

## GOLDSTUCK ON GADGETS

### Inventor of Web has hope for Artificial Intelligence

May 24th, 2017

The man who invented the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, argues that the evils of artificial intelligence have been exaggerated. ARTHUR GOLDSTUCK reports from Las Vegas.



The man who invented the World Wide Web could be mistaken for a schoolteacher, or perhaps a university professor. A slight build, spectacles and thinning brown hair combine with an almost humble demeanour that is difficult to associate with a legacy as great as any of the giants of the technology world.

Tim Berners-Lee was looking for an easier way to connect information when he first came up with the concept of the World Wide Web in the 1980s, while working as a physicist at the CERN laboratory in Switzerland. Today he is a director of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which in effect sets the technical rules for how the Web operates. But he remains an academic, and is a senior researcher and founder chair at the MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory.

It is little wonder, then, that he is as preoccupied with artificial intelligence (AI) as he is with the Web. The latter remains his baby, however, and he has far more to say about it than any other topic. In March 2017, he issued an open letter warning that we have lost control of our personal data, that it's too easy for misinformation to spread on the web, and that political advertising online needs transparency.

Clearly, he is not one to gloss over the perils of progress. So, when it was announced that he was to offer his insights into the dangers of AI at the Dell EMC 2017 conference in Las Vegas, it became the must-attend talk of an already-intensive convention.

The conference represented the first joint convention by two giants of the computer world, following computer manufacturer Dell's purchase of storage leaders EMC for \$67-billion – the biggest IT acquisition ever. EMC and its subsidiary VMware are responsible, respectively, for the storage and the management platforms of a large proportion of the world's cloud computing infrastructure. The cloud, in turn, is going to be integral to AI, hosting and processing the massive amounts of data that will allow AI to help human beings make and act on decisions.



**The hacker, the scrapheap, and the computer** A Tshwane computer e tracked down one of the great treasure computer age – the first space flight computer. ARTHUR GOLDSTUCK tells t

## NEWS

### Execs get into blockch

[READ FULL STORY](#)

## PREVIOUS ARTICLES

- [Windows 10 updates creativity](#)
- [Hacked in translation](#)
- [Samsung QLED TV now in SA](#)
- [Nissan leads EV taxi revolution](#)
- [Win with Gadget and Samsung](#)
- [StarCraft: Remastered](#)
- [Inventor of Web has hope for Artificial Intelligence](#)
- [Companies want to run applications in the cloud](#)

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook or grab the RSS feed

Photo by John S. and James L. Knight Foundation [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

It was no surprise that a record 13 500 delegates attended Dell EMC World. And it was no surprise that the lines to get into Berners-Lee's "AI in Perspective" talk were almost as long as those for the conference's opening keynote by Dell founder Michael Dell.

The Web founder did not disappoint.

While he speaks with a rapid-fire energy that sometimes appears to run ahead of his thoughts, he delivers his perspective of the future with both authority and empathy.

"The promise of AI is really exciting, but you still have to look at it as the thing which makes a lot of people concerned," he says by way of introduction. "We have to look at not just the hopes, but also the fears."

The promise, he says, is that of almost all computer projects:

"We're trying to get machines to do things we don't want to do, like filling out a form. A lot of the progress in computing starts off with simple things, like doing accounts and taxes. Translating languages has always been just about to happen, but is now starting to become functional.

"You can train a machine to beat a game. Instead of training it by looking at lots of people playing a game, you just teach it to play against it self and it becomes better than a human.

"You can grab yourself some cloud storage and some cloud computation and find some open data produced by government or scientific or enterprise, find lots of data, find the latest algorithm, and create something that has added value, and put out signal where there wasn't signal before. Like enabling you to decide where to invest.

"More and more, computers are starting to tick off all those things we were told computers just couldn't do. So these are very exciting times."

There are two key problems in this Utopian vision, however. The first seems easily solved:

"There is a huge dearth of people who know how to do this stuff, but there will be more and more. The stuff is out there and you can teach yourself. The promise is huge."

The second issue is that most difficult of challenges: public perception. Berners-Lee talks about an AI Spring, when the world was full of hope, turning into an AI winter: "The world turned on them and said: 'You were supposed to give us robots by now, what happened? This sucks.'"

At the same time, the fear is building that AI will take away jobs.

"Suddenly its no longer AI. Now it's Natural Language Processing, now it's self-driving cars. But they wont call it AI."

### **The three fears of AI**

Berners-Lee addresses the fears of AI in "three pieces":

"Let's talk about robots replacing jobs. The first take you get on AI: are robots going to take my job or all the jobs of my people? Is an autonomous vehicle going to take my job? Autonomous vehicles are coming. A lot of people, when they arrive somewhere as immigrants, or people between jobs, start out with Uber or a cab company, where driving is one of the things they can do. If that goes away, there is going to be a big shift and we have to be responsible about how we do these things."

The second big category of AI fears lies in its ability to generate fake news. However, Berners-Lee sees AI as the solution rather than the problem: "AI can be a frontline defence against things which can be proven to be false. There's no way of really objecting to the decisions of AI."

The third and most famous category, he says, is the Singularity – when AI surpasses human intelligence.

"Is all this getting out of control? As a kid I read Asimov books, Arthur C Clarke book. Asimov imagined robots would become just as powerful as us and therefore they'd have to be controlled. Ask people who make robots about the problem of robots becoming smarter than you, they say, 'Do you know how difficult it is to build a robot? You know how long it's going to take, getting smarter than us?' Don't worry about it."

He mocks the current trend in movies of showing future robots not only as smart, but humanoid, female, beautiful, blonde and blue-eyed, with female voices.

"By the time they are smarter than us, they won't look like us. A lot of the intelligence already out there is sitting in the cloud, it doesn't have blue eyes, but it does play a part in our society.

"The funny thing is, we're worrying about robots, but we're not worrying about the companies that program them. People are not good at stopping bad things."

In short, he says real people, rather than artificial intelligence, are the bigger threat.

- *Arthur Goldstuck is founder of World Wide Worx and editor-in-chief of Gadget.co.za. Follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) on @art2gee*

### **Leave a Reply**

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment

Name \*




Email \*

Website



4 +  = 10



### Contact Us

 PO Box 752, Pinegowrie, 2123, South Africa  
 +27 (011) 782 7003  
 [Email Gadget](#)

### The Editors

 [Arthur Goldstuck](#) Editor-in-chief  
 [Sean Bacher](#) Editor



Theme design and development by [Absol Internet Business Solutions](#)