Is Automation the Future of Journalism?

(adapted from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automated_journalism)

Automated journalism is sometimes seen as an opportunity to free journalists from routine reporting, providing them with more time for complex tasks. It also allows efficiency and cost-cutting, alleviating some financial burden that many news organizations face[27]. However, automated journalism is also perceived as a threat to the authorship and quality of news and the precarity of employment within the industry.

In automated journalism, news articles are generated by computer programs. Through artificial intelligence (AI) software, stories are produced automatically by computers rather than human reporters. These programs interpret, organize, and present data in human-readable ways. Typically, the process involves an algorithm[36] that scans large amounts of provided data, selects from an assortment of pre-programmed article structures, orders key points, and inserts details such as names, places, amounts, rankings, statistics, and other figures. The output can also be customized to fit a certain voice, tone, in order to imitate journalist's styles.[28]

Data science and AI companies such as Automated Insights, Narrative Science, United Robots and Yseop develop and provide these algorithms to news outlets. As of 2016, only a few media organizations have used automated journalism. Early adopters include news providers such as the Associated Press, Forbes, ProPublica, and the Los Angeles Times.

Due to the formulaic nature of automation, it is mainly used for stories based on statistics and numerical figures[32]. Common topics include sports recaps, weather, financial reports, real estate analysis, and earnings reviews. For example, StatSheet, an online platform covering college basketball, runs entirely on an automated program. Outside of sports, the Associated Press also uses automation to produce stories on corporate earnings[29]. In 2006, Thomson Reuters announced their switch to automation to generate financial news stories on its online news platform. More famously, an algorithm called Quakebot published a story about a 2014 California earthquake[29] on The Los Angeles Times website within three minutes after the shaking had stopped.[39]

Benefits

Robot reporters are built to produce large quantities of information at quicker speeds. The Associated Press announced that their use of automation has increased the volume of earnings reports from customers by more than ten times. With software from Automated Insights and data from other companies, they can produce 150 to 300-word articles in the same time it takes journalists to crunch numbers and prepare information. By automating routine stories and tasks, journalists are promised more time for complex jobs such as investigative reporting and in-depth analysis of events.

Also automated journalism is cheaper because more content can be produced within less time. It also lowers labour costs for news organizations because reduced human input means less expenditure on salaries, paid leave, sick leave, and employment insurance[33]. Automation serves as a cost-cutting tool for news outlets struggling with tight budgets, but which still wish to maintain the scope and quality of their coverage.[37]

Criticisms

One of the greatest concerns about automation is the loss of employment for journalists[30]. In the interest of saving costs, news organizations are inclined to cut staff when switching to cheaper, faster machines such as AI. In 2014, an annual census from The American Society of News Editors announced that the newspaper industry lost 3,800 full-time, professional editors. Falling by more than 10% within a year, this is the biggest drop since the industry cut over 10,000 jobs in 2007 and 2008.

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In addition, there are concerns about the perceived credibility of automated news. [33]Critics doubt if algorithms are as unbiased, fair and accurate as claimed. It is also remarked that machines are unable to reproduce human traits such as creativity, humour, and critical-thinking and therefor lack the ability to write stories with perspective, emotion, thorough analysis, and surprising observations.[35 & 40]

Finally, in an automated story, there is often confusion about who should be credited as the author[31]. Several participants of a study on algorithmic authorship attributed the credit to the programmer; others perceived the news organization as the author, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the work. There is also no way for the reader to verify whether an article was written by a robot or human, which raises issues of transparency.

The Future

The future of automated journalism can be seen as beneficial; however, utilizing a system of automation may separate the audience from the article. This can happen because a human journalist writing on world issues may have their own personal writing style attached to the story, whereas, an article written using AI would result in the story being bland, and not having a personality and the sense of a journalist would be lost in this process.

The other question is that with the advent of social media and citizen journalist, what role is left for human journalists in the news cycle. With news being reported on Twitter, Facebook and other platforms in real time by users, and although it seems a more efficient way of disseminating the news, it leaves little room for professional journalists. The future therefor of journalism seems to be for AI to be doing the routine tasks, immediate news to come from amateur journalists via social media and professional journalists to do deep, investigative types of journalism.[38]

Even so, to ensure best practices in automated journalism, that is that it remains unbiased and accurate, humans need to be involved in the process. So, although the benefits of speed, and cost will help many small outlets humans will still be required even in small local news media producers for the foreseeable future.

Answers

27 A
28 C
29 D
30 B
31 A
32 E
33 A
34 F
35 D
36 C
37 G
38 NO
39 YES
40 YES