

## OpenAI whistleblower found dead in San Francisco apartment

Story by Jakob Rodgers, The Mercury News

**S**AN FRANCISCO — A former OpenAI researcher known for whistleblowing the blockbuster artificial intelligence company facing a swell of lawsuits over its business model has died, authorities confirmed this week.

Suchir Balaji, 26, was found dead inside his Buchanan Street apartment on Nov. 26, San Francisco police and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner said. Police had been called to the Lower Haight residence at about 1 p.m. that day, after receiving a call asking officers to check on his well-being, a police spokesperson said.

The medical examiner's office has not released his cause of death, but police officials this week said there is "currently, no evidence of foul play."

Information he held was expected to play a key part in lawsuits against the San Francisco-based company.

Balaji's death comes three months after he publicly accused OpenAI of violating U.S. copyright law while developing ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence program that has become a moneymaking sensation used by hundreds of millions of people across the world.

Its public release in late 2022 spurred a torrent of lawsuits against OpenAI from authors, computer programmers and journalists, who say the company illegally stole their copyrighted material to train its program and elevate its value past \$150 billion.

The Mercury News and seven sister news outlets are among several newspapers, including the New York Times, to sue OpenAI in the past year.

In an interview with the New York Times published Oct. 23, Balaji argued OpenAI was harming businesses and entrepreneurs whose data were used to train ChatGPT.

“If you believe what I believe, you have to just leave the company,” he told the outlet, adding that “this is not a sustainable model for the internet ecosystem as a whole.”

Balaji grew up in Cupertino before attending UC Berkeley to study computer science. It was then he became a believer in the potential benefits that artificial intelligence could offer society, including its ability to cure diseases and stop aging, the Times reported. “I thought we could invent some kind of scientist that could help solve them,” he told the newspaper.

But his outlook began to sour in 2022, two years after joining OpenAI as a researcher. He grew particularly concerned about his assignment of gathering data from the internet for the company’s GPT-4 program, which analyzed text from nearly the entire internet to train its artificial intelligence program, the news outlet reported.

The practice, he told the Times, ran afoul of the country’s “fair use” laws governing how people can use previously published work. In late October, he posted an analysis on his personal website arguing that point.

No known factors “seem to weigh in favor of ChatGPT being a fair use of its training data,” Balaji wrote. “That being said, none of the arguments here are fundamentally specific to ChatGPT either, and similar arguments could be made for many generative AI products in a wide variety of domains.”

Reached by this news agency, Balaji’s mother requested privacy while grieving the death of her son.

In a Nov. 18 letter filed in federal court, attorneys for The New York Times named Balaji as someone who had “unique and relevant documents” that would support their case against OpenAI. He was among at least 12 people — many of them past

or present OpenAI employees — the newspaper had named in court filings as having material helpful to their case, ahead of depositions.

Generative artificial intelligence programs work by analyzing an immense amount of data from the internet and using it to answer prompts submitted by users, or to create text, images or videos.

When OpenAI released its ChatGPT program in late 2022, it turbocharged an industry of companies seeking to write essays, make art and create computer code. Many of the most valuable companies in the world now work in the field of artificial intelligence, or manufacture the computer chips needed to run those programs. OpenAI's own value nearly doubled in the past year.

News outlets have argued that OpenAI and Microsoft — which is in business with OpenAI also has been sued by The Mercury News — have plagiarized and stole its articles, undermining their business models.

“Microsoft and OpenAI simply take the work product of reporters, journalists, editorial writers, editors and others who contribute to the work of local newspapers — all without any regard for the efforts, much less the legal rights, of those who create and publish the news on which local communities rely,” the newspapers’ lawsuit said.

OpenAI has staunchly refuted those claims, stressing that all of its work remains legal under “fair use” laws.

“We see immense potential for AI tools like ChatGPT to deepen publishers’ relationships with readers and enhance the news experience,” the company said. SAN FRANCISCO — A former OpenAI researcher known for whistleblowing the blockbuster artificial intelligence company facing a swell of lawsuits over its business model has died, authorities confirmed this week.

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