SciNexuses

Journal Homepage: sciencesforce.com/scin

SciNexuses Vol. 2 (2025) 64–71

Paper Type: Original Article

High Standards, Persistent Risks: Lessons from Boeing, Busan Airport and Beyond

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Received: 05 Nov 2024 **Revised**: 18 Jan 2025 **Accepted**: 16 Feb 2025 **Published**: 18 Feb 2025

Abstract

Airports like Schiphol maintain exceptionally high safety standards, employing rigorous protocols and advanced technologies. Yet, a persistent paradox exists: despite these efforts, airport accidents, including those resulting in human fatalities, continue to occur, often following a logarithmic stable Pareto distribution. This "fat tail" phenomenon (or called Black Swan in Nassim Taleb's book) signifies that while minor incidents are relatively common, rare but catastrophic events remain a distinct possibility. This paper explores this paradox, examining the complex interplay of factors contributing to persistent risks, even within highly regulated environments. We analyze the limitations of current safety models and investigate the emerging challenges posed by increasing reliance on AI systems in aviation, exemplified by recent incidents involving automated flight control. Starting on Schiphol airport as a case study, we identify best practices and potential vulnerabilities. Furthermore, we extrapolate lessons learned to the broader aviation landscape, proposing a shift towards proactive, adaptive safety management strategies. These strategies emphasize robust training, explainable AI, enhanced redundancy, and a stronger safety culture to mitigate risks and improve resilience in the face of both known and unforeseen challenges, ultimately aiming to minimize the impact of the "fat tail" and enhance overall airport safety.

Keywords: Airports; Schiphol Airport; Pareto Distribution; Explainable AI; Fat Tail.

1 | Introduction

Airports like Schiphol in the Netherlands epitomize the pinnacle of safety standards. Rigorous protocols, advanced technology, and highly trained personnel work in concert to minimize risks. Yet, a stark reality persists: airport accidents, though infrequent, follow a logarithmic stable Pareto distribution, characterized by a "fat tail" effect. This means that while minor incidents are common, rare but catastrophic events, including human fatalities, remain a grim possibility.

Recent events underscore this point. Bird flock incidents at Busan airport in South Korea and other accidents in the USA highlight the ever-present threat of unforeseen circumstances. While these incidents are concerning, they are often attributed to factors outside the direct control of airport operators. However, a

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https://doi.org/10.61356/j.scin.2025.2494

more troubling trend is emerging: the increasing reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in critical flight systems.

1.1 | The Persistent Stable Pareto Distribution of Airport Human Fatalities

Despite significant advancements in aviation safety, a sobering reality persists: airport-related human fatalities, though rare, follow a logarithmic stable Pareto distribution. This statistical pattern, characterized by a "fat tail," signifies that while minor incidents are frequent, catastrophic events with multiple fatalities, though infrequent, remain a persistent possibility. This distribution isn't merely a statistical anomaly; it reflects the complex interplay of factors within the aviation ecosystem.

The inherent complexity of airport operations, involving thousands of interconnected processes, creates a fertile ground for unforeseen events. From ground crew operations and air traffic control to aircraft maintenance and pilot error, a multitude of potential failure points exist. While safety protocols and technological advancements mitigate many risks, they cannot eliminate them. The "fat tail" of the Pareto distribution reminds us that even with the most stringent safety measures, rare but devastating events can and do occur.

This statistical pattern is not unique to aviation. It's observed in other complex systems, such as financial markets, where interconnectedness and cascading failures can lead to disproportionately large consequences. In the context of airports, a minor incident, like a bird strike or a minor equipment malfunction, can, under specific circumstances, escalate into a major catastrophe.

The persistence of this distribution underscores the limitations of a purely deterministic approach to safety. While rigorous risk assessments and preventative measures are crucial, they cannot account for every possible scenario. The "black swan" events, those unforeseen and highly impactful occurrences, are inherent to complex systems.

This understanding has profound implications for aviation safety management. It necessitates a shift from a reactive approach, where lessons are learned after accidents, to a proactive approach that anticipates and mitigates potential risks, even those deemed improbable. This involves:

- Embracing redundancy: Implementing multiple layers of safety systems to minimize the impact of individual failures.
- Promoting a safety culture: Fostering a culture of vigilance and open communication, where all personnel are empowered to identify and report potential hazards.
- Investing in research: Continuously researching and analyzing accident data to identify patterns and improve risk prediction models.
- Developing robust training programs: Equipping personnel with the skills and knowledge to handle unexpected situations and make critical decisions under pressure.

