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UCSB Library launches ‘AI in Action’ speaker series

At the highest levels of academic research, the task of finding, cleaning and sorting massive amounts of data often becomes Herculean. To help shoulder the load, more and more scholars are turning to AI.

In an effort to bring together a range of AI experiences at UC Santa Barbara, UCSB Library has launched “AI in Action,” a series of free presentations and discussions between campus scholars, students and community members.

“This series aims to foster an open, interdisciplinary community exploring how AI can deepen understanding, expand access to knowledge and inspire new forms of scholarship,” said University Librarian Todd Grappone, who introduced the first event of the series in February. “We’ll highlight how UCSB researchers are using innovative applications of AI and machine learning in their work and what those approaches mean for research more broadly.”

In an overview of AI applications in the Earth Research Institute (ERI), earth science professor Tobias Fischer unpacked the potential life-saving aspects of utilizing the technology to help predict wildfire severity.

“This type of hazard is an interesting application to explore what AI can do,” he explained, outlining the process of inputting complex temperature, wind and terrain data into AI models to create more accurate forecasting of fire behavior in Santa

Barbara County, where wildfire is the most common natural disaster.

Providing another local example, Bren School professor Ben Halpern and his team at the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) have used AI to successfully blend infrequent high-resolution imagery with frequent low-resolution imagery to track ice plant across the Dangermond Preserve, near Point Conception. Monitoring hundreds of acres of the invasive succulent through difficult terrain is next to impossible on foot, Halpern said. With the help of AI, he added, researchers can more efficiently execute an eradication plan mandated by the California Coastal Commission.

Halpern also spoke to the importance of transparency, human oversight of AI outputs and using the technology to accelerate and amplify, not replace, critical thinking. “We definitely need humans in the loop,” he said.

"It was clear from these presentations that artificial intelligence depends on archival material,” Grappone said. “How libraries preserve, curate and diversify the historical record fundamentally shapes the intelligence we build. That is why UCSB Library is an integral part of the campus conversation about the future of AI in research.”

Free and open to the public, the next “AI in Action” event will begin at 4 p.m. on April 9 in the library’s first-floor Instruction & Training Room 1312. Confirmed speakers include Eric Wang, an assistant professor in the Computer Science Department, and Fabian Offert, an assistant professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies. The series event on May 18 will feature Nina Miolane from the Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering and newly arrived materials professor Simon Billinge.

Tags
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