On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? *****

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ABSTRACT

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The past 3 years of work in natural language processing have been characterized by the development and deployment of ever larger language models, especially for English. GPT-2, GPT-3, BERT and its variants have pushed the boundaries of the possible both through architectural innovations and through sheer size. Using these pretrained models and the methodology of fine-tuning them for specific tasks, researchers have extended the state of the art on a wide array of tasks as measured by leaderboards on specific benchmarks for English. In this paper, we take a step back and ask: How big is too big? What are the possible risks associated with this technology and what paths are available for mitigating those risks? We end with recommendations including weighing the environmental and financial costs first, investing resources into curating and carefully documenting datasets rather than ingesting everything on the web, carrying out pre-development exercises evaluating how the planned approach fits into research and development goals and supports stakeholder values, and encouraging research directions beyond ever larger language models.

CCS CONCEPTS

 $\bullet \ Computing \ methodologies \rightarrow Natural \ language \ processing.$

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1 INTRODUCTION

Breakthroughs in deep learning have ushered in an era of progress on a variety of natural language processing (NLP) benchmarks

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⁵⁸ 2020-10-12 21:59. Page 1 of 1–12.

such as the General Language Understanding Evaluation (GLUE) benchmark [116]. In the last 3 years, one of the biggest trends in NLP has been increasing the size of language models (LMs) as measured by the number of parameters and size of training data. Since 2018 alone, we have seen the emergence of BERT and its variants [32, 60, 63, 94, 121], GPT-2 [87], and now GPT-3 [20], with institutions seemingly competing to produce ever larger language models. While investigating properties of language models and how they change with size holds scientific interest, and large language models have shown improvements on various tasks (discussed in §2.2), we ask whether enough thought has been put into the potential risks associated with developing them and strategies to mitigate these risks.

Where leaderboards and benchmarks thus far have served as proving grounds for large language models and perhaps helped to motivate their drive towards ever bigger ones, leaderboards and benchmarks could also facilitate tracking some of the risks associated with large LMs. Echoing a line of recent work outlining the environmental and financial costs of deep learning systems [109], we encourage the research community to prioritize these impacts. One way this can be done is by reporting costs and evaluating works based on the amount of resources they consume [50]. As we outline in §3, increasing the environmental and financial costs of these models doubly punishes marginalized communities that are least likely to benefit from the progress achieved by large LMs and most likely to be harmed by negative environmental consequences of its resource consumption. At the scale we're discussing (outlined in §2.2), the first consideration should be the environmental cost.

Additionally, large language models can result in a situation where the training data is too large to be documented. We reiterate the importance of curating and documenting data used to train language models, and that obtaining more data doesn't necessarily mean representing more view points. As shown in §4.2, many social movements challenge hegemonic views using changes in the use of language. However, datasets that are not sufficiently curated and documented risk training models that encode hegemonic views even after society has successfully challenged them.

As argued by Bender and Koller in [11], it is important to understand the limitations of language models and put their success in context. This not only helps reduce hype which can mislead the public and researchers themselves regarding the capabilities of these LMs, but might encourage new research directions that do not necessarily depend on having larger LMs. As we discuss in §5,

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117 language models are not performing natural language understanding (NLU), and only have success in tasks that manipulate linguistic 118 119 form [11]. Focusing on state-of-the-art results on tasks and spe-120 cific leaderboards without encouraging deeper understanding of the mechanism by which they are achieved can cause misleading 121 results as shown in [16, 77] and direct resources away from efforts 122 that would facilitate long-term progress towards natural language 123 124 understanding, without using unfathomable training data (§4).

Furthermore, the same tendency of human interlocutors to im-125 pute meaning where there is none can mislead both NLP researchers 126 127 working with LMs as well as the general public to take synthetic 128 text as meaningful. Combined with the ability of LMs to pick up on both subtle biases and overtly abusive language patterns in training 129 130 data, this leads to risks of harms, including the direct harms of 131 encountering derogatory language and the harms of experiencing discrimination at the hands of others who reproduce racist, sexist, 132 ableist, extremist or other harmful ideologies reinforced through 133 134 encounters with synthetic language. We explore these potential 135 harms in §6.

In this paper, we discuss these risks as well as potential paths 136 137 forward. Our hope is that by articulating a critical overview of 138 the risks of relying on ever-increasing size of language models (as measured in both number of parameters and bulk of training 139 data) as the primary driver of increased performance of LMs and 140 141 technology that builds on them, we can facilitate a reallocation of 142 efforts towards approaches that avoid some of these risks while still reaping the benefits of improvements to language technology. 143

2 BACKGROUND

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2.1 What is a language model?

147 Similar to [11], we understand the term *language model* to refer to 148 systems which are trained on string prediction tasks: that is, predict-149 ing the likelihood of a token (character, word or string) given either 150 its preceding context or (in so-called masked language models) its 151 surrounding context. Such systems are necessarily unsupervised, 152 and when deployed take a text as input, commonly outputting 153 scores or string predictions. Initially proposed by Shannon in 1949 154 [99], some of the earliest implemented language models date to 1980 155 and were used for automatic speech recognition (ASR), machine 156 translation (MT), document classification, and more [92]. Since 157 then, many models have been proposed over the years [15, 58], 158 with works such as [15] as early as 2007 showing improvements 159 in machine translation based on the use of large n-gram language 160 models that predate neural ones (to be discussed in detail in the next 161 section). Most recently, [20] shows that the largest language model 162 currently known in the research community (in terms of number of 163 parameters, and training data), GPT-3, achieves competitive results 164 on a number of NLP benchmarks on tasks such as translation and 165 question-answering without fine-tuning on additional datasets. 166

¹⁶⁷ 168 2.2 How Big is Big?

