

Bill Gates Warns A.I. Is More Dangerous Than Big Tech Will Admit

In an hourlong interview, he said his industry was downplaying the risks, which he believes include mass unemployment and bioterrorism.



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By Karen Weise

Karen Weise, who has covered Microsoft since 2018, spoke with Bill Gates in his Seattle-area offices last week.

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Bill Gates, the billionaire co-founder of Microsoft, is loudly warning that artificial intelligence poses a grave threat to jobs and human life, and that urgently addressing the risks should be “the world’s top priority.”

In an hourlong interview with The New York Times last week, Mr. Gates said the tech industry was knowingly downplaying those threats because there was too much money on the line.

“In private, people who understand how good this stuff is, and how much better it’s getting, they’re very worried,” he said. But few tech executives, Mr. Gates said, are willing to publicly admit that. “They’re now saying to each other: ‘Hey, man, don’t say that. It’s bad for us — the next trillion dollars we’re trying to raise.’”

On Wednesday, Mr. Gates published a nearly 6,000-word essay on his personal website laying out his concerns about A.I. and offering solutions, such as new taxes and bans. He said he was motivated to speak now because recent improvements in A.I. had far surpassed his expectations and because the industry had ignored technology milestones — like A.I.’s escaping the control of its creators or making recipes for bioweapons — that it once said would warrant more caution.

“They’re just full speed ahead and hoping that the good outweighs the bad,” he said.

Mr. Gates, 70, is the latest in a string of tech luminaries to call out the risks of A.I. as the industry spends trillions of dollars on new data centers, and as young A.I. companies edge toward some of the largest initial public offerings in history.



Mr. Gates arriving for a House committee hearing in the Jeffrey Epstein investigation in June. In an interview, he acknowledged having made mistakes. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

He is taking his stand as he emerges from an extended period of scandal. Early this year, the release of the sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein's emails brought renewed attention to Mr. Gates's interactions with him.

Mr. Gates had to pull out of an A.I. conference in February, and testified for six hours in June before a House committee. Disclosures of his infidelity, combined with his 2021 divorce, have also badly damaged his reputation. He acknowledged that they were all "mistakes" of his own doing.

He appears more willing to step back into the spotlight after answering every question from the House Oversight Committee. "I think people understand what I did do, what I didn't do and that I learn when I make mistakes," he said in the interview.

Mr. Gates conceded that he also might be a flawed messenger simply because of his vast wealth and history as Microsoft's aggressive chief executive. In a landmark federal case, Microsoft was found in 2000 to have repeatedly abused its monopoly during his watch. (Mr. Gates left the company's board of directors in 2020.)

While Mr. Gates avoided criticizing Microsoft or other companies by name, he argued that he was uniquely positioned to work on the A.I. issue. He is a technologist and industry insider who is no longer driven by the profit incentives of running a company, and he has spent decades addressing inequality through his philanthropic foundation.

"The irony of 'innovation lover is scared and says we're not ready and we're crossing thresholds,' maybe it's even more poignant," he said.

Mr. Gates said technological advances had truly stunned him three times: In 1980 when he first saw a graphical user interface, which led to the modern personal computer. In 2022 when the leaders of OpenAI came to his house to demonstrate what would soon become ChatGPT. And this year when he looked closely

at the advances being made by Claude Code, Anthropic's A.I. tool.

Coding, Mr. Gates said, is the subject he knows best, and Claude's abilities shocked him. "The idea that now these things are in a meaningful sense better than I am is like: What the hell?" he said.

Anthropic's Code With Claude event in May. Coding, Mr. Gates said, is the subject he knows best, and he was shocked by Claude's abilities. Jason Henry for The New York Times

Technological breakthroughs in the past created more jobs than they eliminated, Mr. Gates said. But he is in disbelief that industry boosters say that will happen again this time.

The A.I. era is “utterly, absolutely, completely, totally different,” he said. He acknowledged that this unpopular opinion (in tech circles) was “a hell of a claim, and I’m staking everything I know — everything — saying, ‘Are you kidding?’”

He said mass job losses, if not addressed, were inevitable because A.I. would spread across the economy and leave little room for one industry to absorb the refugees from another. The biggest tech companies in the world, including Microsoft, are racing to help corporate customers adopt A.I., which could replace many workers.

Mr. Gates said that companies were just responding to market incentives, but that those incentives might conflict with what was best for society.

He proposed a new tax on A.I. use, known as a “token tax,” to make it more expensive to replace people and provide money to help those who do lose work. A token is a basic unit of A.I. computing. The idea of taxing it has gained some traction, including on Wall Street, as a way to increase the cost of using machines instead of human labor.

Some jobs, Mr. Gates said, should be prohibited from being replaced by A.I. — an idea he called “Human Reserved” — because the role is deeply personal, like a caregiver, or the people in those jobs are unlikely to find new employment.

He argued for new international agreements to set clear criteria to monitor and restrict extreme risks like bioterrorism. He said it could take only a few people with access to advanced A.I. to develop new

pathogens.

He said he would happily debate anyone who argued against mandatory reviews of any A.I. system that could be weaponized to make new molecules and unleash a pandemic. Mr. Gates added that he was dumbfounded by the kind of voluntary measures that the White House and industry leaders were developing.

“Self-regulation on the most dangerous tool ever invented?” he said incredulously. “No, thanks!”

Mr. Gates said he was in a “state of shock” as to why there was not more urgency on these issues. Many of his concerns echo those raised by the Anthropic co-founder Dario Amodei, but Dr. Amodei’s warnings have put him at odds with the Pentagon, the White House and much of the tech industry.

Mr. Gates said A.I. and its dangers were, to him, as important an issue as global health.

Chona Kasinger for The New York Times

“You have people attacking the person who’s the most open about the downsides,” Mr. Gates said.

(The Times has sued OpenAI and Microsoft, claiming copyright infringement of news content related to A.I. systems. The two companies have denied those claims.)

Along with global health issues, Mr. Gates vowed to make his A.I. concern part of every conversation he had with world leaders. “I only have two issues where I’m going to say, ‘Please think more about this, please care more about this,’” he said.

Mr. Gates acknowledged that he was in an odd spot: He has arguably done as much as anyone in the world to evangelize for and shape the modern computer industry. But now he is warning that the technology it is creating presents global risks.

“I don’t like bringing bad news to people, and I don’t like saying that innovation may be a net negative,” he said. “But that’s where we are.”

Karen Weise writes about technology for The Times and is based in Seattle. Her coverage focuses on Amazon and Microsoft, two of the most powerful companies in America.

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