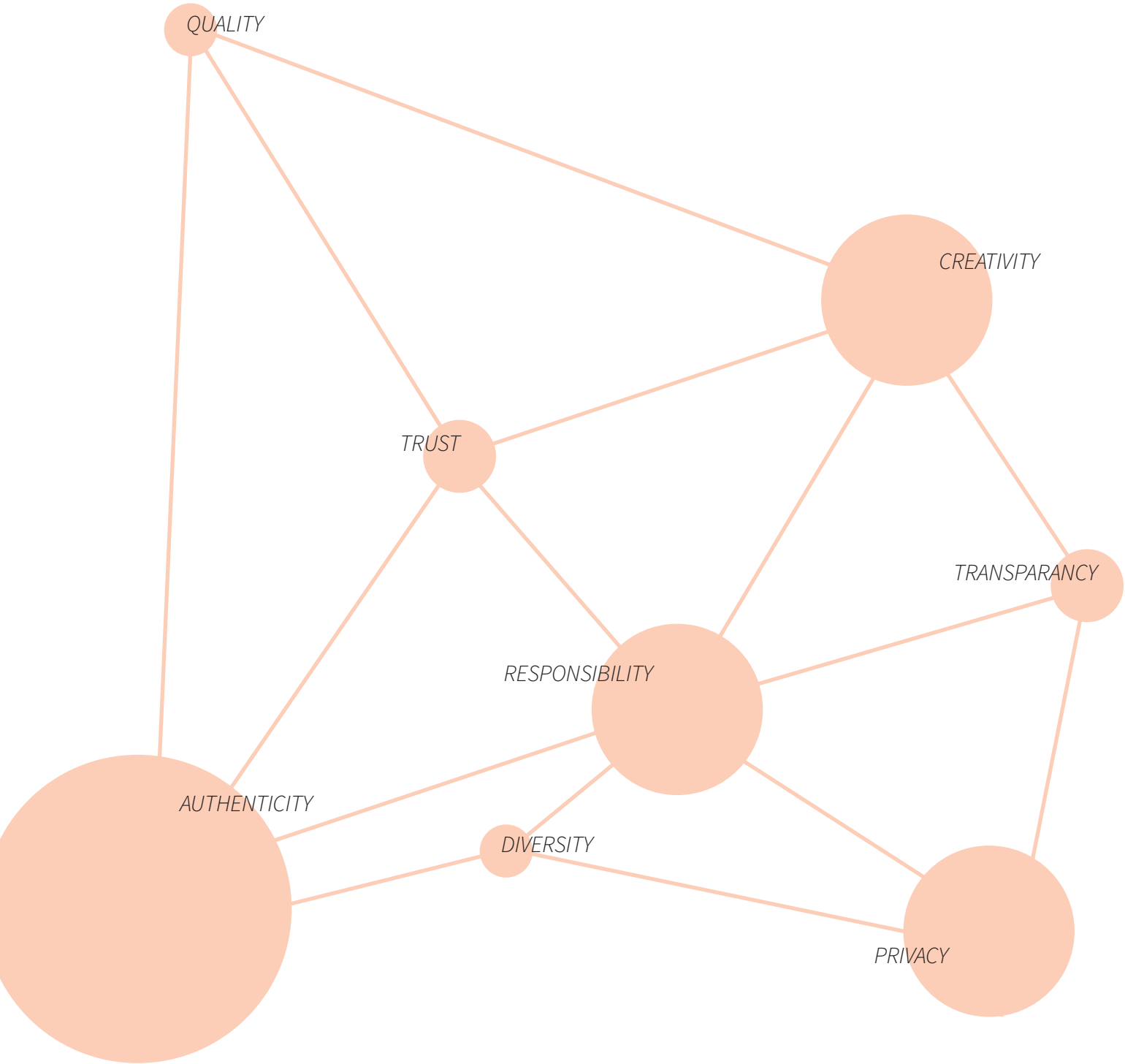
Compelling Data Stories

Raising awareness of potential issues in data projects in the media sector



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Introduction

Algorithms in the media sector

How does the use of a virtual presenter for the news affect a broadcaster's reputation? How does the use of an algorithmic recommender system affect the pluralism and diversity of content? How does the collection of personal data for targeted advertising affect user privacy and trust? How are datafication and algorithms changing journalism, and what skills and preconditions will be needed in the future? Technological innovation involving AI, data, and algorithms offers many opportunities for media organizations. These include improved user experience, accelerated production processes, increased audience reach and stimulation of creative experimentation. However, these advantages also come with challenges. Pitfalls sometimes go unnoticed but can ultimately cause well-intentioned innovations to have unintended or even harmful outcomes.

In data and AI projects, important values within organizations and in society, such as transparency, autonomy, reliability, and privacy, may be compromised. Although existing laws and regulations (such as the GDPR, the AI Act, and copyright legislation) regulate many aspects of data use and AI applications, situations arise in practice where legal frameworks fall short. It is precisely in these gray areas that guidelines for ethical decision-making can support careful and responsible action.

This brochure uses a number of stories to highlight common ethical issues in data and AI projects within the media sector. The stories show where points of friction can arise around the use of data, algorithms, and AI models, and how values can be compromised in the process. This brochure is intended for anyone in the media sector who works or wants to work with data, algorithms, and/or AI. With these stories, we want to help readers hone a sensitivity to points of friction in data projects. This makes it easier to recognize moral tensions and discuss them within your own work practice. This awareness can help you make more informed decisions and practice value-driven