



# Technology's Influence on Journalism

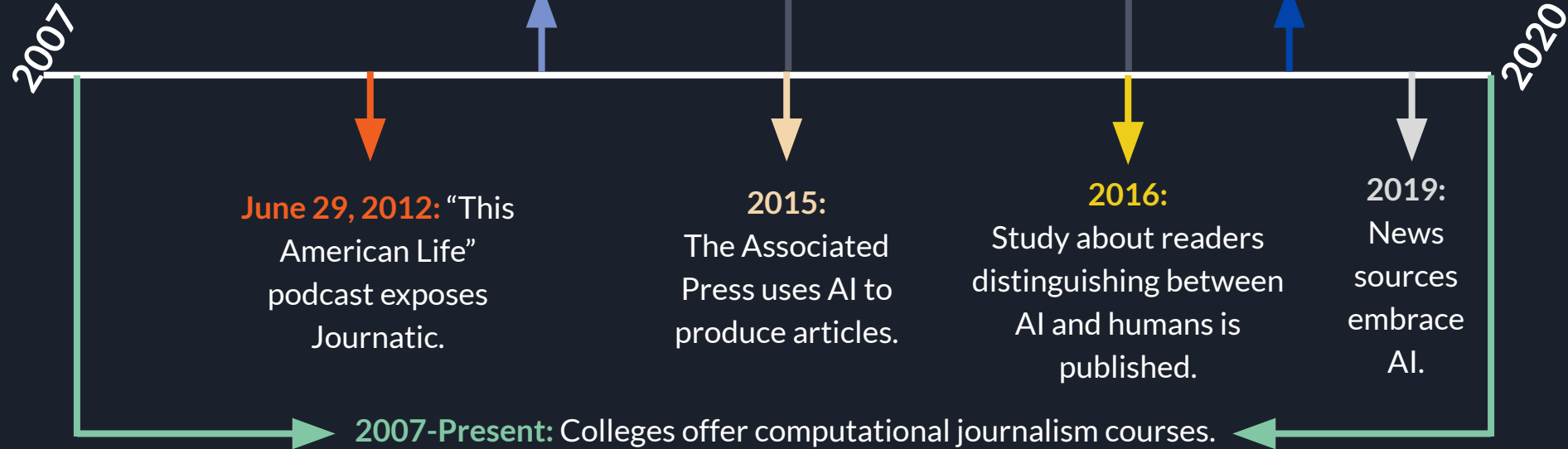
By Emily Krivograd



## Argument

While technology's influence, including the use of artificial intelligence, in the field of journalism is meant to aid journalists and provide readers with quality news, it can create greater difficulties for journalists and change the way people consume their news, whether they know it or not. Journalists and news sources should move forward with caution when using artificial intelligence when producing news articles.

# Timeline



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**BACKGROUND**



## June 2012: Journatic's Unethical Practices

The “This American Life” podcast exposed Journatic, a “news site” for claiming that their journalists were reporting on “hyper-local news” when, often times, the journalist did not even live in the same town-or even country.

But first, a little background on “This American Life” (TAL):

- Just earlier the same year, the podcast’s “Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory” episode was exposed as fake news. The source, Mike Daisey, fabricated his story and little fact-checking was performed by the TAL team.
- Why does this matter?
  - As a news source reporting on the spread of Journatic’s unethical practices, this is ironic.



# Understanding Journatic



## What Journatic Does:

- Reporters working for the company will write what oftentimes seem like short, local news pieces (such as a star student at a high school, a new business in town), but the reporter does not live in the town and will not go to the places he or she reports on.
- Many of the reporters are underpaid. In fact, some of the reporters include Filipino writers who operate under fake bylines, and are paid 35-40 cents a story.

