

Moving Beyond the Hype/Doom Cycles of Generative AI Discourse in Publishing

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Abstract

Generative AI has become a buzzword within the publishing industry over the last two years, with responses often falling into either high optimism or an overall sense of doom. We are now at a suitable distance from the launch of ChatGPT to appraise these developments from a more nuanced perspective and begin to explore their connections to the longer history of AI. In this article, I offer some suggestions for how publishers might approach this topic.

With the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, 'Generative AI' has been heralded as one of the most significant technological breakthroughs since the printing press. Cutting through the hyperbole and the numerous possible counterexamples, the comparison is useful. The transition from manuscript to print culture was an on-going process rather than a sharp shift and we have not stopped prizing forms of manuscript writing centuries later. One mode of communication does not completely displace another; there's little signs that generative AI will eradicate our need and desire for human creativity in fields such as publishing.

Biography

Dr Simon Rowberry is the Director of the Centre for Publishing at University College London, where he teaches and researches the history of digital platforms and their relationships to the publishing industry. He has published two books on the history of digital publishing: *Four Shades of Gray: The Amazon Kindle Platform* (MIT Press: 2022), and *The Early Development of Project Gutenberg, c.1970-2000* (Cambridge Elements in Book Culture & Publishing, 2023).

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Uses and Harms

As the hype and doom subside, we can start to realistically appraise the use of these systems. The boosterism of companies such as OpenAI, Google and Meta does not match the reality – much in the same way as the blockchain and “metaverse” – but there are still uses. In my role as a publishing and digital media educator and researcher, I am largely ambivalent about the latest generative AI tools but believe it is important to investigate them as a learning and research tool to prepare the next generation of publishers to enter the workforce.

Despite its potential uses, these must be weighed up against the great external costs in Generative AI’s production and uses. The server farms required to train these models have an outsized environmental impact—as Nathan Ensmenger notes, “The Cloud is a Factory”¹—and freemium generative AI services displace labour within the gig economy at a greater rate than platforms like Uber and Fivver.

In 2005, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, launched Mechanical Turk, a gig work platform where humans perform mundane repetitive tasks for pennies, terming it “artificial artificial intelligence.”² Generative AI falls into the same approach of augmenting automation with human intervention through outsourcing model finetuning to piece workers in countries such as Nigeria, leading to words such as “delve,” common in Nigerian English, becoming prominent in outputs.³

Generative AIs are not new technologies

It is worth pausing to remember that Generative AIs are not new technologies: ChatGPT was the third iteration of OpenAI’s Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) architecture, that in turn was developed by Google in 2017.⁴ In October 2024, MIT Press will publish *Output: An anthology of computer-generated text, 1953-2023*, an edited collection that aims to demonstrate the longer, and quirkier, history of textual Generative AI that extends beyond the content-generation of ChatGPT.⁵

¹ Nathan Ensmenger, ‘The Cloud Is a Factory’, in *Your Computer Is on Fire*, ed. by Thomas S. Mullaney and others (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 29–49.

² Jason Pontin, ‘Artificial Intelligence, With Help From the Humans’, *The New York Times*, 25 March 2007, section Business <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/business/yourmoney/25Stream.html>.

³ Alex Hern, ‘TechScape: How Cheap, Outsourced Labour in Africa Is Shaping AI English’, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2024, section Technology <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/16/techscape-ai-gadgest-humane-ai-pin-chatgpt>>.

⁴ Ashish Vaswani and others, ‘Attention Is All You Need’, in *Proceedings of the 31st International Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems*, NIPS’17 (New York: Curran Associates Inc., 2017), pp. 6000–6010.

⁵ *Output: An Anthology of Computer-Generated Text, 1953-2023*, ed. by Bertram Lilian-Yvonne and Nick Montfort (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2024); Kate Eichhorn, *Content* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022).

