About Letters from Nature

Climate change is destroying our planet and endangering humanity. Could we give nature a voice to speak up and write letters to world leaders, to ask for help and warn them that ultimately humanity is at stake?

In this art project we use the latest AI text model by OpenAI, GPT-3, to write letters on behalf of various major entities under threat, such as ice caps, islands and coral reefs.

Will the global COVID-19 pandemic lead us to focus solely on fighting this virus and its short-term economic impacts? Or will it give us a new opportunity and sense urgency to rethink our relationship with our planet, and change our policies and behaviours?

Our work is inspired by a range of sources. For thousands of years people have speculated about the ability for nature and inanimate objects to speak and tell stories. The worlds earliest religious tales and worldly sagas contain talking animals, trees, rivers and mountains. Certain religions still ascribe human qualities to objects, and psychological experiments with robots in labs and our homes have shown that humans are strongly predispositioned to do so.

The split between nature and culture, the subject and the object, and alive creatures and dead things has been hotly debated by philosophers for centuries. Bruno Latour went a step further and proposed a parliament of things where "Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name." Read more about his work in this essay by Fien Veldman, on the website of the Parliament of Things platform, another project that inspired us.

The letters have been generated with GPT-3, a large-scale language model by OpenAI that was first described in a research paper, published the end of May 2020. In the second half of July the model was released to a first group of Beta users. It has been trained on a large corpus of text from the internet containing hundreds of billions of words. The underlying idea is that based on a context of characters (tokens) it can predict what characters are likely to follow, which in turn can be fed into the process.

Whilst GPT-3 can carry out many different tasks, we used it for text generation: based on some opening words it will generate subsequent words and sentences. As the goal of the project was not necessarily to demonstrate the strength of GPT-3, we did allow for some cherry-picking of text, but kept this limited. We generated a small selection of letters based on a limited set of seed openings and then selected the most interesting letters. For the video we sampled quotes, but the letters that these were generated from are listed in full on the website without any further editing, and aside from opening words were completely generated by GPT-3.

As GPT-3 is built from content on the web it doesn't necessarily 'understand' the deeper concepts and will make creative use of similar texts that are already out there. For

example, in the project 'Letters to the Next President' American youth was encouraged write letters to the presidential candidates on the topics that mattered to them.

We did run casual checks on the final selection of letters to verify that these weren't already present on the web. This check is by no means exhaustive and given the nature of how GPT-3 works, it will be possible that fragments can be found. We don't necessarily see this as a weakness. Our work can be seen as a way to funnel and amplify the voices of many others and make creative use of these texts. Or in Google's terms: standing on the shoulders of giants. Get in touch with us if you recognize any of the fragments.

With this work we hope to inspire others to follow in our footsteps.

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