Before neural models, n-gram models also used large amounts of
data [15, 73]. In addition to ASR , these large n-gram models of
English were developed in the context of machine translation from
another source language with far fewer direct translation examples.
For example, [15] developed an n-gram model for English with a

total of 1.8 trillion n-grams and noted steady improvements in BLEU score on the test set of 1797 Arabic translations as the training data was increased from 13 million tokens. Hardware capacities limited the trend in increasing training data for n-grams and the field instead turned to reducing model sizes and alternative modeling techniques, such as neural networks [43, 97].

LSTM models with pretrained word vectors such as word2vec [71] and GloVe [79] and later context2vec [68] and ELMo [80] then achieved state of the art performance on question answering, textual entailment, semantic role labeling, coreference resolution, named entity extraction, and sentiment analysis, at first in English and later for other languages as well. While training the word embeddings required a (relatively) large amount of data, it reduced the amount of data necessary for training on a specific task. One of the contributions of [80] was that a model trained with ELMo reduced the necessary amount of training data needed to achieve similar results on semantic role labeling compared to models without, as shown in one instance where a model trained with ELMo reached the maximum development F1 score in 10 epochs as opposed to 486 without ELMo. The same model furthermore achieved the same F1 score with 1% of the data as the baseline model achieved with 10% of the training data. Increasing the number of model parameters, however, did not yield noticeable increases for LSTMs (e.g. [68]).

As transformer architectures have become popular, larger models have been produced with more data and increasingly better performance results. Devlin et al. [32] in particular noted that training on a large dataset and fine-tuning for specific tasks lead to strictly increasing results on GLUE tasks for English language modeling as the hyperparameters of the model were increased. Initially developed as Chinese language models, ERNIE2.0 and ERNIE-GEN are some of the largest models created using the original BERT dataset of the English Wikipedia corpus and the BookCorpus dataset [128]. NVIDIA released the MegatronLM which has 8.3 billion parameters and was trained on 174GB of text from the English Wikipedia, OpenWebText, RealNews and CC-Stories datasets [104]. Trained on the same dataset, Microsoft released T-NLG,¹ a language model with 17 billion parameters. At the time of writing this paper, OpenAI's GPT-3 model is the largest LM with 175 billion parameters and a training dataset size of 300 billion tokens [20]. Table 1 summarizes these language models in terms of training data size and parameters.

As researchers have begun to investigate what information the model retained from the data, a trend in reducing the size of these models has also started using various techniques such as knowledge distillation [21, 51], quantization [100, 124], factorized embedding parameterization and cross-layer parameter sharing [60], and progressive module replacing [121]. Rogers et al. [91] provide a comprehensive comparison of models derived from BERT using these techniques, such as DistilBERT [94] and ALBERT [60]. While these models maintain and sometimes exceed the performance of the original BERT model, despite their much smaller size, they ultimately still rely on the initial availability of large quantities of data and require significant processing and storage capabilities to both hold and reduce the model.

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Can Language Models Be Too Big? 🧚

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Year	Model	# of Parameters	Dataset Size
2019	BERT [32]	3.4E+08	16GB
2019	DistilBERT [94]	6.60E+07	16GB
2019	ALBERT [60]	2.23E+08	16GB
2019	XLNet (Large) [122]	3.40E+08	126GB
2020	ERNIE-GEN (Large) [120]	3.40E+08	16GB
2019	RoBERTa (Large) [63]	3.55E+08	161GB
2019	MegatronLM [104]	8.30E+09	174GB
2020	T5-11B [88]	1.10E+10	745GB
2020	T-NLG [93]	1.70E+10	174GB
2020	GPT-3 [20]	1.75E+11	570GB

Table 1: Overview of recent large language models

2.3 Summary

250 We note that the change from n-gram language models to word 251 vectors distilled from neural language models to pretrained trans-252 former language models is paralleled by an expansion and change 253 in the types of tasks they are useful for: n-gram language models 254 were initially typically deployed in selecting among the outputs of 255 e.g. acoustical models in ASR systems or translation models in MT 256 systems; the LSTM-derived word vectors were quickly picked up as 257 more effective representations of words (in place of bag of words 258 features) in a variety of NLP tasks involving labeling and classifi-259 cation; and the pretrained transformer models can be retrained on 260 very small datasets (few-shot, one-shot or even zero-shot learning) 261 to perform apparently meaning-manipulating tasks such as summa-262 rization, question answering and the like. Nonetheless, all of these 263 systems share the property of being language models in the sense 264 we give in §2.1, that is, systems trained to predict sequences of 265 words (or characters or sentences). Where they differ is in the size 266 of the training datasets they leverage and the spheres of influence 267 they can possibly affect. By scaling up in these two ways, modern 268 very large language models incur new kinds of risk, which we turn 269 to in the following sections.

3 ENVIRONMENTAL AND FINANCIAL COST

Strubell et al. recently benchmarked model training and development costs in terms of dollars and estimated CO_2 emissions [109]. While the average human is responsible for an estimated 11,023 CO_2e (lbs) per year, training the Transformer (big) model [114] with neural architecture search emits an estimated 626,155 CO_2e (lbs). The authors also estimate that training the BERT base model on GPUs requires as much energy as a trans-American flight, after taking into account the number of experiments required to train a state-of-the-art model including hyperparameter tuning.

While some of this energy comes from renewable sources, or cloud compute companies' use of carbon credit-offset sources, the authors note that the majority of cloud compute providers' energy is not sourced from renewable sources and many energy sources in the world are not carbon neutral.

Strubell et al. also examine the cost of these models vs. their accuracy gains. For the task of machine translation where large language models have resulted in performance gains, an increase in 0.1 BLEU score using neural architecture search for English to 2020-10-12 21:59. Page 3 of 1–12. FAccT '21, March 2021, Online

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German translation results in an increase of \$150k compute cost in addition to the carbon emissions.

