

Editorial

CHATGPT AND ME

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On February 13, 2023, Neil Clarke, the editor of *Clarkesworld*, asked if I was being spammed with an increase in “AI” submissions. He had a chart that showed just how quickly these submissions were growing. I responded, “Yes, yes, yes!” I didn’t have a chart, but I knew that my story submissions had grown from 712 in December 2022 to 899 in January 2023, and that they were still on their way up. Neil designed and implemented *Asimov’s* and *Analog’s* online submission system. He was working on some projects that would flag suspicious submissions, but it would be a while before these steps could be implemented.

On February 20, Neil tweeted that he was temporarily closing *Clarkesworld* to submissions due to the onslaught of ChatGPT generated subs. My submission rate was lower than *Clarkesworld*, so I didn’t close *Asimov’s* at that time. Yet, my final figure for February submissions was 1088. In an average month, I rarely see more than seven hundred fiction subs. Now, the shortest month of the year had given me a 55 percent increase in “stories,” and every single AI submission was dreadful.

Neil’s tweet went viral and attracted attention across the media landscape. Once he explained that this problem was hitting a number of SF publications, a couple of reporters even tracked me down. *F&SF’s* editor, Sheree Renée Thomas, called on February 21 to ask if she could pass along my contact information to the *New York Times*. The following day, Neil recommended me to *The Verge*.

I was in a relatively optimistic mood when I spoke to those reporters. I even made a few lighthearted remarks that were quoted in these articles. I wanted to reassure readers, authors, reporters, and the general public that despite the heavy volume of submissions, there was no chance an experienced editor would mistake a ChatGPT sub for a tale created by a human being. My comments appear mostly at the end of *NY Time’s* article “Science Fiction Magazines Battle a Flood of Chatbot-Generated Stories” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/technology/clarkesworld-submissions-ai-sci-fi.html>. My comments in *The Verge* Interview, “AI-generated Fiction is Flooding Literary magazines—but not Fooling Anyone” <https://www.theverge.com/2023/2/25/23613752/ai-generated-short-stories-literary-magazines-clarkesworld-science-fiction> are more extensive.

We’ve taken measures since then to improve our situation. We added language to our guidelines to make it clear that “We will *not* consider any submissions written, developed or assisted by these tools. Attempting to submit these works may result in being banned from submitting works in the future.” By this statement we mean the use of ChatGPT to generate plot, character, setting, and other story development ideas. We don’t mean long-standing tools like spell and grammar checks, dictionaries, or thesauruses.

Toward the end of April, we closed *Asimov’s* to submissions for a few days so Neil could upgrade our system. Neil’s upgrade doesn’t automatically ban anyone nor does it catch all the ChatGPT generated subs. It does flag a lot of suspicious subs, however. This is quite helpful. I’m the only person evaluating the submissions to *Asimov’s*. I want to give the real storytellers as much of my time as possible. I don’t want to waste it on the AI-assisted dreck. I still peruse everything and make the actual determination. I have access to a couple of online sites that can detect ChatGPT generated material. There are helpful for validating my suspicions. These sites don’t always agree with each other or with me. Ultimately, I make the final call.

By now, I've seen hundreds, possibly thousands, of these "stories" and some "non-fiction" articles. Although still pretty obvious, the cover letters have improved. In the beginning, most of the letters read like résumé cover letters. Now they tend to claim that the "author" has been working really hard on his or her "story." Despite the common assertion that they are long-time readers of the magazine, it's pretty clear that the "authors" of these "stories" had never heard of *Asimov's* or SF magazines in general until they stumbled upon some "how-to-make-money" online resource.

There is absolutely no sign of originality or creativity in ChatGPT-generated works. There's no sense of narrative, no character development, and the "plotting" is practically nonexistent. There is no indication that the "writers" of these works ever read a story, heard some folklore, or watched a TV show. I have never read an original human-authored submission that was as poorly written or as uninteresting as these pieces are.

People do worry that the ChatGPT material will improve. That's possible. ChatGPTs are a type of large language models (LLMs) that scrape enormous amounts of words from the internet. The more these LLMs absorb the works of published authors, the more access they'll have to sophisticated language and ideas. There's a thorny legal problem, however. No one yet knows if the legal rights to the "story" generated by the ChatGPT will belong to the person who asked for it or to the creators of the ChatGPT. It's likely that a contract with the person who submitted the "story" would be meaningless.

While wading through ChatGPT generated material has been an unhappy experience for me, there has been one significant silver lining. My admiration for people who take the time to write stories and send them my way has only grown. Every single person who pens their own story has a unique way of looking at a situation. The creative process that goes into title ideas, settings, and every other aspect of a human-generated story continuously tickles me. I will always look forward to reading through the seven hundred real monthly submissions while I hunt for the six or so that I can purchase for publication in *Asimov's*.