Critical, contextualised journalism needed in the face of AI-produced copy

March 2 2017

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In spite of its limitations, automated journalism will expand. According to media researchers, this development underlines the need for critical, contextualised journalism.

Journalists and editors believe 'robo-journalists' do not have a good nose for news and produce one-dimensional stories, according to new research published today. However, despite these limitations, the report reveals plans for the technology to be rolled out more widely with the potential to replace "hundreds" of journalists at Thomson Reuters alone.

The researchers, Professor Neil Thurman (LMU Munich), Konstantin

Dörr (University of Zurich) and Dr. Jessica Kunert (LMU Munich), interviewed journalists, editors, and executives from CNN, BBC, Thomson Reuters, Trinity Mirror, and News UK in an exploratory study. The journalists were given hands-on experience with robo-writing software during a workshop. Robo—or automated—journalism, is software that converts structured data into stories with limited to no human intervention beyond the initial programming. It is used by news organisations including Associated Press, the Los Angeles Times, and Forbes. The report is published in the international peer-reviewed journal, Digital Journalism.

The journalists and editors in Dr. Thurman's study believe robo-journalism's reliance on data streams and the need to program news angles in advance means the stories produced lack the context, complexity, and creativity of much traditional reporting. Journalists also thought the need to template robo-written stories in advance is a drawback. One, from the BBC, said "you can't get a reaction to those numbers, you can't explain or interrogate them because the story template was written before the numbers came out" and concluded, after using robo-writing technology first hand, it was not worth the BBC researching the technology further.

Despite these shortcomings, journalists do believe robo-journalism does have the potential to reduce costs and increase the speed and specificity of some reporting. Journalists at CNN and Reuters thought it could "reduce costs" by replacing "expensive staff" who are doing "fairly simplistic and time-consuming work". A Reuters journalist believed automation could improve speed and accuracy, and said "we are looking at it in all parts of the company". Another Reuters journalist said automation will be used for stories they do not "have the resources to cover manually" or for topics currently below the threshold of reportability.

Robo-journalism was seen as something that could both support and threaten journalistic objectivity. A journalist from The Sun thought it could enhance the accuracy of factual reporting. However, another, from the BBC, was concerned that the volume of content it is possible to produce through automation could make it easier for "prejudiced" individuals or organisations to influence the news agenda.

"The increased volume of news resulting from automation may", Professor Thurman says, "make it more difficult to navigate a world already saturated with information and actually increase the need for the very human skills that good journalists embody—news judgement, curiosity, and skepticism—in order that we can all continue to be informed, succinctly, comprehensively, and accurately, about the world around us."

  More information: When Reporters Get Hands-on with Robo-Writing. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/1 … 1670811.2017.1289819

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich