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Audience reception of news articles made with various levels of automation—and none: Comparing cognitive & emotional impacts

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ABSTRACT

Our knowledge about audience perceptions of manually authored news articles and automated news articles is limited. Although over a dozen studies have been carried out, findings are inconsistent and limited by methodological shortcomings. For example, the experimental stimuli used in some have made isolation of the effects of the actual authorship (automated or manual) difficult. Our study attempts to overcome previous studies' shortcomings to better evaluate audiences' relative evaluations of news articles produced with varying degrees of automation—and none. We conducted a 3 (article source: manually written, automated, post-edited) × 12 (story topics) between-subjects online survey experiment using a sample ($N = 4{,}734$) representative of UK online news consumers by age and gender. Each of the 36 treatment groups read a data-driven news article that was either: (1) manually written by a journalist, (2) automated using a data-driven template, or (3) automated then subsequently post-edited by a journalist. The articles' authorship was not declared. To minimise confounding variables, the articles in each of the 12 story sets shared the same data source, story angle, and geographical focus. Respondents' perceptions were measured using criteria developed in a qualitative group interview study with news consumers. The results show that respondents found manually written articles to be significantly more comprehensible—both overall and in relation to the numbers they contained—than automated and post-edited articles. Authorship did not have any statistically significant effect on overall liking of the articles, or on the positive or negative feelings (valence) articles provoked in respondents, or the strength of those feelings (arousal).

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing • Human computer interaction (HCI) • Empirical studies in HCI

KEYWORDS

Automated journalism, Data journalism, Survey, Audience perception study

1 Introduction

News organisations are increasingly deploying automation technologies in news production (e.g. [11, 5]). For example, data mining can augment news discovery, automatically calibrated content can boost personalised experiences, and the automated production of news articles via text generation software can make journalistic content production scalable. This last practice—so-called "automated journalism"—relies primarily on rule-based natural language generation (NLG) systems that use manually created story templates [6] to transform data so that it possesses the semantic structure of a readable text. Influenced by computational thinking and the technical constraints of these story templates, journalists who automate journalism this way are not writing a story—they are "writing the potential for every eventuality of the story" (Rogers in [4]) to allow templates to react to variations in datasets. As pointed out by previous studies, the use of such NLG systems could affect the composition of data-driven news articles, including the presence of what Caswell [2019] considers the "essential components of the human craft of journalism", such as description, background, and anecdotes. Consequently, the increasing use of automated journalism may affect how news consumers perceive news content and necessitates research into the journalistic performance of stories produced this way. Therefore,

this study seeks to gather and compare audience perceptions of articles produced using varying degrees of automation and none and to do so in a way that produces results of unprecedented internal and external validity.

2 Literature Review

Our knowledge about the perceptions of data-driven, automated news articles is limited as few studies have compared the perceptions of news articles written with the full range of automation variants, including automated, post-edited, and manually written articles (to our knowledge, only [22]). Most commonly, studies comparing audience evaluations focus on two variants: automated and manually written. However, the third variant, where automated articles are post-edited by journalists prior to publication, is increasingly commonly used (see, e.g., [19]).

Although over a dozen studies have been conducted on the perception of automated journalism, their findings are inconsistent and often limited by methodological shortcomings.

Automation technologies explored in perception studies range from more human-dependent, template-based applications (e.g. [10, 7]) to less human-dependent "modular" NLG systems [14] and machine-learning-based applications [18]. In several studies, scholars omit to describe how the analysed automation systems operate and refer to their output simply as "software-generated" [3] or as "generated by algorithms" [23].

Scholars have followed different strategies to find and pair automated and manually written news articles to be used as experimental stimulus material. In several studies, automatically generated articles were paired with published, manually written articles based on the same data, or about the same topic or event, as the automated articles (e.g. [10, 22, 21, 7]). Some studies commissioned professional journalists [9, 14] or journalism students [20] to write articles to pair with automated stories. In a few cases, articles were paired even though they were written in different journalistic styles. One study, for example, paired an automatically generated factual sports report with a manually written opinion piece [3].

