

AI accessibility, or global heat death?

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2024-05-29

Dear friends,

Yesterday I was listening to one, amidst a litany, technology podcast. They were asserting, like the cacophony, that Apple needed to use WWDC to skate to where the puck is, rather than their preferred position of “leading the industry”—not entirely sure where the misguided idea that Apple leads the industry came from in the first place—and now, ‘features’ such as Recall AI would need to be shoehorned into macOS and iOS (derivs).

There are several blogs out there about how potentially terrible and privacy invasive idea Recall is. While there are obvious implications in the privacy space, I think there is something missing in these analyses, which are inherently pro big-tech and offloading what used to be “personal” computing.

Recall is an interesting, and if deployed properly, potentially powerful tool for the way our memory works. Particularly as a neurodivergent human, the potential ability to ask an LLM for help quite literally ‘recalling’ things I’ve seen or done on my computer would likely come in handy. You could definitely look at, in a long bow, how PayPal today is launching an ad network on the backs of years purchase history which was previously thought to be private.

Remembering that this is Microsoft we’re talking about here—any misguided notion of “in the public interest” is for show and part of their well known embrace, extend, extinguish model. How long before, on corporate Windows machines, we start to see Recall used to analyse employee behaviour? We’ve already seen habit tracking, status tracking, document engagement, and other nasty stats used in corporate dashboards to “understand” office workers productivity.

What is missing, then, genius? Well, if we follow the reasoning of various Apple podcasters we see a need for a privacy focussed, AI first model which still “skates to the puck” while simultaneously preserving (their own) notions of privacy.

So, cool, Apple in its public propaganda has a laser focus on consumer devices and “privacy”. As a result any product therein may have a slightly more respectful approach to integration of machine learning models and tools (at WWDC). Though you can bet that, even if it is local, there will be pingbacks to Apple servers. This is the piece that many “privacy” enthusiasts miss—with corporate technology your platform is owned by FAANG not you... So what? Ignore AI, don’t upgrade, what is the play here?

While I was thinking about ways to not be a total spoilsport on the AI ballgame I was thinking about the recent releases, by Apple no less, of additional accessibility features. When you start to think about the potential of LLMs—just LLMs—to change the “access” to technology there are already myriad possibilities. But think about computer vision, TTS, STT, and other technologies advancing in leaps and bounds.

Imagine being the company (or better yet, the FOSS community) that jumps to accessibility features first, buzzwords second. And then I saw a Hacker News article on using “AI Powered Headphones” [1] to be able to single out a voice in a crowded room and my 11 year old Auditory Processing Disorder self just about passed out.

I know there are a few logical leaps here, that’s just how my brain works. However, we do know that when you focus on accessibility everyone benefits. We also know what an inaccessible mess most computing platforms are. Just think about how long it has taken to get properly described images on websites? Oh no, wait, we’re still going there. If a “big

tech” company put accessibility at the forefront —even if that wasn’ t what it said on the marketing tin —couldn’ t we see some incredible advancement for everybody?

What would I know. I do, however, acknowledge there is power in them there woods, sorry, “AI models” and by power, I mean the same stuff that caused a 52° day in Pakistan just the other day. So let’ s seriously consider how we use these “models” because it is straight up heat death we’ re careening towards. Maybe accessibility is a better future driver than “it sees all your computing use and records it” . In related news, and yes I am aware that I am a meme of myself, I have moved my daily computing to a Linux machine in a vain attempt to continue to control my own machinery. We are slip sliding ever more rapidly into an AI controlled, platform grabbing, global heat death, and that is not a future I wish to subscribe to.

Hope you have a great day,

Aidan.

-
1. <https://www.washington.edu/news/2024/05/23/ai-headphones-noise-cancelling-target-speech-hearing/>