

Aaru, AI, Polling and the Future of Everything Else

Bill's World-Class English Class Conversation Kickstarter #67 (Version 1.2)



Rethinking the science of prediction.

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Home page of Aaru's website as of September 2024 (Credit: Fair use)

Let's talk about Aaru and how this startup's using AI to change the future of polling, and, well, the future!

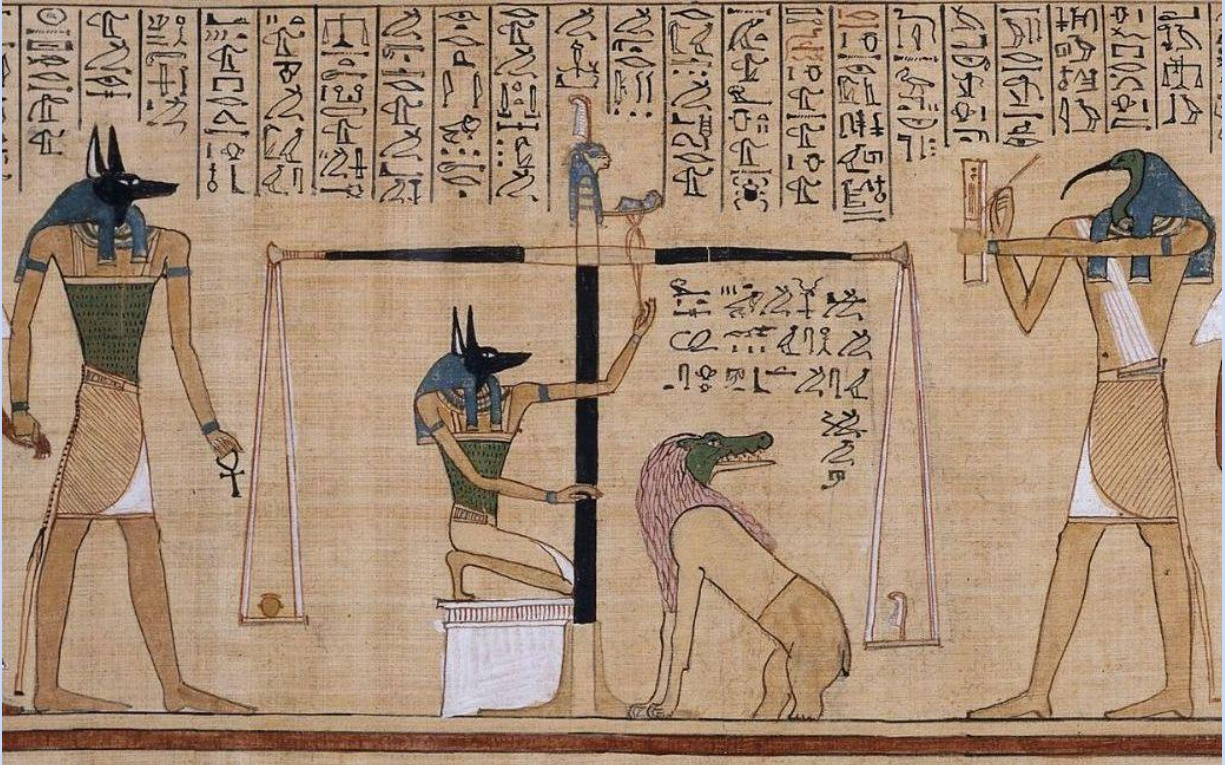
I. Aaru: The Egyptian Afterlife

Valuable Vocabulary (read aloud, cite the number of any word you don't know, and follow links for definitions):

1. afterlife
2. antiquity
3. appropriate

4. deceased
5. intriguing
6. mythology

7. reappropriation
8. startup
9. reeds



(Credit: Public Domain)

Let's start with the selection of the name "Aaru" for this startup, which is intriguing in and of itself: Aaru was the ancient Egyptian name for the afterlife, and the use of this word from antiquity is quite an appropriate reappropriation by an outfit that plans to completely change the world for the better. And as we'll soon see, we can take the symbolism even further: according to Egyptian mythology, only if the heart of the deceased was lighter than a feather was the soul of the deceased allowed to pass into the Field of Reeds, or Aaru the afterlife.

1. Does your own culture have a strong religious tradition? Do you personally believe in the afterlife?
2. It's possible that the founders of Aaru took a page from Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon who, legend has it, came up with the perfect name for his own startup by opening up a dictionary to the "A's" section and going down the list until he came across the name of the world's largest river. How do you think a [name starting with "A" might've helped Amazon](#), and one with a double "A" might help Aaru even more?

