***'An Infinite Deal of Nothing'[[1]](#footnote-2)*: Critical Ruminations on ChatGPT and the Politics of Language**

“*Mystification is simple; clarity is the hardest thing of all*” - Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot.*

“*If we’re successful, I think it will be the most significant technological transformation in human history…it will eclipse the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, the Internet revolution all put together.*” - Sam Altman, CEO, OpenAI.

ChatGPT is topical. It has made its way into popular imagination faster than Miley Cyrus’ assertion that a woman can, indeed, buy herself flowers. This infiltration into popular cultural imagination owes not just to technological prowess, but also to a collective mysticism that clouds the intellectual borders between science and science fiction. This mysticism is a harking back to Umberto Eco’s argument that technology is a ‘product’ of science. "*Science is different. The mass media confuse with technology and transmit this confusion to their users, who think that everything scientific is technological, effectively unaware of the dimension proper to science, I mean to say that science of which technology is an application and a consequence but not the primary substance. Technology gives you everything instantly; science proceeds slowly*.” (Eco, 2008, p. 105). This ‘swiftness’ is responsible for technology’s kinship with magic. As Eco writes, “This addiction to technology has nothing to do with the practice of science.  It has to do with the eternal resort to *magic*.”(Eco, 2008). Our excitement with ChatGPT, perhaps, owes to this element of the magical in its ability to answer questions, take examinations and spew text that has come to the rescue of many a student struggling to meet a deadline. So much so, that it almost reminds one of a Quick-Quotes Quill[[2]](#footnote-3). As humans explore the wonders of ChatGPT - by asking it to write about losing a sock in a dryer in the style of the Declaration of Independence or construct articles on how to conduct surgeries with churros, there is an imminent need to try and unpack what ChatGPT means for textuality. In this short piece, we examine ChatGPT primarily through the lens of textuality and ponder upon the meaning, politics and construction of generative text. Through this examination, we arrive at three broad ways to understand ChatGPT - Information Asymmetry, Naturalness (or, Natural Interaction), and Personal Control. However, before we embark upon the textuality, we provide a short description of what ChatGPT is and how it works, which will hopefully help us better situate the analysis that follows.

**What, indeed, is ChatGPT?**

ChatGPT is an AI (artificial intelligence) language model based on generative pre-trained transformers (GPT) created by OpenAI. It is trained on a massive text corpus, which may be broadly termed as the ‘internet’ (Marantz, 2023). The company behind ChatGPT, OpenAI, initially started in 2015 as a nonprofit ‘research institution’. The billions of dollars that were pumped into the company were ‘donations’ rather than investments by Silicon Valley megastars including Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Reid Hoffman. In 2019, the company became for-profit, and commenced a partnership with Microsoft (Marantz, 2023; Warren, 2023). To delve into the politics of OpenAI’s transition from research to profit lies beyond the ambit of this article. However, the authors would urge readers to engage with this line of inquiry in a critical manner to grasp what this turn means for AI and its implications for society.

**How Does ChatGPT Work?**

It would not be entirely wrong to suggest that ChatGPT is autocorrect on steroids. It engages in a mass mimicry, what Bender et al (2021) refer to as ‘stochastic parrots’. The system has a vast resource of text that it has learnt from, without understanding. Marcus (2022a) writes, “Knowledge is in part about specific properties of particular entities. GPT’s mimicry draws on vast troves of human text that, for example, often put together subjects [*England*] with predicates [*won 5 Eurovision contests*].” In this piece, we probe the idea of mimicry, connecting it to ideas of mimesis, under the section *‘Naturalness’*. Marcus (2022a) adds that Chat GPT does not understand the linkages between the entities and properties, thus repeating the likeliest string of words rather than making actual connections. This model uses a technique called ‘embedding’ which is immensely useful for substitutions (for example, ChatGPT will be really good at substituting words or summarising content) but it is this very technique which also problematises content generation by divorcing meaning from generation (Davis & Marcus, 2020). The generative nature of meaning also means that it is only going to be the most probable version of text - not necessarily within the ambit of textual and meaningful possibility. The third issue in the manner of how ChatGPT works, is that it ‘never masters abstract relationship’ (Marcus, 2022a; Garnelo & Shanahan, 2019) and ‘stimulate(s) human language’ (Zumstein & Hundertmark, 2017). There continues to be an engaging debate between scientists and thinkers on Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). One camp firmly believes that unless machines are able to comprehend symbol manipulation (Marcus, 2022b), it will not be possible to achieve AGI. The other side (LeCun et al, 2020) advocate for an infinite application of Moore’s Law, where feeding a system increasing amounts of data will ultimately lead to general intelligence. This debate aside, it is clear in this iteration of ChatGPT that it is yet to understand language in a manner that enables communication. Human utterances are ‘grounded in the real world’, meaning that it combines bits of information that humans have earlier generated (its training material).