design, which contributes to trust among both the public and within the organization. It also saves valuable time when potential points of friction are identified and addressed early in the project. Reflecting on the intended design of a project contributes to increasing data and AI literacy within the organization and helps identify which capacities, skills, and administrative aspects need to be developed to innovate effectively and responsibly.

Reading guide

Alongside each data story, you will find an overview of questions from DEDA for Media (“D4M”) that apply to the project described. For more information about ethical issues in data projects in the media sector, data management, and data policy, please visit **media.dataschool.nl**. You can also contact us at **dataschool@uu.nl**.

Story 1

Omroep Brabant's virtual newscaster

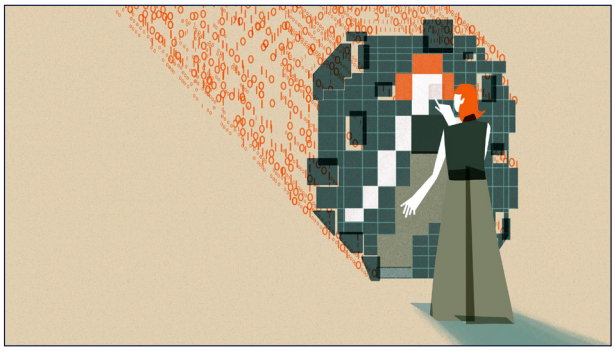
Project

In May 2024, the Dutch regional broadcaster Omroep Brabant introduces an 'AI version' of newsreader Nina van den Broek. This virtual newsreader is used to quickly and easily create videos for Omroep Brabant's website and app. This enables the broadcaster to better respond to the increasing demand for video content, particularly among young people and those with low literacy skills. AI technology is used to mimic the newsreader's voice, appearance, and facial features. This pioneering project is a first in the Netherlands and is an example of how generative AI can be used to respond to market trends.

Challenges

The editor-in-chief believes in the experiment and is not afraid that the trial could have adverse consequences, for example for the broadcaster's reputation. After all, the scripts for the videos are still written by human journalists. Moreover, a disclaimer should make it clear to the public that they are watching a synthetic video. At first, the project seems like a success: the videos draw many viewers. However, problems soon arise. Viewers find it difficult to distinguish the AI presenter from the 'real' Nina van den Broek. The disclaimer at the beginning of an AI video ("the presenter of this video was created with AI") proves insufficient. Due to the great similarity between the two, uncertainty remains, especially among older viewers.