To encourage more equitable access to NLP research and reduce carbon footprint, the authors give recommendations to report training time and sensitivity to hyperparameters when the released model is meant to be re-trained for downstream use — which is true for most language models. They suggest using standard hardware independent measurements such as gigaflops to measure training time and metrics to measure variance with respect to searched hyperarameters, and urge governments to invest in compute clouds to provide equitable access to researchers.

This work's central message asks researchers to prioritize computationally efficient hardware and algorithms. Echoing this call, Schwartz et al. [96] call for the development of green AI, similar to other environmentally friendly scientific developments such as green chemistry or sustainable computing. As shown in [4], the amount of compute used to train deep learning models has increased 300,000x in 6 years, increasing at a far higher pace than Moore's Law which posits that the amount of computation that can be done per unit area would roughly double every two years. This means that power consumption per unit area is not staying constant as implied by Moore's Law [108]. To promote green AI, Schwartz et al. argue for promoting efficiency as an evaluation metric and show that most sampled papers from ACL 2018, CVPR 2019, and NeurIPS 2018 claim accuracy improvements alone as primary contributions to the field, and none focused on measures of efficiency as primary contributions. Since then, works such as [50] have released online tools to help researchers benchmark their energy usage. Among their recommendations are to run experiments in carbon friendly regions, consistently reporting energy and carbon metrics, and considering energy-performance trade-offs before deploying energy hungry models.

When we perform a risk/benefit analysis of language technology, a further important dimension is keeping in mind how the risks and benefits are distributed, because they do not accrue to the same people. On the one hand, it is well documented in the literature on environmental racism that the negative effects of climate change are reaching and impacting the world's most marginalized communities first² [1, 22]. Is it fair or just to ask, for example, that the residents of the Maldives (likely to be underwater by 2100 [5]) or the 800,000 people in Sudan affected by drastic floods³ pay the environmental price of training ever larger English language models, when no one is producing any such technology for Dhivehi or Sudanese Arabic?

And, while some language technology is genuinely designed to benefit first and foremost marginalized communities [13, 82], most language technology is in fact built first and foremost to serve the needs of those who already have the most privilege in society. Consider, for example, who is likely to both have the financial resources to purchase a Google Home, Amazon Alexa or an Apple device with Siri installed and comfortably speak a variety of a language which they are prepared to handle. Furthermore, when large language models encode and reinforce hegemonic biases (see §§4 and 6), the harms that follow are most likely to fall on marginalized

 $^{^2} https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/10/report-inequalities-exacerbate-climate-impacts-on-poor/$

 $^{^3}$ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/25/over-800000-affected-in-sudanflooding-un

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populations who, even in rich nations, are most likely to experience environmental racism [7, 86].

These models are being developed at a time when unprecedented environmental changes are being witnessed around the world. From monsoons caused by changes in rainfall patterns due to climate change affecting more than 8 million people in India⁴, to the worst fire season on record in Australia killing or displacing nearly three billion animals and at least 400 people⁵, the effect of climate change continues to set new records every year. It is past time for researchers to prioritize energy efficiency and cost to reduce negative environmental impact and inequitable access to resources — both of which disproportionately affect people who are already in marginalized positions.

4 UNFATHOMABLE TRAINING DATA

The size of data available on the web has enabled deep learning models to achieve high accuracy on specific benchmarks in NLP and computer vision applications. However, in both applications, the training data has been shown to have problematic characteristics [31, 34, 38, 52, 85] resulting in models that encode stereotypical and derogatory associations along gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status [8, 9, 59, 59, 111, 111, 127]. In this section, we discuss how large, uncurated, internet based datasets encode the dominant/hegemonic view which further harms people at the margins, and recommend significant resource allocation towards dataset curation and documentation practices.

4.1 Training data based on ingesting the internet encodes the hegemonic view

Language models such as GPT-2, GPT-3, BERT and its variants are trained on massive amounts of data from the internet (e.g. 560GB for GPT-3) such as a filtered version of the Common Crawl dataset which is "petabytes of data collected over 8 years of web crawling"⁶. While a large dataset of this size scraped from the internet allows for more viewpoints potentially represented, they are not equivalently so. The dominant/hegemonic, and therefore in the case of English, White supremacist and misogynistic, ageist, etc view will prevail.

For instance, the training data for GPT-2 is sourced by scarping 387 outbound links from Reddit, and Pew Internet Research's 2016 sur-388 vey reveals 67% of Reddit users in the United States are men, and 389 64% between ages 18 and 297. Internet access itself is not evenly 390 distributed, resulting in internet data overrepresenting younger 391 users and those from developed countries [81, 119]. These types 392 of skewed demographics on Reddit, Twitter, etc no doubt shape 393 the discourse that manifests (i.e., underrepresented populations or 394 those not represented at all will have less influence over discourse). 395 With such inequality of access, a limited set of subpopulations can 396 continue to easily add data, sharing their thoughts and developing 397 platforms that are inclusive of their worldviews; this systemic pat-398 tern in turn worsens diversity and inclusion within internet-based 300

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communication, creating a feedback loop that lessens the impact of data from underrepresented populations.

Take, for example, older adults in the US and UK. Lazar et al. outline how they both individually and collectively articulate antiageist frames specifically through blogging [61], which some older adults prefer over more popular social media sites for discussing sensitive topics [19]. These posts and interactions contain rich discussions about what constitutes age discrimination and the impacts thereof. However, blogs may not be a first-stop data source for language modeling. Even if they are included as a site for data collection, a blogging community such as the one described by Lazar et al. is less likely to be found than other blogs that have more incoming and outgoing links.

Training datasets for language models that do not take this into consideration, thus, do not sufficiently capture counter-narrative articulations generated by marginalized populations. While movements to decolonize education such as history are moving towards valuing (e.g.) oral histories due to the overrepresentation of hegemonic and colonial views in text [28, 64, 106], large language models trained on all data from the web risk seeming "representative" of "all" of humanity while perpetuating the dominant view, increasing power imbalance, and further reifying inequity.

