Columbia Journalism School – Foundations of Computational Journalism

**Automated text generation and the future of creativity**

Brezel

GPT

191111

ROBOT VOICE 1: And now, a roundtable discussion about automated text generation and what it means for the creative world. Here’s Aaron Brezel with more.

**intro music**

BREZEL 1: Hello Hello Hello. Thanks for the introduction Rob. Even Artists can’t escape the talk of automation these days.

AI-generated art has been on the scene for a few years now. Christies auctioned off a portait made by a computer for a whopping $432,000 in 2018. But this year – perhaps thanks to a bit of viral marketing – a program called GPT-2 is generating its fair share of buzz. It’s a computer program that can automatically generate sentences. Kind of like your email’s text prediction on steroids.

When Open AI, a Silicon Valley non-profit released the program, they made some suggestions about its potential uses. One was to create an unstoppable army of talkative robots to drive discourse on the internet and destroy the world. No offense Rob.

ROBOT VOICE 2: None taken.

Another was to serve as a writing assistant – to help people overcome writer’s block. Sigal Samuel, a staff writer at Vox, says she’s using it to write her next novel. Using this program seems  easy enough. You input a sentence or two into a text box and out GPT-2 spits out what it thinks should come next.

And that’s what we’re going to try today. With me are three Columbia University experts who are going to help us unpack GPT-2 as a creative assist. I’ve talked enough. Let’s go around and introduce yourselves

**Guest Introductions**

BREZEL 2: Later, we’ll spin up GPT-2 and try it out for ourselves But before we get there, I want to see if we can’t pull back the curtain a little bit. To a lot of people, myself included, GPT-2 seemed like this fascinating paradigm shift in the world of automatic text generation. But Katy, you were telling me a few days ago that the story of computational creative-assists is actually quite old – ancient even …

**Prompt:** Rules for Living with Eight-Year Old Girls

**Computer Response:**

Rules for Living with Eight-Year Old Girls

1. Be Friendly

I have never been in love with this girl, but I am beginning to like her. She has an earring, and I like that. She is popular, which is always a plus in my book.

2. Be Confident

The campers are now chatting casually, trying to figure each other out. Were all smiles, and seemed to be having a great time. The camp directors mother is talking to her daughter about camping, which she does well. I am beginning to like this campers mother. She is warm, sweet and kind. The camp directors daughter also seems to be having a great time, as she sits on the edge of the soccer field next to us and reads a book.

3. Be Friendly

The camp directors mother gives a sweet and manipulative smile, I NEED you to hang out with me after campers leave. That reminds me, I have a favor to ask of you.

Actual Text:

1. Be Confident

We sit on the edge of the soccer field in small clumps. I sit next to the people I was a camper with, attached to the group but not fully apart of it. I’m not sure they are the ones I want to make this transition with. To be a good counselor I need to be sure of myself. In my camp-friend’s eyes I’m still twelve-year-old Sophie--chubby, awkward, clumsy, kind and unable to break a rule. I hope that Counselor Sophie can be cool and kind and fun, but I don’t know how to reconcile Counselor Sophie and Camper Sophie. I’m not sure I know how to be a counselor yet.

2. Be Friendly

The camp friends and I take bets on who will be assigned to which group. We’re all positive that I will be with Frosh Girls--the eight-year-olds. They announce my name almost last, but we’re right. I’m assigned to live with a gaggle of eight-year old girls for seven weeks. I don’t know any of the counselors I have been assigned to work and live with for the entire summer. I flash each one of my co-counselors a smile, and begin to introduce my self. I do my best to become Counselor Sophie.

**Prompt:** Thing I’ve Called My Mom About This Week

Computer Response:

Thing I’ve Called My Mom About This Week (varies depending on the child)

I’m feeling stressed about everything right now. I don’t know if I can even talk right now. I’m having a hard time focusing on what I think I should be doing right now. I’m having a hard time focusing on what I want to talk about right now. I don’t know if I can even start a conversation right now. I’m having a hard time focusing on what I want to say. I’m having a hard time remembering what I said. I’m having a hard time remembering the words I said. I’m having a hard time remembering the sarcasm I hurled at my daughter. I’m having a hard time remembering the face I added in.

I feel like a failure for having called my mom about this, given that I have no idea what the hell "this" is.

Actual text:

Do you know where we packed the command hooks? Sorry, I know you just left. Okay, thank you. I love you. I miss you already. Bye.

Yes. So excited to be back. There have been no bad thoughts about my body at all, but, I swear to god, Jordan has no body fat. I know. I know. It doesn’t affect me, but it makes me jealous.

We all just hung out last night. It was really good to see everyone, but I’m feeling stressed about all the things I have to do this week.

**Prompt:** There are a lot of things I want in life: the confidence to wear white pants, a better president, a movie version of “In The Heights” but at the very top of my list are more stories of

**Computer Response:**

There are a lot of things I want in life: the confidence to wear white pants, a better president, a movie version of “In The Heights” but at the very top of my list are more stories of support. Stories that show me that even the most basic of things can make a huge difference.

I want to empower girls like Chloe, who are just trying to get by. I want to remind me of the power of a simple act: a donation jar. A night of sobbing brought on by the loss of a friend, a grocery run failed and I still managed to find the energy to shoplifted three days later.

I want to remind me of the power of a simple act: a hug. Two days before my eighteenth birthday, I received a phone call from a friend who had just received one. It was from my grandmother, and she asked that I not call her that number. I love her, but I just could not make this call.

My mother agreed to meet me at a coffee shop a few blocks away. We stood together in the dark, swaying in time with the beat. I had forgotten how to talk

Actual text:

There are a lot of things I want in life: the confidence to wear white pants, a better president, a movie version of “In The Heights” but at the very top of my list are more stories of female friendship. I want stories that show women talking about nothing, about their periods, about politics. I want to see women fighting and making up. I want to see what it looks like when female friendships end.

I want and need a guide on how to get over the end of a friendship because I know how to get over a romantic relationship (thanks to Hollywood and unwanted advice from random relatives). But what do I do when that breakup is with someone I love platonically?