In addition to confusion among the public, an internal problem also arises. Generating videos takes more time and effort than expected. Due to high costs, Omroep Brabant has to stop trialing the AI newsreader. The editor-in-chief does indicate that he wants to improve and streamline the process and then resume the experiment. Ideally, news texts could be transformed into newscaster videos at a single press of a button. The appearance of the virtual newsreader is also being reconsidered. According to the editor-in-chief, using an entirely synthetic virtual newscaster instead of imitating a real person could eliminate confusion among the public.



Points of attention

The obstacles in this project are not only practical in nature; they also have a clear ethical dimension. First of all, this project shows that replacing human work with technology is not necessarily more efficient but can actually lead to higher work pressure and more tasks. Moreover, replacing human work can lead to concerns about job security. Another important point of concern is the confusion between 'real' recordings and synthetic videos. Because the public finds it difficult to make this distinction, a feeling of deception arises, undermining values such as credibility and public trust. The transparency provided (via the disclaimer) appears to be insufficient to guarantee these values. It is also questionable whether a virtual newscaster not based on a specific individual would actually eliminate this confusion and sense of deception.

Concerns regarding the use of generative AI for synthetic video content also arise in the entertainment industry. Here, filmmakers are already experimenting with synthetic, AI-powered acting. This raises questions about copyright, among other things,

as the technology that generates synthetic content is trained on the acting of human professionals. But there are also concerns about the human element in acting as well as newscasting. On the one hand, some argue that the human aspect of acting is indispensable because humans have emotions and machines do not. One concern here is that synthetic acting and newscasting will lead to a flattening and loss of authenticity. Others contradict this perspective, arguing that both synthetic and real acting evoke the same emotional response and connection in the audience. The popularity of animated series would seem to support this idea. Finally, there are concerns that the widespread use of synthetic acting and newscasting will lead to homogenization of media offerings. This means that the distinction between different broadcasters, editorial teams, and production companies will become increasingly less visible, jeopardizing diversity, authenticity, and creativity.

The issues mentioned here may not be the only ones. What other ethical issues or challenges do you think this project might raise?

The following questions from D4M are particularly relevant to this project:

- *How does the algorithmic system impact the diversity of perspectives? (13)*
- *How does automation with this algorithmic system affect the work experience and employment opportunities? (14)*
- *What role do humans have in the process that is being automated? (15)*
- *What will employees and the public know about the project? Are the goal and operation of the system explained in accessible language? (18)*
- *How does this execution of transparency support or undermine the trust of the public and employees? (20)*
- *What agreements exist for dealing with possible public backlash or negative reactions from employees? (23)*

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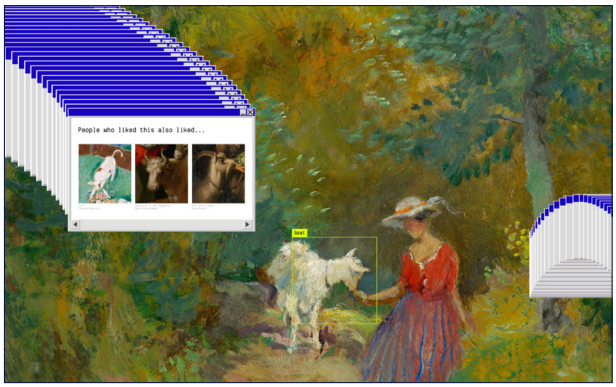
Story 2

ZDF's green recommendation system



Project

The German public broadcaster Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) uses a personalized recommendation system to increase the user-friendliness of its on-demand streaming platform. Using algorithms ("you might also be interested in" and "because you watched *[x]*"), users are recommended content that may be relevant to them. The innovation of the ZDFmediathek is part of a larger trend in which ZDF uses AI for personalization and automation. In addition to its goal of maintaining its leading market position, ZDF also has a social role as a public broadcaster: offering diverse and accessible content and safeguarding public values such as sustainability and pluralism. This project involves developers, newsrooms, the public, and content providers, each with their own diverse interests. This results in a collection of different goals and working methods that are in tension with each other.