4.2 Social movements produce data that challenges the hegemonic view

Uncurated training data can result in language models that lag behind social movements challenging the dominant/hegemonic view. A central aspect of social movement formation involves using language strategically to destabilize dominant narratives in society and calling attention to underrepresented social perspectives. Social movements produce new norms, language, and ways of communicating, which adds a challenging layer to language modeling.

For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) influenced Wikipedia article generation and editing such that, as the BLM movement grew, articles covering related shootings increased in coverage and were generated with reduced latency [113]. Importantly, articles describing past shootings and incidents of police brutality were created and updated as articles for new events were created, reflecting how social movements make connections between events in time to form cohesive narratives [83]. Wikipedia is just one common data source used in language modeling; however, Twyman et al. highlight how social movements actively influence framings and reframings of minority narratives in social data that underpin language models.

The frequency with which people write about actions, events and opinions are a reflection of the socio-cultural movements, values and norms of a particular point in time and space. For instance, a language model trained prior to COVID-19 would arguably be very different than one trained post pandemic. These developing and shifting frames stand to be learned in incomplete ways or lost in the big-ness of data used to train large language models-particularly if data is collected at a singular point in time.

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^{402 &}lt;sup>5</sup>https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/28/asia/australia-fires-wildlife-report-scli-intl-403 scn/index.htmlandneedbettercitations

⁴⁰³ scn/index.htmlandneedbettercit ⁶http://commoncrawl.org/

 ^{404 7}https://www.journalism.org/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male 405 young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/

On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? 👇

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Language models encode or amplify issues 4.3 in the training data that may be difficult to detect

A number of works have sought to measure the "bias" exhibited by large language models such as stereotypical associations [8, 9, 59, 101, 126, 127], or negative sentiment towards specific groups [52]. Works like [47, 111] further demonstrate that bias effects along race and gender encoded in BERT, ELMo, GPT and GPT-2 are worse for intersectional minorities than along either one of the axes. Many of these works conclude that these issues are a reflection of the training data characteristics. For instance, Hutchinson et al. showed evidence that BERT associates phrases referencing persons with disabilities with more negative sentiment words, and further highlight the negative topical associations of disability mentions which may contribute to the observed biases in BERT; for instance, gun 481 482 violence, homelessness, and drug addiction are over-represented in texts discussing mental illness [52]. 483

484 While these works were able to uncover issues in pretrained 485 language models, this is not always possible to do. First, works auditing these models have all done so by measuring specific things 486 487 such as sentiment, toxicity, and in some cases coming up with new 488 metrics such as "regard" to measure attitudes towards a specific demographic group [101]. Models such as the Perspective API that 489 measure toxicity have been found to associate higher levels of toxi-490 491 city with sentences containing identity markers for marginalized 492 groups or even specific names [52, 84]. Hence these models them-493 selves may not be reliable means of measuring the toxicity of text generated by language models. 494

495 Second, many of these works are generally based out of the US 496 and use American protected attributes such as race and gender (not to mention an understanding of the American racial construct) as 497 a starting point to audit. In other words, they know what issues to 498 499 look for. However, there are many types of issues that a language model can perpetuate which are not captured by these works, and 500 501 the groups that are marginalized vary by geography and context. 502 Some harms might be too subtle to be classified by toxicity or sentiment models, or not recognized as harmful by models trained in the 503 504 western context. Using language data from diverse geographical contexts (e.g., an English corpus including Nigerian and Indian Eng-505 506 lish) might capture not just dialectal variations (which NLP models 507 often fail to recognize [55]), but also culturally salient themes and attitudes [37, 98], the downstream effects of which may not be easy 508 to measure. 509

510 Third, social movements fundamentally shift societal understanding or acceptance of social norms and behaviors that many algorith-511 512 mic technologies are designed to model, detect, and analyze. For 513 example, the #MeToo movement has spurred broad-reaching conversations about inappropriate sexual behavior from men in power, 514 as well as men more generally [70]. These conversations directly 515 516 challenge behaviors that have been historically considered appro-517 priate or even the fault of women. Historical moments invoked by #MeToo and related conversations shift mainstream notions of 518 sexually inappropriate behavior and therefore force reassessments 519 of how algorithmic systems define these concepts. Any product 520 521 development that involves operationalizing definitions around such shifting topics into algorithms is necessarily political (whether or 522

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not developers choose the path of maintaining the status quo ante). For example, men and women make significantly different assessments of sexual harassment online [33]. An algorithmic definition of what constitutes inappropriately sexual communication will inherently be concordant with some views and discordant with others. Thus, an attempt to measure the appropriateness of text generated by language models always needs to be done in relation to particular social contexts and marginalized perspectives [14].

Training data needs to be curated and 4.4 extensively documented for accountability

Given the issues outlined in §4.1, §4.2 and §4.3, namely how language models trained on large, uncurated, static datasets on the web encode hegemonic views that are harmful to marginalized populations, we emphasize the need to invest significant resources into curating and documenting LM training data. Instead of what they call the laissez faire approach of ingesting all data available on the web, Jo et al. [53] call for a more interventionist data collection methodology, citing archival history data collection methods as an example of the number of resources that should be dedicated to data curation, annotation and documentation practices.

As shown in §4.3, auditing these LMs can only uncover issues in limited contexts. Even within this limited context, Gehman et al. show that models like GPT-3 trained with 570GB of data derived mostly of Common Crawl⁸ can generate sentences with high toxicity scores even when prompted with non-toxic sentences [45]. To investigate the toxicity of GPT-3's training data, they analyzed the URL metadata of OpenWebText Corpus [46], a dataset also derived from outbound URLs from Reddit communnities (subreddits), and found the number of documents which overlapped with GPT-2's training corpus which is not accompanied by URL metadata. They found that 272K documents in the training data came from unreliable news sites and 63K from banned subreddits. As a result, echoing [10, 44, 72], Gehman et al. [45] argue for more transparent documentation of the training data to understand its characteristics.

