

# AI is not empowering

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Early in the first part of his recent book, *The Message*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing to his former students at Howard University, reflects on what made this particular cohort and their relationship with him special, honing in on Howard's importance as a university "founded to combat the long shadow of slavery—a shadow that we understood had not yet retreated."

For his students as for himself, Coates saw that "we could never practice writing solely for the craft itself, but must necessarily believe our practice to be in service of that larger emancipatory mandate," and that "For you there can be no real distance between writing and politics."

Lately, with the ascendance of tech bros into Trump's administration, as well as the uncontained force and effects of Generative AI in all avenues of society and life, but especially, it seems, in education, the political, economic, and cultural effects of GenAI are brought into ever sharper relief. As usual, business and industry titans are most interested in convincing us that the eventual usurpation of not only our most mundane tasks, but apparently the creation of art, music, and literature, by AI applications and algorithms, is not only inevitable, but desirable as well.

However, these technologies are not built to empower us, but to supplant us, to center ever more of production into the hands of the few. This runs counter to consistent calls for teaching critical thinking and digital literacy in education. It is hard to ask students to be critical and thoughtful, to engage with ideas honestly and openly if we are at the same time putting tools in their hands that hallucinate and make thinking and creativity an afterthought.

Take, for example, a recent opinion piece in *The New York Times*, by LinkedIn co-founder, Microsoft board member, and early funder of OpenAI, Reid Hoffman. Representative of the "it's-inevitable-and-I-stand-to-make-a-lot-of-money-from-this-so-let's-be-positive" AI school of thought currently en vogue, Hoffman's article paints a rosy picture of ChatGPT's "quirky charm" and its "flashes of epiphany."

After openly acknowledging his "personal stake in the future of artificial intelligence," Hoffman goes on to tout his belief that "by giving billions of people access to A.I. tools they can use in whatever ways they choose, we can create a world where A.I. augments and amplifies human creativity and labor instead of simply replacing it."

Lovely, for sure, but history, from the time of King Ludd in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the gig work of today tells us that capital has only used time and labor saving technologies to consolidate power, line its pockets, and control an unruly populace seeking such outlandish desires as housing, bread, and a dignified life where they have a say over their labor and leisure, free from violence and oppression.

As with most articles touting the prospective benefits of artificial intelligence despite its infancy on the world stage, Hoffman's analysis is scant on the details of how we will arrive at this future world where the "billions of people" given access to this technology will have the time and luxury to use it in "whatever way they choose."

Will the powers that give us this technology also give us a reality in which all humans and nonhumans co-exist in an ecological harmony free from inequality and oppression, where one chooses one's work in a way that feeds their soul, and their leisure time is truly theirs?

And can't what is given just as easily be taken away should those receivers decide to use such technologies to upend the status quo and destroy the world which thrives on their oppression? We'll have to wait a few years to

find out, at least until corporations have wrung every possible penny out of artificial intelligence technology, and the finger pointing on top of the smoky ruins of our planet can commence.

Which is a long way of saying, generative artificial intelligence will not be empowering, at least not until the material circumstances of our world change drastically, and perhaps not even then, given its environmental toll. Which brings me back to Ta-Nehisi Coates and his thinking on writing and its purpose.

Reflecting on what the “finished work” means once it leaves his hands and enters the world, Coates muses that “Writing and rewriting is the attempt to communicate not just a truth but the ecstasy of a truth. It is not enough for me to convince the reader of my argument; I want them to feel that same private joy that I feel alone.” Truth. Ecstasy. Private joy.

Regardless of what wealthy purveyors of tech might say, it seems beyond reason to imagine the sort of feelings that Coates describes above ever coming from or being communicated to us by AI in the revelatory way in which a poet describes a personal loss that transcends space and time to speak to a reader a century or continent away. Or, a journalist on the ground describes the collective joys and sorrows of a people suffering or throwing off the yoke of oppression. Because Generative AI, especially in the forms of Large Language Models (LLMs) compile, collate, regurgitate, but do not create and cannot emancipate. It cannot free itself and, in its freeing, seek to free others, through words and visions of revolution and love. To people, that still remains.

To consider what we will have wrought with the unfettered and unthought use of this technology, we need only consider the numerous promises and predictions being made by tech companies in relation to AI use in schools and education. The sudden and precipitous rise of ChatGPT and other generative AI chatbots and tools has led to a slew of opinions and ideas about its uses and possibilities within schools, in the mainstream media, among edu-celebrities, in online teacher forums, and to a lesser degree among teachers and administrators themselves. The emotional range of these discussions or diatribes runs the gamut from gleeful to hopeful to fearful, with some heralding it as the solution to all the educational issues, and others as the apocalyptic, final destruction of teaching as a profession.

Perhaps AI can make everyone a more competent or persuasive writer. Perhaps AI can make everyone a more competent or persuasive fraud. But neither of these scenarios gets to the heart of what is at stake should we give up our ability and desire to struggle with the word, the sentence, the grammar, the meaning.

On the subject of censorship and book banning, Coates writes, “This is not about me or any writer of the moment. It is about writers to come—the boundaries of their imagination, the angle of their thinking, the depth of their questions.” Considering Coates’ words, we should worry that as we thoughtlessly offer AI to our students (and ourselves) as a substitute for the struggles and triumphs of the acts of creation, do we not also risk submerging their (our) questions, flattening their (our) thinking, and enclosing their (our) imaginations in ever tighter spaces. Will we, or future generations, cede our unruly garden plot where surprises and possibility lurk, for a bit of imagined convenience and a homogenized crop?

If capitalism is about ever-increasing speed, of production and consumption, then what is needed is a call for a slowdown and a reckoning with generative AI in society at large. None of us should offload our empowerment and our liberation to machines and the false promises of big tech.

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