In several cases, scholars edited the articles before showing them to readers, for instance by shortening the manually written articles to "match the length of the one written by the algorithm" [9] or by only using the first "400 words" of articles generated by a machine-learning based application [18]. Such artificial interventions might impact the validity of the studies' findings.

Only one study has compared perceptions of fully automated, manually written, and post-edited articles, doing so with regard to

readers' evaluations of source and message credibility [22]. However, this study also has methodological limitations, as one of the post-edited stories was created by the study's authors, which might have reduced the external validity of the stimulus. Furthermore, similar to other studies, the authors only investigated two sets of stimuli. As Jackson and Jacobs [1983] point out, "generalization about a whole category of messages [such as automated or post-edited journalism] requires careful analysis of multiple members of the category", because "any particular message chosen to represent any message category must be assumed to differ from other members of the category in unknown and indefinitely numerous ways". Therefore, we do not believe that the results of a study, such as Wölker and Powell's [2018], that uses just two messages for each message category studied can be generalised to that whole message category.

Our study attempts to overcome previous shortcomings to better evaluate audiences' relative evaluations of news articles produced with varying degrees of automation (and none). Given the apparent absence of literature on how the perception of automated news stories compares with their post-edited offspring, we do not test any hypotheses but rather ask the following research question:

RQ1: How does the perception of automated articles that have been post-edited by human journalists compare with the perception of their automated progenitors and of equivalent, manually written articles that are on the same stories and based on the same quantitative data?

3 Methodology

A large-scale 3 (article source: manually written, automated, post-edited) $\times$ 12 (story topics) between-subjects online survey experiment was conducted using a sample (N = 4,734) representative of UK online news consumers by age and gender. The sample of respondents was drawn from various local regions and divided into 36 treatment groups. Each treatment group was exposed to a data-driven news article that had been produced either: (1) manually by a human journalist (n = 1,542), (2) using template-based automation (n = 1,599), or (3) in a post-edited manner, where a human journalist had further developed the automated article (n = 1,593).

Respondents' perceptions were measured using news perception criteria developed in a qualitative pre-study [16] based on group interviews with UK news consumers (N = 31). The 13 criteria cover four domains: *antecedents of perception*, *emotional and cognitive impacts*, *article composition*, and *news and editorial values*. Several of the criteria have not been used in prior research on the perception of data-driven journalism, including that produced with the help of automation. In this paper we focus on one of these

domains: the emotional and cognitive impacts that the articles have on readers.

3.1 Survey Instrument

3.1.1 Stimulus News Stories. The stimulus material comprised stories sourced from PA Media's Reporters And Data And Robots (RADAR) automated news service and from local, regional, and national British online news websites. The sources were chosen purposefully to include a wide range of news outlets and publishers with different geographical foci, backgrounds, funding models, target audiences, and ownership structures. The stimuli cover a range of topics including public health, crime, sport, transport, and social affairs. To eliminate potentially confounding variables, we stripped the articles of bylines and the publishers' logos and branding, showing respondents only the text in basic HTML formatting to ensure readability.

The automated articles ($N = 12$) were produced by data-driven templates created by data journalists at PA Media's RADAR. The post-edited articles ($N = 12$) were developed directly from the particular aforementioned automated stories by journalists, who, for example, added quotes from local spokespeople or deleted content that was not deemed relevant to the target audience. We classified articles as post-edited by identifying editorial changes that had been made to the body text of the automated stories. Articles in which only the headline had been changed were not included in the sample of post-edited stories. The final set of articles ($N = 12$) were purely manually written (which was confirmed in personal correspondence with the articles' authors) and drew on the same data used in the automated and post-edited versions. The article sets were found via extensive online research.

