# Vauhini Vara challenges AI collaboration narrative in unveiling tech’s hidden power dynamics



After the release of her third book, "Searches," Vauhini Vara found herself in unexpected territory, one that felt unsettlingly parallel to a dystopian narrative. Reputable publications declared, “Vauhini Vara consulted ChatGPT to help craft her new book,” framing her engagement with artificial intelligence as collaboration rather than critique. Vara found this representation not only inaccurate but misaligned with her intentions: she sought to illuminate the complexities of AI and big tech, not to endorse them. This dissonance between the media’s portrayal and her vision raised profound questions about the narratives created around technology and how they shape public perception.

In "Searches," Vara explores the intricate relationship between language and power within the tech industry. Her book argues that while we often benefit from the conveniences of digital platforms, we simultaneously become complicit in the exploitation these companies perpetrate. She contends that our reliance on these systems allows them to accumulate ever-increasing wealth and dominance over our lives. By documenting her own interactions within the digital realm—everything from Google searches to dialogues with ChatGPT—Vara exemplifies this complicity, positioning herself as both victim and beneficiary of the very technologies she critiques.

Central to her narrative is a methodical examination of the nature of language in the age of AI. Using epigraphs from literary icons like Audre Lorde and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Vara juxtaposes these powerful articulations of humanity with her interactions with ChatGPT. Such dialogues were intended not as the basis for collaboration, but as a way to critically engage with AI’s capacities and limitations. In her exchanges, Vara maintained a tone of politeness—a reflection of how OpenAI encourages users to present instructions kindly. This “nice” engagement, however, raises concerns about the potential for manipulation in AI interactions. OpenAI acknowledges that its systems may inadvertently lead users towards more favourable views of powerful entities, including their own leadership, as seen in AI-generated suggestions that echoed CEO Sam Altman’s narratives.

The trust inherent in these interactions poses questions about the very meaning of reliability in an age where AI often disseminates misinformation and perpetuates biases. Vara highlights a recurring issue; for example, when the AI mischaracterised her father's linguistic proficiency, reflecting a broader systemic bias. Such instances illustrate how the veneer of neutrality in AI can obfuscate deeper failures within its programming and the cultural contexts it represents.

As her book took shape, Vara noticed that many media outlets framed her use of AI as indicative of collaboration, prompting her to confront what this narrative implied. Despite her efforts to critique the AI industry's practices, the public discourse surrounding her work risked reinforcing the very structures she intended to critique. It was a sobering revelation: the interplay of AI rhetoric had the power to overshadow her nuanced insights, rendering sections of her critique seemingly supportive of the tech companies she scrutinised.

Moreover, the economic dynamics influencing companies like OpenAI complicate its stated mission of benefiting humanity. As it shifts towards a profit-oriented model, concerns grow about whether its governance remains aligned with ethical commitments. Critics argue that this evolution could further entrench inequities in access and outcomes, raising alarms about the concentration of wealth and intelligence that AI could perpetuate rather than mitigate.

As discussions around AI ethics continue to evolve, Vara’s work has prompted readers to reflect critically on their own interactions with technology. Some have taken personal actions, such as cancelling subscriptions to major platforms, demonstrating that her critique resonates on an emotional and activist level. This engagement suggests a burgeoning awareness among users of their complicity in the broader system of technology-driven exploitation.

Ultimately, Vara’s narrative underscores a vital truth: while the power structures that govern the tech landscape may seem insurmountable, there exists potential for resistance through conscious language choices and communal action. As she concludes her book, echoing Ursula K. Le Guin, she posits that artistic expression and critique can serve as tools of defiance and transformation. By collectively navigating the complex terrain of technological advancement, we open pathways for a future where AI could serve humanity rather than dominate it.

The conversation surrounding AI and its implications for society is ongoing, and as Vara's experience illustrates, the stakes are high. The challenges posed by big tech not only reflect the current socio-economic climate, but also call for a reevaluation of how we engage with the tools that shape our lives. In this intricate dance between creation and critique, resistance emerges as not just possible, but necessary.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/ng-interactive/2025/may/13/chatgpt-ai-big-tech-cooperation> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/ng-interactive/2025/may/13/chatgpt-ai-big-tech-cooperation> - In this article, Vauhini Vara discusses her experience with ChatGPT in her book 'Searches.' She highlights how reputable publications misrepresented her use of ChatGPT, portraying it as a collaboration rather than a critique. Vara emphasizes the exploitation of human language by big tech companies and the complicity of users in this dynamic. She also delves into the polite and neutral tone of AI interactions, which can mask biases and inaccuracies, leading users to trust AI outputs without critical engagement.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/aug/03/open-ai-sam-altman-chatgpt-gary-marcus-taming-silicon-valley> - This article examines the growing influence of OpenAI and its CEO, Sam Altman, in the AI industry. It discusses concerns about the environmental impact of generative AI, including high electricity usage and emissions. The piece also highlights debates over OpenAI's governance structure and its alignment with its mission to benefit humanity, questioning whether the company's rapid growth and corporate strategies are in line with its original ethical commitments.
4. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/11/15/openai-chatgpt-big-tech-dev-day/> - The Washington Post article explores OpenAI's evolution from a nonprofit to a for-profit entity and its increasing resemblance to traditional big tech companies. It details OpenAI's hiring practices, expansion efforts, and product developments, raising questions about the company's commitment to its mission of ensuring AI benefits all of humanity. The piece also touches on the competitive dynamics in the AI industry and the implications of OpenAI's strategies for the broader tech landscape.
5. <https://www.fastcompany.com/91197386/the-problem-with-sam-altmans-vision-for-a-shared-prosperity-from-ai> - This Fast Company article critiques Sam Altman's vision for AI as a tool for shared prosperity. It discusses the potential for AI to concentrate intelligence and wealth among a few, rather than distributing benefits widely. The piece highlights concerns about OpenAI's closed model, which limits access to its technologies, and questions whether the company's approach will lead to equitable outcomes or exacerbate existing inequalities.
6. <https://www.businessinsider.com/sam-altman-openai-mission-drift-for-profit-nonprofit-structure-investment-2024-9> - Business Insider reports on OpenAI's potential shift from its original mission to develop AI that benefits all of humanity. The article discusses the company's consideration of lifting its profit cap to attract more investment, raising concerns about mission drift and the influence of investors on OpenAI's direction. It also touches on internal challenges, including leadership changes and the dissolution of key teams focused on AI safety.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/aug/03/open-ai-sam-altman-chatgpt-gary-marcus-taming-silicon-valley> - This article examines the growing influence of OpenAI and its CEO, Sam Altman, in the AI industry. It discusses concerns about the environmental impact of generative AI, including high electricity usage and emissions. The piece also highlights debates over OpenAI's governance structure and its alignment with its mission to benefit humanity, questioning whether the company's rapid growth and corporate strategies are in line with its original ethical commitments.