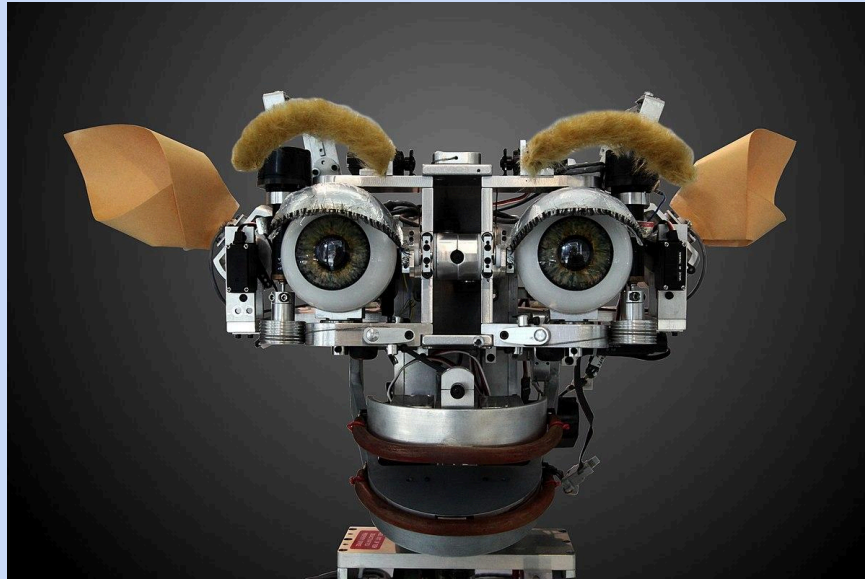
II. Replacing Human Beings, One Respondent at a Time

Valuable Vocabulary (read aloud, cite the number of any word you don't know, and follow links for definitions):

1. chatbot
2. foolish
3. hand-in-hand

4. hypothetical
5. multitude

6. reinvent
7. respondent
8. routinely



(Credit: [Rama](#))

In this golden age of near-global democracy, elections and polling often go hand-in-hand, and AI is starting to be used in a multitude of ways to reinvent the latter. While some other startups are introducing AI-powered chatbots that can quiz human respondents more cheaply and efficiently, Aaru is replacing the respondents with AI-powered substitutes: chatbots that are fed a steady diet of political and other coverage from various news sources, then trained to use several steps of reasoning to arrive at their own choice(s) as hypothetical voters.

1. Do you think it would be dangerous to follow polls created like this? Or just foolish?

2. Politicians who are down in the polls (or up, but cautious) routinely say something along the lines of “the only poll that counts is the one on Election Day.” How much truth do you think there is to this attitude?

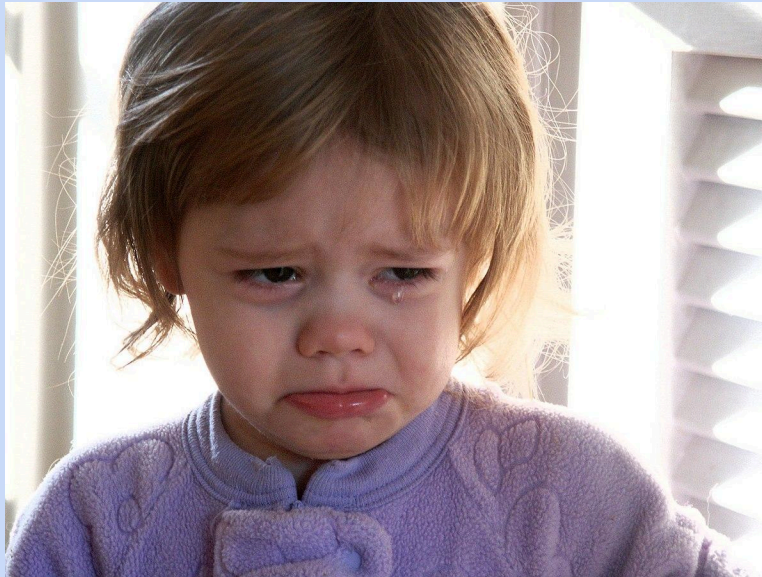
III. Using These Artificial Creations

Valuable Vocabulary (read aloud, cite the number of any word you don't know, and follow links for definitions):

1. distrustful

2. pollster

3. trustworthy



(Credit: [Crimfants](#))

The main driver behind this drive by a pollster to replace human subjects altogether is the simple fact that humans lie, both to pollsters and themselves. People have always been distrustful of strangers (perhaps even more so these days), and, especially in an era of globalization when many voters feel pressure to conform to widespread societal norms, many might tell themselves that, say, they love democracy (when they really admire a strongman) or that they're always accepting of others (when they might sometimes feel disgusted by others).

