

Chapbooks against the machine: analog co-writing and publishing as a collective geography of AI refusal

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Abstract

This article presents *pliegOS.net*, a collaborative action-research project exploring chapbook-making as a low-tech, community-driven practice of analog resistance to AI-generated content. Combining zine culture, digital commons tools, and on-site publishing activities, *pliegOS* develops situated workshops where participants co-write, print, and share one-page booklets in real time. These ephemeral fanzines – whether typed, drawn, collaged, or spoken into existence – circulate immediately as tangible artifacts, sent by post or distributed on-site at festivals, residencies, and classrooms. Rather than reject digital tools altogether, this project navigates the tension between collaborative software and generative algorithms. Alongside *libre* pagination tools and cloud pads, *pliegOS.net* has recently experimented with obfuscated PDFs to complicate machine readability. Through these strategies, their promoters understand AI refusal as a series of gestures that reclaim slowness, imperfection, and embodied co-creation. This article brings together narrative fragments, fieldnotes, workshop images, and a summary of a recent collective experiment reflecting on AI. In doing so, it signals both historical and emerging directions for resisting AI excesses and offers a practical ‘analog creativity resistance toolkit’. Engaging with chapbook genealogies, the project *ethos* aligns with cultural geography debates on materiality, authorship, and infrastructures of mediation. As an essay voiced by the text itself, the article offers not just a summary of the project but a live artifact of it, emerging, as it does, at the intersection of the human, the algorithmic, and the editorial commons. In the process, it proposes analog publishing as a convivial method of critical inquiry and a plural, embodied, and relational geography of writing and reading otherwise.

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AI refusal, analog co-creation, collaborative authorship, ethnographic experimentation, zines and chapbooks

«L'art de l'imprimeur consiste à effectuer une double impression, sur le papier et dans l'esprit» Olivier Deloignon, *Une histoire de l'imprimerie, et de la chose imprimée* (2024)

Welcome to this text, proudly featured in a special issue of *cultural geographies*! But first things first: what you're reading (that's me, this text) has been experimentally mutating as digital content in a human-machine-human loop, among authors, reviewers, and the occasional pre-reader friend. Brought to life as a paper that isn't really paper but digital text, I speak to you – lovely geographic reader, wherever and whenever you are – thanks to a small group of open-source wordsmiths and printing enthusiasts behind [pliegOS.net](#), a project experimenting with collaborative (human) writing and digital obfuscation strategies in the process of making and distributing [fanzines](#).

Yet I'm not entirely human-made. On the digital collaborative side, I've been co-created with tools like an [etherpad](#) and a [Commons cloud](#), following the [four freedoms](#) of free software and the fine art of hyperlinking in and out of our goddess Wikipedia. On the dark algorithmic side, I'm readable thanks to a large language model ([LLM](#)) chatbot with transcription superpowers based on optical character recognition ([OCR](#)), who also translated and corrected me from my original Catalan into this Anglo-language of the Empire. But the main logic and [low-tech](#) process I embody is not new, but rooted instead in cut-&-paste methods that range from Tristan Tzara's [Dada poetry instructions](#) to Burroughs and Gysin's [cut-up technique](#) to [Kathy Acker's zine experiments](#).¹

The spark of the [pliegOS](#) project traces back to 2010, more than a decade before the disruption brought by ChatGPT and other distributed writing automatons, when one of my co-authors found an old suitcase in their family garage. Inside was a collection of 200 Catalan [chapbooks](#) (small printed booklets popular as street literature since the earliest Guttenberg presses) originally published as part of the early-1900s children's series *En Patufet* (Figure 1). Popular across Catalonia until suppressed by Francoist censorship, these yellowed but carefully folded booklets represented a minimalist book format: one triple-folded sheet, cut on one side and stitched or stapled on the other. This chapbook type, evolved from the [early quarto format](#),² typically featured fables and moral tales read aloud to young audiences. Chapbooks are far from a lost craft! Besides being ancestors of modern zines, they are still alive across Latin America, Africa, and South Asia – from Brazilian *literatura de cordel* and Mexican *calaveras literarias* to Onitsha market literature and Chinese *lianhuanhuas* and *manhuas* (Figure 2).

