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A matter of meaning, life and death. Text, AI and the human condition

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Una cuestión de sentido, vida y muerte. Texto, IA y la condición humana

ABSTRACT RESUMEN

The main reason for concerns about the social impact of AI textual functions relate not primarily to the labour market or education, but to the political economy of meaning. The starting point of this critique is the analysis of 'artificial intelligence' as a metaphor that hide and mystifies fundamental differences between human and AI textual functions. This metaphor reduces intelligence to its computational and instrumental aspects and establishes instrumental rationality as a normative model for human intelligence. Contra these implications, I argue the case for the revaluation of meaning-making and textual functions of intelligence as an adaptive response to the problem of death which is uniquely human. These functions are politically relevant because human texts are the tools for the transformation of the subjective experience of life and death into the intersubjective sense of reality. To delegate these functions to advanced forms of computational technology is tempting but risky because the expurgation of subjectivity and, more broadly, the suppression of the dilemmas constituting the human conditions, weakens fundamental evolutionary competences, enhance the oppressive potential of instrumental reason and leads to the unfreedom of the post-political condition.

La principal razón de preocupación sobre el impacto social de las funciones textuales de la IA no tiene que ver con el mercado laboral o la educación, sino en la economía política del significado. El punto de partida de esta crítica reside en considerar la "inteligencia artificial" como una metáfora que oculta y mistifica las diferencias fundamentales entre las funciones textuales de la IA y los humanos. Esta metáfora reduce la inteligencia a sus aspectos computacionales e instrumentales, y establece la racionalidad instrumental como un modelo normativo para la inteligencia humana. Contra estas implicaciones, defiendiendo la revalorización de la creación de significado y las funciones textuales de la inteligencia como una respuesta adaptativa al problema de la muerte, que es exclusivamente humano. Estas funciones son políticamente relevantes porque los textos humanos son las herramientas para la transformación de la experiencia subjetiva de la vida y la muerte en el sentido intersubjetivo de la realidad. Delegar estas funciones a formas avanzadas de tecnología computacional es tentador pero arriesgado porque la expurgación de la subjetividad y, más ampliamente, la supresión de los dilemas que constituyen la condición humana debilita las competencias evolutivas fundamentales, aumenta el potencial opresivo de la razón instrumental y conduce a la falta de libertad de la condición post-política.

KEYWORDS PALABRAS CLAVE

Artificial intelligence; AI; Functional literacy; Death; Meaning of life; Poitics of the real; Instrumental rationality.

Inteligencia artificial; IA; Alfabetización funcional; Muerte; Sentido de la vida; Política de lo real; racionalidad instrumental.

1. Introduction

The release of advanced chatbot applications by techno giants already notorious for engaging in surveillance capitalism, has stirred concerns for the possibility of mass unemployment in the cultural industries and mass cheating in education. A more serious concern is the impact of these functionalities on the political economy of meaning: the competition over the meaning of the experience of life and death that is constitutive of the communicative construction of reality.

I argue the following points. First, the notion of 'artificial intelligence' is a metaphor that while describing a computational technology also establishes a normative ideal for human intelligence. Second, as texts play a fundamental role in the social construction of reality, differences pertaining to the human and AI textual functions are important. Subjectivity and the experience of death are constitutive and unique aspects of human intelligence that are expurgated and suppressed by AI technologies applied to textual production. Finally, in this perspective, reasons for concern do not relate primarily to the labour market or education (e.g. increase unemployment or cheating in education) but, more radically, to the political economy of meaning: the competition for the control over the production and organization of meaning. I discuss these risks in the terms of the expurgation of subjectivity and the suppression of death in the 'sense-making' process associated with the social construction of reality.

2. The metaphor of AI and its implications

Artificial intelligence is a notion describing computational technologies through a metaphoric linkage with human intelligence. Like every metaphoric association, also this one simplifies the understanding of a rather complex object but, at the same time, establishes associations that influence the way we think about this object and its social effects. More precisely: 1) it reduces intelligence to its computational or instrumental aspects and 2) it puts these instrumental aspects to the core of ideal cognitive models for human behaviour.