Challenges

One of the principles of the recommendation system is to combat bias. Recommendation systems can ensure that popular series and films are presented to users more often, which is called popularity bias. As a result, less popular content remains less visible. This gives large producers an unfair competitive advantage over niche genres and smaller productions. For ZDF, this is an undesirable outcome, as its social role is to offer diverse content to a wide audience. To reduce this type of bias, ZDF implements bias corrections for the recommendation system.

Another key principle in this project is sustainability. ZDF would like to have a green recommendation system, but this is proving to be quite a challenge in practice. Reducing power consumption, for example, affects how often the model can be retrained on the most recent data, which directly affects the model's performance. Other ways of reducing the model's emissions also affect the system's performance. To find a balance between sustainability and effectiveness, the project team regularly evaluates these methods.

ZDF is also collaborating with an external party in the development of the system, which can create additional challenges around dependency and transparency. A well-known problem when collaborating with external parties is that part of the processes becomes less visible. To maintain an overview, the development partner is closely involved, and extra effort is put into communicating goals and working methods. In addition, the open-source approach ensures that all information about data, models, and working methods is available to the public.

Points of attention

In this project, ethical considerations and value assessments are embedded throughout the digitization process. From the outset, the team considers important choices that shape the project, such as mitigating measures to reduce popularity bias. Unfair competition from dominant creators against smaller productions in the ZDF media library harms the diversity of the content. Alternative perspectives

The following questions from D4M are particularly relevant to this project:

- *How is bias in the data addressed, considering potentially unwanted effects such as discrimination, stigmatization, or other unfair practices? (4)*
- *Which alternative systems have been considered, and why are they less suitable or useful? Also discuss sustainability considerations (such as energy use, CO_2 emissions, resource usage, etc.) (9)*
- *Is the algorithmic system developed in-house or outsourced? Motivate the decisions and discuss whether these decisions create undesirable dependencies on specific knowledge, teams, or organizations. (10)*
- *How is it verified that the system functions well? How is it ensured that the system continues to function properly in the future? (12)*
- *How does the algorithmic system impact diversity of perspectives? (13)*
- *What will employees and the public know about the project? Are the goal and operation of the system explained in accessible language? (18)*
- *What opportunities are offered to the public or employees to act in response to this project? Consider filing objections or opt out possibilities. (22)*
- *Which processes are in place to identify and address unwanted effects of the project? (24)*

and opinions could remain underexposed. This is an example of how the use of an algorithmic system can affect the diversity of perspectives in the content. This project also provides insight into how a social value such as sustainability can be at odds with a technical aspect such as the accuracy of the system.

In addition, the project shows that collaboration with an external party can lead to undesirable dependencies in terms of knowledge, autonomy, and transparency. For example, the external party may make decisions about technical aspects of the system without communicating this clearly. This affects the functioning of the system and, with it, the way in which public values may be affected. It is therefore important to make clear agreements with external parties about decision-making and the sharing of information. These agreements should serve both the internal knowledge of how the system works and the transparency that ZDF offers to stakeholders outside the organization. Finally, user self-determination is also an important consideration in projects such as this. For example, ZDF offers users the option of not using the recommendation system and actively explains the steps they need to take to do so.

The issues mentioned here may not be the only ones. What other ethical issues or challenges do you think this project might raise?

