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OpenAI Cuts ‘Military and Warfare’ Ban from Permissible Use Policy

"Given the use of AI systems in the targeting of civilians in Gaza, it's a notable moment to make the decision to remove the words," warned one policy analyst.

By Brett Wilkins

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ChatGPT maker OpenAI this week quietly removed language from its usage policy that prohibited military use of its technology, a move with serious implications given the increase use of artificial intelligence on battlefields including Gaza.

ChatGPT is a free tool that lets users enter prompts to receive text or images generated by AI. *The Intercept*‘s Sam Biddle reported Friday that prior to Wednesday, OpenAI’s permissible uses page banned “activity that has high risk of physical harm, including,” specifically, “weapons development” and “military and warfare.”

Although the company’s new policy stipulates that users should not harm human beings or “develop or use weapons,” experts said the removal of the “military and warfare” language leaves open the door for lucrative contracts with U.S. and other militaries.

“Given the use of AI systems in the targeting of civilians in Gaza, it’s a notable moment to make the decision to remove the words ‘military and warfare’ from OpenAI’s permissible use policy,” Sarah Myers West, managing director of the AI Now Institute and a former AI policy analyst at the Federal Trade Commission, told *The Intercept*.

“The language that is in the policy remains vague and raises questions about how OpenAI intends to approach enforcement,” she added.

> What's interesting about this is that weapons development also didn't feature

> as a threat area in the OpenAI preparedness framework, which I think it should. https://t.co/rlJKiPhBGQ https://t.co/5E21P7Rqwm
>
> — Ian J. Stewart (@ian_j_stewart) January 12, 2024

An OpenAI spokesperson told *Common Dreams* in an email that:

> Our policy does not allow our tools to be used to harm people, develop weapons, for communications surveillance, or to injure others or destroy property. There are, however, national security use cases that align with our mission. For example, we are already working with [the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] to spur the creation of new cybersecurity tools to secure open source software that critical infrastructure and industry depend on. It was not clear whether these beneficial use cases would have been allowed under "military" in our previous policies. So the goal with our policy update is to provide clarity and the ability to have these discussions.

As AI advances, so does its weaponization. Experts warn that AI applications including lethal autonomous weapons systems, commonly called "killer robots," could pose a potentially existential threat to humanity that underscores the imperative of arms control measures to slow the pace of weaponization.

That's the goal of nuclear weapons legislation introduced last year in the U.S. Congress. The bipartisan Block Nuclear Launch by Autonomous Artificial Intelligence Act—introduced by Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Reps. Ted Lieu (D-Calif.), Don Beyer (D-Va.), and Ken Buck (R-Colo.)—asserts that "any decision to launch a nuclear weapon should not be made" by AI.

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Brett Wilkins is a staff writer for Common Dreams.

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