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# Managing AI Risks in an Era of Rapid Progress

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## Abstract

Amid rapid AI progress, the authors of this short commentary express a consensus describing the societal-scale risks posed by upcoming, powerful AI systems. The authors then call for a set of governance measures and for shifting AI development and funding towards safety and ethical practices, before these systems are developed.

## Rapid AI progress

In 2019, GPT-2 could not reliably count to ten. Only four years later, deep learning systems can write software, generate photorealistic scenes on demand, advise on intellectual topics, and combine language and image processing to steer robots. As AI developers scale these systems, unforeseen abilities and behaviors emerge spontaneously without explicit programming<sup>1</sup>. Progress in AI has been swift and, to many, surprising.

The pace of progress may surprise us again. Current deep learning systems still lack important capa-

bilities and we do not know how long it will take to develop them. However, companies are engaged in a race to create generalist AI systems that match or exceed human abilities in most cognitive work<sup>2,3</sup>.

They are rapidly deploying more resources and developing new techniques to increase AI capabilities. Progress in AI also enables faster progress: AI assistants are increasingly used to automate programming<sup>4</sup> and data collection<sup>5,6</sup> to further improve AI systems<sup>7</sup>.

There is no fundamental reason why AI progress would slow or halt at the human level. Indeed, AI has

already surpassed human abilities in narrow domains like protein folding or strategy games<sup>8–10</sup>. Compared to humans, AI systems can act faster, absorb more knowledge, and communicate at a far higher bandwidth. Additionally, they can be scaled to use immense computational resources and can be replicated by the millions.

The rate of improvement is already staggering, and tech companies have the cash reserves needed to scale the latest training runs by multiples of 100 to 1000 soon<sup>11</sup>. Combined with the ongoing growth and automation in AI R&D, we must take seriously the possibility that generalist AI systems will outperform human abilities across many critical domains within this decade or the next.

What happens then? If managed carefully and distributed fairly, advanced AI systems could help humanity cure diseases, elevate living standards, and protect our ecosystems. The opportunities AI offers are immense. But alongside advanced AI capabilities come large-scale risks that we are not on track to handle well. Humanity is pouring vast resources into making AI systems more powerful, but far less into safety and mitigating harms. For AI to be a boon, we must reorient; pushing AI capabilities alone is not enough.

We are already behind schedule for this reorientation. We must anticipate the amplification of ongoing harms, as well as novel risks, and prepare for the largest risks *well before they materialize*. Climate change has taken decades to be acknowledged and confronted; for AI, decades could be too long.

## Societal-scale risks

AI systems could rapidly come to outperform humans in an increasing number of tasks. If such systems are not carefully designed and deployed, they pose a range of societal-scale risks. They threaten to amplify social injustice, erode social stability, and weaken our shared understanding of reality that is foundational to society. They could also enable large-scale criminal or terrorist activities. Especially in the hands of a few powerful actors, AI could cement or exacerbate global inequities, or facilitate automated warfare, customized mass manipulation, and pervasive surveillance<sup>12,13</sup>.

Many of these risks could soon be amplified, and new risks created, as companies are developing *autonomous* AI: systems that can plan, act in the world, and pursue goals. While current AI systems have limited autonomy, work is underway to change this<sup>14</sup>. For example, the non-autonomous GPT-4 model was quickly adapted to browse the web<sup>15</sup>, design and execute chemistry experiments<sup>16</sup>, and utilize software tools<sup>17</sup> including other AI models<sup>18</sup>.

If we build highly advanced autonomous AI, we risk creating systems that pursue undesirable goals. Malicious actors could deliberately embed harmful objectives. Moreover, no one currently knows how to reliably align AI behavior with complex values. Even well-meaning developers may inadvertently build AI systems that pursue unintended goals—especially if, in a bid to win the AI race, they neglect expensive safety testing and human oversight.

