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## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

# Will a robot become our next great writer

**L**AST Thursday, September 19, the Centre for 21st Century Humanities at the University of Newcastle held a public conversation at City Hall on *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*.

It's a subject of much interest today - and not a little concern.

The expert speakers were roboticist and systems engineer Professor Alex Zelinsky, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Newcastle, and urban sociologist Professor Duncan McDuie-Ra, also from the University of Newcastle, as well as historian Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington from the Australian National University, and ethics philosopher Professor Nicholas Agar, from Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand.

Newcastle Writers Festival director Rosemarie Milsom moderated the forum, as more than a hundred locals turned out to listen and ask questions. A whole host of important issues came up for discussion - from cyborgs to data control, from armed drones to unemployed IT workers in India.

At the heart of the discussion was the question about whether machines might be able to replace us across all spectrums of human activity - including, especially, cultural creativity.

Elon Musk, the man who wants a select few of us to relocate to Mars, isn't known for cautious circumspection. One thing he worries about is GPT-2, the latest product of his Open AI research company. GPT-2 is a text generator that when given a page of text can continue the story. It did a credible job of extending the narrative from the opening line of George Orwell's *1984*, even if it did relocate the action to Seattle.

GPT-2's creators took the unusual step of deciding the computer's technology was too dangerous to release. The bot's story was too convincing, they thought, and the AI could be mis-used.

It is hard to see a story-writing bot going all Skynet on us, and triggering a nuclear exchange, as in the *Terminator* movies. Though perhaps it may be able to write a story about it!

It is time for us to be clear about what we want - and don't want - from AI. Forbes is already using AI to produce first drafts of stories for its journalists. Could the authors of this op-ed be rendered obsolete?

Right now, the risk may be over-stated. Consider the short novel supposedly written by an AI program that made it past the first



**NEW FIELDS:** Professor Duncan McDuie with humanoid robot NUGUS. Cultural pursuits may be next for artificial intelligence.

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round of the 2016 Nikkei Hoshi Shinichi Literary Award in Japan, causing a stir. It turned out to be co-written by two humans feeding

data into a computer. At this point in time, if AI is going to start writing creative texts, it will need a lot of help from us. Future writers festivals held entirely in a virtual chat-room may be a while off.

The Newcastle Writers Festival can breathe easy, at least for now.

Programmed with a substantial body of texts to work from, a computer could probably generate something passable. But without intelligent and skilled human intervention to check for metaphor, humour, irony and social gaffs, that something just wouldn't make any sense.

What AI can generate is nonsense of the kind made by the *Midsomer Murders* bot. We can cope with nonsense in small doses like that, and find it funny. Authors like Lewis Carroll played on that successfully. But our appetite for nonsense is limited. We expect good writing to help us to make sense of the world, regardless of whether it is a children's book or a classic.

Techies talk about the human-in-the-loop

model, where machine learning requires human interaction. What AI forces us to think about is humans-*on*-the-loop, where humans are actively managing AI as it processes complex tasks. Just as the computer-navigated flight still needs a human pilot to step in if the auto-pilot fails or disengages, in all aspects of AI, we human beings will need to remain at the controls, and actively engaging. The next big question for us is how we can do that. As it became clear from the conversation, we really do need to be thinking about how to control these new technologies. The critical thinking that we humans are so good at will keep us at the controls. Valuing the distinctive contributions that we can all make as creative social and cultural human beings, both individually and collectively, has to be the first step. **Nicholas Agar** (Victoria University Wellington), **Victoria Haskins** (University of Newcastle), **Marnie Hughes-Warrington** (Australian National University), **Duncan McDuie-Ra** (University of Newcastle), **Alex Zelinsky** (University of Newcastle)