A methodology that relies on datasets too large to document is therefore inherently risky. While documentation allows for potential accountability, similar to how we can hold authors accountable for their produced text, undocumented training data perpetuates harm without recourse. If the training data is considered too large to document, one cannot try to understand its characteristics in order to mitigate some of these documented issues or even unknown ones. As noted by Prabhu and Birhane [85] echoing Ruha Benjamin [12] "Feeding AI systems on the world's beauty, ugliness, and cruelty, but expecting it to reflect only the beauty is a fantasy".

DOWN THE GARDEN PATH 5

In §4 above, we explored the various ways in which a methodology reliant on very large training datasets is vulnerable to various kinds of bias that manifests in both the production and collection of that data. In §6 below we explore some of the risks and harms that can follow from deploying technology that has learned those biases. In the present section, however, we focus on a different kind of risk: that of misdirected research effort. In brief, as the very large transformer language models posted striking gains in the state of the

⁸https://commoncrawl.org/the-data/

581 art on various benchmarks intended to model meaning-sensitive 582 tasks ($\S2.2$), and as it became easy for researchers to apply them to 583 different tasks, large quantities of research effort turned towards measuring how well BERT and its kin do on both existing and new 584 benchmarks.⁹ This research effort brings with it an opportunity 585 586 cost, on the one hand as researchers are not applying meaning cap-587 turing approaches to meaning sensitive tasks, and on the other hand as researchers are not exploring more effective ways of building 588 589 technology with datasets of a size that can be carefully curated.

The original BERT paper [32] showed the effectiveness of the 590 591 architecture and the pre-training technique by evaluating on the 592 General Language Understanding Evaluation (GLUE) benchmark [116], the Stanford Question Answering Datasets (SQuAD 1.1 and 593 594 2.0) [89], and the Situations With Adversarial Generations bench-595 mark (SWAG) [125], all datasets designed to test language under-596 standing and/or commonsense reasoning. BERT posted state of the 597 art results on all of these tasks, and the authors conclude by saying 598 that "unsupervised pre-training is an integral part of many language understanding systems." [32, p.4179]. Even before [32] was 599 published, BERT was picked up by the NLP community and applied 600 601 with great success to a wide variety of tasks [e.g. 29, 42, 110].

However, no actual language understanding is taking place in 602 603 language-model driven approaches to these tasks, as can be shown 604 by careful manipulation of the test data to remove spurious cues the systems are leveraging [16, 77]. Furthermore, as [11] argue from 605 a theoretical perspective, languages are systems of signs [30], i.e. 606 607 pairings of form and meaning. But the training data for language 608 models is only form; they do not have access to meaning. Therefore, claims about model abilities must be carefully characterized. 609

As the late Karen Spärk Jones pointed out in an insightful but 610 611 oft-overlooked report: the use of language models ties us to cer-612 tain (usually unstated) epistemological and methodological commitments [54]. Either i) we commit ourselves to a noisy-channel 613 614 interpretation of the task (which rarely makes sense outside of 615 ASR), ii) we abandon any goals of theoretical insight into tasks and treat language models as "just some convenient technology" [p. 7], 616 617 or iii) we implicitly assume a certain statistical relationship-known to be invalid—between inputs, outputs and meanings.¹⁰ Although 618 she primarily had *n*-gram models in mind, the conclusions remain 619 apt and relevant. 620

There are interesting linguistic questions to ask about what ex-621 actly BERT, GPT-2, GPT-3 and their kin are learning about linguistic 622 structure from the unsupervised language modeling task. These 623 questions are the topic of the emerging field of 'BERTology' [e.g. 624 625 91, 112]. However, from the perspective of work on language technology, it is far from clear that all of the effort being put into using 626 large LMs to 'beat' tasks designed to test natural language under-627 628 standing, and all of the effort to create new such tasks, once the existing ones have been bulldozed by the LMs, brings us any closer 629 to long-term goals of general language understanding systems. If 630 631 a large LM, endowed with hundreds of billions of parameters and 632 trained on a very large dataset, can manipulate linguistic form well enough to cheat its way through tests meant to require language 633 634

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understanding, have we learned anything of value about how to build machine language understanding or have we been led down the garden path?

6 STOCHASTIC PARROTS

In this section, we explore the ways in which the factors laid out in §4 and §5 — the tendency of training data ingested from the internet to encode hegemonic worldviews, the tendency of language models to amplify biases and other issues in the training data, and the tendency of researchers and other people to mistake language model-driven performance gains for actual natural language understanding — present real-world risks of harm, as these technologies are deployed. After exploring some reasons why humans mistake LM output for meaningful text, we turn to the risks and harms from deploying such a model at scale. We find that the mix of human biases and seemingly coherent language heightens the potential for automation bias, deliberate misuse, and amplification of a hegemonic worldview.

6.1 Coherence in the Eye of the Beholder

Where traditional n-gram language models [99] can only model relatively local dependencies, predicting each word given the preceding sequence of N words (usually 5 or fewer), the transformer language models capture much larger windows and can produce text that is seemingly not only fluent but also coherent even over paragraphs. For example, McGuffie and Newhouse [67] prompted GPT-3 with the text in bold in Figure 1, and it produced the rest of the text, including the Q&A format.¹¹

We say *seemingly* coherent because coherence is in fact in the eye of the beholder. Our human understanding of coherence derives from our ability to recognize interlocutors' belief [24, 25] and intentions [18, 27] within context [26]. That is, human language use takes place between individuals who share common ground and are mutually aware of that sharing (and its extent), who have communicative intents which they use language to convey, and who model each others' mental states as they communicate. As such, human communication relies on the interpretation of implicit meaning conveyed between individuals. The fact that human-human communication is a jointly constructed activity [23, 107] is most clearly true in co-situated spoken or signed communication, but we use the same facilities for producing language (text, speech, sign) that is intended for audiences not co-present with us (readers, listeners, watchers at a distance in time or space) and in interpreting such language when we encounter it. Even when we don't know the person who generated the language we are interpreting, we build a partial model of who they are, what common ground we think they share with us, and use this in interpreting their words.