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Story 3

Fake authors at Ventures Media

Project

In 2025, articles created using generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT) appear on the websites of several Belgian magazines, such as ELLE, Marie Claire, Forbes, and Psychologies. The articles feature the names and portraits of non-existent authors. Following an anonymous tip, the VRT investigates. An ELLE employee initially claims to know nothing about it, but shortly after the conversation, the names and photos of the fake authors disappear, and the stories are accompanied by a disclaimer: “This content was generated using AI and subsequently reviewed and edited by the editorial team.” In a later interview, a manager explains that this was a small-scale test, in which the tech team generates articles using AI that are published without human intervention.

Challenges

Part of the criticism concerns the lack of transparency. According to several media experts, while the use of generative AI is not prohibited, high quality standards must always be applied and, more importantly, the method used must be transparent. There is also controversy surrounding a fake author with the profile “editor specializing in psychology and well-being.” According to the Psychologencommissie (the Belgian Psychologists' Commission), this is socially undesirable and unacceptable because the profession of psychologist is a protected title in Belgium. Ventures Media responds to the criticism: “We understand that the use of aliases can lead to confusion, which is why we have now adjusted our working method to make it clearer in the future and to indicate that the content has been created using AI.”

Points of attention

A number of points of attention clearly emerge from this project. First and foremost, media experts emphasize the importance of always critically checking the output before publication. In this case, the synthetic articles may contain errors or inaccuracies due to “hallucinations” of the generative AI system. The test in which Ventures Media publishes the AI articles without human intervention is therefore not without risk. Human supervision is important to limit the risk of inaccuracies. This not only improves the quality of an article but also protects the public's trust in the media. Human journalists can take responsibility for their work and are available to add nuance and correct errors. This project lacks such accountability.

Secondly, the use of fake identities in this project is an important ethical concern. Invented names and AI portraits give the impression that the text was written by a real author. This actively misleads the public. Moreover, this deception becomes even more problematic when a fictional psychologist is presented as a source of expertise. In synthetic articles about mothers who co-sleep with their children, the AI system writes with a voice of authority about “her” experiences as a psychologist. Statements that readers perceive as coming from a qualified professional are generated by AI. Such practices can foster false assumptions in society, potentially leading to harmful decisions.

Finally, as in the Omroep Brabant story, copyright plays an important role. As mentioned earlier, the publishers used advanced large language models

(such as ChatGPT) to generate the articles. Such models are often trained on large amounts of text, including text that is automatically collected from public websites. DPG Media, for example, has chosen to block all so-called crawlers and explicitly prohibit the use of their content for training large language models.

The following questions from D4M are particularly relevant to this project:

- *How is bias from an externally designed or pre-trained algorithmic system addressed? (11)*
- *How does the algorithmic system impact the diversity of perspectives? (13)*
- *What role do humans have in the process that is being automated? (15)*
- *How does this execution of transparency support or undermine the trust of the public and employees? (20)*
- *What are the communication strategies for this project? In the case of collaborating partners, have the strategies been coordinated with them both internally and externally? (21)*
- *What agreements exist for dealing with possible public backlash or negative reactions from employees? (23)*

A relevant comparison with Ventures Media's approach is the project by German regional broadcaster MDR, which automatically generates messages for municipalities and constituencies for regional elections. This does not use large language models, but a framework prepared in advance (by humans). The content of these articles is based on rules governing the structure of the article, the text modules, and the data used. In addition, humans regularly check grammar, sentence structures, and interpretations. The rules are also tested in advance with sample data and assessed for quality. Finally, transparency plays a major role here. MDR explains how the automated reporting is generated and makes the project code public. Readers are also given the opportunity to report errors. These elements show how automated writing can be designed in a structured and responsible manner.

The issues mentioned here may not be the only ones. What other ethical issues or challenges do you think this project might raise?