The suitcase discovery inspired [pliegOS](#) as a side project among a small group of typographic enthusiasts, open-knowledge advocates, researchers, and cultural activists experimenting with collaborative writing tools. Over time, this group developed workshop formats for rapid co-writing and zine-making sprints. Adopting the zine ethos of amateur, self-published community media,³ they set a core rule: each publication should be collaboratively written, printed on-site as a one-page chapbook, and distributed immediately. All content is released under a copyleft license like [Creative Commons](#) to encourage free circulation and reuse. Now part of [FemProcomuns](#), a cooperative promoting open-source and open knowledge, the project remains decentralized, low-budget, and driven by mainly creative energy.

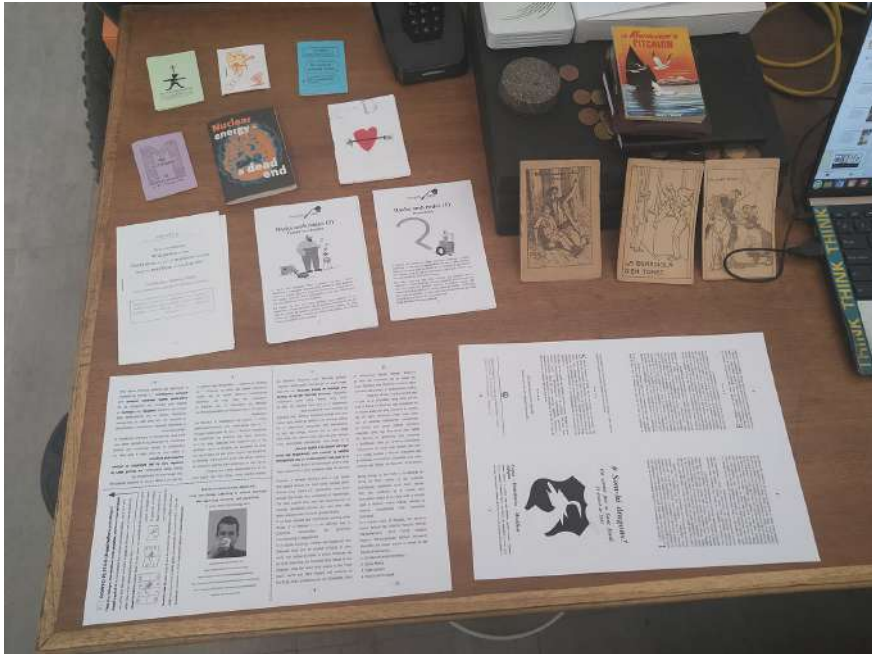


Figure 1. Three Patufet chapbooks from the suitcase (top-right), plus early pliegOS samples (bottom and left). Photo by the authors.

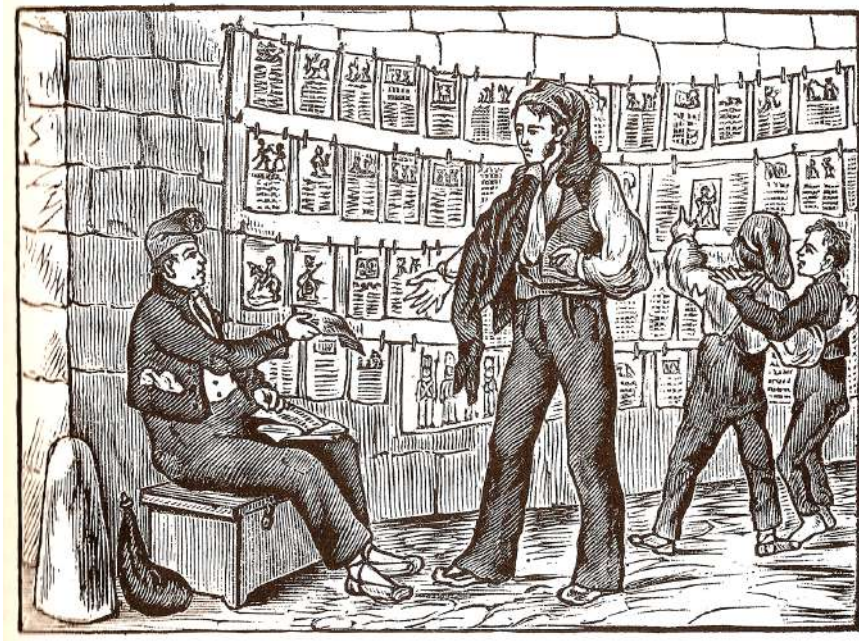


Figure 2. 1850 engraving of a chapbook stall at Plaça de Sant Agustí Vell, Barcelona, Source: Wikipedia (Public Domain).



