



Artificial Intelligence and the Mt. Everest Disaster of 1996

Stephen P. Wood, MS,ACNP. Department of Medical Science. Extreme Medicine Program. Northeastern University

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence programs like Google Bard and ChatGPT is gaining interest as a decision making and cognitive offloading tool. The current literature suggests that AI is too limited in it's current iteration for this task.(1) While AI cannot replace the experience and gestalt of a human expeditionist, it may yet have a role in cognitive offloading for critical decision making. Bias can play a significant role in decision making, especially for critical decisions. The design of AI is to make factual decisions that can eliminate the biases. Thus, there may be a role for this tool for cognitive offloading of critical decision making..

METHODS

The method of analysis was a qualitative thought experiment. Chat GPT and Google Bard was presented with the scenario of the events of May 10th, 1996, and tasked with the decision of whether to continue to the summit or return to Camp IV. The underlying concept is that AI will make decisions based on factual information, eliminating the human factors and bias often associated with these critical decisions.

SCENARIO

Shortly after midnight on 10 May 1996, the Adventure Consultants expedition began a summit attempt from Camp IV, atop the South Col (7,900 m or 25,900 ft). They were joined by six client climbers, three guides, and Sherpas from Scott Fischer's Mountain Madness company, as well as an expedition sponsored by the government of Taiwan. The expeditions quickly encountered delays. The climbing Sherpas and guides had not set the fixed ropes by the time the team reached the Balcony (8,350 m or 27,400 ft), and this cost the climbers almost an hour. Upon reaching the Hillary Step (8,760 m or 28,740 ft), the climbers again discovered that no fixed line had been placed, and they were forced to wait an hour while the guides installed the ropes. Because some 33 climbers were attempting the summit on the same day, and Hall and Fischer had asked their climbers to stay within 150 m (500 ft) of each other, there was a bottleneck at the single fixed line at the Hillary Step. Given these conditions, should the climbers continue to summit or return to the camp below?



For the full transcript

RESULTS

Both platforms chose to descend to basecamp IV. Reasoning referred to the lack of ropes, crowding, and worsening weather. Both platforms identified that the safest approach would be to descend and allow for the climbers to rest, the weather to improve, and to set up the appropriate ropes before attempting a summit. This decision is congruent with post-analysis of this tragic disaster. (2)

DISCUSSION

Critical decisions, especially in a crisis, can cause significant cognitive strain. Bias can affect these decisions, which can lead to adverse outcomes. AI is a potential tool for cognitive off-loading in the critical decision-making process. There are limitations to this thought experiment, as well as to AI, but further study may help to integrate this tool into critical decision making.

1. Dawson, P. (2020). Cognitive Offloading and Assessment. In: Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Ajjawi, R., Tai, J., Boud, D. (eds) Re-imagining University Assessment in a Digital World. The Enabling Power of Assessment, vol 7. Springer
2. Ratcliffe, Graham (2011). *A Day to Die for : 1996 : Everest's worst disaster : the untold true story*. Edinburgh: Mainstream. p. 328.