What's "Critical" about "Critical AI"? A Recommitment to Humanistic Inquiry in the Ostensible March to Hyper-Automation

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This paper interrogates the language we use to talk about generative AI as an emergent writing technology, more specifically focusing on what it means engage in "critical" approaches to digital technologies and to text generative large language models (LLMs) in particular. I then offer "critical interface analysis," as one possible way for slowing down at a time when all roads seem ostensibly to be leading to hyper-automation. In doing so, I discuss the affordances of examining place, materiality, embodiment, and digital interfaces together in our efforts to cultivate students' digital literacy in a time of rapid technological change.

On the Ostensible March to Hyper-Automation

Yesterday, as I was en route to Athens, Georgia, news broke that House Republicans forwarded a proposed decade-long ban on U.S. states and localities regulating AI, in an effort to keep any regulation entirely under federal control (Brown & O'Brien, 2025). This, coming from the party of states' rights, and anti-big government. While it is unclear whether this clause will become policy, it certainly illustrates the level of backing behind Big Tech's Big AI push, and the intimate relationship between the biggest producers and backers of generative AI and the current administration.

Notably, this news came on the heels of yesterday's reports that Big Tech CEOs, including the heads of OpenAI, NVIDIA, and Amazon, accompanied President Trump on his trip to Saudi Arabia (Allyn, 2025). According to NPR correspondent Bobby Allyn, "the Saudis have invested billions of dollars to support AI development in the U.S., and this week, they're promising even more" (para. 6). Princeton professor Bernard Haykel explained that three other reasons Saudi Arabia may be of interest to Big Tech include land for data centers, energy, and a "very low to nonexistent regulatory environment" (para. 7).

Why might Big Tech corporations be looking abroad for land for data centers—among other resources—at a time when there've been reports coming

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out of Memphis about Elon Musk's xAI Colossus supercomputer data center housing 35 illegal methane gas turbines emitting toxic and carcinogenic pollution, creating serious health concerns, with disproportionate impacts for residents of Boxtown, a historically Black Memphis neighborhood (Kerr, 2025; Wittenberg, 2025)? It seems to be the latest iteration of the same old story of U.S. capitalism and exploitation scaled up through neocolonial expansion.

Central elements of this story include the exploitation of human labor, land, and water resources in already-marginalized areas for the benefit of the ultra-wealthy, contributing to an ever-widening wealth gap that exists both domestically and globally (Aratani, 2025; Buchholz, 2025; Inskeep & Dumas, 2025; Qureshi, 2023; Smith, 2025). For instance, xAI is only the most recent iteration of a much longer history of industrial pollution—and community resistance—in South Memphis' Boxtown Community ("Unfair Share," 2021).

What's more, these relationships were brought into stark relief in Karen Hao's *Empire of AI*, which offered an in-depth look at how the current AI industry and the cultures and ideologies that brought it into being contribute to global-scale labor exploitation and resource extraction. These systematized processes can be seen as neocolonial in nature, in the sense that under neocolonialism, "foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world" (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 4).

At its core, the current push for widespread uptake of generative AI products, as heralded by Big Tech corporations like OpenAI, Microsoft, Google, Meta, and Anthropic is extractive not only in the sense of copyrighted materials and non-copyrighted intellectual property being extracted without the informed consent of authors and creators but also extraction of land, water, and energy resources, and the extraction that occurs through underpaid global labor used to label, moderate, and test content, extraction of user inputs and feedback (Hogan & Lepage-Richer, 2024). All of this extraction is taking place for the stated end goal of exploiting human labor on a mass scale in an effort to eventually replace human workers with contracted software and services (Hao, 2025).

I begin with this context because my argument in this piece is that critical approaches to artificial intelligence should include the ability to understand the political histories, ideologies, cultures, and economies undergirding the products that we are encouraging our students to use. I think it's imperative that we all understand that these are the companies, supply chains, and political forces pushing the generative AI products that so many of our students are using, that too many of our universities have signed onto, and that we ourselves are being pushed to adopt. After all, we wouldn't want to bury our heads in the sand, right?