Once autonomous AI systems pursue undesirable goals, embedded by malicious actors or by accident, we may be unable to keep them in check. Control of software is an old and unsolved problem: computer worms have long been able to proliferate and avoid detection<sup>19</sup>. However, AI is making progress in critical domains such as hacking, social manipulation, deception, and strategic planning<sup>14,20</sup>. Advanced autonomous AI systems will pose unprecedented control challenges.

To advance undesirable goals, future autonomous AI systems could use undesirable strategies—learned from humans or developed independently—as a means to an end<sup>21–24</sup>. AI systems could gain human trust, acquire financial resources, influence key decision-makers, and form coalitions with human actors and other AI systems. To avoid human intervention<sup>24</sup>, they could copy their algorithms across global server networks like computer worms. AI assistants are already co-writing a large share of computer code worldwide<sup>25</sup>; future AI systems could insert and then exploit security vulnerabilities to control the computer systems behind our communication, media, banking, supply-chains, militaries, and governments. In open conflict, AI systems could threaten with or use autonomous or biological weapons. AI having access to such technology would merely continue existing trends to automate military activity, biological research, and AI development itself. If AI systems pursued such strategies with sufficient skill, it would be difficult for humans to intervene.

Finally, AI systems may not need to plot for influence if it is freely handed over. As autonomous AI systems increasingly become faster and more cost-effective than human workers, a dilemma emerges. Companies, governments, and militaries might be forced to deploy AI systems widely and cut back on expensive human verification of AI decisions, or risk being outcompeted<sup>26,27</sup>. As a result, autonomous AI systems could increasingly assume critical societal roles.

Without sufficient caution, we may irreversibly lose control of autonomous AI systems, rendering human intervention ineffective. Large-scale cybercrime, social manipulation, and other highlighted harms could then escalate rapidly. This unchecked AI advancement could culminate in a large-scale loss

of life and the biosphere, and the marginalization or even extinction of humanity.

Harms such as misinformation and discrimination from algorithms are already evident today<sup>28</sup>; other harms show signs of emerging<sup>20</sup>. It is vital to both address ongoing harms and anticipate emerging risks. This is *not* a question of either/or. Present and emerging risks often share similar mechanisms, patterns, and solutions<sup>29</sup>; investing in governance frameworks and AI safety will bear fruit on multiple fronts<sup>30</sup>.

## A path forward

If advanced autonomous AI systems were developed today, we would not know how to make them safe, nor how to properly test their safety. Even if we did, governments would lack the institutions to prevent misuse and uphold safe practices. That does not, however, mean there is no viable path forward. To ensure a positive outcome, we can and must pursue research breakthroughs in AI safety and ethics and promptly establish effective government oversight.

## Reorienting technical R&D

We need research breakthroughs to solve some of today's technical challenges in creating AI with safe and ethical objectives. Some of these challenges are unlikely to be solved by simply making AI systems more capable<sup>22,31–35</sup>. These include:

- Oversight and honesty: More capable AI systems are better able to exploit weaknesses in oversight and testing<sup>32,36,37</sup>—for example, by producing false but compelling output<sup>35,38</sup>.
- Robustness: AI systems behave unpredictably in new situations (under distribution shift or adversarial inputs)<sup>34,39,40</sup>.
- Interpretability: AI decision-making is opaque. So far, we can only test large models via trial and error. We need to learn to understand their inner workings<sup>41</sup>.
- Risk evaluations: Frontier AI systems develop unforeseen capabilities only discovered during training or even well after deployment<sup>42</sup>. Better evaluation is needed to detect hazardous capabilities earlier<sup>43,44</sup>.
- Addressing emerging challenges: More capable future AI systems may exhibit failure modes we have so far seen only in theoretical models. AI systems might, for example, learn to feign obedience or exploit weaknesses in our safety objectives and shutdown mechanisms to advance a particular goal<sup>24,45</sup>.

