NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION
Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

AI for communication, by David J. Gunkel, Oxfordshire, CRC Press, 2025, 119 pp., $31.99 (Paperback), ISBN: 978103257170-6

AI for Communication is a short book meant primarily for general readers, but its clarity and concision on key points in debates about artificial intelligence (AI) also make it valuable to scholars of communication and related disciplines. The book canvasses a range of developments in AI that influence communication in the present, including machine translation, natural language processing, social robots, and what Gunkel calls "computational creativity" (p. 1) or the use of AI to generate art, music, and creative writing.

The book has two primary strengths. One is that it assembles authoritative and illuminating definitions of seminal concepts such as media, artificiality, intelligence, and authorship. This helps anchor questions about AI's impact in relation to these core ideas. The book's second strength is its quick encapsulation of key philosophical debates about what to make of AI—as a putative author, as a communication medium, and as an ostensible legal person or bearer of rights—bringing these issues into sharper focus by offering perspective on them from a high altitude.

AI for Communication serves as a companion of sorts to Gunkel's co-authored book with Mark Coeckelbergh, *Communicative AI: A Critical Introduction to Language Models* (2025). The latter work covers some of the same ground, but with a stricter focus on language models and their practical, philosophical, and political import for communication—issues that include bias, plagiarism, and copyright; meaning, truth, and democracy; and the future of writing. By contrast, *AI for Communication* draws more widely from Gunkel's earlier work on the nature of artificial intelligence and robotics in books that include *Robot Rights* (2018) and *Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond* (2023).

If *AI for Communication* has a central thesis, it is that "[c]ommunication—specifically human-level interpersonal communication—has been the defining condition of machine intelligence from the very beginning" (p. 2). Or, as the jacket copy of the book puts it, "since its inception … [AI] has inherently been a science of communication." Gunkel demonstrates this by walking through the historical development of machine translation, from an approach based on translation rules to one based on machine learning. In each case, strategies for more effective pattern recognition or completion were merely a means to enable forms of human communication, of which translation was only one. Gunkel offers further support for this reading in a chapter that explores the development of natural language processing systems in tools such as Siri and Alexa as well as in chatbots, before and after generative AI.

One of the main highlights of the book is the chapter on large language models, and specifically the segment titled "Demystifying LLMs." This chapter offers the clearest and most effective explanation of the many I have encountered of how these models really work and does so concisely. The rest of the chapter contains a succinct summary of the longer survey of LLM costs and benefits found in *Communicative AI* (e.g. bias, hallucinations, environmental impact), and also a brief overview of Gunkel's ideas about AI's impact on the future of writing. His central claim here is that we can begin to understand how to make sense of what language-model writing means and who authored it by drawing on the Derridian notion of logocentrism and Barthes's ideas about the death of the author. For Derrida and

Barthes, the meaning of a text is not to be located in an authorial intention, but in the act of reading. Gunkel suggests that language model texts prove that the meaning making is in the hands of the reader by virtue of AI's lack of subjectivity and intent. Models prove that "meaning is actually (and has always been) an effect that has been retroactively projected to become its own presumed cause" (p. 80).

But what about authority? What kind of author is a language model? Gunkel approaches this by asking a more pointed question: To what degree do language models possess the central attribute of authorship in our cultural and legal conceptions of this idea: namely, creativity and originality? His chapter on "computational creativity" sheds light on this by exploring the evolving use of AI to make music, images, and video—an overview that lends context to a larger debate we now find ourselves entertaining about where language model output fits within our conceptions of copies and originals. Gunkel offers a nuanced view of the issue by noting that generative AI produces work that spans a spectrum; from mere imitation or derivative copy to creative remix, to "truly transformative works" that are "unique and original" in their own right (pp. 92–93). Models can thus demonstrate creativity, but whether they warrant the attribution of authorship turns on new questions about the line between human prompting and unpredictable machine-generated responses.

The book's concluding chapter is its most theoretical and contentious. It offers the intriguing speculation that the "future of communication is AI," and the "future of AI is communication" (p. 98). Gunkel makes this parallel argument by situating AI in relation to the standard model of communication in media studies. In this model, a technology of communication, such as print, radio, or the internet, functions as a medium by enabling and shaping the way in which messages are conveyed between speakers. The temptation is to see AI as part of a continuum of computer-mediated communication tools from email to streaming media. But Gunkel argues that AI disrupts this entire model: "AI is not just a medium through which human messages pass from a human sender to human receivers; AI now occupies the place of sender and/or receiver in many communicative interactions" (p. 101). With AI becoming our interlocutor, attempts to theorize AI's impact within the older paradigm not only miss the mark but fail to see how AI is transforming communication in general. While in some cases AI does serve as yet another medium (e.g. as computational agent helping to craft, send, translate, or summarize messages), much of the time it now serves more as a "socially significant other" (p. 101) or "another kind of communicative subject" (p. 103)—altering our perceptions of communication itself. Conversely, the communicative abilities of AI should, in Gunkel's view, help shift "how we understand and make sense of AI" (p. 103) moving forward. AI should do so by encouraging us to think less about the possible intelligence or sentience of AI and more in terms of control and decision-making processes that underlie AI.

In its closing pages, *AI for Communication* canvasses the question of whether AI should, in some cases, be accorded legal rights. While the argument against an AI rights paradigm rests on an instrumentalist view of AI, seeing it as a tool for its creator or deployer's purposes, Gunkel suggests that AI's ability to produce output that its owners or creators cannot entirely control or predict unsettles a purely functional model. AI's generative abilities do not entitle AI to rights, but they complicate earlier binaries between humans and non-human things that helped guide our ideas about who or what should have rights. Here and throughout this short book, Gunkel strikes a fine balance between substance and concision, making this an effective resource for both scholars and general readers seeking clarity on how AI is transforming communication.

References

Coeckelbergh, M., & Gunkel, D. (2025). *Communicative AI: A critical introduction to language models*. Polity Press.
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https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2026.2628085