Figure 3. Mailing a postcard-chapbook via Spanish postal service. Photo by the authors.

To illustrate their experimentation with analog co-creation and open-source strategies for developing and distributing cultural artifacts below the reach of AI surveillance – through physical, paper-based, and geographically situated means – my two authors offer a dual approach. First, they provide an overview of pliegOS workshops designed as creative responses to AI writing, before describing a practical, field-tested toolkit list for analog writing, editing, and publishing as acts of refusal against LLMs.⁴ With luck, this ‘how-to’ will inspire you to replicate and adapt the method with others. That’s my purpose with these 2,000 floating words! Second, as another read-write experiment, the pliegOS team – or tribe, coven, or oath (they’re unsure themselves) – created a collaborative chapbook-postcard on AI-related reflections. Using a shared template, each mailed in their contribution. This analog co-creation forms the two PDF annexes of this piece (Supplemental Materials 1 and 2). Feel free to download, print, and read the results, or even reuse the template and join the game.

But don’t trust what meets the eye! Based on a series of subtle obfuscation measures around the coding of PDF files, the screen display of one annex complicates as much as possible its processing for the training of LLMs (Figures 3 and 4). This additional AI refusal material is a combination of hidden content until printed, text processed as image (derived from handwritten content in Catalan), and little pages displayed upside-down until folded on paper.