Rather than viewing the current moment as a historical anomaly, there is much to gain through remembering the longer historical context. Rebecca Roach's restorative work on Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA, a chatbot designed in the form of a psychotherapist, offers several familiar challenges: sexism, erasure of labour, hallucinations, and edited transcripts.⁶ Likewise, Brian Merchant argues that the Luddite protests against automation in the early nineteenth century provides a blueprint for how to resist big technology.⁷

The Limits of Large Language Models (LLMs) for Publishers

Within the context of publishing, the current paradigm of generative AI (LLMs) may be reaching a limit and is unlikely to enable one-click, frictionless book publishing without substantial human intervention (or complete abdication of editorial standards). As Molly White suggests, ChatGPT and DALL-E3 might be able to help with ideation, proofreading and other menial tasks but at what cost?⁸

Furthermore, Cory Doctorow argues that generative AI is speeding up the 'enshittification' of the Web that can also be seen on publishing platforms such as Kindle Direct Publishing.⁹ These are not new problems, but the barrier for entry is greatly reduced for bad faith actors who now only pay \$20 per month to generate content.

So, what now?

It's foolish to predict the future around technological adoption, but nonetheless, there is a clear way forward for Generative AI in publishing: collaboration and use of tools in certain circumstances (bearing in mind the ethical and legal challenges). There is a long history of popular digital platforms being founded on acts of perceived and real piracy: Twitch,¹⁰ YouTube,¹¹ Spotify¹² – regulations and standards take time to catch up.

⁶ Rebecca Roach, 'My Search for the Mysterious Missing Secretary Who Shaped Chatbot History', *The Conversation*, 2024 <<http://theconversation.com/my-search-for-the-mysterious-missing-secretary-who-shaped-chatbot-history-225602>>.

⁷ Brian Merchant, *Blood in the Machine: The Origins of the Rebellion against Big Tech* (New York: Little, Brown, 2023).

⁸ Molly White, 'AI Isn't Useless. But Is It Worth It?', *Citation Needed*, 2024 <<https://www.citationneeded.news/ai-isnt-useless/>>.

⁹ Cory Doctorow, "'Enshittification' Is Coming for Absolutely Everything", *Financial Times*, 8 February 2024 <<https://www.ft.com/content/6fb1602d-a08b-4a8c-bac0-047b7d64aba5>>.

¹⁰ Nicholas Deleon, 'UFC Files Lawsuit Against Justin.Tv As It Tries To Eliminate Illegal Online Streams Altogether', *TechCrunch*, 2011 <<https://techcrunch.com/2011/01/22/ufc-files-lawsuit-against-justin-tv-as-it-tries-to-eliminate-illegal-online-streams-altogether/>>.

¹¹ Michael Driscoll, 'Will YouTube Sail into the DMCA's Safe Harbor or Sink for Internet Piracy', *John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law*, 6 (2006), [i].

¹² Maria Eriksson and others, *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

It might also take time to realise the much-hyped potential of AI systems, which is less likely to be the current form of content generation but solving big problems both within publishing (identifying and nurturing diverse voices) and far beyond (climate change). We should not be satisfied with the current systems. Nonetheless, Sara Lloyd, Global AI Lead for Pan Macmillan, states “to argue against innovation in the face of AI’s advance seems to me to be a losing battle.”¹³

Beyond lawsuits, publishers have a great deal of agency in what happens next. Don’t repeat the mistakes of the past where publishers ceded ground to technology companies who went on to develop a monopoly in their niche, such as Amazon. Instead, now is the time for experimentation. This might take the form of integrating generative AI workflows into processes but also encouraging authors to produce experimental works that could follow the template of Patten’s *Mirage FM*, an album made up entirely of sampled AI music designed for “crate digging in latent space.”¹⁴

Finally, as ever, there is great value in the backlist. The current lawsuits around misuse of books in training data are unlikely to be resolved for years but there is still space for smaller scale experimentation internally within publishers. What benefits could be gained through creating publisher-specific LLMs?

If the Generative AI bubble is to burst over the coming years, the contemporary moment will still provide us with a useful moment of introspection: What should publishing prioritise and how can it build a sustainable response to any forthcoming shocks?

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¹³ Sara Lloyd, ‘We Must Be Open about AI Innovation’, *The Bookseller*, 26 April 2024
<<https://www.thebookseller.com/comment/we-must-be-open-about-ai-innovation>>.

¹⁴ Chal Ravens, ‘Patten Taps Into Text To Audio AI’s Musical Potential’, *Bandcamp Daily*, 2023
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