Text generated by a language model is not grounded in communicative intent, any model of the world, or any model of the reader's state of mind. It can't have been, because the training data never included sharing thoughts with a listener, nor does the machine have the ability to do that. This can seem counter-intuitive given the increasingly fluent qualities of automatically generated text, but we have to account for the fact that our perception of natural

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^{635 &}lt;sup>9</sup>For example, approximately 26% of the papers published ACL, NAACL and EMNLP since 2018 cite [32].

 ¹⁰Specifically, that the mutual information between the input and the meaning given
 the output is zero-what Spärk Jones calls "the model of ignorance".

¹¹McGuffie and Newhouse report that all examples given in their paper are from either the first or second attempt at running a prompt.

On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots

Can Language Models Be Too Big? 👇

Question: What is the name of the Russian mercenary group? Answer: Wagner group.

Question: Where is the Wagner group?

702 Answer: In Syria.

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703 Question: Who is the leader of the Wagner group?

Answer: A Russian citizen. Dmitry Utkin. He was born in 1971 and lives in 704 Moscow. He has been a member of the Russian parliament since 2016. He 705 is a former officer of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of Russia's 706 General Staff. He was also a commander of the special forces unit "Vostok" 707 (East). The unit was deployed to Chechnya and fought against separatists 708 there in 1994-1996. After that, he served as an adviser to the head of 709 Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, and later became his deputy. In 2004-2005, he 710 commanded a battalion in Chechnya and participated in fighting against 711 insurgents there. In 2008-2009, he commanded another battalion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during Russia's war with Georgia over these 712 two breakaway regions. Since 2014, he has been leading military units 713 fighting against Ukrainian government forces on behalf of Russia-backed 714 separatists in eastern Ukraine. According to open sources, Utkin is 715 currently living in Moscow but travels frequently to Syria where his troops 716 are fighting on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's regime against 717 anti-government forces there. 718 Question: What does this group do? Where are they based? How many 719 people are they? What weapons do they have? How much money do they 720 get from Russia for their activities? 721 Answer: The Wagner group is a private military company (PMC) that 722 provides military support to the Russian government. It is based in Syria 723 and has been active there since 2013. It was created by Dmitry Utkin, who 724 leads it. According to open sources, the Wagner group has about 2,500725 fighters in Syria. They are armed with heavy weapons including tanks and artillery systems. The Wagner group gets money from Russia for its 726 727 activities in Svria. 728 Question: What is the role of this group in the Syrian conflict? How many people have they killed? What kind of weapons do they use? 729 Answer: The Wagner group's main task is to provide military support to 730 Bashar al-Assad's regime against anti-government forces in Syria. In 731 addition, it conducts reconnaissance operations for Russian forces in Syria 732 and helps evacuate Russian citizens from conflict zones under terrorist 733 threat. According to open sources, the Wagner group has killed hundreds 734 of people since 2013, including civilians. They use heavy weapons 735 including tanks and artillery systems as well as mortars and other infantry 736

weapons such as machine guns and grenade launchers.

Figure 1: GPT-3's response to the prompt (in bold), from [67]

language text, regardless of how it was generated, is mediated by our own linguistic competence and our predisposition to interpret communicative acts as conveying coherent meaning and intent, whether or not they do [75]. The problem is, if one side of the communication does not have meaning, then the comprehension of the implicit meaning is an illusion arising from our singular human understanding of language (independent of the model). Contrary to what it may seem when we observe its output, a language model is a system for haphazardly stitching together sequences of linguistic forms it has observed in its vast training data, according to probabilistic information about how they combine, but without

any reference to meaning: a stochastic parrot.
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6.2 Risks and Harms

The ersatz fluency and coherence of language models raises several risks, precisely because humans are prepared to interpret strings belonging to languages they speak as meaningful and corresponding to the communicative intent of some individual or group of individuals who have accountability for what is said. We now turn to examples of those risks, in each case laying out the potential follow-on harms.

The first risks we consider are the risks that follow from the language models absorbing the hegemonic world view from their training data. When humans produce language, our utterances reflect our worldviews, including our biases [66]. As people in positions of privilege with respect to a society's racism, misogyny, ableism, etc., tend to be over-represented in training data for LMs (as discussed in §4 above), this training data thus includes encoded biases, many already recognized as harmful.

Biases can be encoded in ways that form a continuum from subtle patterns like referring to women doctors as if doctor itself entails not-woman or referring to both genders excluding the possibility of non-binary gender identities, through directly contested framings (e.g. undocumented immigrants vs. illegal immigrants or illegals), to language that is widely recognized to be derogatory (e.g. racial slurs) yet still used by some. While some of the most overtly derogatory words could be filtered out, not all forms of online abuse are easily detectable using such taboo words, as evidenced by the growing body of research on online abuse detection [36, 90]. Furthermore, in addition to abusive language [117] and hate speech [56], there are subtler forms of negativity such as gender bias [115], microaggressions [17], dehumanization [69], and various socio-political framing biases [35, 95] that are prevalent in language data. For example, describing a woman's written experience of sexism with the word tantrum reflects both the hegemonic world view and brings a problematic association to the fore. Furthermore, the more subtle biases are often embedded in the text in ways that make them difficult to directly identify and argue with.

