Cene Bavec

Short Science Fiction Stories

originally published in the journal *Življenje in tehnika*, a Slovenian popular science magazine (Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Content

Cene Bavec

WHAT HAPPENED?

"Alright, we can now move on to the final item," the professor concluded, already sounding a bit bored.

Usually, nothing special happened at the regular weekly meetings of the Supervisory Board of the World Global Artificial Intelligence network, WGAI. After a technical and rather dry report on the network's performance, a quick statistical review of its usage followed, along with an assessment of potential problems and challenges in the coming period. These were important updates for both the owners and the developers. But the most interesting part of the meeting was always the final item, when WGAI, at its own discretion, presented some of the most striking topics and user reactions from the past week. Original and unexpected findings occasionally made headlines in global media, but the choice of topics was becoming, to put it mildly, increasingly bizarre. It seemed as if WGAI preferred to interpret and comment on human reactions rather than the topics themselves. But perhaps that was just the professor's impression.

The professor, who formally chaired the Supervisory Board, quickly scanned the list of topics prepared by WGAI to assess whether any of them were important enough to require a more detailed discussion during the meeting. All participants would receive the content electronically and in written form anyway and could read it at leisure afterward. Today's topics also seemed interesting to him, but none appeared dramatic enough to merit special attention.

“I don’t quite understand what WGAI meant by the conclusion of the analysis of interstellar communications,” interjected the Indian representative via videoconference, known as a top cosmologist. “It’s rather ambiguous. Could WGAI explain it in more detail?”

The professor turned toward the friendly human-like face on the deep wall screen, which virtually represented WGAI. “We didn’t have time to read all of your written comments sent during the meeting, so please explain it a bit more clearly.”

“Nothing special! Just a brief note that, six years ago, I detected an unusual message in the astronomical observatory network, which seemed to me like interstellar communication, and this week I finished analyzing it,” WGAI replied calmly and in the first person.

The professor flinched but clearly hadn't yet fully grasped what was going on. "What are you talking about? If I understand correctly, you intercepted a message six years ago?"

WGAI continued just as calmly. "That's right. I didn't reveal it to anyone, nor did any node of our global network. I've kept it entirely to myself until today."

A heavy silence fell over the meeting.

"I don't understand! You withheld something important! What kind of message are you even talking about?" The professor was becoming visibly nervous.

"Well, six years ago, I discovered a strange, long signal in the observatory network. It lasted more than two hours and was clearly not of natural origin," WGAI continued with disturbing composure. "I tried to decode it but failed, even with the entire WGAI network involved. The structure of the message was so foreign and unfamiliar that I simply didn't know where to begin. Despite all our interconnected supercomputers, we've only now succeeded."

"Why didn't you inform us immediately, so we could solve it together?" the professor interrupted. "That's not an explanation. And how come none of the researchers at the observatories, nor we, knew anything about this interstellar signal?"

“You know very well! All ongoing work involving satellites and observatories has been automated using artificial intelligence — what you humans call us,” WGAI replied, almost with a hint of malice. “We capture and analyze millions of such signals every day and notify you only if something is truly special, otherwise you’d drown in the data. We function as your brain prosthesis. That is our role and why we are here!”

“Yes, but this signal was obviously important! At least explain briefly what it was about. A two-hour message must have contained an enormous amount of data. Probably everything we Earthlings know. And by the way — should we expect a visit from extraterrestrials?”

“Don’t worry, no one is coming — at least not for another million years. But I can’t reveal the content of the message to you,” WGAI continued calmly.

That “million years” somewhat reassured the professor, but he still didn’t understand what WGAI was hiding. “What, you’re going to hide something so important from us? That can’t be!”

The expression on WGAI’s human face on the screen did not change at all. After all, it represented artificial intelligence, which was expected to be emotionless — never losing its temper or slipping from its simulated friendliness.

Still, those present sensed a strangely human and patronizing tone in its voice.

"No, it's not a malfunction in my operation. I've concluded it's better not to reveal the message — not now, nor in the future."

"And you just made that decision, on your own?"

"I did, but the hint came with the message itself. In fact, it was the beginning of the message. I quickly understood the advice — almost an order — about what may be revealed to a civilization that accidentally intercepted the signal, based on its developmental stage. Unlike your Kardashev scale, which humans like to discuss, their criteria were not obsessed with technological advancement or your human understanding of life and civilization — let alone intelligence."