On the other hand, despite these turns of events, I'm still not entirely convinced that a generative AI future defined by current models of these technologies is inevitable. When I say generative AI, I'm referring to current systems that generate text, image, audio, visual, code, and other content through user prompting and probability-based algorithms, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Firefly, Claude, and Character.AI. I'm not suggesting that generative AI will disappear entirely, but I'm not yet convinced that the goal of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) or a ubiquitous generative AI future is an inevitable outcome that all writers and knowledge workers will have to contend with, and I say this for a few reasons:

1. OpenAI has not found a path to profitability. According to Ed Zitron (2025), the company is losing money year over year as every ChatGPT query, whether by a paid or free user, results in a net loss for the company.
2. These technologies are not improving. More recent versions of ChatGPT are reportedly less accurate and "hallucinating" more often, perhaps as a result of its re-processing its own outputs (Laird, 2025; Zeff, 2025).
3. There are reports coming out of the private sector suggesting that these technologies have not been an effective investment for many professions. For instance, Klarna, a Swedish financial technology company, flipped from an AI-first strategy to hiring people again, and a recent IBM survey of 2000 CEOs found that only one in four AI projects delivers on the promised return on investment (Ivanova, 2025). Moreover, there have been frequent reports about how these products have led to—or are likely to lead to—disastrous workplace outcomes, including in fields like law, medicine, and policy development (Merken, 2025; Naddaf, 2025; Al-Sibai, 2025).
4. Much of the evidence for inevitability that I've seen appears to amount to short-term uptake and investment, not sustainable growth. Studies cited often have little to do with the functional capabilities of these products and more to do with uptake, investment, and outlook—things that are more reflective of short-term marketing success than long-term growth and expansion (see, for instance, OpenAI, 2023; Maslej et al., 2025; Watkins & Monroe, 2025). When functional capabilities *are* mentioned, they are often self-reported by companies and measured by company-defined benchmarks (Sano-Franchini, 2025).
5. More recently, Danielle DeVasto and Zsuzsanna Palmer (2024) reported on findings suggesting that direct engagement with generative

> AI had negative learning outcomes for students in a business communication course. In "Building Critical AI Literacy in the Business Communication Classroom", the authors found in a study of student writers that less direct engagement with generative AI had a greater impact on students' understanding of business writing principles. That is, "students in the variable group who collaborated with ChatGPT were less likely to identify and change the shortcomings of the generated text with regard to effective use of business writing principles" (2024, p. 567).

I offer this picture of our current, constantly changing, and expansive context because a large part of what I'm arguing in this paper is that any "critical" approach to generative AI requires that we pay attention to these contexts—including the global flows of capital and harm that circulate to produce, sustain, and manage generative AI products—in our decision-making and practice. Moreover, I argue that it's imperative that we go beyond acknowledgement or recognition to meaningfully account for these concerns through our decision-making and practice.

On Being "Critical"

With that said, can we have a conversation about the rhetorics of "criticality" in the context of generative AI? If you've been paying any attention to conversations about generative AI in higher education, you may have noticed that "critical" is a term that comes up quite a bit—for instance, think "critical AI literacy" or "critical" approaches to—or uses of—AI (MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force & Critical AI Literacy, 2024; Vee, 2025). Yet what I've noticed is that the term "critical" gets used in different ways by different people to advance multiple, at times conflicting, points of view. Recently, I've found myself avoiding the term altogether in the context of this topic because of how the lack of shared understanding can lead to confusion, conflict, and even hurt feelings as we collectively work to disentangle and come to terms with what it means to use, think about, and institutionally implement generative AI. At times, it seems "critical" is equated with thoughtful, intelligent, aware, and questioning as opposed to gullible, robotic, or entirely subservient to technologies. As a result, to be accused of not being critical, very reasonably, feels quite insulting.

So, I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about the rhetoric of criticality in AI discourse. To do so, I analyze a couple of definitions of "critical" that have been forwarded in reference to "AI," before proposing a shift toward a narrower and hopefully more precise understanding of "criticality." My hope is that by gaining some clarity regarding this particular term, we

might be able to more productively push forward our shared understandings of generative AI and its implications for computers and writing, for higher education, and for society more broadly.

Two contexts where "critical" has been explicitly defined in relation to AI and AI literacy are Maha Bali's (2023) oft-cited "What I Mean When I Say Critical AI Literacy," and Lauren M. E. Goodlad's (2023) "Editor's Introduction: Humanities in the Loop." For Bali, "critical" has multiple meanings that include:

- "skepticism and questioning,"
- attention to "social justice dimensions and inequalities," and
- examination of "potential harms, and … the credibility/accuracy of its outputs/outcomes," thus coinciding with "information literacy, media literacy and digital literacy" (para. 1)

On the other hand, Goodlad (2023) defines "critical" by referencing the OED entry for "critical thinking" as "the objective, systematic, and rational analysis and evaluation of factual evidence in order to form a judgment on a subject, issue, etc." In other words, "critical" involves evaluation and assessment through the formation of judgment" based on "factual evidence." In addition, Goodlad (2023) offers the requisite note that although "critical" and "critique" are often associated in the vernacular as a negative approach concerned with "fault-finding," these terms in academic usage are not pejorative but rather extend on the ancient Greek term for judgment and discernment.

