

Chat Me Up

Ask me how I really feel

Us older folks are known for relying on our children or their children's children to work out computer and cell phone issues, to teach us how to use the remote, to program this and download that, to interface smart watches with smart phones (thank you, Dick Tracy). With some notable exceptions, and I am decidedly not one, geezers are noted for being behind the times when it comes to technology. Maybe even resistant — longing for, heck yeah, party lines, remember those? Or dialing the operator. We dialed "O" to make long distance calls until the 1950s. That "O", that voice on the end of the line, was, in a way, the equivalent of our modern-day Google, Alexa and Siri. Watch out what you ask for.

Since those days it has been a rapidly accelerating technological march toward the now, starting with... When does one start? How about with television, then computers, fax machines (The big joke was to send your children off to college with the instruction to "practice safe fax"... how quaint!), smart phones, laptops, Facebook, Google, Instagram, TikTok, smart cars, Roomba, Eufy. Note how our social habits, posture, average weight and all the ways we love our neighbors as ourselves have changed along with these so-called advances. And how about the colonization of our vocabulary: social media's LOL, BTW, FYI, DYK, photobombing, swiping, trolling, blogs, vlogs, memes, clickbait, AMA, bot? Streaming has nothing to do with rivers, brooks, creeks or streams.

Now there's another technological kid on the block. A sneaky and insidious one, if you ask me. It's touted as the most clever of its kind thus far. According to an anecdotal survey I conducted over the past week, it's new to most in Bend. I spoke to an 80-year-old, a middle-aged banker, a 30-something cashier in a natural food store, a 20-year-old at a mail service shop, a shopper in a Grocery Outlet, friends at an Oscars gathering, a young checker at the local hardware. The cross section was evenly balanced between men and women, mostly Caucasian with the exception of one Hispanic and one African American. Ages ranged from 20 to 80. Two had heard of it but hadn't tried it. Three had used it. The rest had not heard of it at all. Of the three who had checked it out, the shopper in the Grocery outlet (who turned out to be a computer professional) said it was potentially dangerous; the 80-year-old was intrigued; the banker was hooked on the "digital secretary" it is professed to be. Indeed, according to projections "it will be possible to build each customer their own customized AI that predicts what they need, responds to them personally and remembers all their interactions. This isn't science fiction. It is entirely doable with the technology just released," according to Ethan Mollick in the [Harvard Business Review](#).

So, what is "it"? It's [ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence chatbot](#) developed over the past four years or so by OpenAI. Elon Musk is a co-founder. Microsoft had invested \$11 billion as of January 2023. It was launched in December 2022 and is soon to be followed by Google's version called Bard. By January, ChatGPT had amassed 100 million monthly users in two months. By comparison it took TikTok nine months to reach 100 million and Instagram two-and-a-half years. ChatGPT gets mixed reviews depending on if you read comments from people who, in my opinion, regard the mind solely as a calculating machine (Kevin Roose of The New York Times

labeled it "the best artificial intelligence chatbot ever released to the general public." Samantha Lock of The Guardian noted it was able to generate "impressively detailed" and "human-like" text)...versus those who regard human thought and creativity as what defines our humanity (in his blog "The Red Hand Files," songwriter Nick Cave calls this new form of artificial intelligence "a grotesque mockery of what it is to be human." Others called it "convincing-sounding nonsense, devoid of truth.") Last I heard that was known as bullshit.

Maybe it's because my father wouldn't allow television in our house on the basis we'd forget how to read and think for ourselves. To me this bot is more evidence, and a powerful one, that my father was right; it is a tipping point that bodes another fraught change in the social and cultural landscape. Are we at risk of abdicating forming our own thoughts and ideas, of settling for AI artifice? There is no beating heart behind these sentences and paragraphs. In fact, there's no sign of living, breathing intelligence at all.