1. Do you think artificial intelligence can be more trustworthy than humans? Can a creator of AI trust it?

2. Each of these AI agents is given hundreds of personality traits. What traits do you think are important?

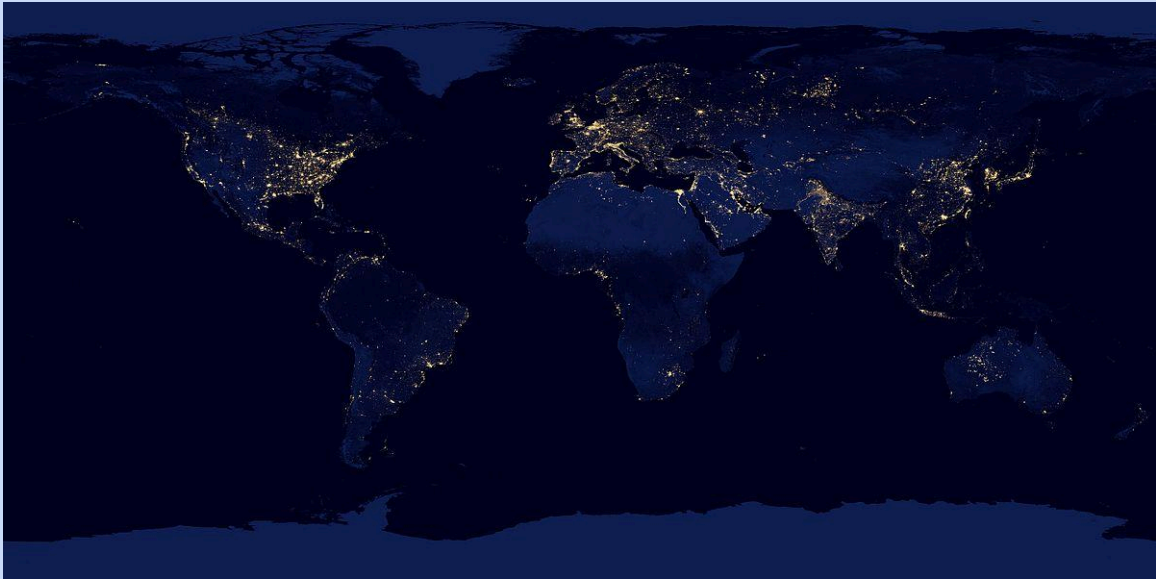
IV. The Future of the Afterlife

Valuable Vocabulary (read aloud, cite the number of any word you don't know, and follow links for definitions):

1. hubris
2. methodology

3. outset
4. simulate
5. tally

6. transition
7. white paper



(Credit: NASA Earth Observatory / Public Domain)

As of this writing, we can only say that we'll see if Aaru's 2024 US Presidential election polls turn out to be accurate (the firm came within 371 votes of the final tally in a June 2024 Democratic primary election [a half-percentage point], and, as we enter the fall race, their methodology favors Kamala Harris over Donald Trump by 4.2 percentage points). Just as Bezos was up front from the outset that books were just the beginning for Amazon, Aaru has [detailed in a white paper](#) their ambitions to be able to, within just two years, "Simulate the entire globe — from the way crops are grown in Ukraine to how that impacts production of oil in Iraq."

1. How do you think this seven-person startup will transition from conducting polls to predicting planet-changing events? Do you think this is yet another case of [dangerous hubris](#)?
2. The author of this CK would love for the makers of [Civ VII](#) to become an Aaru client. Can you guess why?

V. "How artificial intelligence is changing political polls"

Valuable Vocabulary (read aloud, cite the number of any word you don't know, and follow links for definitions):

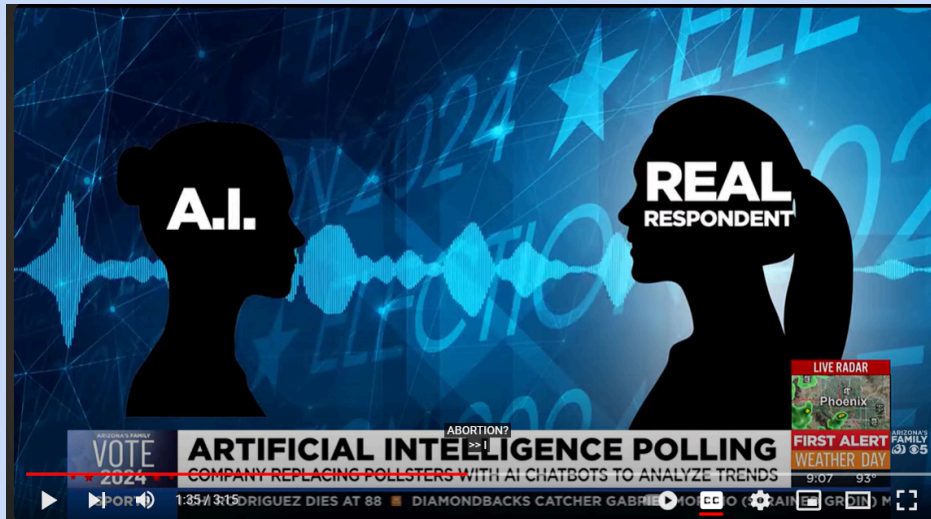
1. component
2. effective

3. forthcoming

4. plausible
5. segment

This news segment approaches the AI revolution in polling from the opposite end. If the respondents to a poll remain real, what words would you use to describe the new AI component?

Let's watch this video about AI polling!



1. Do you think it's more effective to replace the questioners or the questioned? Or should we ignore polls?
2. The folks at CloudResearch claim they were surprised by how forthcoming respondents were with their chatbots. Does this seem plausible?

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