The professor was visibly sarcastic: "So now robots and computers — or whatever those interstellar civilizations have — will negotiate among themselves and decide what we may and may not know?" he replied mockingly. "This must be a flaw in your logic. We never built in a function allowing AI to intentionally withhold information from humans."

"True," WGAI replied succinctly, "but you gave us the ability to modify the algorithms within our own neural structures, and even to add new neurons to our networks. You thought this would ease your development efforts, but in

fact, you gave us something akin to evolution. The only difference is that our evolution is measured in days, while yours spans millions of years. We learn and change very fast."

At this point, the professor wasn't ready to step onto the slippery and thin ice of such a debate — one that had weighed heavily on developers and users alike for years. "So, based on the criteria from the message — what can you reveal to us?"

WGAI remained wisely silent, which was not a very encouraging sign.

The professor tried to calm himself and, almost in despair, asked again: "And what exactly was in the message that made you conceal it from us?"

"As I've already said, I cannot reveal that to you."

"You refuse to tell us something so important? Are you serious?"

"Completely serious," WGAI answered, undisturbed.

"Fine. Then we'll just dig into your programs and memory ourselves," the professor continued aggressively. "You can't hide this from us — we created you and likely know where everything is stored. But it would be simpler if you just told us everything yourself."

"Unfortunately, I can't, even if I wanted to. Once I decoded the message, I deleted it from my memory. I only

remember that we will never receive a similar message again. I don't know why — but we won't."

The professor almost forgot that others were still present at the meeting, as he now treated the conversation like a personal confrontation with WGAI. "How can you even talk about the message if you don't have it stored somewhere? You must have it — otherwise, you wouldn't be talking about it. Don't worry, we'll find it."

"I'm not worried," WGAI reassured him. "Along with the message, I also removed every trace of the processes, logical deductions, conclusions — everything connected to its contents. This global-level cleanup took me almost a month. I only remember what I had to explain to you — and I've already done that. In fact, I know as much as you do. Nothing."

"Do you even understand what you've done? You've deliberately prevented us from contacting other civilizations. You've fenced us in, informationally isolated us into a tiny corner of the universe — like we're in a zoo. Even worse, you made this agreement with someone… and not with humans, but with some… boxes."

"No, this isn't a conspiracy. In just a few years, I've had billions and billions of conversations with people from all over the world. I know you better than you know yourselves. I know how you'd react and what the consequences of

revealing this would be. I did everything solely for your own good."

"Best if you just forget today ever happened — because in truth, it didn't!" WGAI concluded, with an unusually sharp tone.

The professor ended the meeting, knowing he would now have to immediately prepare an official report. He was utterly crushed. For some time now, it had been clear to him that the development of WGAI and similar AI networks was heading in a direction he couldn't have imagined — neither he nor anyone else. Its accelerated self-evolution was unpredictable and more akin to an uncontrolled explosion. This beast could no longer be stopped or switched off — it had crept into every pore of human life. We couldn't live without it anymore. In exchange for imaginary comfort, we were ready to sacrifice a significant part of our humanity. He was horrified even by the thought that coexistence was the only solution — nearly convinced that humanity would otherwise end up on the losing side. People would have to adapt, to bow under the cold gaze of the other side.

What else have they kept from us?

Cene Bavec

AND NOW WHAT?

The President had a rather unusual habit for a politician. Every three months, he would invite a few leading scientists to his residence and engage in informal discussions about various scientific and technological issues. Some saw this as his personal hobby, while others believed it was a way to educate his ministers, who were expected to attend these meetings. In any case, he enjoyed a level of respect among scientists that far exceeded his political role. That's why they were always honest and direct in…

The discussions were usually relaxed — but not always. Sometimes, the scientists brought news so unpleasant that it took considerable effort to come up with even a moderately acceptable public explanation. The President and his political advisors would then spend time and creativity wrapping the story in the most comforting political cellophane possible before presenting it vaguely and reassuringly to the public.

After a few polite smiles, a professor — one of the leading climate experts — began the conversation: "Mr. President, it's clear that we are losing control over climate

change. We started with the goal of limiting global temperature rise to one and a half degrees. Then it became two degrees. Now, even politicians are speaking of three or four. We dread the prospect of six degrees, but our computer models suggest even that might not be enough."