The first problem with this metaphor is the false equivalence between human intelligence and computing in which the latter is construed as a prosthetic supplement that can be functional to and perhaps even outperform its organic equivalent. As Willcocks effectively put it, "The harsh truth is: if it's artificial, it's not intelligent; if it's intelligent, it's not artificial." (Willcocks, 2020) [On the same note (Lee, 2020)]

The second problem is the bidirectionality of the metaphoric linkage. For example, in the metaphor 'war is love', the overt message is about love but the latent one is about war (Stocchetti, 2009). In the metaphor 'artificial intelligence', the overt message is about "machines as smart and useful as human" but the implicit one is about "humans as smart and useful as

machines". Bidirectionality allows for the shift in representation of AI from 'tool' to 'model' for human intelligence. The consequences of this shift are critical. By setting a model for human intelligence, AI participates to the myth of technological determinism, the legitimization of 'instrumental rationality', the expurgation of subjectivities and the suppression of death from the communicative construction of reality.

'Artificial intelligence is not intelligent' (Mims, 2021) and since communicative affordances associated with the naturalization of this metaphor are dangerous, the suggestion is to 'chase new metaphors for artificial intelligence' (Boucher, 2021) (see also Noble, 2023). By describing advanced computational functions in the terms of human reasoning, this metaphor implicitly reduces human reasoning to its computational functions. More fundamentally, this metaphor hides the fact that the fundamental function of human intelligence has not to do with computational logic but with the capacity to find meaning where there is none.

3. Texts, death and intersubjectivity

The metaphor of AI contributes to hide at least two key differences relating to the human and artificial textual functions. First, we create meanings where there's none because the creation of meaning is an adaptive response to the problem of death which is uniquely human. Second, we use texts as tools for the transformation of the subjective experience of reality (i.e. life and death) into the intersubjective (sense of) reality. The same metaphor, however, also hides the question of the deeper human need feeding the efforts to build an artificial 'intelligence'.

The relationship between the meaning of life and the experience of death is one of the oldest documented intellectual concerns of humanity. In modern times, writing during WW1, Freud argued that the unconscious attitude toward death and the repression of the fear of death have had regressive effects on civilization. Paraphrasing the famous saying '*si vis pacem para bellum*', Freud recommended '*si vis vitam, para mortem*'. (Freud, 1959, p. 317). In line with Freud, Becker argued that "of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death". (Becker, 1973, p. 11) and identified the 'impossible paradox' of human condition: "the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life". (Becker, 1973). My suggestion here is that human production of text is a key element in the evolutionary response to the problem described by this paradox¹. In other words, for humans the production of text is, almost literally a matter of life and death.

Humans find meaning where there is none and express it through texts. For millennia we have interpreted natural phenomena as texts that could tell us something important about

the concerns of our lives. We created entire social orders and cosmologies around the meanings we gave to events that had no meaning in themselves because, in that way, we could live despite the problem of death. This inclination to find meaning where there is none is an excellent evolutionary, epistemic response to the problem of adaptation and survival to the challenges of the natural and social environments. The common experience of death feeds the need for individual sense-making and subjective textual competences. The interplay of subjectivities, through the mediation of the text, creates intersubjective realities as impermanent conditions addressing the present without precluding alternative realities and, ultimately, hope in the future. To the extent that both the experience of death and the textual competence to tackle it are in place, the possibility for different intersubjectivities and alternative realities will also exist.

