**[Move over, writers, AI is here](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779778/move-over-writers-ai-is-here)**

[Bina Shah](https://www.dawn.com/authors/179/bina-shah) Published October 7, 2023

LAST week, a story about artificial intelligence turned the literary world upside down. *The Atlantic* [reported](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/books3-database-generative-ai-training-copyright-infringement/675363/) that 183,000 books were used without permission of the authors to train artificial intelligence systems.

The books were pirated from illegal sites, compounding the insult to the people that spent years working on all these novels, biographies, memoirs, non-fiction books and poetry. Companies like Meta and Bloomberg and possibly OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, have used these datasets to teach their generative AI systems how to write in the style of, say, Elif Shafak or J.K. Rowling.

As soon as the news hit, authors around the world scrambled to the database to see if it contained any of their books. Every author I know personally has posted on Facebook or Twitter that they found their books in the database. I searched for my own name and saw that my novel *Before She Sleeps* has also been illegally downloaded and fed into the database, meaning that my work was stolen in order to teach a machine to do my job.

Friends who teach at schools and universities tell me that students are using ChatGPT to write their papers and other assignments. This is understandable in a country where we often require students to write in good English, when it may be their second or third language. Out of fear of looking stupid, they turn to ChatGPT to make them look intelligent and fluent in English.

This is also happening in the Pakistani workplace, where employees use artificial intelligence to generate resumés, reports, presentations and marketing decks in perfect English. The result: a professional-looking document that wasn’t produced by a human being with real-life skills.

Take a moment to consider how many hours of work went into producing those 183,000 books. How much individual experience, education, observation, it took to produce each unique book. How many years it took those people to find agents, editors, publishers. How much competition they had from other writers, how little they are paid in terms of advances and royalties — it’s well-known that few people actually earn enough money from writing to make a living. And yet writers still write, despite these realities. It is pure passion that drives them, and love for the written word.

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I tried a small experiment: I logged in on ChatGPT and asked it to write an 80,000-word novel in the style of J.K. Rowling, set in Pakistan, about a little girl who discovers she’s a wizard, but everyone accuses her of being a witch. The machine immediately spat out this response: “Writing an 80,000-word novel is a complex and time-consuming task, and it would also require creating an entirely new story and world, which is beyond the scope of a single response. Additionally, I cannot emulate the specific style of a copyrighted author like J.K. Rowling.”

Then it said: “However, I can offer some guidance and ideas if you’d like to write such a novel yourself”.

ChatGPT suggested I call my book ‘*The Enchanted Veil of Lahore*’. The first chapter of the novel, ‘A Magical Journey’, described the setting and the main character like this: “In the bustling streets of Lahore, amidst the vibrant colours and fragrant spices of the bazaars, lived a young girl named Amina. She had always felt different from the other children in her neighbourhood. Her jet-black hair sparkled with a touch of silver, and her eyes held a deep, mysterious gleam.”

A cryptic letter from “Professor Rashid” instructs Amina to come to Diagon Bazaar, where she will find out more about a destiny that lies “beyond the veil of the ordinary world”. Over the next five chapters, she goes to a magic shop filled with “wands, potions and magical creatures”. She finds other witches and wizards and becomes lifelong friends with them. They face prejudice and hatred but realise that “magic can be a force for good”. Amina and her friends confront an evil sorcerer and a mighty battle for Lahore takes place between them. In the end, the children win and restore peace to both the “magical and non-magical worlds”.

ChatGPT adds this at the end: “This is just a brief outline and the start of a story. To create a full 80,000-word novel, you would need to develop these ideas further, add more characters, subplots, and details to create a rich and immersive world.”

No machine could have even spat out this synopsis without being well-acquainted with the works of J.K. Rowling. And by acquainted, I mean that it has been fed the Harry Potter books and broken them down into individual words and sentences. It has analysed those words and sentences, then learned how to create a combination of similar words and sentences to write its own stories. They’re not very original, and they’re not even very good. But it really only takes one command for the machine to ignore copyright and produce that full-length book. For the right price, of course. Did you think that would come for free?

Authors are trying to fight back by way of lawsuits, sending letters to Meta and other AI creators that they do not give consent for their books to be used in this manner. But it’s already too late: once it learns, the machine can’t unlearn.

With Amazon working to shut down the already thousands of AI-generated books that are being sold online, with actors and writers in Hollywood having just [concluded a 148-day strike](https://www.dawn.com/news/1778253) to protect their work from AI, the battle of humans vs machines has already begun.

And who knows? Maybe my next book will not have been written by me at all, but a machine — and maybe you won’t know the difference. Maybe even this column was written by AI.

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