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Opinion

Nikcevic: As An Aspiring Screenwriter, AI Comedy Is Good, But Not Good Enough

AI comedy may be impressive, but to earn recognition, it still has to jump the hurdle for great comedy: humanity.



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By **Nicolas Nikcevic**

**Published April 18, 2024 | Updated
May 16, 2024**

I'd like to play a quick game. I'm going to give you four satirical headlines, and you tell me which ones were pulled from The Onion and which were generated by artificial intelligence.

1. "Experts Warn that War in Ukraine Could Become Even More Boring"
2. "Budget of New Batman Movie Swells to \$200M as Director Insists on Using Real Batman"
3. "Story of Woman Who Rescues Shelter Dog With Severely Matted Fur Will Inspire You to Open a New Tab and Visit Another Website"
4. "Rural Town Up in Arms Over Depiction in Summer Blockbuster 'Cowfuckers'"

The answer: they were all AI-generated. These fake headlines were quoted in a "Time Magazine" article titled "I'm a Screenwriter. These AI Jokes Give Me Nightmares." In the piece, the humorist Simon Rich argues that AI is a lot more creative and funny than most people realize. Sure, ChatGPT is painfully bad at writing jokes, but that's because it was designed to be unthreatening. Other, less filtered models such as code-davinci-002, which wrote those headlines, can actually get laughs. Rich argues that within five years, AI will be able to beat any writer when it comes to pure creative ability. His article navigates the consequences of AI's development in the entertainment industry, while also asking philosophical questions about the impending obsolescence of a writer's psyche. Rich ultimately concludes that the comedic AI singularity won't devastate him because he as a writer has always been obsolete: "Even before I was born, books existed that were better than any I could ever write. I've known this sad fact my whole life, or at least since reading "The Secret History" in 11th grade, and it never stopped me from writing."

In his view, whether or not people are lining up at bookstores for his latest work, Rich writes because he loves the craft. While poetic, I can't say that such a conceit convinced me against switching to an economics major.

In fairness to Rich, who is already successful, I have not yet made it as a working writer. I too love writing. I love the process of it. I love the idea that the words squeezed out of my head are uniquely mine, that no one else could have come up with them. But sadly one cannot eat love for dinner, be sheltered from the elements by it or use love to send their children to college. I want people to want to read my writing because then I can get paid for it. But why would anyone pay for my words when code-davinci-002 generates funnier content, and for only a small monthly fee? The answer, I believe, lies in what audiences really care about.

If Simon Rich was aiming to alarm with his article, he picked a good genre of joke to do so. News parody is only one small subset of humor writing, but it is probably the easiest for AI to replicate. For one, news parody is short. But more importantly, it is impersonal. Re-read those four headlines; not one of them uses the first person. AI generated content passes by undetected because there is no sense of a writer behind the joke. But that absence of humanness is unusual.

I'm still cautiously optimistic about my potential career in comedy writing because I don't believe humans watch or read humor based purely on how "funny" it is. Maybe they do to an extent, but there's more to comedy than that. To illustrate my point, imagine a code-davinci-002-powered stand-up comedian. Beyond the novelty of watching a language model tell jokes, would audiences be obsessed with the robot's every move the same way so many have been obsessed with Pete Davidson? Would interview snippets of the robot go viral on TikTok? Would a photo of it and Dua Lipa holding hands on Rodeo Drive break the internet? I don't think so. No matter how funny the robot is, people would know that there is no personality, no emotion, behind its actions. Humans are interested in other humans.

There is a reason why my curiosity piques when I see the name Simon Rich in a Time article or why movie promotions say “From the mind that brought you Bikini Shark Island 1, Get ready for ... Bikini Shark Island 2.”

Am I upset that the concept of making a living through writing is drastically changing? Yes. But I don’t think human writing will disappear entirely. Humanity’s desire to read human writing will never go away. As a writer, I am hopeful that I can continue to do what I love and receive attention within the field. Code-davinci-002 may generate a killer parody headline, but it lacks something that will allow it to progress beyond that. It’s the same reason millions of people love watching Larry David get annoyed, or why David Sedaris books fly off the shelves. It’s an obsession with the person behind the art — the lived experience associated with everyone’s unique background — that makes human writing irresistible.

Nicholas Nikcevic is a member of the Class of 2027 and a writer at the Jack-O-Lantern. Opinion articles represent the views of their author(s), which are not necessarily those of The Dartmouth.

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