

## Special AI Issue

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(2.4 minutes to read)

*Henley Point Executive Advisor Mike O'Sullivan couldn't resist looking into this topic even deeper by asking ChatGPT to write a short essay talking about how AI has similarities to the sensational displays at PT Barnum's museum in the 1800s. Mike's inquiry (a prompt, in the AI vernacular) to the ChatGPT AI application produced the following short essay -- in about 20 seconds. The essay adds depth to our special AI issue, and it also demonstrates what this technology is capable of. Again, these words were constructed by an artificial intelligence program.*

In the mid-1800s, PT Barnum revolutionized entertainment with his American Museum in New York City, drawing crowds with sensational displays that blended education, amusement, and spectacle. Barnum's exhibits often featured oddities, marvels of nature, and human curiosities, designed to captivate the imagination and provoke wonder. Similarly, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the 21st century mirrors Barnum's blend of awe and curiosity, captivating the public with its extraordinary capabilities and evoking a mix of excitement and skepticism.

Barnum's museum was a place where the boundaries of reality and illusion often blurred. He showcased acts that pushed the limits of believability, such as the "Feejee Mermaid" and "Tom Thumb," inviting viewers to question the authenticity of what they saw. Similarly, AI technologies, from deepfakes to advanced language models, blur the lines between what is real and artificial. AI can create incredibly realistic images, videos, and text, leading people to marvel at the technology while also questioning its authenticity and ethical implications.

Another parallel between Barnum's exhibits and AI is their capacity to evoke a sense of wonder and curiosity about the future. Barnum's displays were not merely for entertainment; they also inspired awe about the possibilities of science and human ingenuity. In much the same way, AI captivates the public imagination with its potential to revolutionize various aspects of life, from healthcare and transportation to communication and entertainment. The excitement surrounding AI's potential to solve complex problems and transform industries is reminiscent of the way Barnum's exhibitions prompted visitors to ponder the future.

Both Barnum's museum and AI technologies also face criticism for their potential to mislead and exploit. Barnum was often accused of exploiting his exhibits and deceiving the public for profit. AI, too, faces ethical scrutiny, particularly regarding issues like privacy, job displacement, and the potential for misuse. The sensationalism that surrounds AI developments can sometimes obscure the ethical and societal challenges they pose, much like how Barnum's hype often masked the more dubious aspects of his displays.

Moreover, both Barnum's museum and AI function as mirrors to societal values and fears. Barnum's displays often reflected contemporary fascinations and anxieties about the unknown, the exotic, and the boundaries of human capability. Similarly, AI technologies reflect modern-day concerns and aspirations related to automation, the nature of intelligence, and the future of human-machine interaction. The widespread public interest in AI highlights both a fascination with technological progress and a deep-seated anxiety about its implications for the future.

In conclusion, the similarities between AI and PT Barnum's sensational displays are striking. Both captivate the public with a mix of wonder and skepticism, blur the lines between reality and illusion, inspire curiosity about the future, and reflect societal values and fears. Just as Barnum's museum left a lasting impact on entertainment and culture, AI is poised to leave an indelible mark on the modern world, continuing the tradition of blending spectacle with profound questions about the human experience.

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