

A potent pause

by BROCK WEIR

My imagination would sometimes get the better of me as a child.

When bored, the mind would race to more exciting places and times, the day's math lesson be damned. Outside of the classroom, if bored at home, I'd rip out a large swath of paper from our fax machine, back in the days when paper unspooled from a roll within, to map out exotic but non-existent words.

Sometimes my ?imaginarium? would take me to different parts of history in an effort to walk a metaphorical mile in the shoes of a historical figure. Heck, I even tried to imagine myself within some of my favourite ?television universes.?

Such was my rep at such a young age, along with my apparent willingness to share some of the fancier flights of fancy with my family, that when I spotted a very real intruder in our Newmarket home, it was chalked up as just another example of a fertile mild.

Maybe that's what made me such an easy mark whenever April 1 rolled around.

Whether by my mom, dad, or brother, I was often awakened early on that first day of the new month to some unlikely bulletin. Once, I was shaken awake to run downstairs to see a non-existent pack of bears in the backyard (an occurrence, to be fair, which was more likely in that particular time and place ahead of significant development); that a family (of the human sort) had moved into our rickety, and wholly unsafe treehouse overnight; that someone in the family had won the lottery; and once, which still makes me shudder, the news that a close family member had re-married to someone I couldn't be less close to.

As such, I've always dreaded the dawn of April 1, particularly in the newsroom. We've heard and seen more than our fair share about fake news over the last few years, but the First of April, when it falls on a weekday, is usually one where I screen my office calls to first try and get a handle on whether or not the caller is just having a laugh.

While I was thankful I could relax a little bit this year with April 1 mercifully falling on a Saturday, it didn't mean that the day wasn't littered with pitfalls. We had stories of fast food chains launching unlikely ? but not necessarily awful-sounding ? sandwiches; of zoos tinkering with their DNA kits to recreate long-since-extinct megafauna; of a dating app banning the siren songs of photos of people with fishing rods posing with their catches of the day; and even an endearing story from Sarah Polley, a recent Academy Award winner for her screenplay to *Women Talking*, of her son mocking up a letter from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences telling her the Oscar was given to her in error and she had to return it.

Close to home, the Central York Fire Services even got into the act:

?Welcome to the fleet, E412,? posted the fire department on its social media channels, complete with a mock-up of the blue and white apparatus both on the ice and out front of the newest station with a more traditional red and white counterpart. ?CYFS is the first fire department to have a Zamboni firetruck in service. We are proud to be able to further protect our residents on and off the ice.?

A worthy effort, but, in the end, all wet!

Helping in all these endeavours this year were any number of new Artificial Intelligence (AI) apps and programs which allow users to input all sorts of fanciful criteria that is then processed into a cohesive and sometimes convincing image.

Take, for instance, the image of Pope Francis that went viral over the last couple of weeks.

Perhaps taking inspiration from the Prada-designed Papal slippers that were revived by the late Benedict XVI before being ditched once again by his successor in favour of more traditional footwear, the image wouldn't have been out-of-step with some of the more famous fashion runways.

The 'photo' depicted the Pontiff wearing a snazzy white puffer jacket and holding a cup of take-out coffee. As far as images go, it was pretty convincing - but less so when you take a closer look and see the crucifix he's 'wearing' is missing a full necklace to hold it in place and he's holding the cup with the edge of his fingernail, a miraculous turn of events even if you are the Pope!

Following the roll-out of the ChatGPT program, which sparked further interest in AI amongst us laymen, and a recent update which expanded how it can be used - including, according to the CBC, from 'engaging users in human-like conversation to composing songs and summarizing lengthy legal documents' - tech leaders like Steve Wozniak and Elon Musk co-signed a letter calling for a pause in the development of AI systems for six months to address growing concerns.

'Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?' they wrote, apparently leaving it to the rest of us to point out that particular dam has already broken. 'Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop non-human minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete, and replace us? Should we risk loss of control over our civilization? Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders.'

'Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable.'

Laudable points all, but UBC Professor Wendy Wong recently told the CBC that a six-month pause wasn't enough.

'If you look at the statement it's almost as though robots will take over and eclipse humanity, and I just don't believe that the technology has that potential,' said Wong. 'But between that point of eclipsing our civilization and this point, there are a lot of things that can be done. This is where governance really matters, and this is where actually of us really matter.'

'To date, we're often treated as data subjects, but we should be data stakeholders. We can actually put a claim on how these technologies develop and affect us.'

But, in however long it takes to have a full analysis of all these concerns, most likely a window that will have to remain open longer than just a half-year, other actions can take place.

In my view, one of the most important is to put an increased emphasis on technological and media literacy.

As students are now being equipped, finally, with the practical math skills they need for day-to-day life, it's time for increased importance to be placed on media literacy; to spot the tell-tale signs of when something might not be real, reflect the full scope of the issue, or manufactured from whatever our electronic equivalent of whole cloth might be these days.

Imaginations might still be as fertile as they've ever been, but awareness and discretion must keep pace along with them.