Considering what ChatGPT is, and how it works, it is important to critically look at what it does to language, our understanding of it and textuality. This is also a bid to demystify what ChatGPT is and what it does - especially owing to the tall claims of OpenAI and how it is being hailed, among other things, the ‘Google Killer’, the tool that would render content writing irrelevant or the next big thing in technology. ChatGPT is definitely a leap in chatbots. It remembers, summarises better, and often, even contextualises correctly. However, artificial intelligence as a concept in technology is one that has already made bigger promises than it has delivered[[3]](#footnote-4).

Thus, in the following sections, we attempt to probe a bit further into the demystification of ChatGPT, using notions of critical theory to contextualise what it means for textuality within three broad concepts:

1. **Information Asymmetry**

*“The fabulous and the phantasmatic have a feature in common: stricto sensu, in the classical and prevalent sense of these terms, they do not pertain to either the true or the false, the veracious or the mendacious. They are related, rather, to an irreducible species of the simulacrum or even of simulation, in the penumbral light of a virtuality that is neither being nor nothingness, nor even an order of the possible that an ontology or a mimetology could account for or subdue with reason. No more than myth, fable and phantasm are doubtless not truths or true statements as such, but neither are they errors or deceptions, false witnesses or perjuries.” -* Jacques Derrida, *History of the Lie: Prolegomena.*

Information asymmetry, defined as an imbalance of knowledge between two parties (Akerlof 1970), is the first theoretical concern with ChatGPT that this article will outline. Critics of ChatGPT, including Gary Marcus and Noam Chomsky, have indicated that it is the ‘king of pastiche’ (Marcus, 2022a). The understanding is that ChatGPT is a large-scale copy paste autocorrect generator, that mimics human language. It is not a random text generator, like the wildly entertaining Postmodernism Generator based on the DADA Engine[[4]](#footnote-5). Instead, it combines text that has already been generated by humans. The obvious concerns about it being a plagiarism engine (Chomsky, 2023) aside, the process itself results in the loss of context and meaning. Marcus (2023) evokes Harry Frankfurt’s philosophisation of ‘bullshit’ while discussing ChatGPT. Frankfurt (2005) defines bullshit as communication intended to persuade without any regard for truth. The critical distinction between lies and bullshit is that the former has a relationship to truth-value while the latter has no regard for it. Lies have the intent of deviating from the truth, while bullshit has no such concern. Bullshit is focused on deception - steering away from truth insofar as the objective of persuasive communication is met. Bullshit is neither veracious nor mendacious, it is merely functional. In a post-truth (Jayson, 2018) era, a tool that expertly crafts bullshit with no relationship to truth value posits immense danger to any text. Whether it is the summary of a philosophical treatise that a graduate student refers to instead of the text itself, an analysis of an election or the political position of a certain leader - bullshit poses more danger than the outright lie. When ChatGPT provides a mathematical solution to a problem that is outrightly and outrageously wrong, there still is a calculator to prove otherwise. However, in the context of religion, politics or culture, where exactitude is ever dangerous and opinion formation is critical, a tool like ChatGPT could be immensely powerful in the hands of the wrong entity. Considering it was built for research by a once non-profit company that is now in the hands of the mega-tech in the age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2017), the agenda setting of ChatGPT and its generative text poses a major challenge for our democratic systems. Cambridge Analytica has already shown how influential technology can be in opinion manipulation, and the potential of mass-scale information asymmetry that ChatGPT posits should be a key ingredient in any critical inquiry today.