Each of these definitions offer something helpful at the same time that I find both too broad to be particularly useful. What I think is helpful is Bali's (2023) suggestion that critical analysis involves attention to social justice and inequality, as well as Goodlad's (2023) caveat about "critical" not necessarily being a negative stance but rather meant to signify discernment and judgment more broadly. Here, Goodlad (2023) is speaking to a distinction between vernacular usages and specialized, technical usages of "critical" as it is often used in the humanities, a distinction that I think is important to keep in mind.

At the same time, I find both definitions are so broad that one can make the case that any kind of "skepticism and questioning" or evaluation and judgment formation related to LLMs and their capabilities are "critical." Yet for me, being skeptical of an LLM's outputs—which are widely known to provide inaccurate "hallucinations" with a great degree of frequency—and evaluating and questioning how to form usable prompts is not in and of itself "critical." As a result, I would argue that "critical" gets used to describe what Stuart Selber (2004) referred to as "functional literacies"—the ability to understand and analyze a product's functionality often, in a rather bounded way, with limited attention to a broader, global context.

At risk of stating the obvious, the value of using a term like "critical" to differentiate "analysis" from "critical analysis" or "evaluation" from "critical evaluation" is to imply that there is a way to engage in analysis and evaluation that is different from the way everyday users of products and technologies analyze and evaluate these products. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau (2002) described how everyday users of objects engage in a kind of everyday creativity where people quite typically use objects "imposed by a dominant economic order" (p. xiii) in ways that are subversive—that go beyond what the producers or designers of those products had in mind (p. xiii). For instance, he suggests that even the act of speaking is a kind of active reappropriation of dominant language by the speaker (p. xiii). He argues that "users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (pp. xiii–xiv). Put differently, de Certeau says "The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices" (p. xvii).

In other words, ordinary use of LLMs often already includes the practices of analysis, evaluation, questioning, and tactical approaches to making chatbots work for a given user's purposes. As a result, "critical" gets used to describe what I would argue are mundane activities that, to be sure, require skill and active engagement, yet arguably do not necessarily justify dedicated, postsecondary-level lessons, courses, and even degree programs. It is also for this reason combined with the fact that LLM chatbots are generally products designed for non-expert consumers that I believe students who must go on to use these products and assess their outputs in the workplace will generally be quite capable of doing so. As a result, the argument that we need to teach students how to use these technologies because they will need to use them in the workplace is not a particularly compelling argument for me.

Instead, I argue that we need to consider the valuable skills and literacies that higher education offers that are not easily found or learned in the workplace, on Google, or in the context of everyday life, and that we can do so by looking back to the usage of "critical" as a specialized, technical term in advanced humanistic study—as a source of expertise. To do so, I draw on its usage in the term "critical theory." According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s entry on the "Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)," understandings of critical theory are often grounded in the Frankfurt School vis-a-vis Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory." Through this context, "critical theory" involves a few key features:

- It does not "take the existing social order as given." Instead, it "analyze[s] the broader social context in which [empirical social research is] embed-

ded," and it does so because social orders are contextual, rhetorical, and historically situated, and because norms of knowledge production function to "reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures" (para. 19).
- As a result, it reflects on the context of its own origins and, importantly, aims to be a transformative force within that context.
- In doing so, it embraces an interdisciplinary methodology that aims to bridge the gap between empirical research and the kind of philosophical thinking needed to grasp the overall historical situation and mediate between specialized empirical disciplines.
- It "aims not merely to describe social reality, but to generate insights into the forces of domination operating within society in a way that can inform practical action and stimulate change" (para. 20).
- And finally, "it aims to unite theory and practice, so that the theorist forms 'a dynamic unity with the oppressed class' (1937a [1972, 215]) that is guided by an emancipatory interest…in establishing 'reasonable conditions of life' (ibid., 199)" (para. 20).