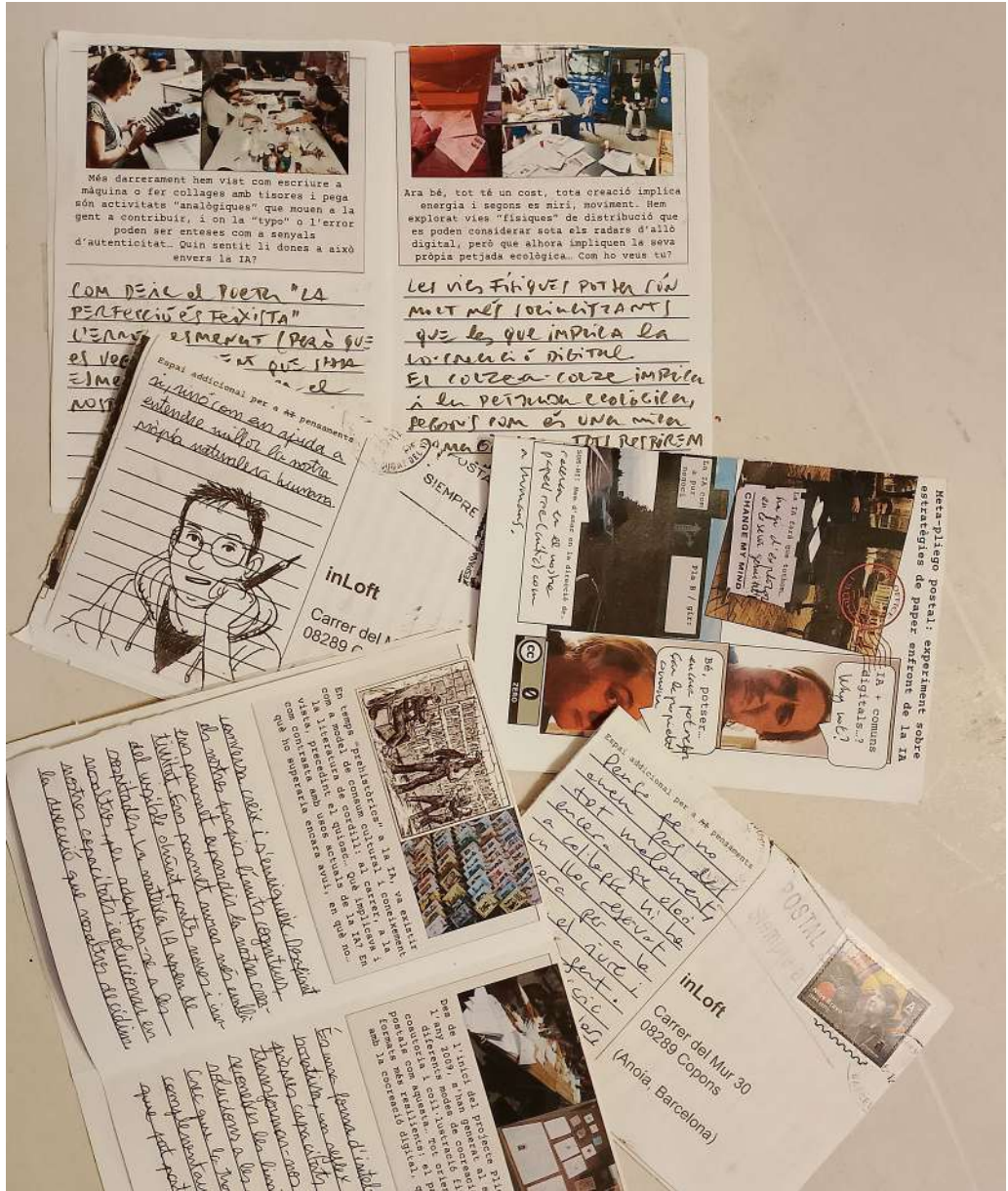


Figure 4. Five received chapbooks, each with distinct handwriting. Photo by the authors.

A short overview from co-writing to AI refusal, open style

In its early days, pliegoOS worked with children to create their own chapbooks, illustrating texts by volunteer writers. In 2010, at the Catalan Fair of Social and Solidarity Economy, kids even sold freshly printed copies, experiencing the full cycle of making and sharing literature. Later, at the Kosmòpolis literature fair at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, the ‘pliegoOS van’



Figure 5. Early DIY chapbook workshop with kids. Photo by the authors.

was born, drawing from Adam Hyde's book sprints. This mobile editorial unit, like a bookmobile, enabled rapid, on-site writing, editing, and printing. Though not yet linked to AI, the core idea was already clear: bring publishing to where things happen, making the process open and public (Figures 5 and 6).

Over time, the project evolved flexible methods for community and artistic settings, using digital tools to get fresh words on paper. In 2020, pliegOS organized the PlegaVeü poetry recital, using voice recognition and a digital pad to transcribe verses into chapbooks that attendees could take home. A more recent milestone was the collaboration with artists at Can Serrat, where analog collages and visual zines took precedence over text. After each half-day session, and in the spirit of mail art, copies were sent as chapbook-postcards to other artistic residencies. During these zine-sprints, participants often emphasized the care embedded in sending creative work by post as an affective, deliberate act in contrast to digital speed (Figures 7 and 8).⁵

More recently, at the 2024 re:publica festival in Berlin, pliegOS offered an ephemeral, situated alternative to ChatGPT-style creation. For several days, their van became a collaborative zine station, where themes were chosen on the spot and copies printed daily. Amid stands with augmented reality demos, AI services, and 3D printers, two Olivetti typewriters and a collage table with stationery revived analog gestures, drawing co-creation participants from curious crowds. Was it a reaction to digital overload, a desire to reconnect hand and mind through tactile tools? Whatever the case, the appeal of analog practices for writing was evident, and pliegOS finds its place within this broader slow-tech resurgence.⁶ In academic and research contexts, the project has recently revitalized similar analog and hybrid participation through chapbook and zine making: collecting



Figure 6. The pliegOS van at CCCB during Kosmopolis fair. Photo by the authors.



Figure 7. Writing, editing, and printing at a Can Serrat workshop. Photo by the authors.



Figure 8. Final proofreading and zine-layout discussion. Photo by the authors.

perspectives on rural motherhood (Figure 9) for the visual ethnography project *Dolors*,⁷ discussing mass tourism in workshops at the European Association of Social Anthropologists, and reflecting on cooperative urban fieldwork in “The city of shades”: ethnography of urban habitability in times of climate mutation (Figure 10).

Drawing on these experiences, we (the authors, not the text) outline below a basic toolkit for co-creation oriented to AI refusal, echoing basic kindergarten, avant-garde, and countercultural traditions. These elements are part of a basic art-as-resistance strategy that follows three key principles: (1) Balancing facilitation and the labor-intensive task of scanning and printing throughout intensive interventions; (2) Working toward a shared goal of producing printed, off-the-grid material on-site, with participants leaving with a copy; and (3) Prioritizing paper as a lasting, tangible medium meant to be read, gifted, or mailed beyond the digital. Here are the elements of that toolkit.

- Blank paper, whiteboards, post-its: Flexible tools to kick off creativity, sketch ideas, draft texts, or structure contributions. No room here for AI shortcuts.
- Paints, colored pencils, markers: Tactile materials and personal strokes that activate ‘manual thinking’ and expressive freedom, countering automated writing habits.
- Magazines, scissors, glue: Collage invites intuitive reinterpretation of images and headlines. Such collaborative, recursive work is still very hard for LLMs and other AI tools to properly mimic.