**Pink-slime journalism**-the term coined for Journatic's low-cost automated story generation.

# Experiences in Working with Journatic

- Journatic reporter Ryan Smith had attended journalism school and was writing his stories, sometimes from 1,000 miles away for the company.
  - “It’s sort of a tattered product that’s been written overseas and half-heartedly edited and just kind of slopped on the page....I don’t know these communities and I have no stake in them, so it didn’t matter to me when I found out the information if I got it right.”
- CEO and founder of Journatic, Brian Timponi believes that the company is helping the industry.
  - “I personally think that we’re saving journalism with our approach.”
- Chicago Tribune had bought a share in Journatic, and was using these outsourced reporters for their TribLocal content. Brad Moore, Vice President of Targeted Media for the Tribune Company spoke to TAL on the subject.
  - “It’s more content and it’s at a savings.”





# 2013: Journatic Rebrands

- To preserve the reputation of Journatic after the TAL podcast, the company worked with Tribune executives and Hawthorne Strategy Group to rebrand as Locality Labs (or LocalLabs-they don't go by one name) and re-establish their credibility.

## Locality Labs' Website:

### What We Do.

Since 2006, Locality Labs has been a leading collector and publisher of community-level public records for news publishers. Our clients include the largest media companies in the U.S.

### Contact

[contact@locallabs.com](mailto:contact@locallabs.com)

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### Areas of Practice

#### **PUBLIC RECORD COLLECTION SERVICES**

Locality Labs is constantly collecting public records from federal, state governments as well as local governments, departments, and administrations of all sizes.

#### **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST SERVICES**

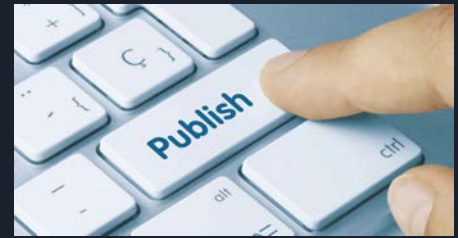
Most data Locality Labs collects isn't available online, therefore we are continually submitting FOIA requests to governments of all sizes for their records in the public domain.

#### **PUBLIC RECORD PROCESSING & NEWS PRODUCTIZATION**

Not all data comes in the same form or even digitally. Locality Labs cleans and normalizes data for easier processing. We then use this data to create content for our clients.



# Publishing More for Less



Journatic represents the growing demand for quantity over quality.

- While media companies face financial issues, they can turn to a company like Journatic to produce cheap, easy content.
- Operations like these separate the work from the worker, so no one knows or cares who is producing the article.

News sites also want to produce content on a mass scale.

- According to Nicole S. Cohen, communications professor at the University of Toronto, content farms use search-based algorithms to guide editorial policy for freelancers.
- The use of metadata and algorithms lower production costs.
- In the digital age, a news source's audience signals what kind of journalism will get the most attention, and therefore, what is produced.

**EVIDENCE**





## 2007-Present: Colleges Offer Classes in Computational Journalism

While Journatic was exposed, in an effort for graduates of journalism school to appear more marketable, universities offered classes to make journalism students more appealing to employers in the digital age.

**Computational Journalism:** combination of algorithms, data, and knowledge to supplement to accountability part of journalism (Anderson “Sociology” ).

- 2007- Georgia Tech University began teaching classes on computational journalism.
- 2008- Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism offers journalism programs for prospective students with “strong technology skills.”
- 2010-Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism offers a dual degree program in journalism and computer science.

# Pros of Technology's Growing Influence in Journalism in the Early 2010s

The digitalization of journalism provided more opportunities for journalists and news sources in the field.

- Journalists now have methods to create storytelling more visually and with interactive media.
- Newspapers can now experiment with more ways for which an audience can receive and experience news.
- News sources have lower labor costs.



# Cons of Technology's Growing Influence in Journalism in the Early 2010s

More technology in the field of journalism, however, also sets the scene for a grim future of those who want to pursue careers in journalism.

- While companies experiment with new ways to profit online, some journalists face mass layoffs.
- New sources' technological tools and methods for reaching and keeping a wider audience runs the risk of making journalism into a commodity.





## 2015: The Associated Press Generates Articles Using Algorithms

In a Comedy Central episode of The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, journalist Hasan Minhaj explored the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and journalism.

