

Microsoft to replace MSN news production workers with artificial intelligence

Mike Ingram
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Microsoft is firing dozens of news contractors after June 30 and replacing them with artificial intelligence (AI).

Around 50 journalists and editors in the US contracted through Aquent IFG and MAQ Consulting and 27 in the UK contracted through PA Media (formerly the Press Association) will lose their jobs. These workers operate MSN news pages, curating content and in some cases rewriting headlines and editing content to fit the format.

MSN was launched as Microsoft's news portal in 1995. At its launch, MSN published original content as well as links to news, weather and sports updates. In 2014, the site was relaunched as a partner with other news sites, paying them to redistribute their content.

At the launch of Microsoft News in June 2018, Microsoft said it had more than 800 editors working in 50 locations around the world. The company has been gradually moving toward AI for its news work in recent months, using AI to scan for content and process and filter it. Software can also suggest photos for human editors to pair with content.

In the "About us" section of msn.com, Microsoft states:

"Every day, our publishing partners send us more than 100,000 unique pieces of content. Our AI scans the content as it arrives, processes it to understand dimensions like freshness, category, topic type, opinion content and potential popularity and then presents it for our editors. Our algorithms suggest appropriate photos to pair with content to help bring stories to life. Editors then curate the top stories throughout the day, across a variety of topics, so our readers get the latest news from the best sources."

The layoffs indicate that Microsoft aims to eliminate the manual curation step and fully automate the

process, with the potential loss of hundreds of jobs.

In a statement to the *Seattle Times*, Microsoft said, "Like all companies, we evaluate our business on a regular basis. This can result in increased investment in some places and, from time to time, re-deployment in others."

The Microsoft spokesperson said the layoffs were "not the result of the current pandemic," but Microsoft, as with other companies, has seen a significant decline in ad revenue.

Full-time news producers will remain employed by Microsoft, but as they perform similar functions to the fired contractors, their jobs could also be at risk.

The *Seattle Times* cites employees speaking anonymously, saying that MSN will use AI to replace the production work they had been doing. "It's been semi-automated for a few months but now it's full speed ahead," one soon-to-be-terminated worker said.

According to the *Guardian*, in the UK, "Employees were told Microsoft's decision to end the contract with PA Media was taken at short notice as part of a global shift away from humans in favor of automated updates for news."

A worker expressed concern to the *Guardian* that the move to automation was risky, as staff were careful to stick to "very strict editorial guidelines" to ensure that users were not presented with violent or inappropriate content. As MSN is the default browser homepage on Windows devices, there is particular concern regarding younger users.

The use of artificial intelligence in journalism has grown in recent years. A February 2019 *New York Times* article titled "The Rise of the Robot Reporter" noted that "Roughly a third of the content published by Bloomberg News uses some form of automated technology."

The Associated Press first began using AI for the creation of news content in 2013 to produce sport and earnings reports. The *Washington Post* used “automated journalism” to report on the Rio Olympic Games in 2016.

In 2017, Google funded an automated news project in which computers would write 30,000 stories a month for local media. The Press Association (PA) received £622,000 for its Reporters and Data and Robots (Radar) scheme, which it claimed would benefit “established media outlets,” independent publishers and local bloggers.

In the UK’s 2019 General Election, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) used AI to produce nearly 700 articles, covering every constituency that declared election results overnight.

In December 2019, the BBC reported: “Using machine assistance, we generated a story for every single constituency that declared last night with the exception of the one that hasn’t finished counting yet. That would never have been possible [using humans].”



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