

# AI: Friend or foe?

Last month, I was struck by a core comment made by Kyle Fessler, Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas.

He was lobbying to pass Oregon House Bill 4111, which updated and solidified consistent taxation on agricultural equipment. This bill is now law, but the comment still rings in my mind.

To paraphrase Kyle: “When I asked my dad (Tom) what the tax system was like back in 1968, you had a tractor and a barn. Pretty easy to understand the tax implications.” The law was set in 1973 and has not really changed in over 50 years. It was time.

Farming has never been easy, but the staggering technological advancement since that time produced equipment that not only grew in size, but in complexity. It is no wonder the lines became blurred as to what should have been taxed and what should be exempt. However, we were able to make sense to our state legislators and pass our bill.

Now, technological change of a different sort is accelerating in the blink of an eye. Artificial intelligence, or AI, is here.

## AI is exponentially growing

Last June, I wrote a column entitled “My conversation with Open Artificial Intelligence,” and talked about the emergence of ChatGPT and its open-source abilities. I found it fascinating.

Type pretty much anything into ChatGPT and it'll spit out a confident, convincing response. Since that time, it feels like this tool is accelerating in its influence and use, in some cases with very dire consequences. The youth of AI is now a teenager.

In this column I will be paraphrasing a lot of different thoughts postulated by others, who are far greater experts in this subject than I am.

The idea of technological adolescence is really thought-provoking, and it speaks to the challenge of navigating the ethical and social implications of technological progress. It's a relevant and timely question, given the rapid pace of advancement we have seen over the last year.

I have basic gnawing questions. Are we prepared to deal with the consequences

of our technological advances? Do we possess the wisdom and self-control to use AI responsibly?

## The insights of Carl Sagan

I am a movie guy and admit one of my guilty pleasures is the 1997 movie “Contact” — an adaptation of the book by Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer and author. It asks how to reconcile issues of science and faith in a society that is often not well equipped to tackle such issues.

Jodie Foster plays an astronaut, Dr. Eleanor Arroway, who considers the questions she would have asked if given the opportunity to converse with another life form. Her answer: “How did you do it? How did you evolve? How did you survive this technological adolescence without destroying yourself?”

Sagan correctly directs his readers to the inherent conflict between society and discovery during a big transition.

While AI is not a being from another planet, I would submit we understand very little about the profound impact this technology could have on our lives. We face a serious challenge as we navigate the complexities of an ever-expanding technological landscape. In the span of months, not years, AI can reproduce voices, video and messages that could fool the most trained experts. AI is learning from itself as fast as it is learning from us. That gives me great pause.

## Technology is advancing all around us

Our industry is seeing technological advances that come faster every year such as advanced robotics, drones and scientific breakthroughs on plant genetics. Heck, loading a GPS on a piece of equipment is almost horse-and-buggy type stuff now. But what happens when technology makes its own decisions? Are we the zookeepers or the inhabitants?

While I think that is the alarmist in me talking, there needs to be serious guardrails placed on AI as we grapple with pressing ethical, social and existential questions about the implications of our technological evolution. The interconnectedness of our digital world has blurred the boundaries between the physical and virtual realms. We're seeing new frontiers



Jeff Stone  
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

of exploration and discovery, but we're also exposing ourselves to vulnerabilities and risks that demand thoughtful consideration and responsible stewardship.

## Center stage in the 2024 campaign

During the primary election season, we have already seen robocalls — recorded calls sent to voter phone numbers — that mimicked President Joe Biden telling Democratic voters to stay home and not vote. If it sounds like the president, is it really him?

The issue is that many may not be able to tell the difference. With an electorate that is so polarized, this is a terrible time for AI to take center stage and craft realistic videos, saying things to either suppress voters or outright lie about a candidate's position.

This tactic was used against former president Trump by the Lincoln Project — which created an ad of an AI-generated image of his father talking about how disappointed he was in Donald J. Trump. Like or dislike a candidate, this is dangerous ground.

The general public lacks a deep knowledge of the political process, and our fragile democracy is about to be tested by sophisticated “deep fakes.” If you can't trust what you see and hear, how can you possibly trust an election?

In agriculture, you hold strong beliefs and demonstrate a faithful love for our country. But sometimes we need to see if something smells or is off. We are in an interesting transition with technology, and it can be a great boon to the nursery and greenhouse industry. Let's just make sure it is on our own terms. ☺