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Story 4

Sveriges Radio's public service algorithm

Project

In June 2021, Swedish public radio broadcaster Sveriges Radio (SR) wins an international award for developing a public service algorithm. In this algorithm, public values play a central role in selecting and arranging news stories in SR's digital environment. It operates as follows *(see Figure 1)*. After a reporter submits a news story, editors assess it based on three dimensions. The first dimension is impact, where the score can range from low to extraordinary. The second dimension is the lifespan of the story, which can be short, standard, or long. Thirdly, editorial staff determine the extent to which (yes, no, or in a unique way) the story reflects SR's news values. These values include proximity to the public, consideration of underrepresented regions or groups, and the inclusion of unique perspectives. Based on this assessment by the editorial team, the algorithm automatically calculates a score. This score then determines the position of the news story in relation to other stories, for example on the website's homepage or in the news playlist. Because the system adjusts the scores in real time, stories with a short lifespan can quickly drop in position and be replaced by newer or more impactful stories. This creates a dynamic news overview in which current and impactful stories automatically receive more visibility.

This project should make decision-making about the relevance and order of news stories more objective and consistent. In addition, the system should save time: automatic sorting of news frees up time for improving content. Finally, the assessment system is intended to encourage employees to actively seek out stories that convey their values (as mentioned above).

Challenges

This project will clearly affect the work experience and tasks of the SR editorial team. Whereas previously an editor-in-chief manually determined the arrangement of news stories in the digital environment, this decision-making process has now been decentralized, giving editorial staff more influence. This requires good coordination on what counts as, for example,

