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“ I feel an urgent need to understand how AI will affect my life.
– Chris Armstrong.

UKeig

Conversations with a retired information scientist about the appropriate use of Artificial Intelligence

The UK e-information Group management committee was saddened that our chair David Ball passed away recently, only weeks after the loss of Douglas Veal, a great information scientist who co-chaired with David our prestigious international Tony Kent Strix information retrieval award panel. It dredged up thoughts of the movers and shakers past and present who have supported us over the years, since our inception as a special interest group of the Institute of Information Scientists in 1978 and now as a core part of the CILIP community.

I HAVE had the honour to remain in contact with writer and poet Chris Armstrong, who joined UKeig, formerly known as the UK Online User Group (UKOLUG) in 1986. He had a multiplicity of roles including chair, membership engagement, editor and web guru.

We were chatting recently, whimsically, about the notion of “rewinding” AI. He has concerns about the impact of large language models (LLMs) and chatbots. I was intrigued by our discourse. AI systems, he said, were “unconcerned with truth”. Art, fiction and poetry are being severely compromised.

“AI used for necessary processes like NHS image scanning to speed up analysis, diagnosis and consultations, is wonderful. Unnecessary AI simply to make money for the lazy is not.”

We all recall the option to resist “upgrading” to a new interface; to retain the comfortable “classic” look and feel; the familiarity of a Boolean-ly logical discovery comfort zone. We are now faced with gargantuan AI systems able to mimic humanity and rob us of our integrity and intellectual property. What next?

Recently our Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer waded in embracing this disruptive technology. He described AI as “the defining opportunity of our generation. It is not a technology that is coming, a future revolution on the horizon. It is already here, materially changing lives.” Skills and talent lay at the heart of the growing momentum to “build sufficient, secure, and sustainable AI infrastructure”. But, what of the threat to information integrity and literacy?

I rang Chris to chinwag about this latest gauntlet threatening the potential disintermediation of our profession. We kicked off with semantics.

“What do we really mean by AI? The term sweeps in general robotics which has limited intelligence through large language models which swallow and assimilate and ‘learn’ from huge, uncontrolled and unfiltered vats of text without permission, human interference, value adding or ‘explaining’.”

The crux of our conversation was the moral dilemma; the ability to produce pictures, novels, poems or works of art that are forgeries. “AI is creating vacuous content. A novel or a poem is a representation of an author’s thinking. An

AI creation is just some cleverly jumbled words with no life or meaning other than the lexical. It has no value.”

“AI systems have no inherent morals or ethics. Neither do many of our leaders who make choices on our behalf, but at least they exist in the same bubble of morality. Do AI systems have even that basic ‘morality’ built in? What moral and ethical safeguards are there? Should we know what they are? Who decides on the morals or ethics? Are ours the same as Mr Trump’s over the pond? Can his affect or infect ours?”

Cloud busting

Chris also struggles with the vast energy consumption necessary for cloud computing data centres and generative AI systems. “Is this morally acceptable? Also, why would the MD of a company trust all his corporate information and documents to a remote/unknown computer? Is that responsible? What happens if there is a fire, data breach or power down – at the very least the company will be without its staff, customers, stock and financial data for a period! And have no control over their re-instatement.”

Chris’s take is that AI is being foisted on