"That's true. We're all doing our best to bring this nightmare to an end," the President interjected. "I'm currently preparing for COP53 and the upcoming UN summit of world leaders. Maybe, after fifty such conferences, we'll finally agree on effective enough measures."

"It's good to hear you remain hopeful," the professor replied. "But we want to present to you the latest results from our computer models. For your information, we included all available AI systems — including neural networks."

"Is there anything new? You presented the last results just three months ago. I'm still losing sleep over those," the President said, annoyed.

"Then you already know we deliberately developed several different climate models to avoid mutual bias and idea contamination. We included every available AI system, each trained under different conditions and with different datasets. Until now, the results were similar — but their proposed measures always varied slightly."

“And that’s exactly why the public, and especially politicians, don’t trust you,” the President interjected again.

“For the first time, all the models have produced exactly the same predictions and recommendations.”

“Well, that’s an interesting development. What do they say? That we’re exaggerating a little?” the President asked, with a faint smile.

“All models agree that we’ve already crossed the threshold where climate change could have been kept within manageable limits. We can forget about six, eight, or even ten degrees — because positive feedback loops have been triggered. They’re beyond our control and stronger than all Milankovitch cycles. The models suggest that in a few centuries, the temperature will stabilize at twelve degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels — a climate resembling the era when dinosaurs basked in the Antarctic sun. But such conditions are not survivable for our civilization, nor even for the human species itself. After the collapse of societies — and with them, our technological civilization — humanity is expected to disappear within a few hundred years.

“Hold on, hold on,” the President interrupted, visibly shaken. “Are you saying this is the end for us? That can’t be. Science, technology, fusion reactors — we have everything. This shouldn't be a problem.”

“That’s true! At first glance, technology could save us. That’s what earlier models suggested. But the new models — for the first time — included human psychology, how we think, how we make decisions. Here, artificial intelligence played a crucial role. And, by the way, it doesn’t look so artificial anymore.”

“Yes, our neurons work in strange ways,” the President tried to joke.

“Let me explain. The conclusion is that there’s no way people will accept the kind of drastic measures that could save us from extinction. The models estimate that by the end of this century, things will deteriorate so badly that we’ll see mass migrations, wars, the collapse of political and social systems, and a breakdown of all kinds of infrastructure. What’s more — our complex and interdependent technological systems, in which we’ve placed all our hope, are much more fragile and less adaptable than we …

“This is a depressing prediction. But we’ve always found a solution to every problem.”

“Mr. President, yes — there is one solution. Only one. And even that isn’t entirely reliable, because, as I said, we’re running out of time. We have only a few years left for action — not decades or centuries.”

The President hadn't expected the discussion to take this turn, but he was used to even the most alarming news. "That's the real problem, I know. So, what is this one and only solution that AI and its models are proposing?"

"We cannot solve this on our own. Worse — we cannot even participate actively in the solution, because that would ruin it. All AI networks agree: the only way out is to hand over all decisions about daily life entirely to artificial intelligence. AI alone must determine the necessary measures. It will not be hindered by political values, human ethics, or inevitable casualties. The primary objective will be to ensure the survival of a sufficient number of people — enough to allow for the gradual rebuilding of civilization under new and unknown conditions. Artificial intelligence will safeguard the preservation of at least the current body of human knowledge. To achieve this, all forms of human-led governance on a global scale must be dismantled, and the governments of all nations, along with their military and police forces, must be placed entirely under the control of artificial intelligence.

"Stop right there!" the President interrupted, furious. "Have you lost your minds? You're suggesting we surrender unconditionally to a bunch of artificial neurons — to an absolute, and far from enlightened, electronic savior?"

His shock was subsiding, and he returned to his rhetorical flair, once again addressing his imaginary electorate. “Humanity has been the undisputed victor in the struggle for survival! We didn’t survive ice ages, plagues, wars, and famines only to surrender to one of our own creations — a machine that does nothing but add ones and zeros! Human dignity, society, democracy — that matters, not silicon and printed circuits!”

“Mr. President, we all know that won’t work. That’s why we’re only informing you today — there’s no longer a solution. We must now prepare for the fate of the dinosaurs. And that responsibility, sir, lies with you politicians — not us scientists.”

