

GLOBE & MAIL Opinion - Will the pen be mightier than AI?

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With the sudden breakthroughs in [artificial intelligence](#) of the last year has come, for those of us in the writing trade, a sudden realization: the robots have come for us, at last.

Previously our thinking on AI had been confined to noting how, after centuries of replacing one blue-collar trade after another, technology was about to replace the white-collar trades as well. We meant, of course, lawyers, accountants and other obvious parasites on society. It never occurred to us that we gentle hacks might also be among the newly obsolete.

And yet what was the recent Hollywood writers strike about but our replaceability? The strike ended in [a modest victory](#): while writers will be allowed to make use of AI, the robots will not be allowed into the writers room. But it felt like a rearguard action, as doomed in the long run as those 18th-century weavers attacking the spinning machines.

Of course, given the other potential harms associated with AI, up to and including the extinction of the human race, whether Fast and Furious XI: Dominic's Way is drafted in a few months by a couple of overpaid thirty-somethings or in 20 seconds by a computer may not seem the most pressing issue before us. Still, I can't help worrying that something precious and irreplaceable is about to be lost, beyond my precious and irreplaceable salary. Doubtless the weavers felt the same.

I tend to be a [techno-optimist](#), at least when it is other people's jobs on the line. In all previous waves of technological change, that is, the jobs lost have been more than offset by the jobs created, usually better ones. Higher productivity from automation leads to higher income leads to more consumption leads to more jobs. There is no fixed amount of work to be done.

The replacement of physical labour by machines, what is more, was often beneficial in itself, even if it did not feel that way at the time. The jobs that most of our ancestors did were back-breaking, dangerous, often fatal. That the broad mass of people are no longer obliged to work in the fields or the mines or in the "dark satanic mills" typical of early industrialization is on balance a good thing.

Can the same be said when it comes to writing? Language is hard-wired into us. Writing is how we do our best thinking – as Joan Didion observed, "I don't know what I think until I write it down" – and thinking is what makes us human.

Granted, we've already off-loaded some of our thinking to machines: the calculator, for example. But something is lost even here. As James Somers (presumably) [writes](#) in the New Yorker, "Google Maps has made us all perfect navigators, except that we never really know where we are." What happens when we no longer rely on our own thoughts to address more complex problems?

Probably it won't come to that, or not yet. The most sophisticated works of AI still fall well short of the best human writing. They are clever, but obvious. They are capable, just, of humour, but not (the new Turing test?) of making you laugh. Ambiguity is beyond them, as are those inexplicable leaps of intuition we call genius.

And of course the whole world of authentic flesh-and-blood human experience – emotions, memories, pleasures, pains – is closed to them. At best they can produce a simulacrum of them, and while that's true of many human writers, too, it is not hard to spot it.

Still, I remember when we said the same thing about computers playing chess. The technology is still in its infancy. In a few years, we may no longer be able to tell the difference. What then?

Most likely the first writing to be replaced will be the kind of generic boilerplate that might as well be produced by a machine: operating manuals, advertising, music reviews. It may be that writers, as such, will come to occupy the same niche that artisans and craftsmen do today, with the same "handmade" cachet: higher quality, more distinctive, more ... human.

Even if AI comes to excel us at all types of writing, we may yet be saved by a kind of comparative advantage: it will still make sense for the AI to specialize at what it is "most best" at. The best writing may be produced neither entirely by computer nor by humans, but by the two combined, harnessing the relative strengths of either.

For however it is produced, some writing will always be better than other writing. Who says? You, the reader. It may be possible to teach a computer to write, but only a human can feel the pleasure of reading. Or the pain.