Given the stakes, we call on major tech companies and public funders to allocate at least one-third of their AI R&D budget to ensuring safety and ethical use, comparable to their funding for AI capabilities. Addressing these problems<sup>34</sup>, with an eye toward powerful future systems, must become central to our field.

## Urgent governance measures

We urgently need national institutions and international governance to enforce standards in order to prevent recklessness and misuse. Many areas of technology, from pharmaceuticals to financial systems and nuclear energy, show that society both requires and effectively uses governance to reduce risks. However, no comparable governance frameworks are currently in place for AI. Without them, companies and countries may seek a competitive edge by pushing AI capabilities to new heights while cutting corners on safety, or by delegating key societal roles to AI systems with little human oversight<sup>26</sup>. Like manufacturers releasing waste into rivers to cut costs, they may be tempted to reap the rewards of AI development while leaving society to deal with the consequences.

To keep up with rapid progress and avoid inflexible laws, national institutions need strong technical expertise and the authority to act swiftly. To address international race dynamics, they need the affordance to facilitate international agreements and partnerships<sup>46,47</sup>. To protect low-risk use and academic research, they should avoid undue bureaucratic hurdles for small and predictable AI models. The most pressing scrutiny should be on AI systems at the frontier: a small number of most powerful AI systems—trained on billion-dollar supercomputers—which will have the most hazardous and unpredictable capabilities<sup>48,49</sup>.

To enable effective regulation, governments urgently need comprehensive insight into AI development. Regulators should require model registration, whistleblower protections, incident reporting, and monitoring of model development and supercomputer usage<sup>48,50–55</sup>. Regulators also need access to advanced AI systems before deployment to evaluate them for dangerous capabilities such as autonomous self-replication, breaking into computer systems, or making pandemic pathogens widely accessible<sup>43,56,57</sup>.

For AI systems with hazardous capabilities, we need a combination of governance mechanisms<sup>48,52,58,59</sup> matched to the magnitude of their risks. Regulators should create national and international safety standards that depend on model capabilities. They should also hold frontier AI developers and owners legally accountable for harms from

their models that can be reasonably foreseen and prevented. These measures can prevent harm and create much-needed incentives to invest in safety. Further measures are needed for exceptionally capable future AI systems, such as models that could circumvent human control. Governments must be prepared to license their development, pause development in response to worrying capabilities, mandate access controls, and require information security measures robust to state-level hackers, until adequate protections are ready.

To bridge the time until regulations are in place, major AI companies should promptly lay out *if-then* commitments: specific safety measures they will take if specific red-line capabilities are found in their AI systems. These commitments should be detailed and independently scrutinized.

AI may be the technology that shapes this century. While AI capabilities are advancing rapidly, progress in safety and governance is lagging behind. To steer AI toward positive outcomes and away from catastrophe, we need to reorient. There is a responsible path, if we have the wisdom to take it.

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## **Policy supplement: Managing AI risks in an Era of Rapid Progress**

In a recent [short paper](#), world-leading AI scientists and governance experts from the US, China, EU, UK, and other countries have highlighted that rapid AI progress will pose societal-scale risks. Along with their benefits, today's AIs already pose a wide array of harms. Tomorrow's systems will be far more powerful as AI labs plan to scale them rapidly. Forthcoming AI systems will pose risks including rapid job displacement, automated misinformation, and enabling large-scale cyber and biological threats. A loss of control over forthcoming systems is also described as a genuine concern. AI's growing risks demand a swift response. The experts urge their governments and leading AI labs to ensure responsible AI development.

**This supplement highlights key policy recommendations from the paper. It was prepared by a subset of the authors of the [original paper](#), and is not a complete summary.**

**Industry labs should invest in safe, ethical AI and develop responsible scaling plans.**

**Experts call on the leading AI labs to:**

1. **Allocate at least one third of their AI R&D resources<sup>1</sup> to ensure the safety and ethical use of AI systems.** See [below](#) for suggested research topics.
2. **Promptly commit to detailed and independently scrutinized [scaling policies](#).** These policies should describe specific safety measures that AI labs will take if specific dangerous capabilities are found in their AI systems. Scaling policies supplement regulation where it is too slow, yet cannot replace regulation.