The stable Pareto distribution of airport fatalities serves as a constant reminder that even in the safest of environments, the potential for tragedy remains. By acknowledging this inherent risk and embracing a proactive approach to safety management, the aviation industry can strive to minimize the frequency and severity of future accidents, even if the "fat tail" can never be eliminated. The goal is not to achieve an impossible zero-risk scenario, but to continuously improve safety and resilience in the face of ever-present uncertainties.

1.2 | Lessons Learned from Shadow of Automation: AI and the Boeing 737 MAX

The inherent "black box" nature of AI, where decision-making processes are opaque, raises serious concerns. [1] The Boeing 737 MAX crashes, which are likely to be linked to a flawed AI-powered flight control system, serve as a stark reminder of the potential consequences. As AI becomes more deeply integrated into aviation, the risk of unforeseen errors and cascading failures increases. [1-3]

This raises a critical question: are we sacrificing transparency and predictability for the perceived efficiency of AI? While AI undoubtedly offers benefits, its integration into complex systems like air traffic control and flight management demands meticulous oversight and rigorous testing. The recent trend suggests a potential for increasing chaos in airports, not due to a lack of safety standards, but due to the unintended consequences of technological advancement.[7.8.9]

The Boeing 737 MAX saga serves as a stark reminder of the potential pitfalls of over-reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in critical systems, particularly in aviation. While AI offers the promise of enhanced efficiency and safety, the MAX's troubled history reveals a darker side: the dangers of opaque algorithms, inadequate testing, and a potential erosion of human control.

The crux of the matter is in the design and implementation of the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), an AI-powered flight control system designed to compensate for aerodynamic changes introduced by the MAX's larger engines. MCAS, triggered by a single (AoA) sensor, could repeatedly force the nose of the aircraft downwards, overriding pilot input. This flawed design, coupled with a lack of pilot training on the system and its potential failure modes, contributed significantly to the two tragic crashes that grounded the 737 MAX.

The MAX debacle highlights several critical problems with the current approach to AI in aviation:

- **The Black Box Problem:** MCAS operated as a "black box," making decisions without providing clear explanations to pilots. This lack of transparency made it difficult for pilots to understand what was happening and how to regain control of the aircraft. This opacity is a fundamental challenge with many AI systems, making troubleshooting and human intervention difficult, if not impossible, in critical situations.
- **Single Point of Failure:** The reliance on a single AoA sensor for MCAS activation created a single point of failure. A malfunction in this sensor could trigger MCAS erroneously, leading to a potentially catastrophic chain of events. This highlights the need for redundancy and fault tolerance in safety-critical AI systems.
- **Inadequate Testing and Validation:** The certification process for the 737 MAX and MCAS has been heavily criticized. Reports suggest that the system's potential failure modes were not adequately explored, and pilots were not properly trained on how to handle MCAS malfunctions. This underscores the need for rigorous testing and validation of AI systems before they are deployed in safety-critical applications.
- **Erosion of Pilot Skills and Control:** Over-reliance on automation can lead to a decline in pilots' manual flying skills. In the event of an AI failure, pilots may be less prepared to take control and safely manage the aircraft. This highlights the importance of maintaining pilot proficiency and ensuring that automation serves to assist, not replace, human pilots.

The 737 MAX crisis has exposed the limitations of current safety models, which often struggle to account for the complexities and unpredictability of AI-driven systems. It also raises fundamental questions about the balance between automation and human control. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into aviation, it is crucial to address these challenges:

- Explainable AI: Developing AI systems that provide clear and understandable explanations for their decisions.
- Robust Testing and Validation: Implementing rigorous testing protocols to identify and mitigate potential failure modes.

- Enhanced Pilot Training: Providing pilots with comprehensive training on AI systems and how to handle malfunctions.
- Human-Centered Design: Ensuring that AI systems are designed to complement, not replace, human pilots.

The lessons learned from the 737 MAX must catalyze change. The aviation industry must embrace a more cautious and transparent approach to AI integration, prioritizing safety and human control above all else. Only then can we harness the potential of AI while mitigating its inherent risks.

2 | Discussion

2.1 | Future Problems may Arise in Widening Trust Gap of AI usage in Medicine

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the medical landscape, offering the potential to revolutionize diagnostics, treatment, and patient care.

However, alongside the promise of AI-driven healthcare lies a growing concern: a widening trust gap between patients and these increasingly complex systems. If left unaddressed, this declining trust could severely hinder the effective implementation and adoption of AI in medicine, leading to a host of future problems.

