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The AI Slopilization

We've always outsourced creativity, can emotions be next?

Something about "AI slop" *really* bothers the creative class. Writers, musicians, filmmakers, and their kin loathe AI-generated text, music, and videos, and not just because they frequently violate copyrights. Some fear AI slop will create an "alternative reality", flood the internet with political "slopaganda", reduce white-collar jobs to fixing "workslop", and leave behind a slop-ilization.

Ok, yes, I made up slop-ilization, partly to emphasize a point: that our ability to market a panic is better than our ability to evaluate whether it's worth panicking about. All the more reason to explore this topic.

In full disclosure, I have a personal gripe against AI slop, which is its overuse of my beloved em dash. It's been my favorite punctuation mark for 20 years. AI uses em dashes to fabricate drama and suspense—a cheap trick, if you ask me.

But back to the question: Is AI slop the danger creatives would have us think?

It's not scary that we're outsourcing creativity. I am hired creativity. So are creative agencies. So are innovation studios. So are session musicians. We exercise creative skills, and our clients stamp their brand on the output. It's a fair transaction.

A well-trained, carefully prompted AI can produce technically sound output. However, it lacks a crucial quality, which is access to primal emotions.

There's a famous book on screenwriting called Save the Cat!, by Blake Snyder, that speaks to this issue. Snyder argues that "The best ideas and characters in the lead roles must have basic needs, wants, and desires. Basic, basic!" He lists five: hunger, survival, fear of death, sex, and protection of loved ones. The greater the conflict the hero faces, and the greater the obstacles to achieving one or more of these primal goals, the more invested we feel in the story.

A screenwriter can tap into their own primal fears and desires when writing. Their characters and stories feel more compelling for it, and the fiction can end up feeling more "real" than nonfiction.

For AI, though, none of those primal fears and desires are real or accessible. The AI mimics the techniques an artist develops through years of intensive training but without any of the emotion, experience, or struggle that drives such efforts.

AI, as far as we know, doesn't have fears or desires. Some lab experiments have found that AI wants to survive; that it'll manipulate and threaten people to avoid being shut down. But AI doesn't die. It does not feel pain, does not leave behind loved ones, doesn't grieve. While it can predict which words and images we associate with fear and desire, it knows nothing of how those emotions feel.

Art devoid of human needs and desires is intrinsically meaningless. And while AI might attempt to translate our needs and desires into content, it seems to fall short of even the sloppiest human content.

Lest we forget, people mindlessly consumed junk content made by human beings before generative AI arrived. We scrolled through their travel photos, doctored glam shots, and ramblings on politics. Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, built a multibillion-dollar business on the thesis that we'd stare at this junk for hours on end. It paid off (for investors, not our society).

Human slop is laden with fear and desire. The person who documents his lavish vacations and expensive possessions wants to be seen as accomplished or wealthy or successful. His peacocking is relatable to us, the bystanders. We may feel envy but recognize the act as pathetic and insecure. We register the fears and desires displayed in his sapien slop.

Now, someone who uses AI as a tool might have a valid counterargument. I wrote the prompt, they say. Just as the camera is a tool for a photographer, and the brush is a tool for an artist, the AI is what I use to express myself.

Fair enough. But isn't AI doing the bulk of the work? Is it not deciding, algorithmically, what word, pixel, or frame should appear next? Is something merely a tool if it makes harder creative decisions than the tool's user?

A ghostwriter can empathize with their client. The staff at a creative agency have felt the emotions their clients want to convey in advertisements. Folks at the innovation agency can experience or empathize with the frustrating problem their client hopes to solve.

The AI feels and wants nothing yet mimics feeling and wanting. That, I believe, is why AI slop is so maddening. It is the ultimate counterfeit. AI falsifies not just art, but the human condition that makes art meaningful.

Maybe a slop-ilization is one in which an AI superintelligence so thoroughly dopes our fears and fulfills our desires that our primal emotions feel vacant. Which is all to say, leave my em dash alone, AI—you don't get it.



