

The robots' long march

THIS SPRING saw a spate of books worrying us about the potential for artificial intelligence to take over "white-collar" work. In particular, in *Rise of the Robots* software entrepreneur Martin Ford asserts that websites such as **Forbes.com** are making more use than they admit of software like Quill, which generates news reports from raw data.

The book appeared at the same time as *Culture Crash* by Scott Timberg, who was an arts reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* before the paper cut its culture coverage, and *The Internet is Not the Answer* by CNN columnist Andrew Keen.

Interestingly, all three acknowl-

edge their intellectual debt to *Who Owns the Future?*, a 2013 book by Jaron Lanier, the researcher who coined the term "virtual reality" (see the *March Freelance*). Once again, Lanier has started a trend.

And in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* we find this:

"A few days ago her startled eye had caught an advertisement in the newspaper, headed 'Literary Machine'; had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles?"

"Alas! The machine was only for holding volumes conveniently, that the work of literary manufacture

might be physically lightened. But surely before long some Edison would make the true automaton; the problem must be comparatively such a simple one.

"Only to throw in a given number of old books and have them reduced, blended, modernised into a single one for today's consumption."

Others who have until now failed to read Gissing's wonderful documentary fiction of publishing toil should know that it was published in 1891. He thus raises the image, lovely to some, of a coal-fired artificial journalist crafted from black iron and polished brass...

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Freelancing? That were luxury!

You think freelances have it hard in the UK? In Belarus freelancing is illegal. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) is extremely concerned by the increasing numbers of fines imposed on Belarusian freelance journalists for "illegal creation of mass media production" since April 2014. On 1 June Ina Shayko, judge of the Dziarzhynsk district court, ruled against journalists Volha Chaychyts and Siarhei Krauchuk and demanded them to pay 5,400,000 rubles each (€310 or £220). For more see: www.europeanjournalists.org/blog/2015/06/08/belarus-imposes-more-fines-on-freelance-journalists

More of us work from home

PEOPLE working from home – which would include many of the NUJ's freelances for at least some of the time – made up 13.7 of the UK's workforce as of early June, up from 12 per cent in 2005.

That's according to the *Independent*, which quotes Office for National Statistics data and a recent TUC analysis of "government figures". This has 800,000 people becoming "home workers" over the last decade, with a total working-from-home workforce of 4.2 million.

The figure includes staff who are

allowed to work for their bosses from home at least some of time, as well as the self-employed. The more senior your position if you are an employee, the more likely you are to be able to negotiate some kind of working-from-home arrangement – one in five managers surveyed seem to have pulled this off.

The remainder are the self-employed – with four fifths of workers from home being male, reflecting the fact that a majority of the total UK self-employed workforce (two thirds) are male.

See Andrew Bibby's ready reckoner for the amount you save your clients in overheads by working from home: it's at www.andrewbibby.com/reckoner.html

This factors in the "costs of providing premises" to the employee, coming up with a figure of £7750 per "workstation" per year. Andrew admits this is an average for the UK, which considerably underestimates how much it would cost the client to run a workstation in London. It's worth mentioning when negotiating rates for work done at home.

Bad books blocked and contracts queried

THE PUBLISHERS' Association has obtained an order in the High Court requiring internet service providers BT, Virgin Media, Sky, TalkTalk and EE to block access to seven sites that offer unauthorised copies of ebooks. These purport to hold around 10,000,000 ebook titles and have been making substantial sums of money, primarily through referral fees and advertising. None of this money has been going back to either the publishers or the authors of the works. See the Society of Authors' report at bit.ly/BadBooks-Blocked

Meanwhile in Brussels, the Eu-

ropean Commission on 11 June launched an inquiry into "certain business practices by Amazon in the distribution of electronic books". It says this is particularly to do with clauses that "require publishers to inform Amazon about more favourable or alternative terms offered to Amazon's competitors and/or offer Amazon similar terms and conditions than to its competitors, or through other means ensure that Amazon is offered terms at least as good as those for its competitors." This "may make it more difficult for other e-book distributors to compete with Amazon".

And, though perhaps few *Freelance* readers are directly affected by the working conditions of artistes with 24 platinum discs to display in the toilet (for just 5 titles)... it may be of significance for the future of online creativity that one Taylor Swift forced the Apple corporation to backtrack on a plan to force musicians to give work away for three months to promote, er, Apple's new online music venture. The corporation announced on 22 June that it would pay for downloads from day one of the service: which incidentally received rather a lot of publicity.

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Award alert! Sound science prize

You have until **20 August** to submit your entry for the John Maddox prize for "sound" science journalism. Unusually among awards we've recently come across, rather than just covering you in glory it offers some actual money! Two thousand quid's-worth of money, in fact. (The winner was also be covered in glory, getting their own spot in *Nature*.) To enter: www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/maddox-prize-2015.html and see page 5 for the report on a recent LFB meeting on reporting on medical science.

Petition, consultation, survey

PLEASE consider signing the following petition and completing the following survey and submitting to the following consultation:

● **Petition:** call on Minister for Culture John Whittingdale MP to protect the BBC and ensure it has the necessary resources to remain as a strong impartial voice both in the UK and globally. It's at https://secure.avaaz.org/en/uk_

media_33/?v=58368 - Whittingdale, former Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee has hosted LFB and Society of Authors gigs at the House of Commons (see www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1106hoc.html in 2011) and made intelligent observations on the need for enforcement of copyright and on related subjects, so he is not entirely unsympathetic.

● **Survey:** The NUJ is gathering evidence of editorial pressures being applied on journalists by proprietors and advertisers. Please respond (in confidence) at www.surveymonkey.com/s/WPFsurvey

● **Consultation:** ACLS members respond to their consultation on proposals for Extended Collective Licensing. Details: www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1503alcs.html