How AGI became the most consequential conspiracy theory of our time

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Every age has its believers, people with an unshakeable faith that something huge is about to happen—a before and an after that they are privileged (or doomed) to live through.

For us, that's the promised advent of artificial general intelligence, or AGI. People are used to hearing that this or that is the next big thing, says Shannon Vallor, who studies the ethics of technology at the University of Edinburgh. "It used to be the computer age and then it was the internet age and now it's the AI age," she says. "What's different, of course, is that in contrast to computers and the internet, AGI doesn't exist."

The mythmaking behind the term "AGI" has been there since the start of the computer age. Alan Turing asked if machines could think only five years after the first electronic computer, ENIAC, was built in 1945. Then, in 1955, the computer scientist John McCarthy and his colleagues applied for US government funding to create what they fatefully chose to call "artificial intelligence." It's this myth that's the root of the AGI conspiracy. A smarter-than-human machine that can do it all is not a technology. It's a dream, unmoored from reality. Once you see that, other parallels with conspiracy thinking start to leap out.

It's impossible to debunk a shape-shifting idea like AGI. Most people don't even agree on what AGI really is—which helps explain how people can get away with telling us it can both save the world and end it. At the core of most definitions you'll find the idea of a machine that can match humans on a wide range of cognitive tasks. And there it is: You can't prove it's not true.

Jeremy Cohen, who studies conspiracy thinking in technology circles at McMaster University in Canada, is focused on transhumanism (the idea that technology can help humans push past their natural limitations) and AGI. "I am seeing a lot of parallels. There are forms of magical thinking that I think is a part of the popular imagination around AGI," he says. "It connects really well to the kinds of religious imaginaries that you see in conspiracy thinking today."

For Vallor, this belief system is notable for the way that a faith in technology has replaced a faith in humans. "We're in an era where other paths to material improvement of human lives and our societies seem to have been exhausted," Vallor says. Technology once promised a route to a better future. "We've passed the peak of that," says Vallor. "I think the one thing that gives many people hope and a return to that kind of optimism about the future is AGI."

One popular feature of conspiracy thinking is that there's a group of powerful figures pulling the levers behind the scenes and that, by seeking the truth, believers can expose this elite cabal. But what if there are, in fact, shadowy puppet masters here? The kings of Silicon Valley are throwing everything they can get at building AGI for profit. The myth of AGI serves their interests more than anybody else's. There's a business incentive for companies (and governments) to push the myth of AGI, says Milton Mueller at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who works on technology policy and regulation, because they can then claim that they will be the first to get there. But because they're running a race in which nobody has agreed on the finish line, the myth can be spun as long as it's useful. Or as long as investors are willing to buy into it.

What does it mean for technology in general if we fall so hard for the fairy tales? In a lot of ways, I think the whole idea of AGI is built on a warped view of what we should expect technology to do, and even what intelligence is in the first place. Stripped back to its essentials, the argument for AGI rests on the premise that one technology, AI, has gotten very good, very fast, and will continue to get better. But set aside the technical objections—what if it doesn't continue to get better?—and you're left with the claim that intelligence is a commodity you can get more of if you have the right data or compute or neural network. And it's not. Intelligence doesn't come as a quantity you can just ratchet up and up. Smart people may be brilliant in one area and not in others. Some Nobel Prize winners are really bad at playing the piano or caring for their kids. Some very smart people insist that AGI is coming next year.