



Automated Content Writing Tools and the Question of Objectivity

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Published online: 8 November 2023

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The possibilities for text generation with AI are unprecedented, ranging from real-time interaction with the machine directed toward specific writing tasks, such as polishing text for style and grammar, to summarising contents. As I write, these technologies are quite easily accessible, raising interesting questions about useful or legitimate use by students at different levels of education, as well as ones related to our work as academics.

While delegating writing tasks to machines may appear as a panacea, especially regarding “tedious” writing tasks, I wish to offer a few ideas to problematise their (good or less good) use. Let me clarify from the beginning that I’m not suggesting abandoning the use of these technologies; if anything, I am pressing for more discussion on their *purpose*. Another useful clarification: it is misleading to think that questions related to whether, or to what extent, we can or should delegate writing tasks arise *only now*. These questions came to light earlier, with perhaps less “glamorous” technologies, but went unnoticed. Take spell checkers and predictive text tools that have been stock features of word processing and mobile phones for some time. Yet, with respect to generative AI, the change is certainly radical if we think of the machine’s newfound capabilities.

However, such changes lay more in a continuum if we think of our relations with machines more broadly. Specifically, what motivates us to delegate tasks to a machine (analogue or digital)? To reduce effort from our side, to increase the precision of an outcome, or the speed of a process, and most often, a combination of these. In the case of writing tasks, machine writing also allows for the broader and swifter production of content (and thereby its dissemination too). Precision and accuracy are particularly important features of writing, especially in our work as academics, educators, and learners. Yet how *objective* are the modifications the machine suggests, whether it is MS Word, ChatGPT, or Grammarly? Basic spelling mistakes seem straightforward to correct, yet this invites a thorough reflection on basic skills, not only to teach pupils and students but

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also to entertain throughout long-life learning. Within an educational setting, this has implications for assessment since texts with no spelling mistakes are graded higher than ones containing spelling and syntax errors. (Incidentally, what is the difference between handing in a ‘perfect’ text that is proofread by a close relative or friend, rather than Chat GPT?) Let me repeat: this is not an argument *against* the use of (digital) technologies that (partly) automate writing but *for* a thorough reflection on purpose. In turn, questions of purpose need to be accompanied by an epistemological reflection on the nature of knowledge and learning practices — especially considering their distributed and relational character. Simply put, knowledge is not something that we ‘own’ as individuals, but something that we humans produce because of, and thanks to, the interactions with the thinking of other humans, our experiences in an environment, and with tools that have varying degrees of sophistication, from a simple pen to digital technologies automating content writing.

Considerations around more elaborate suggestions from a machine, for conciseness or other types of “favourable” phrasing, are much less straightforward, and the complications increase as we consider delegating the preparation of a summary to a machine. What is at stake here is an important question related to autonomy, one which scholars delving into recommendation systems will easily recognise—how do constant suggestions for writing and rephrasing impact our autonomy as thinkers and writers? Recommendations are part of how knowledge is produced because they show once more the relational and distributed character of knowledge. Yet, how such recommendations are offered and delivered may make a difference. But I want to draw attention to an *epistemological* question that has not yet been given due attention—the question of *objectivity*, which is at the core of methodological reflection across the sciences, including computer science and the humanities. Briefly put, the question is: *to what extent are automated content writing tools’ objective’?* When a generative AI system, or even your word processor, suggests more concise phrasing, this seems to be guided by a supposedly acclaimed epistemic principle that ‘the shorter the better’. But is this the case? Or, what do we lose by missing out on nuances and details in both the writing process and the resultant text?

Suggestions and automatically generated summaries also appeal to non-native speakers, as they supposedly correct their idiosyncratic language mistakes or provide access to otherwise long and complex text. And yet, should we instead cherish such mistakes? The *values* behind the proposed suggestions may differ, and while these technologies *seem* to suggest that standardisation of text is a desirable feature of writing, one could argue that we should preserve and cherish epistemic *diversity*, a value that can be expressed, *inter alia*, through writing and its idiosyncrasies.

At this point, I would like to introduce the concept of *situatedness* as developed in feminist epistemology. Situatedness refers especially to knowledge production and practices and indicates that there is no *objective* knowledge. Instead, any knowledge claim is (also) the product of one’s past experiences, expertise, intentions, goals, and the environment in which one is embedded. In short, *who* and *where* we are significantly contributes to the knowledge we produce—in this case, the text we write. Teachers know that there is no ‘objective summary’ of a text—give the task of summarising a text to your class, and you will get as many different summaries as

the number of students in the class. To cut a long story short, just as we and our writing are situated, so is the machine and its attempts to correct it.

However, perhaps due to our current tendency toward technological rationality, we often erroneously take (sophisticated) algorithms to be exempt from being situated. But machines are not exempt. For one thing, developers and designers of digital technologies have their situatedness and positionality—often (non)intentionally importing these values into new and emerging technologies. For another, the training set used in building a generative AI system also carries a plethora of idiosyncrasies in their training texts. This is not a bad thing! It is precisely this that makes our writing and thinking unceasingly rich. We are thus invited to reflect on the digital society one level up: how do we think about the intertwinement of our situatedness with that of the machines whilst writing *with* machines? Are we worried about a “flattening” of style that would somehow “devalue” the richness of our writing and thinking? Are we hopeful that this intertwinement could give us new flavours and colours to play with when writing? Whilst we’re yet to see answers to these questions—thinking about the intertwinement of our situatedness with these technologies and ensuing relationality opens new ways to reflect on the epistemological underpinnings of the digital society.

We must come to terms with the idea that digital tools for writing are not the holy grail of objectivity. To me, this is not bad news. The bad news is not to be aware of the *illusion* of objectivity and the reduced epistemic diversity stemming from standardised writing.

Where to go from here? The question of purpose remains prominent—*why* would we want machines to correct our writing or even write for us? In answering this why-question, we need to anticipate as many consequences as possible of delegating writing to machines, from the impact on individual literacy skills to a collective flattening of style. Digital technologies offer, once again, an opportunity to shape our future. The financial and reputational impact for R&D for companies (small, medium, or big) is only short-term. Instead, we need to consider a more important and long-term impact at a societal level, which I would encapsulate in the following query: *What type of knowledge society do we want to be?* The answer to this question, among others, depends on crucial choices we will make in the development of digital tools for writing.¹

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¹ In my daily writing, and in my role as teacher and mentor, I am directly confronted with these questions. This text, in particular, has been written making minimal and considerate use of MS Word auto-correction system, and actively seeking for the invaluable suggestions on contents and style by William Gopal.