ENGL 739B: Reading Machines, Writing Machines

Fall 2025
University of Maryland

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Description

This seminar will address recent and startling developments in generative artificial intelligence that are of a predominantly textual variety, where ChatGPT is the most notorious but far from the only exemplar. The primary focus will be the critical and theoretical stakes of the seemingly overnight reality of computers composing reasonable facsimiles of human prose via what are termed large language models (LLMs). While our focus will not be technical, we will of necessity spend some time working towards an understanding of what these models are doing (and not doing) at a functional level. Our readings are drawn from relevant areas of media studies and literary/critical theory, the current research literature in AI, relevant primary sources, and public commentary. We will also read one novel.

Schedule

NB. Readings without links are PDFs available on class repository.

Sept. 2: Introduction to the Course

- Michael Gavin, "Literary Theory in the Age of AI" and accompanying ChatGPT Transcript

Sept. 9: What is a Large Language Model?

- Rita Raley, "Representation–Simulation–Generation"
- "Generative AI Exists Because of the Transformer" (Financial Times)
- Benjamin Bratton and Blaise Agüera y Arcas, "The Model is the Message"
- Meghan O'Gieblyn, "Babel"

Sept. 16 Hermeneutics I

- Vauhini Vara, "Ghosts"
- N. Katherine Hayles, "Inside Mind of an AI: Materiality and the Crisis of Representation"
- Emily Bender, et al., "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Large Language Models be Too Big?" 🦜
- Amanda Gunzburg, "Diabolis Ex Machina (This is Not an Essay)"

Sept. 23 Hermeneutics II

- Hannes Bajohr, "Post-Artificial Texts: Machine Learning and the Reader's Expectations of Literary and Non-literary Writing"
- Michael Townsen Hicks, et al., "ChatGPT is Bullshit"
- David Gunkel and Simon Coghlan, "Cut the Crap: A Critical Response to 'ChatGPT is Bullshit'"
- Cody Kommers, et al., "Computational Hermeneutics: Evaluating Generative AI as a Cultural Technology"

Sept. 30: Leif Weatherby's *Language Machines* I

- Introduction and chapters 1-3

Oct. 7: *Language Machines* II

- Chapters 4-6 and conclusion

Oct. 14: Reading Holiday

Oct. 21: Project Proposal Presentations

Oct. 28: Bruce Holsinger's *Culpability*

- Read the novel in its entirety
- Bernd Carsten Stahl,"Embedding Responsibility in Intelligent Systems: From AI Ethics to Responsible AI Ecosystems"

Nov. 4: AI and Democracy

- Trump Administration's 2025 Executive Orders on AI (April 23, July 23a, July 23b, July 23c) and AI.gov
- Gina Neff, "Can Democracy Survive AI?"
- Eliot Higgins, lecture on "Disordered Discourse" at Cambridge Disinformation Summit (YouTube, approx. 1 hour)

- Claudia Aradau and Mercedes Bunz, "Dismantling the Apparatus of Domination? Left Critiques of AI"

Nov. 11: AI and Personas

- Lawrence Switzky, "ELIZA Effects: Pygmalion and the Early Development of Artificial Intelligence"
- Murray Shanahan, et al., "Role Play with Large Language Models"
- Amy Winecoff, "Artificial Sweeteners: The Dangers of Sycophantic AI"
- OpenAI, "Sycophancy in GPT-4o: What Happened and What We're Doing about It"
- Alice Cai, et al., "Antagonistic AI" (to read the PDF, click on "View PDF" under "Access Paper" in the righthand column)

Nov. 18: AI and Authorship

- Sarah Bull, "Content Generation in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"
- Avery Slater, "Post-Automation Poetics: or, How Cold War Computers Discovered Poetry"
- Matthew Kirschenbaum, "Spec Acts: Reading Form in Recurrent Neural Networks"
- Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, "'@Tubman's_Rock"

Nov. 25: AI and the Humanities

- Henry Farrell, et al., "Large AI Models are Cultural and Social Technologies"
- Lauren Klein, et al., "Provocations from the Humanities on Generative AI Research"
- Ted Underwood, "The Impact of Large Language Models on the Humanities and Vice Versa," "Mapping the Latent Spaces of Culture," and " A More Interesting Upside of AI"

Dec. 2: AI and the University

- UMD's Guidelines for the Use of AI
- Tressie McMillan Cottom, "AI, Politics, and Inequality" (TikTok!)
- AAUP, "Artificial Intelligence and the Academic Professions"
- Matt Seybold, "Against Technofeudal Education"
- Matthew Kirschenbaum and Rita Raley, "AI and the University as a Service"

Dec. 9: TBA