AI in the think tank World: My Personal Assistant, Not (Yet) My Friend

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Introduction

In 2019, I shifted my approach towards Artificial Intelligence (AI) from academia to the political sphere. I transitioned from studying the risk of AI for autonomous driving in Edinburgh to serving as a policy advisor on AI in Berlin. Although I was never a supporter of the Kurzweil-Narrative in The Singularity is Near (2005) regarding AI's evolution to surpass human intelligence, I remember that at that time, the consensus among the community was that AI would at least become ubiquitous in the following few years. Highlighting this point might seem almost redundant, considering that at least half of the readers of this text are likely wondering if ChatGPT played a role in its creation. However, it's important to note that discussing AI often feels like missing the forest for the trees. There are many AI applications out there that make life much easier. However, there are nearly as many problems associated with their use, demonstrating that AI is far from being a friend. Therefore, the text that follows shine upon aspect of the benefits AI provides as a digital tool akin to a personal assistant especially within the think tank world but also analyses ethical considerations and the state of technology that prevent it from being entirely reliable.

AI in the think tank word

Since I started focusing on AI in politics back in 2019, I've seen some truly interesting changes in how people view and use artificial intelligence. Initially, conversations around AI were dominated by its involvement in high-tech areas such as image recognition, robotics, and autonomous driving. As Mikey James illustrates in *The Evolution of Artificial Intelligence* (2023), these applications, complex and almost futuristic, showcase AI's potential in transforming industries and daily life. However, a significant shift has occurred over the years, steering the collective consciousness towards AI's role in writing and content creation. This change signifies a monumental leap. AI is no longer an elusive technology reserved for the few but a practical tool for the many, particularly for those daring enough to integrate it to their work bench. As Michelle Mitchel argues in his book *Artificial Intelligence* (2019), this democratization of AI is both intriguing and inspiring. It suggests that AI has breached the barriers of specialized domains, embedding itself into the fabric of everyday work. The implications are vast, not only in how we perform our tasks but also in our understanding and acceptance of AI as an integral part of our professional lives. But how does this apply to Thinks Tanks in particular?

When employing an expansive definition of think tank activities, one can identify five fundamental pillars: 1. Research, 2. Policy Development, 3. Advocacy, 4. Education, and 5. Networking. These pillars, particularly the first four and to a certain degree the fifth, are interconnected through a crucial skill—writing. Writing, essentially the art of translating thoughts onto paper, is pivotal across these domains. In this context, utilizing text generation tools like ChatGPT not only represents one of the most recognized applications in the current landscape but also stands out as a superior digital tool for integrating AI into professional workflows for two primary reasons:

1) Reduced Complexity: ChatGPT, or any other text creation AI, uses written text as the interface. As long as you can translate your desired goal into written text, ChatGPT will generate a corresponding output. This simplifies the interaction process, eliminating the need for complex interfaces or additional forms of communication. In a work environment where writing is one of the core exercises, this design allows for seamless integration of AI.

2) Open Sea Approach: Building upon its simple user interface, ChatGPT in particular aids in suggesting how to use its services, such as “write an email” or “create a concept note.” However, there are no further structural components that force the user into a specific set of steps to have text created. Whatever you type, there will be a response. It is up to your creativity to enhance the result. I call this method the “open sea approach,” because the general environment gives you a casual understanding of its functions and even supports your behaviour partially. But the exploration part is up to you and your curiosity. If done correctly, almost all parts of the pillars mentioned earlier can be translated into a written input for ChatGPT to respond to.

Together, these two elements elevate a text creation AI into an incredibly powerful personal assistant, provided you clearly define your objectives. For optimal use, the focus should shift from merely selecting prompts that improve your text to articulating the specific needs and gaps in detail that the AI assistant is intended to address. This becomes particularly critical when considering the potential risks.

AI: The Black Box and its Echos

As we delve into the integration of artificial intelligence within the think tank world, the call for well-defined ethical guidelines becomes increasingly apparent, particularly when assessing the associated risks. A key concern in employing AI-generated content lies in the realm of intellectual property rights. Adhering to academic integrity by avoiding to copy-paste AI-generated text is a commendable first step, but it does not tackle the real issue: the opacity of AI processes. The mechanisms through which AI systems generate text, especially regarding how extensively they rephrase existing content from expansive datasets, remain unclear. This lack of transparency, often referred to as the “black box”. In Christoph Molnars Interpretable Machine Learning (2019) we learn that this problem, poses a significant challenge in the ethical deployment of AI. And as further highlighted by Francesca Rossi in Building trust in artificial intelligence (2019), simple advisories against direct copying fall short of addressing these deeper concerns. They merely navigate the issue without providing thorough guidelines on the appropriate use of text-generating AI technologies.

This complexity is further heightened by another important issue: the echo chamber effect. This phenomenon occurs when individuals are consistently exposed to information and opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, thus endangering the inclusion of diverse perspectives in their opinion formation. In their article The echo chamber effect on social media (2021) qMatteo Cinelli et al. point out that the problem is starkly evident on social media and personalized news feeds, where extreme forms of echo chambers are prevalent. However, text-generating AI is not immune to this issue. It is notably more challenging to identify the influence of echo chambers in AI-generated content. Unlike on social media, where users might recognize that frequently engaging with specific content leads to the recurrence of similar themes, in text generation via AI, such mechanisms are obscure. When AI is tasked with tasks such as “make my text sound more professional” or “finalize my facts into a comprehensive argument,” it may inadvertently replicate frequently used text passages, risking the originality of your content. This problem is particularly acute when AI is prompted to provide specific background on political matters or to define technical terms. While such prompts are standard for search engines during online research, their implications for the use of text generation AI are profound and often misunderstood. However, as mentioned earlier, recognizing and understanding these issues is crucial. As Janna Anderson & Lee Rainie conclude in their chapter Closing thoughts on ChatGPT (2023), by clearly defining the objectives, the AI is meant to achieve, one can harness the same AI technologies that pose these problems to create viable ways to ones goal. In the end defining the problem can be 50% of the solution.

Conclusion: Human creativity will prevail

In the dynamic interplay between AI and human creativity within the think tank realm, it’s clear that while AI can replicate certain aspects of human intelligence, the essence of creativity remains distinctly human. This creativity serves as a safeguard against the challenges posed by AI’s opaque processes and its tendency to create echo chambers. Recognizing that a general prompt yields a general result highlights the importance of individual reflection. This enables one to translate personal perspectives into creative expressions

effectively. As stated in the beginning, for think tank professionals, the art of writing is familiar territory, which facilitates the integration of AI tools like writing assistants. However, the impact of a text—whether it's aimed at shaping policy, advocating for a specific set of facts, or outlining potential outcomes—does not solely rely on formal language, precise grammar, or thorough structuring. Rather, its effectiveness is derived from its narrative and the persuasive power of its content.We recognize this principle from the business world where it is equally critical. Here, AI shall not solely enhance efficiency and analyze data, but must also be used to understand market demands and reflect the changes of the respective environments in order to support decision-making. This approach provides businesses with a competitive edge by accelerating workflows and optimizing resource utilization to remain competitive. AI can expediently lay down a solid foundation for your arguments, much as spell-check tools help reduce typos in digital content. Yet, it cannot substitute for the unique creative flair that humans bring to their work. Therefore, as think tanks leverage AI technology, they must do so as an asset to enhance, not solely replace, repetitive and easy writing tasks. This approach ensures that AI acts as a conduit to a more informed, ethical, and human-centric future. Importantly, those who adopt this technology should not shy away from acknowledging its use. And yes, this text was enhanced through the use of ChatGPT.