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Posthuman advertising: does AI spell the end of media and marketing as we know it?

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Don't over mind the automation of mundane tasks; Scott Button says AI is about to disrupt creative roles, advertising and culture.

Artificial intelligence is becoming so embedded in the everyday that we risk not noticing it at all. Self-driving cars, humanoid robots and Go grandmasters may grab the popular imagination, but it's the way that AI is seeping into everything from voice recognition to fast food delivery that better illustrates its quiet ubiquity.

Alexa and Siri are getting smarter, day by day, along with most other connected devices.

In the domain of digital advertising, machine learning has already been with us for several years. Well-known techniques – from regression analysis to deep learning – are being used to combat ad fraud, optimise ad viewability, improve audience composition, and enhance goal conversion. The vast amounts of data generated by ad tech platforms and the fast feedback loops enabled by real time media buying have made digital advertising an especially fertile proving ground for AI.

What's new and different today is the widespread availability of cloud-based AI platforms, turning machine learning into a utility; one that's cheap, fast, and accessible to anyone that wants to use it.

A great example is IBM's Personality Insights services, which uses the company's Watson platform to analyse data from social feeds in order to predict an individual's personality and key traits.



It's uncontentious that differing psychological traits influence receptivity to advertising. The extravert is more likely to share an ad. The conscientious individual is more likely to respond to an offer. Now machine learning techniques like IBM's service mean that we can analyse tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people, very quickly and very cheaply.

By combining this data with information on people's purchasing habits – all collected through an opt-in survey – Unruly quickly found that we could create interesting aggregate personality profiles for different brands and different customer segments.

In essence, we could utilise Watson to help advertisers to learn how and why people think, act and feel a certain way.

In the first instance, we've integrated these machine learning capabilities into our targeting tool, to allow advertisers to improve the accuracy of their online marketing campaigns by engaging the people most likely to increase a brand's sales – light buyers.

This new iteration of the tool is built on large scale consumer panel studies with more than 10,000 respondents, combined with insights from the social media accounts of participating consumers. We use a mix of linguistic analysis and machine learning to determine the socio-demographic and psychological profile of each panellist, clustering and aggregating the profiles based on buying patterns and purchasing frequency.

We're really excited to be at the forefront of this new world, but this is just the start.

The world's first AI media agency already exists. Blackwood Seven was set up three years ago. It's slightly intimidating but seems fairly obvious that machines will do a better job of planning and optimising media than lightly trained execs shuffling Excel sheets around.

But what about creative?

While digital has always promised the possibility of customising (and then multivariate testing) thousands of creatives for different audience clusters, this strategy has tended to fall over in practice or be implemented simplistically because it's expensive and slow. If AI can make it fast and cheap, it might just revolutionise mass marketing.

Thinking further into the future, it's not crazy to speculate about the creation of the world's first AI ad agency, perhaps implemented as a generative adversarial network. One neural network churns out thousands of ideas and storyboards with the goal of them being indistinguishable in terms of originality, relatability and emotional impact from award-winning campaigns of the past and present. A second neural network then rates the ideas of the first and attempts to figure out which ones are really award-winning human-authored efforts and which machine-generated, thereby generating further feedback for the first machine.

What's vertiginous here is not so much the breathless pace of technological change but rather the trajectory we're headed on. In the not-so-distant future, machines will be better than us – not just at the mundane tasks that threaten hundreds of millions of jobs in the developed and developing world, but also at the sorts of things that we think of as being elevated and distinctively human, including the creation of advertising and culture.

The claims here ought not to be especially surprising or contentious, though perhaps the evidence is, through being so close to our noses, becoming increasingly invisible to us. In many areas of life we've already handed responsibility to intelligent machines. News and our life stories to social networks. Navigation to mapping apps. Collision prevention to autonomous driving systems. Medical diagnosis to neural networks. Life partners and one night stands to dating platforms. EdgeRank. PageRank. We trust the algorithm to know us better than we know ourselves.

This is the end of the human as we know it. Humanity displaces God, Machine displaces Humanity, and, more

prosaically, Algorithm displaces Ad.

Scott Burton is cofounder and CSO at Unruly.

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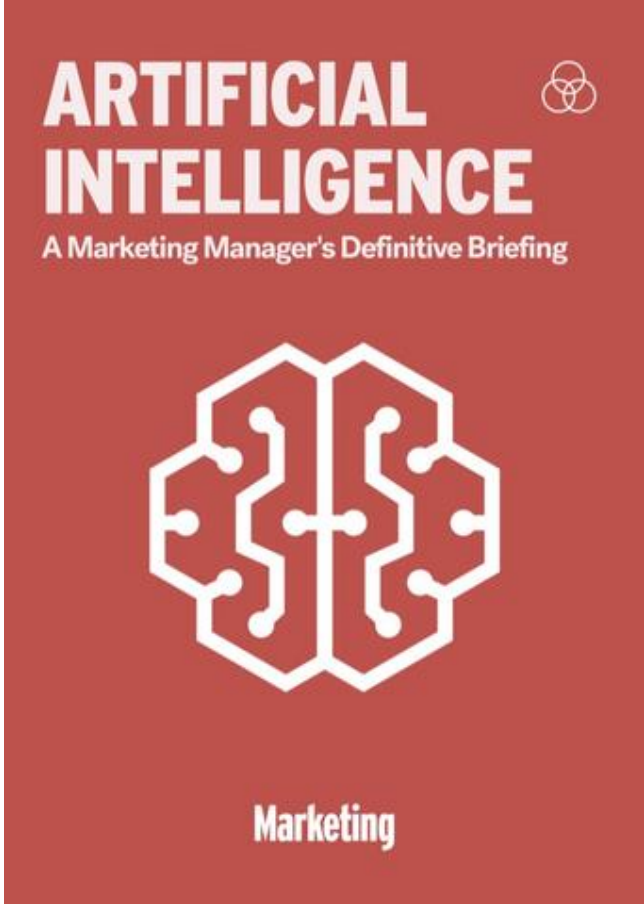
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