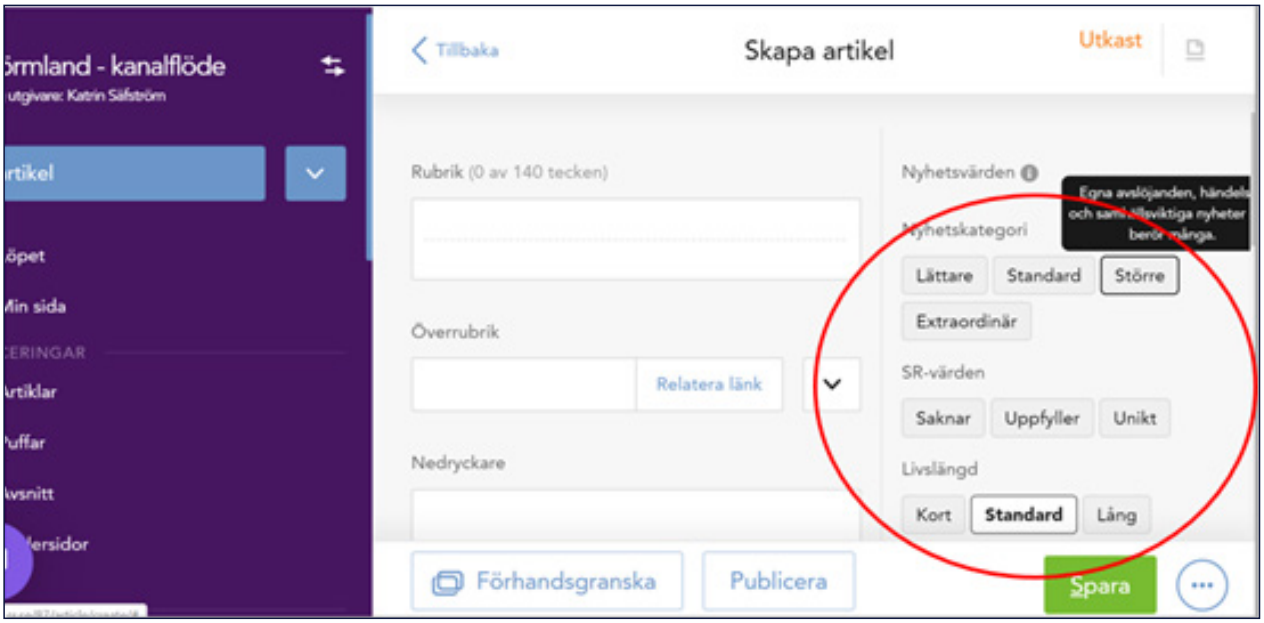

Figure 1: How the SR scoring system works

the “extraordinary” versus “major” impact of a news story. The interpretation of SR's news values and the way in which a news story can be assessed based on news value (e.g., “in a unique way”) also remains a challenge. SR therefore organizes evaluation sessions with editorial staff members in which they can discuss the use of the criteria and the assignment of scores. A beneficial side effect is that the editorial staff members gain knowledge about the value of certain news stories and how reporters can improve them. A challenge for SR in this regard is that authors must avoid writing stories solely within the “frame” of the assessment criteria. Reporters naturally understand which stories receive high scores. This can lead them to write their stories in such a way that they score highly on the assessment criteria, which may be at the expense of good and honest journalism.

Points of attention

In this project, automation, so to speak, serves the public interest. Nevertheless, there are some important points of attention in SR's working method. First of all, the project is causing a change in employment and work experience. Innovation is eliminating some tasks and replacing them with others that require different types of knowledge from employees. To support this shift, it is necessary to hire new employees or retrain existing employees. In addition, automation can cause a shift in decision-making power within the organization, as editorial staff take over tasks from the editor-in-chief. This can affect the dynamics and power structure of the editorial team.

The use of the algorithm also raises questions about how SR's news values are operationalized. SR's news values have been chosen and formulated by people. However, it is difficult to make concepts such as “proximity to the public” and “degree of diversity in perspectives” measurable and concrete. The “flexibility” of these concepts makes scores based on these criteria unreliable. After all, one editorial member may be quicker to conclude that a news value is reflected in a “unique” way than another. The results of the algorithm with subjective measurement criteria can therefore become inconsistent, making the model unreliable. This can lead to bias, for example in the way certain news stories receive more exposure than others.

The issues mentioned here may not be the only ones. What other ethical issues or challenges do you think this project might raise?

The following questions from D4M are particularly relevant to this project:

- *How is the quality of the data ensured? Consider quality in terms of accuracy, completeness, consistency, validity, and timeliness of the data. (3)*
- *How is bias in the data addressed, considering potentially unwanted effects such as discrimination, stigmatization, or other unfair practices? (4)*
- *How does the algorithmic system work? Are the results explainable? (8)*
- *Which alternative systems have been considered, and why are they less suitable or useful? Also discuss sustainability considerations (such as energy use, CO_2 emissions, resource usage, etc) (9)*
- *How is it verified that the system functions well? How is it ensured that the system continues to function properly in the future? (12)*

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Story 5

Contextual targeting by Ster

Project

The phasing out of third-party cookies in popular browsers such as Safari and Firefox, partly due to stricter privacy legislation, has major consequences for the online advertising market. Without these cookies, it becomes more difficult to track the surfing behavior of website visitors. As a result, media parties are dependent on their own data sources when building user profiles for targeted advertising. That is why media companies are focusing on sustainable alternatives.

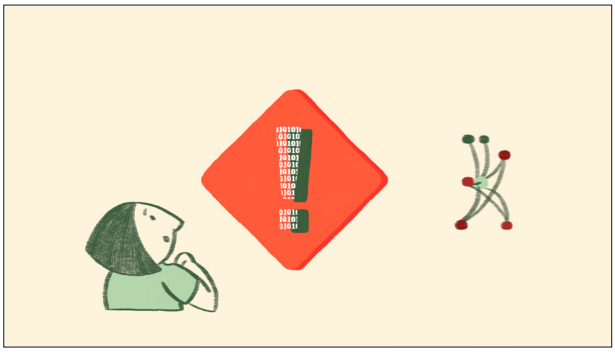
One of the alternatives to online tracking systems that use cookies is contextual targeting. This involves the system tailoring advertisements to the content of a web page, rather than to the behavior or profile of the individual visitor. This concept is not new, but technological advances in AI have made it more effective. The technology analyzes the text, keywords, and themes of a web page to display relevant advertisements. Stichting Etherreclame (Ster), the Dutch public broadcasting advertising foundation, fully switched to this advertising method in 2020. On the tech platform Tweakers.net, parent company DPG Media also attempted to remove all forms of tracking in 2022, partly due to the growing need for transparency and privacy within the community. Moreover, news reports in the United States surrounding ICE have shown data collected for marketing ends could also be used by investigative and law enforcement bodies. Authorities could use such data to undermine citizens' rights, profiling and threatening them. Aside from these privacy concerns, the very effectiveness of targeted advertising is also debatable.