The problem of meaning is thus distinctive to the logic of human textual competences. These competences are an adaptive result to the ultimate challenge of death or, more precisely, to the problem of making sense of something that cannot be made sense of. Instead, AI produces text autonomously: without the interest nor the ability to care about the purpose and effects of its text, and without moral responsibility – the later a distinctive feature of democratic communication. The problem is not if AI can write a symphony – it probably can – but the actual meaning of that piece of music beyond its commercial usage. *Outside the logic of the culture industry, the main function of AI consists of the meaningless production of meaning.*

By hiding fundamental differences relating to meaning, however, the AI metaphor also contributes to hide the unconscious needs driving the development of AI. According to Possati, this need is projective identification: a process in which “the human being translates parts of itself into AI and asks AI for an answer, a treatment of these parts, and AI can reply in a useful and meaningful way.” The rationale for projective identification seems to be a defensive one as this process allows one to “step back from himself or herself” creating a distance “that helps the projector endure a stressful situation.” (Possati, 2021, p. 62).

Could it be that this “stressful situation” is a result of the suppression of (the fear of) death?

By keeping this need unconscious, the metaphor of AI undermines the possibility to look deeper into the causes of this ‘stressful situation’, the hidden forces at play in the frantic efforts in AI development and the implications of this move on the intersubjective construction of (the sense of) reality.

4. Texts and the politics of the real

The false equivalence between human and AI texts reflects unconscious needs but is supported by the ideological bias of

interpreting text as a commodity to appreciate for its exchange rather than its use value, as testimony of the experience of life. In the terms of Baudrillard, we have become accustomed to the logic of ‘symbolic exchange’ of the capitalist political economy and the experience of ‘death’ associated with it (Baudrillard, 1993/2017).

While for us, texts are the communicative tools necessary to express our humanity in the intersubjective construction of reality, for AI a text is the output of a computational process independent from both expressive needs and the need of (a sense of) reality. The obvious difference, in other words, is obfuscated by the suppression of projective identification and facilitated by the influence of an ideology in which the textual functions of AI are appealing as palliative meaning-making for the experience of life in conditions that have been deprived of meaning by the effacement of death necessary to the enforcement of the free-market utopia.²

The charm of AI consists in its function as ‘prosthetic God’, a notion that Freud discussed in *Civilization and Its Discontent* (Freud, 1930/2005) (Millar, 2021, p. 59) and the risks associated with it may go well beyond that of the obsolescence of the author in the cultural industries or the decline of the essay as a signifier of achieved learning objectives. Concerns about obsolescence and fascination with the hermeneutics of the posthuman participate to the construction of the ‘reality’ of AI. The social meaning of its textual affordances, however, consists in their participation to the process that constitutes the condition we call ‘reality’ and in the competition for the control of its features. This condition is politically important but not above politics itself. As Carey argued “reality is, above all, a scarce resource... The fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display this resource.” (Carey, 1988, p. 87). The politics of the real, thus, is a notion that describe the efforts of competing actors to control what Goffman described as ‘the sense of reality’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 2).

Concerns about the textual affordances of AI are justified because texts play a fundamental role in the social construction of reality, and textual competences are key in the competition for the control over this process. The possibility to transform the subjective experience of reality into an intersubjective sense of reality, depends on the effective solution of a problem that is political in its essence as the relative influence of subjective experiences in this process ultimately depends on the distribution of power in society. When inequalities in the distribution of power increase, the social construction of an intersubjective sense of the real becomes more problematic, leading to the ‘epistemic crisis of democracy’ (Dahlgren, 2018). In this condition, the appeal of AI consists in the illusion of objectivity produced through texts endowed with meanings purified by the bias of particulars. This is an illusion because AI and its algorithmic soul reflect the bias of its data (Possati, 2021, p. 86). But is an illusion supported by the dangerous (and

'modern') belief that humanity can be found in universals, rather than in particulars: in some elusive 'essence' distilled from the purification of subjectivity from the individual experience of life.