In the context of an AI language model like ChatGPT, the problem of asymmetrical information arises because the makers of the technology and the users of the technology do not have equal amounts of information required to make an informed decision about the content generated by the language model. The creator(s) of the language model is(are) usually aware of the flaws and shortcomings of the model and that it may often be unable to provide output that is correct (e.g., mathematical) or critically engages with a topic (e.g., social). Potential users, however, typically do not have this knowledge, since they are not privy to the insights that the creator has. In a marketplace for information, where large language models promise superior information over other existing options (e.g., libraries), inferior information provided by such language models may lead to a lowering of value provided to the user; it may also keep superior options from being accessed by the user.

Deep Learning, on which GPT is based, is fundamentally a pattern recognition technique built on multiple layers of data. Deep Learning powered language models have been recently referred to as ‘stochastic parrots’ by AI researchers (Bender, Gebru et al, 2021) precisely because it understands little, but regurgitates a lot. This leads to unreliability. For example, when it comes to driverless cars, deep learning systems like Tesla’s ‘Full Self-Driving Mode’ have committed errors like this:

*“A Tesla in so-called “Full Self Driving Mode” [encountered](https://youtu.be/RVkLI9pPd24?t=166) a person holding up a stop sign in the middle of a road. The car failed to recognize the person (partly obscured by the stop sign) and the stop sign (out of its usual context on the side of a road); the human driver had to take over. The scene was far enough outside of the training database that the system had no idea what to do.”* (Marcus, 2022b).

Similar examples abound in AI and Deep Learning literature, constantly pointing to the problem of the outlier in a dataset. This also remains as the single most convincing argument against constantly increasing the size of the data that is fed to the model - a path that is glorified by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. Altman has famously argued in ‘Moore’s Law for Everything’ (Altman, 2021) that “In the next five years, computer programs that can think will read legal documents and give medical advice. In the next decade, they will do assembly-line work and maybe even become companions. And in the decades after that, they will do almost everything, including making new scientific discoveries that will expand our concept of “everything.” And this will be achieved by feeding it with more and more data. This ‘scaling argument’ has one major issue - the lack of true comprehension. More data might mean slightly more fluent at what they do, but not more accurate or trustworthy. In other words, more data does not, at any cost, guarantee truth value – or, superior information.

The methodology of deep learning, likened to pastiche by LLM’s most prominent critics, also requires examination. More akin to the post-structuralist bricolage, this method in itself is suspect when it comes to generative language. Pastiche, according to Jameson (1989), is “parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language”. As a marker of postmodern textuality, pastiche contains within itself an irreverent politics, a ‘cannibalisation of styles’, as it goes. Pastiche is also essential to the simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994), since it problematises history by crafting texts of patchwork from anomalous times. This, in itself, embeds a kind of impish politics of acute irreverence. However, when a machine adopts pastiche as method devoid of the politics of pastiche, it becomes misinformation without taste. Subtracting the radicalism from the method of patchwork leaves it as a space of generative text within the simulacra without the politics of content. Thereby, crafting a recipe of information asymmetry that is dangerous in its non-affiliation to any kind of textual politics. This lends to the next point of contention - personal control. When generative text propagates information asymmetry without the politics of pastiche, it situated the end-user in a space of simulated summaries without any notion of control over the origin of content.

1. **Personal Control**

Control is the power to make decisions about how something may be managed/done (Ehrenbrink & Möller, 2018). Personal control brings together perception and actual control (Puntoni et al., 2021). Researchers have investigated how new technologies may enhance or diminish users' perceptions of being in control of their choices (André et al., 2018).

When we ask ChatGPT to do something, the cursor blinks mysteriously. In the imagination of the user, the spectre of technology is at work while we wait fleetingly for answers. ChatGPT gloriously mimics what it may be like to talk to a real person. The key difference between this and a search engine like Google is the exactitude of information. This is not to say that search engines necessarily give information that is correct - but only to assert that the information from search engines are cited. ChatGPT carefully avoids any citation at all, giving us what Ted Chiang refers to as a ‘blurry JPEG of the web’ (Chiang, 2023). The proliferation of technology means that surveillance capitalism is at its peak. Data is the new gold, and everything from our purchases to our economies seem to revolve around it. Information is a precious resource, and putting concrete information behind a paywall is what may be the strategic finance model of the future. Imagine a scenario where you only had ChatGPT for information, and had to pay for actual citations. The blurry JPG would be all you got, and only a premium subscription would guarantee a clearer picture. While this may seem wildly alarmist today, the gradual decrease in end user control over data does not entirely put this scenario in the science fiction zone.