Challenges

In addition to online tracking's questionable effectiveness and stricter laws and regulations surrounding it, user attitudes are also a factor in the transition to contextual targeting. At Tweakers, for example, more than half of desktop users

have installed an ad blocker, as have a quarter of mobile users. When privacy and data protection are important to users, the question is whether online tracking still fits in. Ster has also noticed a growing awareness of online privacy among visitors. According to its own research, only ten percent of visitors give permission for personalized ads with videos on the online NPO (the Dutch public broadcasting organization) platforms. This limits the effectiveness of personalized advertising, as advertisers can only reach their target audience to a limited extent.

As mentioned, contextual targeting is an alternative advertising method that does not depend on the collection of personal data. However, that does not mean that this method is less valuable. Research by Ster suggests that an online campaign can be just as effective and high-quality without the use of personal data. In addition, placing an advertisement in a relevant context can increase consumer attention. Moreover, an advertisement that matches the content of the page, rather than a purchase made two weeks ago, can reduce the feeling of being 'spied on'.



However, the attempt to rid Tweakers.net of tracking has failed. Two years after the introduction of the alternative advertising system with contextual targeting, Tweakers is switching back to DPG Media's advertising system. The reason for the failure of the alternative system is mainly the declining advertising revenues. In practice, Tweakers' advertising setup does not sufficiently align with the working methods of online advertisers, causing them to stay away or reduce their budgets. In the future, according to DPG Media's advertising model, users who agree to cookies will see personalized advertisements.

Points of attention

According to a 2025 report by the Rathenau Institute, online advertisers and media parties do not always comply with the laws and regulations surrounding online tracking. According to this report, there are gray areas where the authorities could strengthen legislation, and it appears that the extent of online tracking is increasing rather than decreasing due to new technological possibilities. This could compromise public values such as transparency and privacy. For example, users have limited control over what information they choose to share. In theory, they can make choices about tracking, but in practice this is often made difficult. Due to the complexity and opacity of tracking, it is questionable to what extent users are still able to make informed choices.

Finally, it is important to consider the limitations of contextual targeting. This method uses algorithms that analyze the content of text, images, or videos and classify them into categories. However, these analyses are never fully neutral: historical bias in the training data can unintentionally reinforce certain stereotypes. It is therefore important to periodically evaluate whether the system is functioning properly. This requires reflection on the advertising method used and how it relates to both social values and the values within the organization.

The issues mentioned here may not be the only ones. What other ethical issues or challenges do you think this project might raise?

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The following questions from D4M are particularly relevant to this project:

- *Why are these data needed to achieve the project's goals? If personal data are used, could the project do without them? (2)*
- *How, where, and for how long are the data stored? Who has access? (5)*
- *Under which conditions can the data be shared with others (internally with other departments as well as externally)? (6)*
- *How does the algorithmic system impact the diversity of perspectives? (13)*
- *What will employees and the public know about the project? Are the goal and operation of the system explained in accessible language? (18)*
- *What opportunities are offered to the public or employees to act in response to this project? Consider filing objections or opt out possibilities. (22)*

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Contact information

Have these compelling data stories made you curious about the responsible use of AI within your organisation? Contact Data School and ask about the possibilities:

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