This 'expurgation of subjectivity' is another way to describe the effects of the myth of the enlightenment on the possibility of human emancipation. In this myth, instrumental reason becomes an end in itself, leading to the abolition of "the transcendental subject" and its replacement "by the operations of the automatic mechanisms of order, which therefore run all the more smoothly". (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, p. 23). If the expurgation of subjectivity is construed as a necessary step towards the perfection of reason confined within its 'instrumental' functions, the possibility of artificial reason – that is, a reason liberated from the organic burden of subjectivity and the problem of death – becomes an obvious ideal. In this perspective, the fascination with and the relentless efforts to develop a truly (non-metaphoric) 'artificial intelligence' appears a response to the anxiety associated with the vacuum left by the enlightenment and its dilemmas. (De)construed as 'artificial reason', AI is then *the instrument for making sense of reality independently from the subjective experiences of those who live it*. In this way, AI textual functionalities contribute to the expurgation of subjectivities and dissolution of the competition for (the sense of) reality into the post-political condition.

5. What has to be done?

The main reason for concern about the textual affordances of AI relates to the political economy of meaning: the competition for the control over the organization of meaning and the communicative construction of the intersubjective sense of reality.

The founding fathers of media ecology (Mumford, 1934) (Innis, 1950/1986) (Innis, 1951/2008) (McLuhan, 1964/1994) (Ellul, 1964) long since discovered that technology gives with one hand and take with the other. In our days of multiple crisis (including the combined decline of functional literacy and democratic ideals), the textual affordances of AI may seem appealing as a form of escape from freedom experienced as insecurity (Fromm, 1942/2003).

The metaphoric construction of computational technologies as a surrogate "intelligence" and the development of AI textual functions are tempting but dangerous solutions to the fundamental problem of human condition. The appeal of this solutions reflects the influence of technological determinism and its myth. This myth is enforced to support a condition in which questions relating to the meaning of human life and the fear of death are suppressed by the ideological influence of the free-market utopia.

Meaning-making functions are constitutive of humanity: of what it means to be human but also of the distinctive way

the problem of death is dealt with through the constitution of society and the intersubjective reality that legitimize the organization of the social order. To delegate these functions to advanced forms of computational technology will expurgate subjectivity and strengthen the role of instrumental rationality and its oppressive affordances. It will further suppress the problem of death in the experience of life, accelerate the decline of textual competences necessary to imagining alternative futures, and ultimately bring about the regime of unfreedom associated with the post-political condition and forms of social control with deep epistemic roots, very hard to subvert and terrible to endure for most of those experiencing it.

The fundamental appeal of AI, its utopia, in other words, hides the dystopia of a world in which optimal solutions expropriate people of the responsibility of tackling the problem of meaning and the price of freedom, relegating both to the logic of instrumental reason.

The impossibility of mistakes, confusion, incoherencies, and contradictions that populates human experience of life will efface also the desire to learn and communicate this experience. The establishment of a computationally perfect present will eradicate the capacity to desire alternative futures. In this world, imagination becomes useless and rebellion impossible.

The wide array of conceptual tools to address this challenge on intellectual grounds (e.g. Critical theory of technology, (Feenberg, 2009) Critical AI studies, (Dyer-Witthof, Mikkola Kjøsen, & Steinhoff, 2019) (Roberge & Castelle, 2021) critical post-humanism (Herbrechter, 2018) are rather useless without the 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1974/2013) of the oppressive potential of the AI metaphor and the myth associated with it. This is why the role of education is crucial. The real challenge is not to tackle cheating but making cheating useless by opposing the toxic effects of performative pedagogy, the subordination of education to the 'needs' of the labour market, the tendency to consider meaning-making as a burden rather than the distinctive way we control our reality. We must resist the influence of ideologies that command compliance with a dehumanized reality in which freedom is experienced as insecurity. We must learn to live in a reality of our making. Not giving up responsibility but learn to handle that; not to automate moral dilemmas to avoid the trouble of their resolution and the pain of their results but learning to live with both troubles and pain. Not to escape freedom and its dilemmas but learning to appreciate its fruits.

Endnotes

1. Another key element is the 'tragic optimism' described by Frankl in his famous book on the experience of concentration camps (Frankl, 1959/1984)
2. This effacement is necessary to the devaluation of labour-time and the support of consumerism. If people would not suppress the awareness of death, in other words, people would be less inclined

to sell their labour for cheap but also to waste the money acquired by giving up lifetime into buying unnecessary commodities.

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