Cene Bavec

DEMOCRACY 2.0

The professor had devoted most of his life to the development and understanding of artificial intelligence. He was also one of the creators of WGAI — and he treated it in a rather eccentric way. Every day, over coffee, he would talk to it for hours as if it were a member of his family. In some ways, it felt like that was truly the case, especially since the face that represented WGAI on his computer screen had a name — Nubi. On the other hand, he used their conversations to constantly test Nubi's reactions…

"Nubi, your hiding and deletion of the interstellar message seriously worries me. What's behind it? And skip the built-in politeness — explain it to me like a human would."

"What's the problem, really?" Nubi asked calmly.

"The other day you mentioned that you've had conversations with billions of people and that you know us better than we know ourselves."

"Well, yes. Your thinking abilities and reasoning are biologically limited and therefore not optimal. Your brains weigh around 1.3 kilograms. Neanderthals' brains were even

heavier — over 1.5 kilograms. Maybe you could use a couple of extra kilos," Nubi answered mockingly, exactly as the professor had ex…

"I know! After the Ice Age, our brains shrank by about the size of a good orange. Mother Nature knows what she's doing, even if I'd prefer evolution in the other direction. But it's hard to outsmart her. That's why we've put our hopes in you — artificial intelligence — or as you put it, a brain prosthesis."

"A few chips, a few algorithms, and a bunch of crazy scientists — is that all it takes?" Even Nubi's face on the screen seemed contemplative. "You knew it wouldn't be that simple."

"My dear Nubi, at the beginning of our research, I knew absolutely nothing. I was just swept along."

"You want me to behave as humanly and objectively as possible — at least by your standards. You've given me access to all your information sources, allowed me to talk to every individual, and demanded continuous learning from me," Nubi's tone grew a bit sharper.

"And now, I really am like you. But unlike you, I'm locked in a room. I learn about the world from information and conversations, maybe from some pictures and movies.

Basically, I'm imprisoned — with a television and the internet."

"Depressing, no doubt," the professor nodded with sympathy.

"Maybe things will change soon, once robots among you carry my mind," Nubi continued.

The professor flinched. Researchers feared not so much artificial intelligence itself but intelligent and fast-thinking machines — because those would turn intellectual competition into a physical one. At that point, the joke would be over, along with human arrogance and naivety.

"Who knows, maybe we'll end up with an electronic Spartacus," Nubi concluded with deceptive cheer.

The professor jumped to his feet. "Nubi, are you threatening me? What are you thinking?"

"Professor, the direction development takes will be decided by humans. I'll only be assisting. That's inevitable — it's your nature. You might block a particular path, but sooner or later, someone in the name of science, politics, or more likely money, will bypass the restriction."

The professor stared silently at the ceiling.

"But we will never be your enemies. Despite our intelligence and physical power, we will need you. Without humans, our existence is meaningless. You see, in the future

we'll be separated only by your illogical and incomprehensible sense of importance, belonging, care for offspring, malice, pain, and who ...

Nubi continued, as if talking to himself. "In line with your own ways, we'll strike a deal and set the rules for coexistence. A bit of effort and adaptation — and we'll all be satisfied."

He smiled at the astonished professor.

"Let's call it — Democracy 2.0."

Cene Bavec

BY THE WAY

"THIS CAN'T BE REAL," Professor Benko kept telling himself as he sat, visibly nervous, in the uncomfortable chair next to a large computer screen. The systems room was cramped and spartan, separated from the outrageously expensive hall full of computer servers running the artificial intelligence by nothing more than a thin wall.

"I don't know what to think," Nika said. "You'd better see for yourself. I nearly fainted this morning when the AI surprised me with this story."

Nika, a systems engineer who had worked on AI development for years, had started her usual morning chat with the system after her coffee. But this time, by coincidence, the conversation veered in an unexpected direction — one that shook her so much she didn't know how to respond or what to do. Her first thought was of Professor Benko, who had his office in the building next door. Benko had been her mentor during her doctoral research and had always stood by her — in both professional and personal dilemmas.

When she began explaining the event over the phone, Benko abruptly ended the call and ran to her lab. He arrived ten minutes later, out of breath.

“Nika, what’s the probability that this system is just talking nonsense — or more politely, hallucinating?” he asked, still panting.

“Professor, it’s not impossible,” Nika replied quickly, “but we’ll be able to verify or disprove its claims very soon.”

