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'If we insisted that every politician write his own piece, we'd either get terrible pieces or none at all,' said an op-ed editor at the New York Times.



CHAD CROWE

AI: Ghostwriter in the Machine

By James Taranto

I use artificial intelligence when I write articles, including this one. I run partial or complete drafts through a chatbot and ask what it thinks. It spits out copious suggestions, some of which inspire me to make revisions and improvements. AI is also an immensely powerful research tool, able to find useful information via queries too vague or abstract to be effective in an ordinary Google search. For this essay, I used it to track down a magazine article I dimly remembered reading almost 40 years ago. As you'll see, that old piece turned out to contain a killer quote.

Some self-styled guardians of journalism think I should include a paragraph like the preceding one in every article I write. "Transparency means that the use of AI is disclosed to readers in a clear, honest, and obvious manner," Pangram, which makes an AI tool that purports to identify AI-generated writing, asserts on its marketing blog. "Whether journalists use AI to generate leads, engage in research, or create visuals, their audience always deserves to know." The post calls such transparency one of "four non-negotiable principles."

This is bad advice, and I won't follow it. The repetition would quickly become boring, and my readers deserve better. Curiously, Pangram and its supporters also insist that I should outsource my judgment to AI in my capacity as features editor of the Journal's opinion pages. "I suggest the WSJ use Pangram to screen all content," Kevin O'Connor, a general partner of ScOp Venture Capital, emailed me in response to my April article criticizing Pangram for unreliability. ScOp led Pangram's seed funding in 2025 and participated in another funding round this July.

I asked Pangram CEO Max Spero if the company has any newspapers or other traditional news organizations among its customers. "Out of client confidentiality, we decline to comment on this matter," he replied. So transparency is negotiable after all.

Pangram says its product's ultimate purpose is to "protect editorial integrity." I ensure the integrity of my own work with a simple rule: I never paste AI output into a piece I'm writing (except when AI transcribes text from an image or recording, and then I check the quote against the source). That has been my practice since I started using AI, and it is consistent with the Journal editorial page's policy for staff, which my boss, Paul Gigot, announced last month: "No letting AI draft a column or editorial."

Several months ago, Mr. Gigot and I discussed whether to adopt a policy on AI use by outside writers, as other newspapers have done. The New York Times op-ed contract provides: "As a freelance contributor to The Times, you may not submit any material for publication that contains content generated, modified or enhanced by gen-A.I. tools." I argued that attempting to police outsiders would be too cumbersome and that we don't yet know enough about AI to make sensible uniform rules governing its use. And although I believe professional writers have an ethical obligation to write our own words, I don't think that's true of every op-ed contributor.

We instituted no policy, and that saved us from embarrassment by allowing us to stand behind a (very good) piece by the investor Stanley Druckenmiller that Pangram's detector tagged as "AI generated." Mr. Druckenmiller answered media inquiries with an admirable nonchalance. "Of course I used AI," he told the news site Notus (now the Washington Sun). "I was a B student in English, but an A-plus in economics," he said to a Journal reporter. "These are my ideas and I've been speaking about them for over 15 years, as anyone who knows me knows. Would I prefer that I was a great writer? Yes, but that's not who I am."

A related and similarly candid acknowledgment came from Kyle Crichton, deputy op-ed editor of the New York Times: "If we insisted that every politician write his own piece, we'd either get terrible pieces or none at all." But Mr. Crichton, who has since moved to another position at the Times, wasn't talking about AI. His quote appeared in the April 18, 1988, issue of the New Republic, in an article by Ari Posner about ghostwriting.

In September 1987, a young senator had ended his presidential campaign owing to a plagiarism scandal. Joe Biden lifted not only words but biographical details from speeches by the British politician Neil Kinnock. Mr. Posner noted that "speechwriters throughout Washington helped their bosses craft responses to the revelation that Biden used others' words without credit" and that "even after Joe Biden was zapped from the presidential race, he didn't bother to write his February 3 op-ed piece in the New York Times." He quoted an unnamed Biden staffer, whose op-ed defense anticipated Mr. Druckenmiller's by 38 years: "The piece reflects nobody's but the senator's views."