The commodification of information is closely linked to the ‘beautification’ of information. Almost like civic landscape gardening, ChatGPT offers to neatly package content in a palatable manner to you, without disclosing how it works. Yet another example of the increasing black-boxification of technology, this posits a dangerous precedent. Globalisation has long been driven by a reduction of knowledge that is simplified to make it more understandable. Critics of global capital have long argued that the simplification of information is related to its commoditisation, and leads to the manufacturing of consent (Herman & Chomsky, 2003).

The heterogeneity of language and text through which language games (Wittgenstein, 1973; Lyotard, 1985) work, are faced with the threat of a summarising uniformity which takes away any control of information from the end-user. This eerily opens up the possibility of a ‘technocratic language game’ (Lyotard, 1985) that operates on ‘informational commodities’.

The implication of this in mass producing fake news and propaganda with very little labour cost is imminent - and needs urgent critical inquiry. This notion lends to the transition to our third concept - that of naturalness (or natural interaction). Countless end users have already commented on the eerie similarities between ChatGPT and human generated content. Apart from the ‘hallucinations’ (Smith, 2023) and glitches, ChatGPT largely appears to generate believable content. That it does so is part of the concern with loss of end user control. In the following section, we elaborate and ponder upon what naturalness means in the context of textuality.

1. **Naturalness:**

Natural human-machine interaction (also known as natural interaction) in human information processing, focuses on incorporating human language and behaviour into technological applications, paying attention to how people live, work, play, and communicate with one another. "Natural" is frequently used to refer to things that come naturally to people and are understood and applied based on self-awareness, prior experience, and observations. For example, voice interaction systems like Alexa and Siri have enhanced the naturalness of human-machine interactions (Brill et al. 2019). The question-answer format – that is, a conversation-based interaction marks the naturalness of interacting with ChatGPT.

In previous sections, we have elaborated upon how ChatGPT works. The text that it generates after sifting through massive amounts of data is a result of mimicry of human content, or imitation. In critical traditions of understanding aesthetics, the notion of imitation and mimesis is essential to understanding the nature of art. In Aristotle, mimesis is considered to be inherent to human nature - a method of communicating experience through representation - something deeply embedded in the human process of creativity. Later theorisations of mimesis by Benjamin (1989), Adorno (1998) and others have added perspectives of social praxis and inter-relationality to the process. Benjamin (1989) speaks of mimesis as a human faculty rooted in representation and expression. The constant urge for ‘sensuous similarity’ or a referent is what drives human creativity. Benjamin (1986) writes, “*In this way language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic*.” The search for kinship and community is what drives human mimesis, according to Benjamin and Adorno. Taussig (1993) suggests that mimesis as mimicry opens up “*a tactile experience of the world in which the Cartesian categories of subject and object are not firm, but rather malleable; paradoxically, difference is created by making oneself similar to something else by mimetic "imitation"*.  Observing subjects thus assimilate themselves to the objective world rather than anthropomorphizing it in their own image”. This notion of mimesis, thus, is radically different from how ChatGPT mimics human text. Lots of data (the endless Moore’s law method) need not necessarily generate text that is meaningful.

Magic is viewed as a prehistorical mimetic model where identification with an aggressor results in immunization. Mimesis involves actively making oneself similar to an Other, rather than simply imitating. Adorno's discussion of mimesis dissociates it from a definition of imitation. Adorno and Horkheimer (2007) argue that mimesis, once a dominant practice, has been transformed by Enlightenment science into a repressed presence in Western history, where individuals yield to nature and lose themselves in the surrounding world. However, artworks offer a possibility to revise or neutralize the domination of nature. Art provides a refuge for mimetic behavior that assimilates social reality without subordinating nature. On the other hand, Derrida (1998) uses the concept of mimesis in relation to texts, which are always doubled and refer to something that has preceded them. The mimetic text lacks an original model and requires deconstruction due to its inherent intertextuality. Mimesis contributes to a profusion of images, words, thoughts, theories, and actions without itself becoming tangible. It resists theory and constructs a world of illusion, appearances, aesthetics, and images, which appropriate, change, and reinterpret existing worlds. Images are part of our material existence but also bind our experience of reality to subjectivity, connoting a sensuous experience beyond reference to reality.

