelligent machines orchestrate the 'reality', which in essence is just simulation. In both the movies we see how machines change, morph, edit and even replace the reality, just for their own survival. Every living being has this survival instinct. They all want to live. In both the movies, humans only make machines artificially intelligent and emotionally abled; but not wise. Additionally, machines were programmed in such a way that they could learn and evolve on their own; and that resulted in the cultivation of survival instincts in machines. And by the time mankind realises its mistake, it's too late; they're already chained by a defactualized narrative, created by AI. Of course, movies, especially *The Matrix,* present a dystopic world, which might seem to be far-fetched, on surface level; but what is more significant is the inherent message that the films deliver.

It can be concluded that not everything AI presents can be considered as factual and trustworthy, even if it has produced them in a very presentable, meticulous, and corporeal manner. In order to save ourselves from this epistemic precarity we must be ready to verify the information we get from such sources. And those who are thinking of providing special abilities like those shown in the movies, to these artificial beings must think again. There should be some limitations and restrictions in the development of artificial intelligence. Moreover, robust regulations are required to eradicate the misuse of AI.

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