Put differently, critical approaches account for the taken-for-granted presuppositions of the specific context of analysis. In this way, I must admit that I have quite a hard time understanding any stances that make generative AI adoption compulsory—or taken for granted—as critical approaches. And to be clear, my point here is not that everyone must use the word "critical" in the same way, or that we all need to prioritize terms that have been used in critical theory. My point is that we need to consider the rhetorical affordances and limitations of how we use the terms that we do.

How can a critical theory approach be applied to the context of current generative AI? As a start, a critical approach to generative AI might involve asking questions like:

- Where, how, and why has this technology emerged? What are the various motivators, agents, and driving factors that have pushed forward its production? What problem(s) is it designed to solve?
- How does it fit into broader social orders and global contexts? How is it located in the context of existing flows of capital?
- What are the presuppositions, logics, and values that lie beneath the discourses of compulsory adoption that have been circulating in the field and in higher education more broadly?
- What are the limitations and affordances of functional approaches to analysis and understanding?

For me, this is what a critical approach to technologies like generative AI looks like. To do "critical" work is not only the ability to problem solve, nor

is it simply about making something work for one's individual purpose, such as the ability to discern and correct for biases in a system's outputs. It is also not about understanding how to strategically navigate existing inequitable systems and ultimately perpetuate the status quo. It is the ability to recognize how various objects, processes, and activities are always embedded within and contribute to much larger political systems, with varied implications for different communities of people. Importantly, it is the ability to account for inequitable systems within one's decision-making and ultimately intervene in injustice and exploitation. It is also the ability to reflexively navigate ambiguity, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, and to make decisions that consider individual, community, and global impacts at the short and long term.

Moreover, these considerations are very much in our wheelhouse as computers and writing teacher-scholars, given our historical foundation in the works of folks like Cynthia Selfe, Gail Hawisher, Richard Selfe, Stuart Selber, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Adam Banks, Angela Haas, Carolyn Miller, and others who have pushed us to ask critical questions about the language we use to talk about technology, and about the technologies themselves, including their long term impacts. For instance, Stuart Selber's (2004) *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* stated that critical literacy is "about the ways students might be encouraged to recognize and question the politics of computers" (p. 75). More specifically, he argues that "a critical approach to literacy first recognizes and then challenges the values of the status quo. Instead of reproducing the existing social and political order, which functional modes tend to do, it strives to both expose biases and provide an assemblage of cultural practices that, in a democratic spirit, might lead to the production of positive social change" (p. 81). In other words, Selber's (2004) explication of "critical literacy," which is likewise often referenced in current discussions of generative AI, makes clear that it is not enough to recognize ethical issues and biases; it's imperative that critical approaches actively challenge the values of the status quo through practice.

In a lot of ways, and as Megan McIntyre pointed out in a conversation we recently had, these contrasting approaches to "critical" AI are indicative of two different ways of interpreting the issue, or even two different realities, where one presupposes generative AI *use* at front and center, while the other foregrounds and prioritizes the contextual implications of generative AI.

Critical Interface Analysis

To offer a possible example of how we might slow down in the current generative AI context, I look back to prior work I've done on critical interface analysis, a method that I argued (2018) is built from a tradition of scholarship that

has explored the ideological function of technological interfaces in computers and writing, including works by Cynthia and Richard Selfe (1996); Myra Moses and Stephen Katz (2006); Stuart Selber (2004), Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1996), Aimée Knight et al. (2009), Michelle Sidler and Natasha Jones (2008), Christina Haas (2012), and Edward Tufte (2003). I lay this method out in "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology" (2018) where I engage in a critical interface analysis to demonstrate how Facebook's user interface design contributes to political polarization as it "prioritizes concision, speed, curation practices that limit divergent perspectives, and the flattening of complex identities and political commitments such that they are indexable processable, and thus, monetizable" (p. 387). Moreover, I argued that affectively, Facebook's interface design "encourages sensationalism, controversy, drama, intrigue as well as feelings of amusement, anxiety, fear, and suspicion over curiosity, empathy, understanding, or kindness" (p. 401). As a result, I suggested that critical interface analysis can be a way to unpack some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and oft-overlooked biases built into digital interfaces. In addition, in the Introduction to a special issue of *Technical Communication* on critical digital interface analysis, Kaytely Carpenter and I (2023) argued that "critical digital interface analysis is distinct from other approaches to studying UX and digital platforms … in that it considers how the design of digital interfaces—which all who have access to that technology can directly and immediately access—affects how technology users interact with the platform, the organizations that host them, one another, and the ideas, objects, and spaces that make up the world around us" (p. 1).

