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The impact of AI in Media & PR

Skills Guide

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AI and Media: How is the media and public relations practice being impacted by AI?

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This CIPR #AIinPR primer examines the extent to which AI and automation has impacted the media industry and the implications for public relations practitioners.

Lean about:

- Computational Journalism
- Natural Language Generation (NLG)
- The role of automation and AI in media relations

The media industry globally has already been massively changed by automation and AI in the last decade. The areas of biggest impact have been on the skills and practice of journalism as well as the very economics of the industry

The traditional media sector model, whereby advertising revenue effectively bankrolls the production of quality journalism, has been transformed.

The digital media revolution

It is worth tracing the history and development of this process.

In the early 2000s, as media outlets began moving more content to the web, many of the big media firms noticed that Google's search engine was a massive referrer of traffic.

These organisations begged Google to index their content with the assumption that all this visitor traffic could be easily monetised via online advertising. Advertising revenue might be falling through print, but it would be more than made up for by the money to made via online ads.

Things turned out very differently. Print circulations and ad revenues have continued to plummet over the last few years and online ad revenues for publishers have not been enough to make up the shortfall.

Advertiser media spend typically ends up in the hands of various intermediaries rather than the publishers themselves.

In 2016 The Guardian tried buying its own ad inventory in order to see how much of the media budget found its way to the outlet. For every pound spent by advertisers, a mere 30p came back to The Guardian. Most of the media spend (70%) was being taken by third parties. This included ad agencies, a raft of tech intermediaries such as ad exchanges and the technology stacks that enable the ads to be served.

The rise of programmatic ad fraud and ad blocking have all further compounded the misery of the media sector.

Impact on journalism: machines step up

From the perspective of journalism, the practical knock on effect has been to reduce the number of human journalists left to write stories – and the rise of AI and automation to attempt to fill the breach of generating news content.

The use of AI, machine learning and automation to generate media content has been commonplace since 2015. Firms such as Narrative Science and Automated Insights have pioneered an approach known as Natural Language Generation, a software process that automatically transforms data into written narrative.

The Associated Press (AP) was an early adopter of Automated Insights' Wordsmith platform. It now produces 4,400 quarterly earnings stories – an almost 15-fold increase over its manual efforts. AP has expanded into using the tool for sports coverage including in February 2019, US college basketball previews. Local newspapers have perhaps suffered even more than national media in the wake of the changes in the industry. The local newspaper journalist is an endangered species.

To fill the gap, services like RADAR from Urbs Media have emerged, self-described as a "pioneering news agency which harnesses the power of technology to deliver incisive, fact-based news stories at scale." Launched in 2018, it claims to file thousands of stories every week, powering hundreds of local news outlets.

Algorithms replace editors

Recent PR industry surveys in the UK and US point to large numbers of PR professionals still being heavily involved in media relations and seeing their role as attempting to gain positive media coverage for clients through human journalists.

So, what are the practical implications for the modern-day practitioner in a world where there are fewer human journalists to deal with – or where the journalist is a combination of data and algorithms?

Automation and AI tools have already been available for some time to help support a more nuanced approach to finding ways to increase the likelihood of a journalist finding a story pitch more likely to be worth writing about. Examples include Grammarly to improve written content; and Crystal Knows to provide insight into the personality type of the journalist.

Machine generated content

AI and machine learning may play an increasing role in generating, testing and identifying the best PR content. In July 2019, JP Morgan Chase signed a five-year contract with Persado, a software start-up that uses artificial intelligence to write marketing copy, following a successful pilot.

In doesn't take much of a stretch to see that similar technology could be applied in the realm of public relations content.

The role of the modern public relation practitioner is more akin to that of a commercial pilot. In today's automated environment, on average, the pilot of a Boeing 777 commercial jet has actual control of the plane, flying it manually, for only seven minutes of every flight[1]. This does not mean the pilot is unimportant, and very few of us would be comfortable getting on a plane that did not have a human pilot to take over when and as necessary.

In a similar way, we still need human input to the public relations process, particularly in media relations, and we still need human intervention where necessary. The CIPR estimated in a paper by Jean Valin called Humans Still Needed that machines would be capable of undertaking up to 40% of the tasks routinely undertaken by a practitioner by 2023[2].

Case study

AP (Associated Press) and Automated Insights

AP found answers in automation with the Wordsmith platform from Automated Insights. Wordsmith uses natural language generation to turn data into a written, plain-language narrative. In this case, Wordsmith transforms earnings data from Zacks Investment Research into a publishable AP story in a fraction of a second. In fact, the Wordsmith team specifically configured the natural language generation engine to write in AP style.

As a result, AP now produces 4,400 quarterly earnings stories – an almost 15-fold increase over its manual efforts. The stories retain the same quality and accuracy that readers expect from any of AP's human-written articles. Aside from an explanatory note at the bottom of the story, there is no evidence they were written by an algorithm.

Biography

Andrew Bruce Smith is a specialist digital PR, social media, SEO and analytics trainer and consultant. He has developed and implemented many highly successful strategic digital communications programmes for some of the world's biggest brands including IBM, Capgemini, Apple and Checkpoint.

Andrew was recently cited by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) as "one of PR's greatest thinkers" as part of the CIPR's list of 70 members who've made an outstanding contribution to the Institute and the wider PR industry.

He has consulted or provided training to over 2000 organisations in the last eight years including NATO, the Department of Environment (DEFRA), NHS, Specsavers, Sky, Jaguar Landrover, Disney and many others.

He has also provided analytics and digital marketing training to numerous charities and charitable foundations including Wellcome Trust, Alzheimers Society, Cure Parkinsons, Dogs Trust and Blesma.

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Further reading

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