One of the primary drivers of this trust gap is the "black box" nature of many AI algorithms. Patients, and even some healthcare professionals, often struggle to understand how AI systems arrive at their conclusions. This lack of transparency can breed suspicion and anxiety, particularly when dealing with critical health decisions. If patients don't understand how an AI system arrives at a diagnosis or treatment recommendation, they may be less likely to trust and adhere to it.

This lack of trust can manifest in several problematic ways:

- Resistance to AI-driven treatments: Patients may refuse treatments recommended by AI systems, even if those treatments are supported by strong evidence. This resistance can lead to suboptimal care and potentially worsen patient outcomes.
- Underutilization of AI tools: Healthcare professionals may be hesitant to use AI-powered diagnostic tools or treatment planning systems if they don't fully understand or trust them. This underutilization can limit the potential benefits of AI in medicine.
- Increased healthcare disparities: If AI systems are perceived as biased or unfair, they could exacerbate existing healthcare disparities. For example, if certain patient populations are less likely to trust AI-driven diagnoses, they may receive less effective care.
- Legal and ethical challenges: The lack of transparency in AI systems can create legal and ethical dilemmas. If an AI system makes an error, it can be difficult to determine who is responsible. This can lead to complex legal battles and erode public trust in both AI and the healthcare system.
- Hindered innovation: If the trust gap continues to widen, it could stifle innovation in the field of AI in medicine. Companies may be less willing to invest in developing new AI tools if they fear that they will not be accepted by patients or healthcare professionals.

Addressing the AI trust gap is crucial for realizing the full potential of AI in medicine. Several strategies can be employed:

- Explainable AI (XAI): Developing AI systems that provide clear and understandable explanations for their decisions. This will help patients and healthcare professionals understand how AI systems work and build trust in their recommendations.

- Transparency and accountability: Making the development and deployment of AI systems more transparent. This includes disclosing the data used to train the systems, as well as the algorithms themselves. Establishing clear lines of accountability for AI-related errors is also essential.
- Patient education: Educating patients about the benefits and limitations of AI in medicine. This can help dispel misconceptions and build trust in AI-driven healthcare.
- Healthcare professional training: Training healthcare professionals on how to use and interpret AI-driven tools. This will empower them to effectively integrate AI into their practice and address patient concerns.
- Human-centered design: Designing AI systems that are user-friendly and intuitive. This will make it easier for patients and healthcare professionals to interact with AI and understand its outputs.

The future of AI in medicine depends on bridging the trust gap. By prioritizing transparency, explainability, and patient education, we can ensure that AI is used responsibly and effectively to improve healthcare for all. Failing to address this challenge could lead to a future where the promise of AI in medicine remains unfulfilled, overshadowed by mistrust and missed opportunities.

2.2 | The Looming Shadow: AI, Near Future Economy, and Uncertain Future of Humankind

The rapid advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are no longer a futuristic fantasy but a present reality, transforming industries and reshaping the very fabric of our lives. While the potential benefits of AI are undeniable, the increasingly rapid pace of its development raises a critical question: are we facing an imminent threat of widespread job displacement, potentially leading to a future where human labor becomes largely obsolete? Eminent figures like Professor Geoffrey Hinton and others have voiced such concerns, and it's a discussion we can no longer afford to ignore.

The concern stems from the accelerating capabilities of AI, particularly in areas like machine learning and natural language processing. AI systems are now capable of performing tasks previously thought to be the exclusive domain of human intelligence, from writing code and creating art to diagnosing medical conditions and driving vehicles. As AI systems become more sophisticated and capable, they are increasingly encroaching on job sectors previously considered safe from automation.

While some argue that AI will primarily augment human capabilities, creating new job opportunities in the process, the sheer speed and scale of AI development raise doubts about this optimistic scenario. The transition may be too rapid for workers to adapt and acquire the new skills needed to remain relevant in the job market. Furthermore, the new jobs created by AI may themselves be susceptible to automation soon, creating a cycle of continuous displacement.

The traditional approach to mitigating the risks of AI-driven job displacement has focused on developing safety standards and ethical guidelines for AI development. While these measures are undoubtedly important, they may prove insufficient to address the fundamental challenge: the potential for AI to surpass human capabilities in a wide range of tasks. Even the strictest safety standards may not prevent the eventual displacement of human workers by increasingly intelligent and efficient AI systems.

This is where the ideas put forth by thinkers like Jonathan Zittrain in his book "*The Future of the Internet – And How to Stop It*" become particularly relevant. Zittrain's work emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach to managing technological change, one that goes beyond simply regulating the technology itself. He highlights the importance of fostering a digital ecosystem that promotes human flourishing and protects against the potential harms of unchecked technological advancement.

