Editor's Notebook

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I feel odd writing on this topic, as I am no expert on technology. I have been called a Luddite. I use my smartphone primarily as a telephone, my laptop for word processing, and am absent from social media. I would rather be sneezing over a dusty old book than scrolling through commentary. When I started learning about the emergence of AI and its potential consequences, I chose to ignore it for as long as possible. But now the writing is on the wall . . . and it was generated by ChatGPT.

Much of my teaching career has involved confronting technology, i.e. the Internet. That does not mean that I do not accept technology as a tool. As an educator, it has been my job to train students to sift through online noise and discover quality websites. Online digital archives, for example, have been amazing for research and teaching opportunities. Still, the Internet has competed against me to grab students’ attention with information whittled down into a few short and simple summary paragraphs. The ability of our students to read and process material written with length and depth has been an ongoing concern. Holding up an assigned book, I have implored students to “Just read it, please, that’s all that you have to do. You do not have to go online for anything. Just . . . read . . . the book.”

Are we entering a phase where, more than ever, we will have to encourage our students to “just write the essay?” For many faculty, the concern with ChatGPT centers on writing. We have always struggled with making sure that student writing was original, but AI introduces unchartered territory. In the past, I have encountered students who misused information from the Internet to write essays. Yet in doing so, they appeared to put in more work piecing together the various online parts to avoid detection than if they followed the assignment correctly. With ChatGPT, even that stage of the incorrect writing process would be eliminated, as the program would do that for the user. It also appears that it will be easy for students to have essays generated even when these AI programs are still in their rudimentary stages of development. What happens when they get sophisticated? That’s where the true anxiety lies.

Over the summer, I designed assignments based on perceived possibilities of AI usage. In a strange way, I felt robbed of my academic freedom due to the limitations that I encountered while thinking about how I would outsmart the robots. I will not know until I start grading how I fared. What we all know and recognize is that a dialogue (among humans) is necessary. Perhaps Bridgewater Review can serve as an additional platform for faculty discussion on the topic, as we have different perspectives and approaches to new technologies. Such a possibility will be addressed in the next call for submissions.

In the meantime, I have been left to contemplate what this new technology could mean for educators in the humanities. Those who teach in the humanities are now facing anxieties similar to artists who worry about being eclipsed by AI. Will students continue their exodus from the humanities due to fears that potential jobs will be usurped? Or will students flock back to those classes, exhausted from living in a more de-humanized world? For historians like me, discussing how new technologies impacted societies is common practice. Even so, as someone who teaches in the humanities, I can already sense that I will be placing even more emphasis on what it means to be human – all that is magnificent and tragic. That conversation will continue as the great unknown of AI unravels.

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