New newscast offers virtual anchor, personalized content

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Watch out Katie Couric, Brian Williams and Charlie Gibson. New technology from researchers at Northwestern University provides individual users with an automated, personalized newscast that is completely virtual, including a virtual anchor based on video game characters.

Co-invented by Kristian Hammond, co-director of Northwestern's Intelligent Information Laboratory (InfoLab), and graduate students Nathan Nichols and Sara Owsley, "News at Seven" collects, edits and organizes existing news stories based on a user's interests, then passes the formatted content to the virtual anchor. Using Web resources like Google and YouTube, the system utilizes the text of news stories to retrieve video, images and blogs related to the content of the story.

"It's a completely personalized, completely automated news report using Web resources," explains Hammond, professor of electrical engineering and computer science at Northwestern's McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science. "The system can create an original news package based on someone's interest, then deliver it on demand. It is the first step in creating a world in which information is automatically gathered, edited and delivered to people based on their interests and needs."

Once it has assembled the materials, the system edits the news stories, replacing abbreviations and other phrasings that are appropriate for written text but not meant to be spoken. News at Seven virtual anchors

then present a cohesive, compelling performance that combines techniques of modern news programming with features made possible by the fact that the system is, at its core, completely virtual.

In this first version of the system, News at Seven produces a three-minute daily news update, featuring national, international and human-interest stories. Information from blogs provides commentary on national stories.

Although a very young project, News at Seven already creates a compelling, cohesive, on-topic newscast. With further research and development, the creators of News at Seven hope to offer a commercially viable replacement to the typical televised news show, offering instead a show tailored to a user's specific interests. A brand new news package could be delivered daily, hourly or even every half hour.

Source: Northwestern University