Mr. Posner's article was titled "The Culture of Plagiarism," but that was an exaggeration. Most of the examples he cited—which also included judicial opinions drafted by clerks and CEO shareholder letters written by the communications department—didn't involve appropriation of others' words, only purchasing the service of producing them. The clearest exception was from academia, where a scientist had sued her supervisor alleging that he "deleted her name and presented a paper as his own in a class he taught." (She ultimately prevailed in court.)

The headline notwithstanding, Mr. Posner allowed that "obviously there is a spectrum of respectability here." Nobody expects the president to write his own speeches, even if nowadays we can count on plenty of improvisation. "At the other extreme, people do have the right to expect that a journalist's byline means that he or she actually composed the words that follow." There's no obvious reason the same distinctions shouldn't apply when the ghostwriter is a machine rather than a human.

I have experience with ghostwriting on both sides of the editorial fence. Mr. Crichton told Mr. Posner in 1988 that the Times had "never rejected something because it was written by a ghostwriter." I have, although I make such decisions case by case. Sometimes the ghostwriting is too obvious, as when a piece carries the byline of a sympathetic plaintiff in a publicinterest lawsuit but is written in the bloodless style of an appellate brief.

One ghostwritten op-ed stirred me to indignation. In 2018 a public-relations flack emailed me that the head of his firm wanted to write a piece commenting on a business story that involved social policy. I told him I'd be happy to look. The draft arrived with a different byline and an explanation from the flack that "we actually found an even more enthusiastic author," the leader of a conservative advocacy organization. I turned it down on grounds that the argument—essentially that conservative values are good for business—would be more credible coming from someone with no ideological ax to grind, ideally "a politically neutral expert" such as a business-school professor.

The flack then sent me the same piece, with slight edits, under a professor's byline. I wrote back: "I am extremely put off by the fakery of this whole exercise, and I question the ethics of a professor's allowing his name to be put on a ghostwritten piece." The professor emailed me a few hours later to apologize.

I have also ghostwritten op-eds. My first full-time job was in the PR department of the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank, which I joined two months after Mr. Posner's article appeared in 1988. Among my duties was to produce one op-ed column a week for the foundation's president, Ed Feulner. I would select a topic, draft a formulaic piece about it, and send it upstairs, where Feulner would edit it (in most cases minimally), approve it, and send it back. It was then printed and sent by mail to newspapers across the U.S., which could publish it free of charge.

I was somewhat uncomfortable with this practice, and Heritage found it embarrassing enough that my boss there once told me I was forbidden to mention “ghostwriting” on my résumé. But in retrospect I don’t think it was all that bad. Feulner was known more as an advocate than a scholar, and Heritage scholars generally wrote their own material, which I sometimes compressed to op-ed length. I found it distasteful mostly because it was drudge work, as were other tasks such as writing press releases.

Entry-level jobs typically involve a fair amount of drudgery. Before joining Heritage I had internships with two news organizations, United Press International’s Los Angeles bureau and KNX Newsradio. Both jobs entailed tedious rewrite work that would have fit into Mr. Posner’s capacious definition of plagiarism. At UPI, I recast stories from the Los Angeles Times into wire copy, and at KNX I reworked wire stories into scripts for the anchors to read. Some of those scripts no doubt originated in newspapers and had been rewritten twice by the time they reached the studio.

A common speculation about AI has been that it will render much entry-level work obsolete. My experience supports the claim. Today’s large language models could easily rewrite a news story or produce a serviceable Feulner column or press release. Critics bemoan the proliferation of AI “slop,” but slop is nothing new. “As writing becomes mass production, the words under the suspicious byline are also losing their value,” Mr. Posner wrote in 1988.

AI is merely a tool, and a versatile one. It can be used to automate an assembly line, to compensate for a gap in the user’s skills, or to augment and sharpen individual creativity. Pangram won’t tell you the difference. That requires old-fashioned human judgment.

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