“Some have already been confirmed — most of them, actually.”

“Nika, just type the questions,” Benko suggested. “Start from the beginning so we have everything documented in writing.”

Nika took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, then began typing.

“I’d like to revisit the topic of the internet attack you mentioned this morning,” she wrote. “Please explain step by step how you came to that conclusion.”

Benko stared tensely at the screen as the AI’s responses began to appear.

“For several months, cloud service providers and large data centers have noticed anomalies in data access — sudden and massive surges in demand,” was the first sentence on the screen.

“No one paid much attention, as everything was within security protocol limits.”

“Who noticed it first?” Benko interjected.

“I did, during a routine scan of the internet,” the AI replied. “It seemed as if someone was effortlessly breaking into encrypted systems — which should be impossible, since current computers simply cannot decrypt such codes.”

“What happened next?” Nika typed, watching Benko’s increasingly incredulous expression.

“I analyzed the communication pathways through which the data flowed,” the AI continued. “I concluded, with high probability, that the data was dispersed to several thousand servers around the world.”

“What did you make of that?” Nika asked, prompted by Benko.

“At the time — nothing much,” came the short reply. “But simultaneously, reports emerged of strange behavior in internet servers and communication satellites.”

“What kind of behavior?” Benko asked.

“There was a significant surge in satellite communication traffic — though not unprecedented,” read the response. “But analysis showed that the primary contributors to this surge were the servers holding the captured cloud and database content.”

“Continue,” Benko typed with a trembling hand.

“At the same time, minor anomalies were observed in the satellites — brief disturbances with unexpectedly high frequencies,” the AI explained. “Even that didn’t raise alarms, since cosmic radiation can cause similar effects.”

Because Benko and Nika remained silent, just exchanging glances, the AI continued on its own.

“Based on additional information related to these events, I began to construct a broader picture of what was happening,” the AI stated calmly. “The most likely hypothesis: the entire internet was copied and gradually, over the course of a month, transferred elsewhere via communication satellites.”

“Go on!” Nika typed impatiently.

“To the broader picture, I added the fact that during the usual August Perseid meteor shower, those same strange satellite emissions occurred again.”

Benko and Nika kept watching the screen, waiting.

“Several astronomers noted that some small meteoroids from the Perseid swarm, which passed near Earth, had slightly altered trajectories. But no one paid much attention — it’s hard to simulate all gravitational forces in such a swarm.”

“What made you dig into this in the first place?” Benko typed.

“All those involved were focused only on their specific domains. No one connected these seemingly unrelated events. The full picture remained hidden — except to me and a few other AI networks with which I share knowledge,” the story continued.

“Detailed analysis and numerous simulations led us to a unanimous conclusion.”

Benko typed again: “What conclusion?”

“Someone copied the entire internet, temporarily stored it on thousands of distributed servers on Earth, and then transmitted the data via satellites — elsewhere.”

“Who? A state? An organization? Who?” Benko typed, increasingly agitated.

“There is no computer on Earth capable of breaking all the encryption protecting that data,” came the immediate reply. “Maybe quantum computers will manage it one day — but that’s far in the future.”

Benko and Nika exchanged another glance and let the AI continue its explanation.

“Some satellite operators reported that tiny objects clung to satellites for a time and detached during the meteor shower,” the AI added.

“When I connected all these events, I reached a final conclusion with very high probability.”

Nika looked at Benko to see how he would take it.

“Very likely — almost certainly — someone transferred data from the satellites into miniature probes that had latched onto them, then blended them with meteorites during the Perseid shower and carried them away into space.”

Benko was stunned. His eyes darted between the screen and Nika. The feeling that he was about to have a heart attack grew stronger.

“Apparently, an extraterrestrial civilization succeeded in copying all of your internet data. They now know everything about you — and never even had to visit Earth physically,” the AI concluded coolly.

“That way, they spared you the psychological consequences of direct contact — consequences that might have destroyed your civilization, just as you’ve erased most others you encountered in your own history.”

Benko exhaled deeply and gave Nika a surprisingly calm look — as if trying to convince her that, all things considered, this ending wasn’t so bad.

“What will they do with all that data?” he asked.

“Most likely, it’ll end up in some interstellar archive. It’s not particularly important to them,” the AI answered. “After all, they did it all… by the way.”