- In the video, Lou Ferrara, the chief content editor for the Associated Press, offered information on how they, a reputable source of news, are using AI and robot journalists to generate articles.
- Additionally, he detailed that they believe robot journalists eliminate bias and only report factual information.
- In other words, instead of humans writing a news article, a robot writes it.

# What AP Says About AI

The Associated Press maintains that by using AI in producing news stories, they are helping their journalists.

- The use of AI started when their Business News Desk began automating stories about corporate earnings.
- Reporters were spending time on writing articles reporting earnings, numbers, and other factual, yet repetitive information.
- By using AI, AP's reporters can spend more time working on "higher-impact journalism" (Associated Press).

## AP's AI Strategy:

### AI Strategy

AP looks for ways to deploy artificial intelligence in everything we do, starting with how we gather the news, moving through the production process and, ultimately, how we distribute news to customers.



The screenshot shows a presentation slide with a dark background. At the top left is the SAM logo. The main title is 'Social Media Powered Alerts' in large white font. Below the title is a short paragraph: 'SAM is a global disruption monitoring tool. We deliver speedy alerts and situational awareness through the lens of social media.'

### Newsgathering

AP deploys a variety of news gathering tools to enable our journalists to break news and dig deeper. This involves working with startup partners to scan and analyze social media feeds with natural-language processing and building our own internal tool to verify social and user-generated content faster.



## 2015-16: Locality Labs Owns Partisan Local News Sites

Websites appearing to belong to local news organizations were actually all operating under the same company, Locality Labs, LLC. as well as an organization called Metric Media.

For Metric Media, about three dozen of fake local news sites had appeared in Michigan, totalling to about 200 sites. Such sites operate under names like the *East Michigan News*, *Hickory Sun*, and *Grand Canyon Times*.

Out of all of these stories appearing on local news sites, only **about 100 titles had the bylines of human reporters.**





# What Do these “Local’ News Sites Report On?

**Google Search:** Since the creation of the “local news sites,” they have reached a high Google Search ranking and appear on the first results page, sometimes below official government sites. Readers will regard the first results page in a Google Search as more credible.

**Partisan News:** Because local news sources have cut funding and have laid off workers, a market for which partisan news that claims to produce journalism has been created. These sites are biased, often circulate right before elections (such as the 2020 Presidential Election), and are not labeled as political advertising.



# What This Means for Readers Before an Election

Readers already trust news sources as a reliable way to understand candidates in an election. If sites masquerading as news contain false information, readers are misinformed and the election can be swayed.

The general media (including both biased news and reputable news sources) may gain the reputation that they are trying to misrepresent information about:

- Certain candidates
- Limited government
- Tort reform
- Labor unions





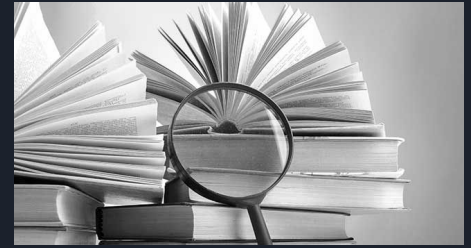
## 2016: German Study on Computer-Generated Articles

Four professors teaching in Germany ran an experiment in which they presented articles that were either algorithmically created or written by a human journalist to an audience.

- 986 participants
- Participants rated two articles on credibility, readability, and journalistic expertise
- Article topics ranged from sports to finance

While technology had, at this point, assisted human journalists with research for awhile, this study acknowledged that the division of labor from humans to algorithms had changed.

# Findings of the Study



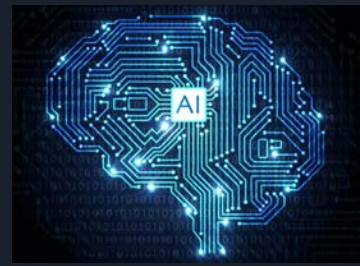
The researchers found that participants rated **articles written by bots as having higher credibility.**

While participants did rate computer-generated articles to be more credible, some of them were told that that algorithmically generated articles were written by humans.

