

Orwell and AI: A New Kind of Literature?

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Introduction

I was recently reading an essay published by George Orwell in 1946 on the issue of literature and freedom of expression titled “*the Prevention of Literature*”¹. From Orwell’s perspective, the Soviet Union and other totalitarian communist states posed the greatest threat to freedom of expression, of thought, of the press and thus to the life of the writer and all literary people. His conclusion was that prose, without freedom of thought and the freedom to put whatever one really thinks onto paper, was dead.

However, Orwell leaves room for a hypothetical scenario:

“In the future it is possible that a new kind of literature, not involving individual feeling or truthful observation, may arise, but no such thing is at present imaginable.”

Nearly eight decades on, with the development of open and closed source Artificial intelligence programmes, this begs the question; has this “new kind of literature” that Orwell hypothesised really come about? And if so, what are its consequences, and what are we to do about it?

A Short Story in Moscow

In order to determine whether or not the nexus of this new literature was really coming about, I consulted the popular AI programme ChatGPT, and asked it to write a “short story about Moscow in 1930”². At this time, Stalin would have held absolute power for three years. Any references to “challenging circumstances” or “challenges”, “trying times” or “political and social changes”, to “shelters”, or “poverty”, or to “those less fortunate” were to be censored. All circumstances which the main character of the time and place would have himself observed are absent from the story.

The story that presents itself does manage to be benign, whilst being set in the shadow of Stalin’s reign of terror (though an uninformed reader wouldn’t know this from reading it). However, it fulfils the criteria to be prose both structurally and characteristically: its unmetered, follows grammatical rules, and is organised into sentences; it has a main character, its set in Moscow, and its themes are “unity and compassion”. The plot is fairly thin and unexciting, but its still there, albeit about the fairly mundane events and occurrences of a baker’s everyday life, stripped of all truthful observations or even the slightest hint that anything unpleasant is afoot, which anyone who lived at the time and place would have observed, even if he/she wouldn’t say a word about it considering the circumstances.

Is such a censor-proof story worth reading? Perhaps not. Orwell points out that very little good literature had come out of either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, and Fascist Italy, although to a slightly lesser extent thanks to less rigorously enforced censorship laws that were looser than the former two (in other words, its more authoritarian rather than totalitarian character). The same can be said for China, North Korea, and increasingly Russia today; the best

Chinese authors are mostly either ancient, dead, in exile, or at the very least highly censored⁵.

It is therefore possible to merely dismiss ChatGPT's writing as being equivalent to an oppressed, obedient writer who does as a totalitarian state expects, in which case he is not really a writer, but rather in essence a cultural bureaucrat or a minor official. But this 'bureaucrat' has something to be said for him in that he may, in his own way, develop a certain recognisable, individual style. And he may risk weaving truth into falsehoods, or a wink to the observant reader that shows at heart he is really a subversive. Although not written in a totalitarian regime *per se*, but an authoritarian one, speculation about Virgil's true intentions in writing the *Aeneid* is rife. Aeneas's exit from the underworld via the "ivory gate... of delusive dreams" in Book 6³ has been interpreted by some as a subtle indication that the whole story is not an account of Augustus's purported ancestor and the glorification of Rome's future, but rather a very well-veiled critique.

Orwell himself is clear about the distinction between authoritarian regimes and totalitarian ones. This difference is part of the reason why literature is doomed in the latter; unlike a mere authoritarian state, which possesses "*a ruling class (that is) usually either corrupt or apathetic or half-liberal in outlook*" a totalitarian one will not run the risk of allowing the writer an opportunity to do what Virgil is thought by some to have done. The bureaucrat, however dull and subdued, is a human being and is fallible. In a regime which demands total infallibility, to grant the fallible creative powers in a realm with a scope as large and a destructive potential as great as that of literature is unthinkable and far too dangerous. Hence this is why the practice of creative writing is so tightly controlled in North Korea, meaning that whatever literature is produced is effectively a carbon copy of whatever Kim-related mythology is already being blared out from every radio, television, and speaker across the country⁴. But ChatGPT does not possess agency or a mind of its

own, hidden desires to rebel against a tyrannical system, or even an imagination. There are no feelings it must suppress and destroy before it can write, a process which eradicates the writer anyway. It can develop the capacity for self-censorship before it even begins or contrives an 'imaginative' work of fiction. It will not offer any complaint or give reason for a totalitarian state to shut it down akin to the way it might ship off a writer to a prison camp. It does not simply do as it is told; that is its sole purpose. For all totalitarian regimes this is a fantastic development and a broadening of their cultural capacity to control. Most importantly, it will allow it to do away with having to deal with the human obstacle and dignity of the writer that hampers its ability to propagate so-called 'indisputable facts' which can and must be entirely altered at a moment's notice. In this regard, 'journalists' in China are most likely to find themselves displaced. For all literary people and all those concerned with sacred fact and freedom in all its manifestations, the prospect of a totalitarian state finding much easier and more efficient means to tighten its grip in another area of life as sacrosanct and as influential as literature is a terrifying prospect indeed.

Conclusion

ChatGPT and AI algorithms like it do not pose a serious threat (at least for the time being) to writers in non-totalitarian countries. Where it will be most useful is in the hands of a totalitarian regime for whom art can be used as a means by which to glorify the state and by extension the tyrant, as well as to entertain and distract the masses. This is why architects, ballet dancers, and musicians enjoyed the full patronage of the state in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany⁵. Writers have never had the same privilege, and they never will, because allowing them creative free reign poses a threat which architects or musicians could never, simply by virtue of the

nature of their work. Literature in the broadest possible sense of the word, developed artificially by an algorithm, which in China is already being controlled and driven by the state apparatus, may find itself manipulated and used and abused to the benefit of the totalitarian state like the other aforementioned art forms. That is, I think, the greatest threat AI poses in a literary and in an artistic sense, rather than the displacement of say screenwriters or novelists. It should come part and parcel with greater concerns about its potential to be misused by bad actors.

This is a threat which cannot be dismissed by empty and increasingly meaningless suggestions of mere tighter regulation, or by encouraging a more thoughtful development process. For one, the cat is already out of the bag with the (allegedly) hasty release of ChatGPT by OpenAI; but more pertinently, this is something outside of our control anyway. Whether Microsoft or Google speed up development or slow it down matters very little to the myriad of Chinese companies developing AI programmes and their suzerains in the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology⁶ who would be more than happy to take the lead in the race with their global counterparts. We are entering a new age where forms of literature previously done away with by oppressive state apparatuses have the potential to be used and repurposed as a political tool in countries where totalitarianism has today taken root, and to the benefit (however significant or marginal) to those who rule them. “The imagination”, Orwell writes “like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity”. It appears we have found an artificial womb.

Bibliography

1. [The Prevention of Literature, by George Orwell](#)
2. [A Short Story in Moscow](#)

3. [Book 6 of the Aeneid, by Virgil](#)
4. [On reading North Korean short stories, by Stephen Epstein](#)
5. [Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics, by Frederic Spotts](#)
6. [Beijing enlisting Chinese Big Tech firms](#)