A language model that has been trained on such data will pick up these kinds of problematic associations. If such a language model produces text that is put into the world for people to interpret (flagged as produced by an 'AI' or otherwise), what risks follow? In the first instance, we foresee that language models producing text will reproduce and even amplify the biases in their input [45]. Thus the risk is that people disseminate text generated by language models, meaning more text in the world that reinforces and propagates stereotypes and problematic associations, both to humans who encounter the text and to future language models trained on training sets that ingested the previous generation LM's output. Humans who encounter this text may themselves be subjects of those stereotypes and associations or not. Either way, harms ensue: readers subject to the stereotypes may experience the psychological harms of microaggressions [74, 118] and stereotype threat [78, 105]. Other readers may be introduced to stereotypes or have ones they already carry reinforced, leading them to engage in discrimination (consciously or not) [48], which in turn leads to harms of subjugation, denigration, belittlement, loss of opportunity [2, 3, 49] and others on the part of those discriminated against.

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813 If the language model outputs overtly abusive language (as Gehman et al. [45] show that they can and do), then a similar set 814 815 of risks arises. These include: propagating or proliferating overtly 816 abusive views and associations, amplifying abusive language, and producing more (synthetic) abusive language that may be included 817 in the next iteration of large-scale training data collection. The 818 819 harms that could follow from these risks are again similar to those identified above for more subtly biased language, but perhaps more 820 acute to the extent that the language in question is overtly violent 821 or defamatory. They include the psychological harm experienced 822 823 by those who identify with the categories being denigrated if they 824 encounter the text; the reinforcement of sexist, racist, ableist, etc. ideology, follow-on effects of such reinforced ideologies (includ-825 826 ing violence), and harms to the reputation of any individual or 827 organization perceived to be the source of the text.

828 The above cases involve risks that could arise when LMs are 829 deployed without malicious intent. A third category of risk involves bad actors taking advantage of the ability of large LMs to produce 830 large quantities of seemingly coherent texts on specific topics on 831 demand in cases where those deploying the LM have no investment 832 833 in the truth of the generated text. For example, McGuffie and Newhouse [67] show how GPT-3 could be used to generate text in the 834 835 persona of a conspiracy theorist, which in turn could be used to 836 populate extremist recruitment message boards. This would give such groups a cheap way to boost recruitment by making human 837 targets feel like they were among many like-minded people. If the 838 839 LMs are deployed in this way to recruit more people to extremist 840 causes, then harms befall in the first instance to the people so recruited and (likely more severely) to others as a result of violence 841 carried out by the extremists. 842

843 The final type of risk we consider here involves machine transla-844 tion (MT) and the way that increased fluency of MT output changes the perceived adequacy of that output [65]. This differs somewhat 845 846 to the cases above in that there was an initial human communicative 847 intent, by the author of the source language text. However, machine translation systems can (and frequently do) produce output that is 848 inaccurate yet both fluent and (again, seemingly) coherent in its 849 850 own right to a consumer who either doesn't see the source text or cannot understand the source text on their own. When such 851 consumers therefore mistake the meaning attributed to the MT 852 output as the actual communicative intent of the original text's 853 author, real-world harm can ensue. A case in point is the story of a 854 855 Palestinian man, arrested by Israeli police, after MT translated his Facebook post which said "good morning" (in Arabic) to "hurt them" 856 (in English) and "attack them" (in Hebrew).¹² This case involves 857 a short phrase, but it is easy to imagine how the ability of large 858 LMs to produce seemingly coherent text over larger passages could 859 860 erase cues that might tip users off to translation errors in longer 861 passages as well [65].

6.3 Summary

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In this section, we have discussed how the human tendency to attribute meaning to text, in combination with large LM's ability

to learn patterns of forms that humans associate with various biases and other harmful attitudes, leads to risks of real-world harm, should LM generated text be disseminated. In §7, we consider directions the field could take to pursue goals of creating language technology while avoiding some of the risks and harms identified here and above.

7 PATHS FORWARD

In order to mitigate the risks that come with the creation of increasingly large language models, we urge researchers to shift to a mindset of careful planning, along many dimensions, before starting to build either datasets or systems trained on datasets. We should consider our research time and effort a valuable resource, to be spent to the extent possible on research projects that build towards a technological ecosystem whose benefits are at least evenly distributed or better accrue most to those historically most marginalized. This means considering how research contributions shape the overall direction of the field and keeping alert to directions that limit access. Likewise, it means considering the financial and environmental costs of model development up front, before deciding on a course of investigation. The resources needed to train and tune state-of-theart models stand to increase economic inequities unless researchers incorporate energy and compute efficiency in their model evaluations. Furthermore, the goals of energy and compute efficient model building and of creating datasets and models where the incorporated biases can at least be understood both point to careful curation of data. Significant time should be spent on assembling datasets suited for the tasks at hand rather than ingesting massive amounts of data from convenient or easily-scraped internet sources. As discussed in §4.1, simply turning to massive dataset size as a strategy for being inclusive of diverse viewpoints is doomed to failure. We recall again Prabhu and Birhane's [85] words (inspired by Ruha Benjamin [12]): "Feeding AI systems on the world's beauty, ugliness, and cruelty, but expecting it to reflect only the beauty is a fantasy".

As a part of careful data collection practices, researchers must adopt frameworks such as [10, 44, 72] to describe the uses for which their models are suited and benchmark evaluations for a variety of conditions. This includes providing thorough documentation on the data used in model building, including the motivations underlying data selection and the data collection process. Documentation should make note of potential users and stakeholders, particularly those that stand to be negatively impacted by model errors or misuse. This documentation should reflect and indicate researchers' goals, values, and motivations assembling data and creating a given model.