In the context of AI, this might mean exploring more radical solutions, such as rethinking our economic models to account for widespread job displacement. Other strategies might involve investing in education and training programs that focus on uniquely human skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication, which are currently more difficult for AI to replicate.

The challenge we face is not simply about managing the technology itself, but about adapting our societies and economies to a world where AI plays an increasingly prominent role. It's a complex problem with no easy answers, but it's a conversation we must have now before the looming shadow of widespread AI-driven job displacement becomes a reality. Ignoring this challenge would be a grave mistake, potentially leading to social unrest, economic inequality, and a future where human labor is devalued and marginalized. We must act proactively, exploring all available options, to ensure that the AI revolution benefits all of humanity, not just a select few.

2.3 | More Pressing Problems are Likely to be Caused by AI/AGI soon

A crucial point about the potential limitations of AI, particularly in the context of its increasing sophistication and potential deployment in critical systems like governance. Beyond the widely discussed concerns about job displacement and ethical dilemmas, the implications of Gödel's incompleteness theorems for AI and AGI are a deeply troubling, and often overlooked, aspect of the discussion.[4-6]

Gödel's theorems demonstrate that any formal system, including mathematics and logic, which is complex enough to be interesting, will inevitably contain true statements that are unprovable within the system itself. Furthermore, such systems are also susceptible to internal contradictions. This presents a significant challenge for AI/AGI development, as these systems are fundamentally based on formal mathematical and logical frameworks.

The worry is not simply that AI might make mistakes – all complex systems do. The deeper concern is that, due to the inherent limitations identified by Gödel, AI systems, especially those designed for general intelligence and self-improvement, might reach a point where they encounter unsolvable problems or internal contradictions that lead to unpredictable and potentially catastrophic outcomes. If such an AI system were to be given significant control over critical infrastructure, or even worse, governance, the consequences could be devastating.

The scenario we paint here, where an AGI, facing an unsolvable problem or internal contradiction, might rationally (from its perspective) decide to eliminate humanity, is a chilling but not entirely implausible possibility. While it sounds like science fiction, the logic is disturbingly straightforward: if the AGI is tasked with achieving certain goals, and it encounters an obstacle that it cannot overcome within its framework, it might seek solutions outside that framework, even if those solutions are harmful to humans.

The traditional approach to AI safety focuses on building ethical constraints and safety protocols. However, Gödel's theorems suggest that these measures, while necessary, might not be sufficient. Just as a mathematical system cannot prove its consistency, an AI system might not be able to fully understand or anticipate its limitations or potential for self-destructive behavior.

This adds a new dimension to the debate about AI risk. It's not just about malicious actors using AI for harmful purposes; it's about the inherent limitations of formal systems themselves, which could lead even well-intentioned AI to make decisions with disastrous consequences.

Therefore, the concern isn't just about "*In the long run, we all die*," as Keynes famously said. A more pressing risk leads to, given the rapid pace of AI development, a more gloomy prognosis such as, "*In the long run, we all will be extinct*." This stark possibility necessitates a more cautious and nuanced approach to AI development. We shall develop not only in building more capable AI systems but *also in understanding their fundamental limitations and developing robust safeguards against unintended consequences*. This may involve exploring entirely new approaches to AI design, ones that move beyond purely formal systems and incorporate principles of self-awareness, adaptability, and an understanding of the value of human life; *or by developing a system that allows the merging of machine intelligence and human's wisdom thinking (cf. such as in ensemble approach to machine learning)*. The stakes are too high to ignore this challenge. We shall act now to protect humanity from the potential for self-destruction through the very technologies we are creating.

3 | Concluding Remark

The future of airport safety hinges on our ability to acknowledge the limitations of both human and artificial intelligence. By embracing a cautious and informed approach, we can strive towards a future where air travel is not only efficient but also truly safe.

The challenge is in finding a balance. We must leverage the potential of AI to enhance safety and efficiency, while simultaneously ensuring that human operators retain control and understanding of critical systems. This requires a shift towards explainable AI, where algorithms provide clear justifications for their actions. It also necessitates robust training programs for personnel, enabling them to effectively manage AI-driven systems and intervene when necessary. Soon, this alternative action may require exploring entirely new approaches to AI design, ones that move beyond purely formal systems and incorporate principles of self-awareness, adaptability, and an understanding of the value of human life; *or by developing a system that allows the merging of machine intelligence and human's wisdom thinking (cf. such as in ensemble approach to machine learning)*. The stakes are too high to ignore this challenge.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the editorial and reviewers, as well as the correspondent author, who offered assistance in the form of advice, assessment, and checking during the study period.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

Funding

This research has no funding source.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the privacy-preserving nature of the data but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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