To minimise confounding variables, the three articles in each of the 12 story sets are based on the same data source(s), feature the same story angle, and cover the same locality.

3.1.2 Perception Criteria and Measures. As we knew from the qualitative interview-based pre-study [16] that the articles could have an *emotional impact* on respondents, we measured *valence* and levels of *arousal* and *liking*. Respondents indicated the intensity and direction of emotional arousal they experienced when reading an article (see [12]). Additionally, respondents reported their overall "liking" of the news article (see [17]). These variables were measured on a continuous scale from −30 to +30, modelled after the affective slider, a self-reporting tool for the quick assessment of pleasure and arousal [1].

In addition to *emotional impact*, our qualitative interview-based pre-study [16] showed that articles can also have a *cognitive impact* on readers. Therefore, we asked respondents about the *overall comprehensibility* of the article they read. In addition, we asked

about respondents' *comprehension of numbers* in the article. Before data analysis, all variables were recoded to a 1 to 60 metric scale.

3.1.3 Instrument Pre-Test. The questionnaire was pre-tested in October 2022 after its initial development but before its full-scale field administration. We used developmental expert reviewing and cognitive interviews ($N = 10$) with respondents, involving think-aloud complemented with verbal probing procedures [21]. Our goal was to identify and repair problematic measures, questions, and concepts; and issues with the usability of the survey. To generate feedback, we administered a prototype of the survey that contained nine different articles. Three of these articles were manually written, three automated, and three post-edited to ensure that the pre-test covered articles produced with all potential degrees of automation, including none. To test variations in the responses related to individual reactions to story topics, the articles covered nine different topics, including energy costs, e-scooter casualties, and drug deaths. Each article was sourced from Birmingham news outlets and we only recruited pre-test candidates who lived in the Birmingham area. By doing so, we took special care to ensure that our respondents were exposed only to sets of stories that were relevant to their geographic interest. Based on the feedback collected from the pre-test interviews, we modified questions and repaired survey defects [21].

Before the survey's broader distribution, we deployed a soft launch. Approximately 100 respondents completed the survey allowing us to test its technical functionality and measures, check output data structure and validity, and gather additional feedback via a free-text question.

3.1.4 Survey Administration and Data Collection. The survey was fielded by YouGov to their own proprietary online panel between 26 January and 1 March 2023. To be eligible for participation in the survey, respondents were pre-screened to ensure that they were aged 18 or older, used online news at least once a month, and were resident in one of the selected news organisations' catchment areas to ensure that the article was relevant to where they lived. Each experimental treatment group (automated, manually written, and post-edited) comprised at least 100 participants, with quotas set on age and gender.

To make sure that the recruited participants read the stimulus article, only respondents who passed an attention check were included in the final sample [15].

3.1.5 Sample Description. The overall target population for this survey was monthly UK news consumers aged 18 and older, who were resident in regions and cities covered by the catchment areas of those news organisations we drew our stimulus news articles from.

The sample comprised N = 4,734 respondents with a mean age of M = 50.66 years (SD = 15.77) and a gender split of 55% women (N = 2,602) and 45% men (N = 2,132). Each experiment within each area required at least 100 respondents per treatment (automated, manually written, and post-edited), and there were at least 300 respondents per experiment due to oversampling.

4 Results

To compare the mean scores of the variables *overall liking*, *emotional impact*, and *cognitive impact* across manually written, automated, and post-edited articles, we ran multiple ANOVAs. Variance distribution of the three treatment groups was mostly heteroscedastic, i.e. having unequal variances. Therefore, we opted for the Games-Howell test to compare multiple means, which provides a method for dealing with a situation where either or both of the assumptions are violated, while still controlling for Type 1 errors (see [13]).

4.1 Differences in Levels of Liking Between Automated, Manually Written, and Post-edited Articles

The level of liking did not differ significantly for the different levels of automation, Welch's $F(2, 3144.24)$ = 2.479, p = .084, η^2 = .001. An inspection of the mean values reveals that manually written articles were the most liked (M = 33.73, SD =12.93), followed by post-edited articles (M = 33.41, SD = 12.36), followed by automated articles (M = 32.76, SD = 12.08).