The mimetic text, thus, like the methodology of pastiche and bricolage, are situated within a politics of the human condition. The desert of the real (Baudrillard, 1994) that the text often harks forward to, is an illusory simulacrum. This constant deferral embodies the politics of the textual utterance - the incessant deferral of meaning (Derrida, 1998). This mimesis in itself, thus, is a natural textuality of human expression. What ChatGPT is mimicking is essentially an infinite copy of the copy of the copy… a textual impossibility that only holds the promise of escape from the uncanny valley, never really breaking the event horizon unless symbol manipulation is achieved.

Symbol manipulation, as opposed to deep learning, is the methodology that suggests intelligent behaviour will emerge from understanding abstraction - a quality of meaning making that comes quite ‘naturally’ to humans. Manipulating symbols has long been the holy grail of traditional computer science - from Turing to von Neumann - but is an idea that has been vigorously critiqued by those who place their bets on deep learning. Marcus (2022b) writes that “T*he deep learning hope—seemingly grounded not so much in science, but in a sort of historical grudge—is that intelligent behavior will emerge purely from the confluence of massive data and deep learning. Where classical computers and software solve tasks by defining sets of symbol-manipulating rules dedicated to particular jobs, such as editing a line in a word processor or performing a calculation in a spreadsheet, neural networks typically try to solve tasks by statistical approximation and learning from examples. Because neural networks have achieved so much so fast, in speech recognition, photo tagging, and so forth, many deep-learning proponents have written symbols off.”*

Naturalness is perhaps the only check and balance left for content manipulation.

**Conclusion**

ChatGPT works fine and is pretty convincing… until it doesn’t. The break in immersion happens with great immediacy and often, with hilarity, once the bot makes a mistake. These mistakes quickly break the illusion of ‘magic’ - the prestige. Once this is broken, the text loses its aura (Benjamin, 1986) and the whole cycle begins anew. As large language models hold out a promise of superior information at minimum information processing cost, users may be lulled into accepting this promise without adequate evaluation of the information provided. As discussed in this short piece, the user is often not adequately equipped to evaluate the information as a result of information asymmetry and lack of personal control, while naturalness of interaction with such models contributes to the enhanced adoption of such technology. Such interactions are likely to have implications for management and business ethics. We hope that some of the issues delineated in this article provide a set of future research directions that researchers investigate and expand on this thread of conversation.

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1. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, (India: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010). Line 121, Act I, Scene I. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A magical quill in the *Harry Potter* universe that self-generates text. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “Few fields have been more filled with hype and bravado than artificial intelligence. It has flitted from fad to fad decade by decade, always promising the moon, and only occasionally delivering. One minute it was expert systems, next it was Bayesian networks, and then Support Vector Machines. In 2011, it was IBM’s Watson, once pitched as a revolution in medicine, more recently [sold for parts](https://www.statnews.com/2022/01/21/ibm-watson-health-sale-equity/). Nowadays, and in fact ever since 2012, the flavor of choice has been deep learning, the multibillion-dollar technique that drives so much of contemporary AI and which Hinton helped pioneer: He’s been cited an astonishing half-million times and won, with Yoshua Bengio and Yann LeCun, the 2018 Turing Award. Like AI pioneers before him, Hinton frequently heralds the Great Revolution that is coming. Radiology is just part of it.” Quoted from Gary Marcus, *Deep Learning is Hitting a Wall*, Nautilus. <https://nautil.us/deep-learning-is-hitting-a-wall-238440/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. A computer programme that produces imitations of postmodernist writing. It was developed by Andrew Bulhak (Monash University) in 1996. See <https://www.elsewhere.org/journal/wp-content/uploads/2005/11/tr-cs96-264.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)