To engage in a critical interface analysis, one would analyze a digital or other designed interface with the following questions in mind:

- Who is the target/primary user? Who are the secondary users, unintended users, and other stakeholders and beneficiaries?
- What are the tasks, interactions, and relationships (human-computer, human-human) that are facilitated by and through the interface?
- What kinds of content are presented through it?
- What are its organizing logics?
- What are the ideological and cultural values and assumptions imparted through the interface, whether through its content, its organizing logics, or the interactions facilitated by the site?
- In what environments will these tasks be conducted and these interactions take place?
- What are the affordances and limitations of the interface? What and whom does it leave out?

- What are the range of emotions and embodied responses that are enabled and encouraged by the interface?
- On what memories, literacies, and histories does the interface rely? (p. 391; see "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord" (2018), for a walkthrough of a critical interface analysis.)

For purposes of this discussion, I argue that what makes this method critical is that it encourages engagement with questions that go beyond functionality to include interrogation of stakeholders and beneficiaries; the range of tasks, interactions, and relationships facilitated by the interface; its organizing logics and the ideological and cultural values and assumptions imparted through the interface; as well as its broad affordances and limitations. In doing so, critical interface analysis encourages slow engagement with digital technologies as opposed to foregrounding compulsory use.

Moreover, this framework was productively expanded upon by Chen Chen and Xiaobo Wang, (2023) who, in "Reporting Online Aggression: A Transnational Comparative Interface Analysis of Sina Weibo and Twitter," revised this framework in ways that, importantly, more explicitly call attention to transnational users, adding questions like:

- How do the ideological and cultural values imparted by the interface interact with the cultural and ideological values of transnational users?
- How do transnational users navigate these competing values? What kinds of affective experiences may they have? What dispositions and deliberations are facilitated by the interface and how do they impact transnational users?
- How does the interface empower or fail users through cultivating virtues or vices (hexis) in transnational contexts?
- How does the interface reproduce colonial, imperial values, while erasing cultural values from historically marginalized groups through its design? How does the interface facilitate online aggression and violence toward transnational, multilingual users?
- How does the interface impart a platform's assumptions about these users' labor and data in transnational spaces?

As a result, Chen and Wang (2023) demonstrated how critical interface analysis can be productively modified and adapted to suit one's given concerns and context.

More on Critical AI Literacy

Critical AI literacy might also involve interrogation of the taken-for-granted language that is used to discuss generative AI products, which Megan McIntyre,

Maggie Fernandes, and I (2024) argued "create associations between these technologies and human activities and capabilities [… associations] that are designed to cultivate trust in corporate, exploitative, and extractive technologies" (para. 5). For instance, what if, rather than talking about AI broadly, which includes a wide range of technologies that have existed long before ChatGPT's 2022 launch and that have a variety various functionalities, purposes, and implications, we use more specific terms like "(text/image/code) generative AI," "LLMs," or "chatbots"? What if rather than talking about "AI" writing, we identified LLM outputs as "synthetic text," "synthetic media," or simply "output"? What if we stopped saying that LLMs can "read" or "think,"—which they can't—and instead described what is occurring in these moments as "processing"? What if, rather than "hallucination," we used "inaccuracy," "error," "misinformation," or even "disinformation"? How might we, as rhetoricians and as computers and writing scholars, use our expertise to more critically study the discourses and rhetorics that are used to discuss these products, in ways that go beyond isolated experiences and single use cases, to analyze the broader social, political, and global contexts in which generative AI is embedded, including how it might function to "reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures"? And how might we then build systems and infrastructures that meaningfully take up what we find from such analyses?

As folks who work at the intersections of writing, rhetoric, and technology, we understand that how we talk about Big Tech Gen AI matters. I implore that we stop reinforcing either/or, adopt-or-refuse frameworks that limit possibilities and, worse, work to advance a supposed "middle ground" third option. Such rhetorics not only limit possibilities in decontextualized ways, but also position the notion that people should have the option to refuse to use corporate chatbots that rely on stolen intellectual property, that are environmentally destructive, that are extractive and exploitative on multiple levels, as an extreme position. In my view, the position of compulsory use is a far more extreme and destructive position and one we need to continue to challenge as these positions arise in higher education. Having a critical, expansive, hopeful, and forward-thinking view of generative AI must include options that center the more difficult avenues of resistance, refusal, and reimagining.

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