

NORTHWICH u3a – June 2024 meeting

At the monthly meeting of Northwich u3a, the members were warmly welcomed by Janice Jackson, who updated us about Northwich u3a news.

Our speaker was Reverend Dr. Chris Goswami who gave us ‘An Introduction to AI’. Chris is a Baptist minister in Lymm and is a chaplain at Manchester Airport every Wednesday. He spent 30 years working in the tech industry is very interested in all aspects of AI and especially how it might affect the church. He pointed out that AI is everywhere and that most of us would have used AI, albeit in a simple form. Chris stated that AI is not going away and will be enhanced in the years to come.

So what is AI? Chris told us that they are systems which are trained on billions of pieces of information on the internet and can predict word, sentence, paragraph and write an essay (or longer). This is machine learning. AI - a machine capable of intelligent behaviour normally expected from a human. It has the ‘ability to discover’ without being explicitly programmed. AI can read, hear, speak, see and is being integrated in our everyday tools. Chris’ first slide asked if we would ‘talk’ to someone who had died. If information is fed into the internet, then it is possible to have a ‘conversation’ with that person (a recent storyline in a famous Manchester soap opera). This is a very emotive and controversial aspect of AI.

AI can create music, videos, images, artwork and much more (and in Chris’ opinion, usually projects images of perfect looking people!). AI though, can, and does, make mistakes. We must question what we see and hear. Chris showed us images of people (created using AI) with toes missing or with 3 arms.

For society, the implications of using AI are massive. AI is already profoundly impacting education, work and society in general in both positive and negative ways. Because AI can generate essays etc., it has been found useful for teachers to ask pupils to learn at home and then complete the assignment in school where the teachers can see that it is the children themselves doing it. Many work practices have changed due to AI, mostly white-collar jobs as AI cannot carry out manual jobs (yet!). There are huge advantages for society, especially in medicine, where AI can predict eye problems, Parkinson disease, strokes and do much more. AI could also be very useful in social care as ‘bots’ never run out of patience or time and can converse with people on a range of subjects.

Chris gave us lots of information and showed us videos and images using AI. He suggested that AI be used as a summariser, a conversation companion and as a critic, not as a creator or oracle. This was a thought provoking presentation which generated much conversation.

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 17th July at Owley Wood Club, Weaverham at 2pm, when Ella Milnes will give a talk on ‘Being Transgender’. Come and join us! Look on the Northwich u3a website for information about Northwich u3a.