

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Artificial Intelligence AI and Our Spiritual and Cultural Lives

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Professor Kate Devlin

Opening remarks: Introduction – who are you and what is your background, what will you be talking about and why did you choose your focus area? (1 min)

I'm Kate Devlin, I'm Professor of Artificial Intelligence & Society, in the Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London. I am a co-investigator and the Creative lead on the UKRI-funded Responsible AI UK programme. I am also a Commissioner on the AI, Faith and Civil Society Commission, where I represent Humanists UK. I have been a Patron of Humanists UK since July 2022. I am speaking as an academic working in AI, including my knowledge of AI as it affects the creative industries, and am speaking in a personal capacity about my Humanist perspective on AI and about the need to reflect people's values in AI so that this technology is developed in a fair and responsible manner that enhances our lives.

Main objective: Main evidence, concise and short, based on your specific professional background or expertise in the matter. (5 min)

- **Spiritual and Cultural Impact: What are the ways AI is already impacting spiritual and cultural identities? How might it further impact these key aspects of what makes us 'human' in the future?**

I wish to talk here about one particular part of the UK's cultural identity: that of a creative nation. The cultural and creative sector in the UK, which added £126bn to the economy in 2022, is lauded worldwide, shaping our national identity and providing us with a form of soft power. We are all emotional beneficiaries of this too: how much harder would the pandemic lockdowns have been without art, music, books, TV, film, and games to console us, as well as public service broadcasters delivering information to us when we needed it most? Creativity enriches us all, whether we are doodling on a page or listening to a podcast. It makes life bearable; it makes life beautiful.

The widespread uptake of AI – especially of generative AI such as foundation models that can produce plausible text and images – has already had a profound effect on our cultural identities. These industries are under threat from the big tech companies who train their machine learning models on copyrighted material that they have scraped from the web without permission. In roundtable discussions that I have run, IP and copyright is the number one most discussed topic. IP rights are vital in driving innovation, and a threat to IP is a threat to the sector's growth. A knock-on effect of this is decreased job opportunities in the creative industries, and a market over-saturated with submissions of poorer-quality AI-generated content. This is not to say that AI cannot be used in this sector; there are opportunities for it as a tool, but it needs to be integrated in a considered and responsible manner so as not to negatively impact this rich economy. If we value human creativity and the culture that has been handed down to us over centuries, then we must ensure that AI is managed carefully to protect *all* of those who create or who enjoy the results of creativity.

- **Preserving Cultural And Spiritual Heritage: What are some of the risks AI is presenting in these areas? How can we ensure human spirituality and creativity are protected in an AI era?**

In terms of preserving cultural heritage, the majority of generative AI models are based on datasets scraped from the Web. English is by far the most common language of these datasets, comprising approximately 60-70% of the data used for training. This, and the predominance of tech companies in the Western World, means that there is a threat of cultural homogenisation, which could lead to the erosion of languages and traditions that are underrepresented or excluded from the datasets. This is exacerbated by the AI algorithms on social media platforms that prioritise English-language content. We know also that AI perpetuates bias and is less accurate when dealing with marginalised groups, leading to unintended – but sometimes intentional – cultural erasure. This is well-evidenced but infrequently mitigated.

- **Technological enhancement: Can AI be used to uplift spiritual and creative sectors? What are examples?**

There are roles for AI, but those roles must be designated carefully. In the creative industries, some subsectors already use AI successfully, usually as a tool for productivity or as a way of automating laborious and repetitive parts of a task that are less fundamental to the creative process. Some people will be able to use these tools in their line of work. However, this is not without issues. If AI is there to carry out rote (yet necessary) parts of the creative process that are usually handed to more junior staff, how will those junior staff gain the experience needed to progress? We could end up with a lack of skilled senior staff. Any adoption of AI needs to be done with a full evaluation of downstream impact.

In terms of cultural heritage, AI offers an opportunity to speed up digitisation of archival material, or to analyse and catalogue artefacts and sites under threat of destruction. This is caveated with the acknowledgement that the skills of heritage professionals are intrinsic to this work and that human oversight will be needed to understand the nuances. This would require investment in equipment, infrastructure, and in training and jobs for heritage experts.

- **Civil Society's role: How can civil society play a part in protecting and promoting spiritual and cultural values**

As a patron of Humanists UK, a civil society organisation, I can share my own personal views of how we might protect our values – values that centre on human flourishing – in the AI era. Humanists believe that this is the only life we have, and that human welfare should be at the centre of our ethical decision making. I believe that my decisions in the world should be based on rational, scientific thinking and that my life has meaning because I want to do what I can to make the world a better place for all. This is jarring when faced with the untrammelled power of AI. The AI industry is technocratic, governed by a handful of billionaires whose entire reason for running their companies is make money. In doing so, they are prepared to exploit people, be it through taking art, music and writing without consent, or via the well-documented use of hidden labour – workers behind the scenes in the Global South who label datasets and moderate distressing content, or who mine the raw materials needed in dangerous and distressing conditions.

The tech companies, who need data, compute, and energy to scale up, are directly contributing to environmental threats. These actions do not consider the impact on people, but it is people who will be harmed. They do not centre the voices of those who are subject to the AI – those who have algorithmic decision making determining their futures. Civil society organisations, much like religious and spiritual organisations, can play a role in coordinating and championing the voices of those who are left out. They can expose and amplify the sociotechnical impacts of this technology, supporting human rights in the face of AI imposition. Humanism holds that humans are capable of great achievements. We should ensure that there is a chance for our technological future to be decided equitably and fairly, so that individuals and societies can flourish.

[Concluding remarks: What is your recommendation to Parliamentarians, how can they address the issue you brought forward effectively? \(1 min\)](#)

In conclusion, while AI offers opportunities, these must be weighed against the negative impacts. I recommend three things:

1. International tech companies are stripping the value of the UK's cultural and creative economy. We need to showcase and protect our strong reputation and strengthen the UK's gold-standard copyright laws to enable our cultural and creative sector to innovate and grow.
2. The UK's groundbreaking action in convening the first AI Safety Summit shows that we are committed to responsibility and accountability at an international level – and it was the strengths of UK diplomacy that brought China and the US to the table. We can, and should, extend our work here to champion human rights and human values in this space.
3. Religious, spiritual and civil societies represent the people whose voices are rarely heard in discussions about our technological future, despite the profound impact it has on all of our lives. We have a proud history in the UK of encouraging citizens to share their views, when many, many nations don't allow this. I urge you to use these established networks to hear from those communities and to listen to their ideas for how we can uphold human dignity in this rapidly changing world.

Thank you.