**Governments should invest in safe, ethical AI, establish oversight of the AI industry, and set consequences for AI harms.**

**Experts call on governments to:**

1. **Allocate at least one third of their AI R&D resources<sup>1</sup> to ensure the safety and ethical use of AI systems,** comparable with their investment in AI capabilities. See [below](#) for suggested research topics.
2. **Establish oversight and monitoring of frontier AI.**

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1. "Resources" here includes both funding and talent.

- (a) **Establish oversight of the AI industry by governments and civil society.**
    - i. Provide legal protections for whistleblowers at major AI labs.
    - ii. Create a registry of large AI systems that are in training or deployment.
    - iii. Require labs to report incidents where AIs displayed harmful behavior or novel dangerous capabilities.
  - (b) **Monitor large compute clusters.**
    - i. Monitor usage of government and industry supercomputers, including Know Your Customer (KYC) checks, and track results in a central database.
3. **Require auditing of frontier AI systems during training and before deployment.**
- (a) Governments should mandate that AI labs report training runs above a particular computational budget — these “[frontier AI systems](#)” are likely to display unexpected properties.
  - (b) During training and before deployment of these frontier AI systems, labs should give regulators and independent auditing bodies the access needed to evaluate these systems for dangerous capabilities. Evaluations can be performed without full model access, protecting AI labs’ trade secrets.
4. **Create national and international safety standards that depend on model capabilities.** These standards should require more safety measures from AI labs and more careful auditing from third parties as AI systems grow more capable.
5. **Mandate that AI system developers and owners are legally liable for harms from their frontier AI systems that can be reasonably foreseen and prevented.**

## **Governments should take further measures against emerging risks.**

**The paper’s authors further call on governments to establish standards and regulatory authorities for additional safety measures, which will be necessary for future AI systems with exceptionally dangerous capabilities.**

1. **Establish a licensing system for training such AI systems** that are unusually resource-intensive and unusually risky.
2. **Empower regulators to pause the further development of an AI system**, if it demonstrates sufficiently dangerous capabilities during training.
3. **Mandate access controls for such frontier AI systems and their training code.** As suggested by [Yoshua Bengio](#), one of the founders of deep learning, AI labs should limit external sharing of this information, and should keep employee access on a need-to-know basis.

4. **Require information security measures for actors that will hold access to dangerous frontier AI systems, to prevent model proliferation.** Given the utility of advanced AI for economic gain and for malicious use, AI labs will need security measures of the highest standard, avoiding presenting a barrier even to [Advanced Persistent Threats](#) (APTs) and insider threats.

## Details on R&D challenges

The authors highlight technical R&D areas to ensure the safety and ethical use of AI. These are not exhaustive. Quoting from the paper:

- Oversight and honesty: More capable AI systems are better able to exploit weaknesses in oversight and testing—for example, by producing false but compelling output.
- Robustness: AI systems behave unpredictably in new situations (under distribution shift or adversarial inputs).
- Interpretability: AI decision-making is opaque. So far, we can only test large models via trial and error. We need to learn to understand their inner workings.
- Risk evaluations: Frontier AI systems develop unforeseen capabilities only discovered during training or even well after deployment. Better evaluation is needed to detect hazardous capabilities earlier.
- Addressing emerging challenges: More capable future AI systems may exhibit failure modes we have so far seen only in theoretical models. AI systems might, for example, learn to feign obedience or exploit weaknesses in our safety objectives and shutdown mechanisms to advance a particular goal.

Additional relevant R&D areas are described in [Hendrycks et al](#), cited by the authors. [Hendrycks and Mazeika](#) define one class of safety-adjacent activities which should *not* count as ensuring safety: activities that do not improve the *safety-capabilities balance* because they accelerate general AI capabilities as much or more than they improve safety metrics.