

When should AI be banned?

I teach a small seminar on public writing about the misuses of mathematics and statistics. It typically enrolls about ten students who are either studying mathematics or else in the university's Honors Program. The course syllabus bans the use of AI and (in the case of students whose mother tongue is not English) AI-enhanced translation software. After all, employers of graduates of U.S. universities have the right to assume competence in the English language. A student who is barely literate in English and achieved a good transcript and a degree through the use of AI-enhanced translation software is deceiving potential employers.

I want my students to be thoughtful and analytical in what they write. An AI cannot be thoughtful and analytical. One of my writing assignments is to review the classic book *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould and to explain — in a clearer and simpler way than the author does — the mathematical and statistical fallacy to which he devotes much of the book, what he calls the “reification” fallacy in factor analysis. This is one of several fallacies in the argument that white supremacists have used in their attempts to justify racist theories about intelligence.

Last year and this year I had a total of 20 students in the two seminars. I caught four of them — all of them Chinese students — using AI-enhanced translation software. It was easy for me to spot the plagiarism from AI. For example, in the one that used AI for the review of Gould's book the AI's grammar was perfect, and its vocabulary and word choices were more sophisticated than that of any of my students, including the native English-speakers. But the AI could not give the required explanation of the reification fallacy. Instead, it hallucinated about what Gould was saying. The AI said that Gould was wrong to oppose the use of factor analysis. But Gould nowhere opposed its use. On the contrary, he described it as a very useful technique in statistics and only opposed its misuse. If

the review had been written by a student, I would have thought that the student had not even read the book. When confronted, all four students confessed to having used AI-enhanced translation software.

University courses that expect students to write about their own thoughts and arguments should ban AIs. So should high-quality magazines and newspapers.

A year ago I saw an interesting discussion on the talk-pages of Wikipedia, where editors were discussing the reliability of the best-known American sports magazine, called *Sports Illustrated*. To cut costs, the magazine had reduced its reliance on journalists and had started using AI. The consensus of the Wikipedia editors was to downgrade the magazine to “generally unreliable”. That means that if an editor adds a sentence to an article that's sourced to *Sports Illustrated*, probably another editor will remove the sentence for being poorly sourced. The point of the discussion was to maintain the quality of the world’s only successful free online encyclopedia, even if some of its sources, such as *Sports Illustrated*, don’t.

The last four decades have seen a right-wing shift in the U.S. toward an ever more inhumane and antidemocratic version of capitalism, with high levels of poverty and homelessness, and increasingly obscene displays of wealth by the very rich. This drift to the right started during the Reagan years (1981-1989) and culminated in our recent election, in which AI was used in well-designed disinformation campaigns that spread lies, distortions, fake photos, and fake videos that manipulated voters on a much larger scale than was ever before possible.

Much of the economy and many of our institutions have come under the control of people who primarily care about short-term profits for their shareholders. For example, so-called “hedge funds” have bought vast amounts of forest land so that they can clear-cut the trees for huge profits, with no thought about sustainable forest management that would help our forests survive climate change. Similarly, universities, newspapers, and magazines are under increasing pressure to cut costs and find inexpensive ways to bring in revenue.

I'm glad that Tia Sáing forbids its journalists from using AI. Newspapers and magazines should expect journalists to write with thought and in depth, just as university courses should expect our students to do. It is important for the public to have confidence in the journalists' reports and explanations. Confidence is not likely if the "journalists" are AIs with computer chips and a tendency to hallucinate rather than humans with brains.

Some have asked, "What about editing? Surely ChatGPT can be a good editor that finds writing errors." Of course, software that spots typos and possible grammatical errors — a simpler technology that predates AI — is useful, and I have no objection to that. But editing is a high-level task that requires thought and true understanding. In my public writing course I pair student writers with student editors, because I want the students to know how to edit. I ask them not only to catch typos and routine grammatical errors, but also to make suggestions for improvement in tone, word choices, organization, and quality of argumentation. And experience editing other people's work leads to doing a better job proofreading and revising one's own writing. An AI cannot be expected to fulfill the role of editor.

Putting aside firing journalists, editors, and professors, there are some reasonable ways that AI can be used to reduce expenses without harmful consequences. Universities in the U.S. have seen a cancerous growth of bureaucracy, which is accompanied by reductions in faculty and increased tuition for students. Much of what people in the bureaucracy do could easily be done by AI. We get a constant stream of messages from the administration, almost all of which we can immediately delete. Administrators like to post "vision statements" and proclamations about "values", and it's become fashionable for universities to publicize a set of insipid slogans concocted by the administrative staff. (Among my university's slogans some of the worst are "Go purple, be gold!", alluding to the university's colors, and "The passion never rests!", alluding to who knows what.) Someone in the bureaucracy has to write all this, and ChatGPT could probably do a better job. The messages and postings are routine and generally predictable, and writing them certainly does not require in-depth thinking. We would be able

to reduce the size of the bureaucracy — and be able to maintain faculty size and reduce student tuition — if we started replacing administrative positions with AI.

It's not only universities that need to reduce bureaucracy. In the private sector as well, many large corporations have a huge administrative structure and large departments devoted to producing advertisements, hype (I was particularly struck by both Microsoft's and IBM's postings about their quantum computing projects, which shamelessly exaggerated their possible future benefits in solving the world's problems), and glossy but useless brochures. People writing these things typically receive salaries that are much higher than the value of what they do. If many of them could be replaced by AI, perhaps the prices of a company's goods and services could be brought down.

I realize that Vietnam has a very different system from that in the United States. But in Vietnam as well it might be possible to use AI to write routine documents and [some day perhaps even attend Zoom meetings] perform other routine functions of the bureaucracy, and in this way start eliminating unnecessary positions occupied by humans and moving people from the bureaucracy into productive labor and professional work.