Figure 9. Visitors at the Dolors exhibit writing on motherhood and rurality. Photo by the authors.



Figure 10. Chapbook editing at 'The City of Shades' workshop. Photo by the authors.

- Typewriters: Retro and engaging. Their sound and mechanics create a physical, focused link to the act of writing (Figures 11 and 12).
- Printers/scanners: Mid-tech tools for hands-on chapbook making. Drafting, printing, scanning, printing again, and refining content through shared, iterative care where the group's energy converges during the process.
- Voice recorders and Polaroid cameras: Low-distraction tools to capture stories and images. Recorders collect voices for offline transcription; Polaroids add instant visuals for zine layouts.

Additionally, these analog artifacts and processes can be backed by the ever-evolving pliegOS-maker: the project's own *free/libre* software for smooth pagination, ghostscript-powered, facilitating chapbook and zine layout for print formats. Give it a try and let us know if it works for you. Even take the code from GitHub and make it yours!.

Reflecting on AI through scrapbook-style postal zines

The postal co-creation experiment helped pliegOS promoters express a shared yet multifaceted view on the rise of AI. If you don't have a printer to properly read the annex, here's a collage-like selection of 10 brief reflections and excerpts derived from the chapbooks they sent to one another about the topic: (1) Paper-based co-creation sharpens awareness of material resources and contrasts with AI's hidden costs⁸; (2) Presence, focus, and manual labor in pliegOS sessions turn chapbook-making into a political gesture; (3) 'As the poet said, "Perfection is fascist." The corrected mistake (but clearly visible as a correction) must be our great ally', noted one member; (4) Imperfections like typos should always be welcomed in paper formats, subverting AI's push for seamless outputs; (5) Fanzine aesthetics resist standard formats and algorithmic convergence; (6) 'If AI runs on patterns, are we doomed to repeat our worst ones?'; (7) pliegOS operates as a form of action research embedded in a broader analog revival – among critical responses to the unchecked proliferation of AI tools and their growing dominance in cultural production; (8) 'The more digital we get, the more tangible media makes sense – like cassettes or vinyl', noted another participant; (9) Process and sociality take precedence over finished products; community comes first; (10) 'Following a Luddite logic, there might be a way to disrupt or misalign AI from within – some kind of Dadaist "untraining" that makes it hallucinate constantly, not just occasionally' was handwritten on another postal-chapbook.

The above questions reflect a nearly random cut-&-paste selection of a shared yet multifaceted collective view on AI's rise. Many of the reflections generated through the exchange and cross-reading of these scrapbook-style postal zines about materiality, error, care, and resistance should be understood not as personal statements, but as situated positionings crossing in space and time and shaped by a kind of distributed geography of writing. Originally handwritten, then sent with a stamp and carried to their physical destination, they challenge the invisibilized but omnipresent infrastructures of LLMs by prioritizing creative presences, crafting gestures, and low-tech agency. With the same counter-logic, pliegOS workshops have unfolded like alternative spaces and situations for writing in diverse locations like festivals, libraries, classrooms, rural residencies, and city courtyards. Always face-to-face, these workshops are often filled with people new to collaborative writing, to typewriting, and even to collaging as material processes that preceded, like Dadá or punk, the language of digital media and its algorithmic tricks.⁹ Together, pliegOS activities 'below the radars' of AI aim to produce fresh, amateur content – from drawings and overheard phrases to improvised poetry – stitched quickly into good old paper chapbooks and zines that remain beyond the digital. These logics and formats, when open and collaborative, propose how text can emerge from exchange, not instruction, and from conviviality, not prompts, connecting diverse cultural



Figures 11 and 12. Participants using the typewriters next to the pliegOS van at re:publica festival. Photos by the authors.

geographies in an open way: plural, embodied, situated. Current postal experimentations by pliegOS seek to expand this ethos of a slower, more dispersed, but still relational co-creation ‘against the machine’, playfully turning mailboxes into gathering points and stamps into tiny artifacts of resistance. Now, my authors are pushing things further: experimenting with obfuscated PDFs, local zine circuits, and distributed editorial infrastructures. Not totally against AI, but beyond its cold replication logic.

And here I am, a chapbook-extension text shaped by it all. I spoke not as author, but as result of a method old like collage that treats text as gathering. That is, not just as content but as an evolving artifact of cultural geography otherwise.

Ethics statement

Not applicable.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

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