

Funding the Future

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I cannot have been alone in being just a little amused at the news that Google's new artificial intelligence chatbot [got an answer wrong](#) in the advert used to promote it.

AI is meant to be the next big thing in technology. Maybe it is. But, I cannot help but feel concerned about this development.

That concern is not based upon the fact that artificial intelligence could make a mistake. As a matter of fact, it can only be as good as the data provided to it, pretty much like most human beings and, as a matter of fact, there is a great deal of straightforwardly wrong information available in the world. Just look at the Wikipedia page about me, which is absolutely riddled with errors. Mistakes are bound to happen in that case.

Instead, three things worry me.

The first is that just as most people have now forgotten how to use a pen, most people will also now forget how to write because a machine can do it for them. The loss of the pen was to some degree inconsequential: it was just a tool. The loss of the ability to write a coherent argument that sets out to achieve an objective might be of much greater consequence.

This is the fundamental skill that much of our education seeks to develop, even if most politicians do not seem to be aware of the fact. As I know from observing students, it is something that many find hard to master, but which is worthwhile achieving. If we provide a machine alternative to this, we diminish the skills available to many by removing the motivation for acquiring them. Worryingly, I see no alternative skill that will replace this one. The consequence might be a deskilled world, where even greater inequality becomes prevalent. Of course, that worries me.

Second, the appraisal of this skill will now become much harder. I have long believed that essay writing (or the preparation of reports, and similar material) is the best way to test the skills of many people. I used essays rather than exams as the basis of appraisal in the courses that I taught. How, however, can this survive when a student might use an AI bot to assist in the preparation of their work or to re-write it before its

presentation? Are we really going to have to resort to exam-based testing for everyone now, which is by no means suitable for all?

Third, the Google bots' error is indicative of the ease with which AI writing could be used to spread disinformation. The Orwellian task of rewriting history would be so much easier with an AI bot that could be programmed to exclude offending data and include new false information. Worse, once done, the promulgation of this would be a relatively easy task. The use of these bots for propaganda purposes might be very worrying.

Am I a fan of this technology as a result? No, I am not. And it is going to require a lot to convince me of its benign benefits.