- Computer-written articles were rated as more credible and higher in terms of expertise than the human-written articles
- Human-written articles were rated as more readable than those written by bots.

The results suggests a trade-off when publishers choose to produce articles written by humans and articles that are algorithmically generated.

# Why Is AI So Appealing?



The study also discussed that while AI can reduce costs for news sources and give journalists more time to work on investigative pieces, many new sources believe that the AI-generated pieces will not contain bias, but will only report the facts. **But is this true?**

**Put simply, no.**

While AI is less error-prone, does not tire, and will not overlook facts, they can still have biases written into their algorithms by developers.

Additionally, the sources that the algorithms may use to produce an article may not be correct, so a computer-generated article can still spread misinformation.



## 2018: Threat of Legal Liability

There are currently no regulations on how libelous articles produced by bots can be regulated.

### Case for reference- Facebook's algorithms:

- Communications professors Seth C. Lewis, Amy Kristin Sanders, and Casey Carmody authored a scholarly article which detailed that in 2016, Facebook fired their human "Trending Topics" team after charges of political bias and replaced the humans with an algorithm that would recognize popular topics. Soon after implementing this new system, however, the algorithm highlighted a fake news article claiming that Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly had been fired from the cable TV network because she had endorsed Hillary Clinton for president. The few human editors who were still on staff failed to recognize this inaccuracy. This situation raised the question of who is legally responsible for what happened; in other words, can a robot commit libel?



# Different Perspectives on AI and Libel

As these new technologies are created, the U.S. Supreme Court has to consider how the First Amendment will apply to news writing bots.

The landmark case of *New York Times v. Sullivan*, which ruled that the First Amendment somewhat protects libelous statements unless the statement was made with knowledge of its inaccuracy and the intent of actual malice also needs to be considered.

- Some believe bots function like a third party channel, so free speech does not apply to them.
- Some think that the writers of algorithms should be held responsible if the bots generate a fake news article.

# The Future of the First Amendment and Bots

The authors of the article also mentioned that most news platforms, such as radio, were not regulated according to the First Amendment until it reached wide societal use.

Additionally, proving actual malice when bots are responsible for writing a news article can be nearly impossible, as they do not have desires or agendas against a plaintiff.

Essentially, it may be years until legal regulations impact bots and news writing.







## 2019: News Sources Are Using AI

According to Forbes writer Nicole Martin, many news sources say that this AI technology is meant to assist journalists, not replace them.

- Forbes uses Bertie, an AI-powered content management system that suggests content and articles.
- The Washington Post released Heliograf, which generates articles from quantitative data (which is useful when writing pieces about financial statistics).
- Bloomberg Businessweek uses Cyborg for content creation and management, making roughly a third of the content published with the help of some form of automated technology.



# Impact of AI on Reporters

## News Source's Perspective:

- The use of AI can free up 20% of a journalist's time.
- AI will help, but not replace reporters.
- Using AI to do research will drive costs down.
- Reporters have a better style to their writing, something a robot cannot mimic.

## Reporter's Perspective:

- Newspapers have already laid off reporters due to high costs.
- Journalists still have to spend time writing several versions of a story to account for different outcomes when the system creates an article.
- Reporters attempting to find work in the field and may have started by writing lower risk, short pieces now have their work generated by AI.

**CONCLUSION**

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# What Does Technology's Growing Influence on Journalism Mean?

**News sources** have the choice to either embrace AI or they could monitor the AI to make sure generated articles are accurate and there are still available positions for incoming reporters.

**Journalists** can use the technology to help them, but should fact check articles to make sure all information is accurate and produced ethically. They also may have to become more technologically literate to stay marketable.

**Readers** may not be aware of whether a bot or a human is writing the news articles they read. As the use of technology in journalism grows, they may develop or grow some level skepticism as to if the information they receive is correct.



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# Writer's Review

To view the accompanying writer's review, [click here](#).