

ChristmasGPT

Axel Bruns

For my Christmas apéro speech and farewell as guest professor at the IKMZ, Mike Schäfer asked me to say a few words – and told me to make it a little funny. To meet that challenge, and in the spirit of exploring the new communicative tools that seem to be emerging almost constantly now, I asked the new AI service ChatGPT for some assistance. Here's what happened.

It's hard to believe that my time as a guest professor at the IKMZ is coming to an end. It feels like just yesterday that I arrived, wide-eyed and full of excitement (and a little bit of jet lag). But now, after four months of lectures, discussions, and the occasional race to catch the tram, I'm almost ready to head back home.

(That was ChatGPT.)

First of all, I want to say thanks to Mike and Frank and everyone else involved in getting me here – as you may know, this was all meant to happen some time in 2020, but then the borders closed and we had to postpone. Many thanks to you all for hanging on to the idea – and the funding – and I'm glad we could finally make it work this year. And the fact that this put me in a better timezone to follow the World Cup was just another added bonus.

Of course this didn't happen without quite a bit of bureaucracy. Ah, Swiss bureaucracy. It's a never-ending spiral of paperwork and endless forms. But don't worry, with a little bit of patience (and a whole lot of caffeine), you too can navigate the sometimes-baffling world of Swiss bureaucracy.

First things first: make sure you have all the necessary documents. And I mean all of them. Birth certificate? Check. Passport? Check. Proof of insurance? Check. Oh, and don't forget the notarized copy of your great-great-grandfather's birth certificate. You never know when that might come in handy.

But bureaucracy in Switzerland isn't all doom and gloom. In fact, there are a few silver linings to be found. For example, the efficiency of the system is admirable. You may have to jump through a million hoops, but once you do, everything will run like clockwork (no pun intended). And let's not forget the polite and helpful staff who are always there to guide you through the process.

That, by the way, was the AI again – but having gone through the full process of BVK, AHV, KVG, Ausländerausweis, and all the rest I have to say it's right on the money: there's a lot of bureaucracy, but it's all incredibly efficient.

Now the four months I've been here don't really seem like such a long time, but there's actually quite a lot that's happened during that time. When I first arrived here, the temperature was 20 degrees, Tesla stock was at US\$280, Elon Musk was the richest man in the world, and a mastodon was some kind of extinct animal; now it's zero, Tesla is worth US\$150, Elmo has been overtaken by the guy from Louis Vuitton, and Mastodon is somewhere you go to toot into the Fediverse. Apparently.

I'm still struggling to find my way around Mastodon, frankly, so I did the obvious thing and asked ChatGPT to explain it to me:

Here's how it works: imagine a giant herd of prehistoric creatures, lumbering across the vast expanse of the internet. These majestic beasts are called "toots," and each one represents a message or update that you post on Mastodon. But unlike other social media platforms, these toots don't just disappear into the abyss after a few hours. Oh no, they remain on the platform for all of eternity, preserved for posterity.

But here's the catch: each Mastodon herd is called an "instance," and each instance has its own set of rules and guidelines. So if you want to join the Mastodon party, you'll have to choose which herd you want to join carefully. Will you join the nerdy book lovers' instance? Or perhaps the cat-lovers' instance? The possibilities are endless!

But no matter which instance you choose, one thing is for sure: you'll never be bored on Mastodon. With its endless supply of toots, you'll always have something to read and discuss with your fellow Mastodoners. So come on and join the herd, and let's toot our way into the internet history books!

Meh, seems close enough to me.

Meanwhile, it's pretty clear that Twitter itself is in big trouble, but what I still don't understand is what Elon wants with it if he's not interested in actually running it in any sensible fashion. So I also asked ChatGPT for some possible explanations:

1. He needed a new place to store all of his extra money. After all, a man can only have so many flamethrowers and tunnel-digging companies. Twitter seemed like the logical choice.
2. He was feeling nostalgic for the good old days of MySpace and wanted to bring back the glory of microblogging.
3. Maybe he was feeling a little lonely and wanted a platform to share his thoughts with the world (and by "thoughts," I mean random musings about colonizing Mars and building tunnels under Los Angeles).

But then it got a bit darker:

You see, Elon is a bit of a control freak. He wants to be in charge of everything, and what better way to do that than by owning the platform where everyone goes to share their thoughts and opinions? With Twitter under his thumb, Elon can control what we see, what we think, and how we interact with the world. It's like a real-life version of "The Truman Show," but with Elon as the puppet master.

Which, frankly, doesn't seem all that implausible. Mind you, just afterwards ChatGPT also went on to say that:

My personal theory is that Elon Musk is actually a super-intelligent alien from outer space, and he bought Twitter as a way to send secret messages to his fellow extraterrestrial beings. That's right, folks. All those strange tweets about flamethrowers and Neuralink are actually coded messages meant for his alien comrades. And if you decode them correctly, you'll be able to uncover the secrets of the universe. Or at least, that's what I like to believe.

That's right – the AI has a 'personal theory' that makes it sound like it's a secret Qanon follower. Hmmm.

But in all seriousness, there's something quite amazing as well as unsettling about how good ChatGPT and similar text-based AI systems have now become at mimicking human speech. After the Swiss team's loss against Portugal, I asked it to pretend to be a player giving a post-match interview, and it came back with all the usual clichés – the other team was just better, some injured players were missing, and the driving rain and muddy pitch in Qatar didn't help either. It even produced this in what seemed to me like some very credible Schwyzerdütsch – and no, I won't even try to read any of that out, but you can find it as a screenshot on Twitter. That's assuming I haven't been banned yet for making fun of the Glorious Leader.

Sorry, I've digressed a bit on the wonders of AI there, haven't I. So let me also say, and this is genuinely me talking here, that I've really enjoyed my time here, and have been genuinely impressed by the quality and variety of the research going on. There are a bunch of opportunities for further collaborations between IKMZ and DMRC that my colleagues and I are very keen to pursue with you all over the coming months and years – and of course, hopefully we'll also see some of you again in a couple of years, if not earlier, when ICA is coming to the Gold Coast just south of Brisbane.

I'll miss you all, and I hope this is only the start of a much longer connection.

But let's be real, I'll definitely miss the delicious Swiss chocolate the most. And the cheese! Don't even get me started on the cheese. Raclette, fondue, and all the amazing varieties - I'll be dreaming of them for months to come.

But as they say, all good things must come to an end. So with a heavy heart and a full stomach, I say goodbye to Zurich. Thank you for the memories. I'll be back for more chocolate and cheese in no time.

(And yes, that was the AI talking again, but I totally agree.)