FREELANCE

Can AI assist us?

HOW CAN Artificial Intelligence (AI) help journalists, asked November's LFB meeting. Our speakers were computer scientists who work with journalists.

Neil Maiden, Professor of Digital Creativity at City University, London is co-instigator of Inject (**www.injectproject.eu**) – a free "discovery" engine. Inject trailed in local newsrooms in Scandinavia, where the journalists have to write six to ten stories a day. Neil claims Inject will "improve productivity so we can actually maintain the workforce" by helping journalists work "quicker and better".

More "information discovery" than information search, Inject is a plug-in or add-on that you can add to, for example, Google Docs. It appears as a side bar that helps you come up with new angles and ideas. Neil demonstrated by running search terms from a then-recent story – "Democrats" "House of Representatives" "majority" – through Inject. The software offers a selection from hundreds of thousands of recent news stories from 300 public news outlets, translated from six languages.

Inject's "creativity tool" gives prompts. For example, "Who is Richard Cordray?" He's a random Congressional candidate who may be a possible angle – a less obvious and more original one – for a story on the recent US mid-term elections. Another prompt brought up Pakistan PM Imran Khan and his less-than-obvious links to the mid-terms.

There are various "tools" with icons that you click on in the Inject

Neil Maiden (left) and Tony Abel (right). Image © **Hazel Dunlop**

sidebar –"backing and evidence", "causal", "individuals", even "quirky and satire". The sources that pop up on an Inject search are deliberately random: run it again and it gives different results. A "control" on the sidebar allows you to be more "strict" with your choice of sources, how far back the stories go and which original languages sources are in. Its users employ it for two or three minutes at a time, for those first moments of a story when you have only a topic and are finding an angle for it.

Tony Abel is co-founder of **www.krzana.com** – a proprietary news-gathering tool used by the BBC and Reach. He's noticed journalists are "really stretched" these days – with "way too much time" spent on keyword and trending searches in social media tools such as Tweetdeck.

According to Tony, AI is really good at those bits of the slog of newsgathering that we have to do but don't really regard as journalism. Keyword searches don't express your beat: they throw up mostly "noise". Results from searches for "spikes in activity" on social media are already too late, while there's the "more ideological issue… you're being told what to write by what people are already talking about".

While Google tells you what the top answer is, Krzana allows you to decide yourself what sort of sources you rely on. If you describe your beat with a search term such as, for example, "violence near polling stations in US", Krzana will bring up real-time results from blogs, police websites, Wikipedia edits and so on. This allows journalists "to take these simple tasks… automate those" so we have time to do the stuff we are actually trained to do.

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● There's a longer version of this article at **www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1811ai.html**

UC – bad for freelances

NUJ MEMBERS are reporting serious problems with so-called "Universal Credit" (UC).

Many in the UK who have had variable income – a feature of freelance life – have relied on Working Tax Credit to tide them over lean months. When the government moves them onto UC they lose out, sometimes massively.

The problem is that UC assumes an "income floor" – the assumed minimum wage. It is re-assessed every month, and so doesn't take account of big fluctuations in freelances' income – as well as imposing a time penalty in effectively re-applying monthly.

This has the effect of being a "super sanction" disproportionately affecting those who are judged to be

self-employed – and anyone who is a director of a company, including a company that a client required you to form in order to invoice them.

For example, say a self-employed individual has gross profit of £2452 over a four-month period for UC purposes. The income floor is applied and their UC award over this period amounts to £1116 including housing costs. As an employee they would have received £2164 – a difference of over £1000. Previously, they would have received Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit of about £2688 – so they've lost £1572 over the four months.

The NUJ is assisting members in taking up these concerns with MPs – and also the difficulties posed by the mandatory online claim pro-

cess. A survey by the Department for Work and Pensions itself found that only half of all claimants were able to register their claim online unassisted. The NUJ is also campaigning with the Federation of Entertainment Unions and the TUC.

Apart from the obvious point that the government is sacrificing struggling freelances on the altar of austerity. this has wide cultural implications. The NUJ's sister union the Society of Authors points out that both JK Rowling and this year's Man Booker prizewinner Anna Burns depended on benefits at some point in their careers. London Freelance Branch members with experience to share can contact **uc@london-freelance.org**

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