

# Sustainability in the Age of 'Generative' Computation

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## Aspirational Abstract

In this age of generative computational systems that appear to produce 'human-responsibility-free' images and texts, how can we better identify what it is that we are trying to sustain in our intentional, scholarly, digital work? What constitutes an ethical, productive sustainability practice in a computational environment increasingly populated by machinic outputs masquerading as human creations? How many of our approaches partake of the assumption that the more we retain the better for the machine and not for we humans? This talk will address a number of socio-technical constraints that impact many humanists as they make decisions about how long they want their projects, products, and communities to last.

## Part I: “Human-Responsibility-Free?”

In this age of generative computational systems that appear to produce ‘**human-responsibility-free**’ images and texts, how can we better identify what it is that we are trying to sustain in our **intentional**, scholarly, digital work? What constitutes an ethical, productive sustainability practice in a computational environment increasingly populated by **machinic outputs masquerading as human creations?**

## Part I: “Human-Responsibility-Free?”

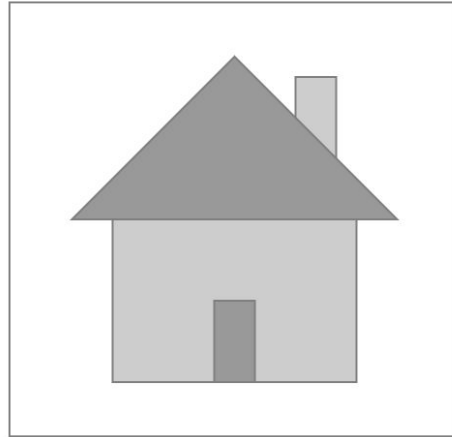
- Words (and images) are given *effective* power through their connection to human intention, both in their **production** and in the **reception**.
- How do *known* **and** *unknown* computer-generated outputs fit into this worldview?
- Who is doing any “fooling?” A computer or a human?

# Effective Power? Production and Reception?

A



Model of the World



B



# The Standard Expectation Towards Unknown Texts

Hannes Bajohr, “On Artificial and Post-Artificial Texts,”  
hannesbajohr.de, March 2023,

<https://hannesbajohr.de/en/2023/03/11/on-artificial-and-post-artificial-texts/>



The standard expectation of unknown texts is precisely this: That they stem from a human being who wants to say something. To recognize a text as artificial still requires additional information—especially in the case of artificial poetry.

–Bajohr

# Humanist Take-Away #1

*Process Matters to the Interpretation of  
Product*



## Part II: “More the Better?”

How many of our approaches partake of the assumption that the **more we retain the better for the machine** and not for we humans?

## Part II: “More the Better?”

- Isn't CC-O/Public Domain sharing principles the ethical ideal?
- Humanists are not interested in a closed system where only a select few can access the information needed to construct new frames for human to understand that information.



“Because copyright today covers virtually every sort of human expression – including blogposts, photographs, forum posts, scraps of software code, and government documents – it would be impossible to train today’s leading AI models without using copyrighted materials.”

–OpenAI

# Contextual Integrity

Helen Nissenbaum, “Privacy as Contextual Integrity,” *Washington Law Review* 79, no 1 (2004): 119-157.



...the scope of informational norms is always internal to a given context, and, in this sense, these norms are relative, or **non-universal**...

–Nissenbaum

## Humanist Take-Away #2

*The drive to create universal patterns is just one way to create knowledge.*

## Part III: “Communities *and* Disciplines”

This talk will address a number of socio-technical constraints that impact many humanists as they make decisions about how long they want their projects, products, and **communities** to last.

## Part III: “Communities *and* Disciplines”

- The Death of the ~~Digital~~ Humanities



# ChatGPT is Taking Our Jobs!!

Thomas S. Mullaney, ed., *Your Computer Is on Fire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).



[Humanists] are gadflies, it would seem, always dwelling upon the negative sides of technology rather than its unquestionable positives.

–Mullaney



We are technophobes who, either because of our failure to understand the technologies we critique, or perhaps out of envy for the power of those who build them, are akin to millenarian street preachers waving signs that read “The End Is Nigh.”

–Mullaney

## Humanist Take-Away #3

*Techno-Utopianism Covers a Million  
Human Flaws*

What's *Sustainability* in  
the Age of Generative AI?

# ~~Persistence~~

Storing things forever.

BookTime™.

Creating the best cold, dark place.

# Sustenance

Where does the ***energy*** come from to keep going?

Exactly what is ***drawing down that energy***?

What is *ethical* action  
in this same “age?”



# Ethics

Ethics is about tending to the *humanity* of a situation.

Computers on their own *have no ethics*.

On their own, they generate heat.

# Take-Aways, Summarized

# Process *as well as* Product

They're both interesting...but only one of them can be made into *data*.

# Beyond “Close Looking”

It isn't just about “slowing down,” although...sure.

It's about thinking about the importance of *context* and what it means to have the *capacity* to break the pattern.

# BE THE WET BLANKET

I kid.

We aren't "wet blankets" for accepting our full humanity and for accepting that these machines can only represent *who we think we are and what we wish to do.*

Thank you!!

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