4.2 Differences in Emotional Impact Between Automated, Manually Written, and Post-edited Articles

The highest levels of arousal—i.e. the strength of an associated emotional state—across the respondents could be found after they had read one of the manually written articles (M = 35.16, SD = 14.43). Arousal was weaker after respondents had read a post-edited article (M = 35.06, SD = 14.07) or an automated article (M = 34.76, SD = 13.92). However, arousal did not differ significantly for the different levels of automation, Welch's $F(2, 3149.19)$ = .345, p > .05.

We then assessed the effects of level of automation on valence, i.e. the extent to which an emotion is negative or positive. After recoding, respondents perceptions of valence were measured using a scale from 0 very negative to 60 very positive with 30 as the neutral middle point. All article types were evaluated on the slightly more negative side of the scale. The automated articles triggered the highest negative valence (M = 23.48, SD = 12.34), followed by post-edited articles (M = 24.14, SD = 12.78), and manually written articles (M = 24.60, SD = 14.34). However, valence did not differ significantly for the different levels of automation, Welch's $F(2, 3131.17)$ = 2.83, p > .05.

4.3 Differences in Cognitive Impact Between Automated, Manually Written, and Post-edited Articles

The overall comprehensibility of the articles differed significantly for the different levels of automation, Welch's $F(2, 3153.97)$ = 23.56, p < .001, η^2 = .010.

Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed a significant difference (p < .001) in overall comprehensibility between manually written and automated articles as well as between manually written and post-edited articles. There were no significant differences between automated and post-edited articles. The manually written articles were considered the most comprehensible (M =46.07, SD = 12.90), and significantly more comprehensible than both automated articles (M = 42.92, SD = 13.06, 95%-CI[2.04, 4.26]) and post-edited articles (M = 43.86, SD = 13.63, 95%-CI[1.10, 3.32]).

Respondents' comprehension of numbers in the articles also differed significantly for the different levels of automation, Welch's $F(2, 3153.97)$ = 39.944, p < .001, η^2 = .016.

A pair-wise comparison of the mean values revealed a significant difference (p < .001) in the comprehension of numbers between manually written and automated articles and between manually written and post-edited articles. There were no significant differences between automated and post-edited articles. The mean value for how comprehensible respondents thought numbers in the articles was highest for manually written articles (M = 44.44, SD = 13.127). Our data showed a significant drop-off for automated articles (M = 40.17, SD = 14.06, 95%-CI[3.13, 5.42]), as well as for post-edited articles (M = 41.63, SD = 14.03, 95%-CI[1.67, 3.96]).

5 Discussion

This study investigated the differences in news consumers' liking of automated, manually written, and post-edited news articles, and the emotional and cognitive impacts those different article types had on them. The results show no significant differences in the level of liking for the three types of articles. Regarding emotional impact, although manually written articles triggered the highest level of arousal, followed by post-edited and automated articles, the differences were small and not statistically significant. In terms of valence, although automated articles triggered the highest level of negative valence, followed by post-edited and manually written articles, again these differences were not statistically significant. In terms of cognitive impact, there were significant differences between the article types. Manually written articles were perceived as significantly more comprehensible than post-edited and automated articles. The comprehension of numbers in articles was also significantly higher for manually written articles than for automated and post-edited articles.

The findings of this study have implications for the design and production of news articles. The results suggest that manually written articles are perceived as more comprehensible overall and in their presentation of numbers than fully automated articles, indicating the importance of maintaining human involvement in the production of news content. However, the study also showed that post-edited and automated articles were not significantly less liked than manually written articles, suggesting that automated content has reached a level of acceptance amongst news consumers.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of finding the right balance between human involvement and automation to ensure that news content is comprehensible to the audience.

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