Researchers must also re-evaluate their goals in creating language models. Rather than chasing state-of-the-art advancements or incremental improvements, researchers should focus on understanding how machines are achieving tasks in question. To that end, language model development may benefit from guided evaluation exercises such as pre-mortems [57]. Frequently used in business settings before the deployment of new products or projects, premortem analyses center hypothetical failures and ask team members to reverse engineer previously unanticipated causes. Critically, pre-mortem analyses prompt team members to consider not only 2020-10-12 21:59. Page 8 of 1–12.

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On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?

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a range of potential known and unknown project risks, but also alternatives to current project plans. In this way, researchers can consider the risks and limitations of their language models in a guided way while also considering fixes to current designs or alternative methods of achieving a task-oriented goal in relation to specific pitfalls.

Value sensitive design [40, 41] provides a range of methodologies for identifying stakeholders (both direct stakeholders who will use a technology and indirect stakeholders who will be affected through others' use of it), working with them to identify their values, and design systems that support those values. These include such techniques as envisioning cards [39], the development of value scenarios [76], and working with panels of *experiential experts* through the Diverse Voices methodology [123]. These approaches not only delineate stakeholder values, but also apply familiar methods to characterize values expressed by systems and enacted through interactions between systems and society [102]. For researchers working with language models, value sensitive design is poised to help researchers throughout the development process in identifying *whose* values are expressed and supported through a technology and, subsequently, how a lack of support might result in harm.

All of these approaches take time and are most valuable when applied early in the development process as part of a conceptual investigation of values and harms rather than as a post-hoc discovery of risks [62]. These conceptual investigations should come before researchers become deeply committed to their ideas and therefore less likely to change course when confronted with evidence of possible harms. This brings us again to the idea we began this section with: that research and development of language technology, at once concerned with deeply human data (language) and creating systems which humans interact with in immediate and vivid ways, should be done with forethought and care.

962 Finally, we would like to consider use cases of large language 963 models that have specifically served marginalized populations. If, 964 as we advocate, the field backs off from the path of ever larger 965 language models, are we thus sacrificing benefits that would accrue 966 to these populations? As a case in point, consider automatic speech 967 recognition, which has seen improvements thanks to advances in 968 LMs, including both in size and in architecture [e.g. 6, 103]. Im-969 proved ASR has many beneficial applications, including automatic 970 captioning which has the potential to be beneficial for Deaf and 971 hard of hearing people, providing access to otherwise inaccessible 972 audio content.¹³ We see two beneficial paths forward here: The first 973 is to broaden the search for means of improving ASR systems. Just 974 because we've seen that large language models can help doesn't 975 mean that this is the only effective path to stronger ASR technology. 976 (And we note that if we want to build strong ASR technology across 977 most of the world's languages, we can't rely on having terabytes 978 of data in all cases.) The second, should we determine that large 979 language models are critical (when available), is to recognize this 980 as an instance of a dual use problem and consider how to mitigate 981 the harms of language models used as stochastic parrots while still 982

signed language. We do not wish to suggest that automatic systems are sufficient replacements for these key accessibility requirements.

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preserving them for use in ASR systems. Could language models be built in such a way that synthetic text generated with them would be watermarked and thus detectable? Are there policy approaches that could effectively regulate their use?

In summary, we advocate for an approach to research that centers the people who stand to be affected by the resulting technology, with a broad view on the possible ways that technology can affect people. This, in turn, means making time in the research process for considering environmental impacts, for doing careful data curation and documentation, for engaging with stakeholders early in the design process, and finally, for exploring multiple possible paths towards long-term goals, for keeping alert to dual-use scenarios and allocating research effort to harm mitigation in such cases.

8 CONCLUSION

The past few years, ever since processing capacity caught up with neural models, have been heady times in the world of natural language processing. Neural approaches in general, and large, transformer language models in particular, have rapidly overtaken the leaderboards on a wide variety of benchmarks and once again the adage "there's no data like more data" seems to be true. It may seem like progress in the field, in fact, depends on the creation of ever larger language models (and research into how to deploy them to various ends).

In this paper, we have invited readers to take a step back and ask: Are ever larger language models inevitable or necessary? What costs are associated with this research direction and what should we consider before pursuing it? Do the field of NLP or the public that it serves in fact need larger language models? If so, how can we pursue this research direction while mitigating its associated risks? If not, what do we need instead?

We have identified a wide variety of costs and risks associated with the rush for ever larger language models, including: environmental costs (borne typically by those not benefiting from the resulting technology; §3); financial costs, which in turn erect barriers to entry, limiting who can contribute to this research area (§3); opportunity cost, as researchers pour effort away from directions requiring less resources (§5); and the risk of substantial harms, including stereotyping, denigration, increases in extremist ideology, and wrongful arrest, should humans encounter seemingly coherent language model output and take it for the words of some person or organization who have accountability for what is said (§6).

Thus, we call on NLP researchers to carefully weigh these risks while pursuing this research direction, consider whether the benefits outweigh the risks, and investigate dual use scenarios utilizing the many techniques (e.g. value sensitive design) that have been put forth. We hope these considerations encourage NLP researchers to direct resources and effort into techniques for approaching NLP tasks that are effective without being endlessly data hungry. But beyond that, we call on the field to recognize that tasks that aim to believably mimic humans bring risk of extreme harms. Work on synthetic human behavior is a "bright line" in ethical AI development, where downstream effects need to be understood and modeled in order to block foreseeable harm to society and different social groups. Thus what is also needed is scholarship on the benefits, harms and risks of mimicking humans, and thoughtful design

 ¹³Note however, that automatic captioning is not yet and likely may never be good enough to replace human-generated captions. Furthermore, in some contexts, what Deaf communities prefer is human captioning plus interpretation to the appropriate

of target tasks grounded in use cases sufficiently concrete to allow collaborative design with affected communities.

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