

GUEST ESSAY

Bernie Sanders: A.I. Is a Public Resource. You Should Own Half of It.

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By Bernie Sanders

Mr. Sanders, an independent, is the senior senator from Vermont.

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Artificial intelligence will almost certainly be the most transformational technology in the history of the world. It will profoundly affect the life of every man, woman and child in our country. It will bring — and is already bringing — unimaginable changes to our economy, our democracy, our emotional well-being, our environment and how we educate and raise our children. Further, there is a very real fear that as A.I. becomes smarter than humans it could eventually function independently, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The question, then, is not whether A.I. will change the world. It will. The question is: Who will own and control that future? Who will benefit from it, and who will be hurt by it? Will A.I. be used to make life better for working families? Will it enrich

our quality of life? Will it help us eliminate poverty, extend life expectancies and solve the climate crisis? Or will the future of humanity be determined by a handful of billionaires who have promoted and developed A.I., with virtually no democratic input, who stand to become even richer and more powerful than they are today?

That is the choice before us.

Let us be clear. Artificial intelligence was not created out of thin air. The data and language used by generative A.I. tools didn't just pop into Sam Altman's head or Elon Musk's imagination. A.I. is built on our collective intelligence: our books, songs, artwork, journalism, computer code, scientific research, videos, conversations, images and ideas spanning generations. That is not just the opinion of Bernie Sanders. According to Mr. Altman, the head of OpenAI, A.I. models were trained on our "collective experience, knowledge" and "learnings of humanity."

For the most part, tech oligarchs have fed this knowledge into their A.I. models without permission, without acknowledgment, without compensation. In other words, the creative work of millions of people — writers, artists, musicians, journalists, teachers, scientists and ordinary citizens — has essentially been stolen by some of the wealthiest people in the world. It's time for us to reclaim it.

Since A.I. is built on the collective knowledge of humanity, the wealth it generates must benefit humanity. Not just Mr. Musk, Mr. Altman, Dario Amodei and other moguls whose companies are positioned to dominate the industry. Not just venture capitalists in Silicon Valley or money managers on Wall Street who undoubtedly see A.I. as the next great wealth-extracting machine.

That is why I will soon be introducing the American A.I. Sovereign Wealth Fund Act. This legislation would give the public a direct ownership stake in the largest A.I. companies in our country. How? It would create a sovereign wealth fund through a one-time 50 percent tax — not on the profits of OpenAI, Anthropic, xAI and other companies, but paid with something far more valuable than that: the stock.

If passed, this legislation would do two crucial things. First, it would give the public a direct role in determining the future of this technology. No longer would the future of A.I. and the transformation of human life that it will bring be dictated by a handful of Big Tech oligarchs. The federal government would have the power, through its voting shares and an equal representation on each company's board, to block decisions that hurt our citizens and to push for policies that help them.

Second, this legislation would guarantee that the trillions of dollars potentially generated by A.I. are used to improve the lives of all of us — not simply to make the richest people in the world even richer. If the big A.I. companies continue to grow as rapidly as many analysts expect, then the value of the sovereign wealth fund will grow as well — and the benefits to the American people will grow along with it.

This is not an original idea. It has been proposed by scholars. It has been endorsed by some of the leading A.I. companies in America. OpenAI, for example, recently proposed creating a “public wealth fund that provides every citizen — including those not invested in financial markets — with a stake in A.I.-driven economic growth.” Anthropic, led by Mr. Amodei, similarly proposed the creation of “national sovereign wealth funds with stakes in A.I.” Mr. Musk, who runs xAI, wrote, “Universal HIGH INCOME via checks issued by the Federal government is the best way to deal with unemployment caused by AI.”

Dozens of sovereign wealth funds exist all over the world to ensure that ordinary people benefit from national wealth. Norway's sovereign wealth fund, one of the largest in the world, was funded from the country's oil wealth and is now worth more than \$2 trillion. Instead of a few oil executives pocketing all the benefits of this national resource, Norway made the decision that this wealth should be used to improve life for all of its people.

This concept has already been put into practice right here at home. Fifty years ago, Alaska created a sovereign wealth fund from the state's oil revenues. For decades, it has paid annual dividends directly to Alaskans. Moreover, public pension funds in

states across the country already hold hundreds of billions of dollars in the stock of companies throughout America. Even President Trump, in an executive order, has proposed establishing an American sovereign wealth fund.

To start, the billions, if not trillions, of dollars generated by this fund would provide direct payments to the American people. And as the fund generates more and more wealth, the proceeds would be used to ensure that every man, woman and child in our country has a decent and dignified standard of living, including health care, education and housing.

Needless to say, I recognize that for the government to have a major stake in a company, particularly one for which A.I. is only part of its business, is complicated. More details — including the specific spending priorities and the mechanics of implementation — will be included in the legislation I unveil in the coming weeks.

But the principle is simple: When a public resource generates wealth, the public should share in that wealth. A.I. is being built on a public resource far more valuable than oil: the accumulated knowledge, creativity and labor of mankind.

The future of A.I. and the fate of humanity must not be decided behind closed doors in Silicon Valley. It must not be dictated by billionaires seeking to maximize their power and profit. It must be decided by workers, parents, teachers, artists, scientists, communities and the American people. It's our future. We must decide it.

Bernie Sanders is the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

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