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Microsoft

Microsoft sacks journalists to replace them with robots

Users of the homepages of the MSN website and Edge browser will now see news stories generated by AI

Jim Waterson *Media editor*

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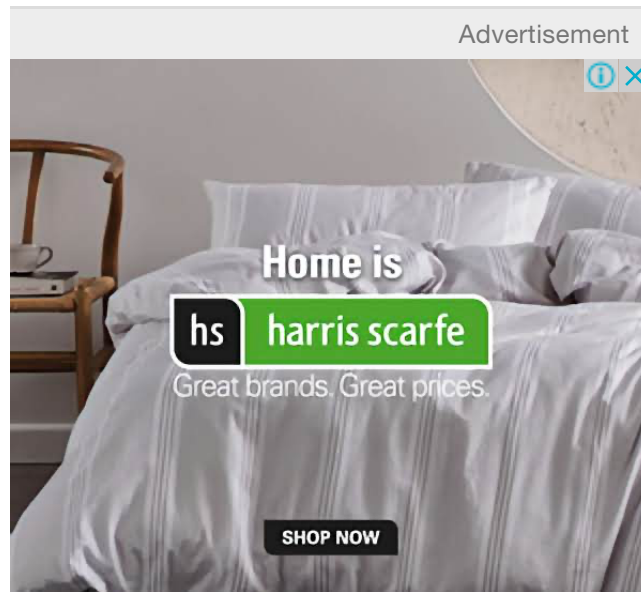


Dozens of journalists have been sacked after Microsoft decided to replace them with artificial intelligence software.

Staff who maintain the news homepages on Microsoft's MSN website and its Edge browser - used by millions of Britons every day - have been told that they will be no longer be required because robots can now do their jobs.

Around 27 individuals employed by PA Media - formerly the Press

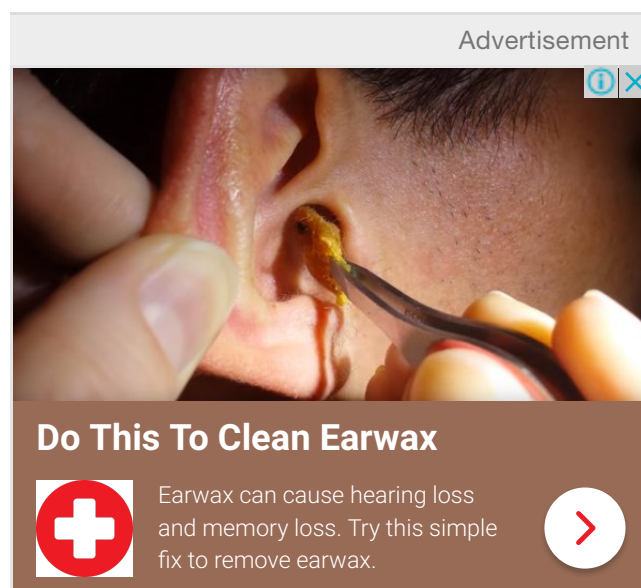
Association - were told on Thursday that they would lose their jobs in a month's time after Microsoft decided to stop employing humans to select, edit and curate news articles on its homepages.



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 favour of automated updates for news.

One staff member who worked on the team said: "I spend all my time reading about how automation and AI is going to take all our jobs, and here I am - AI has taken my job."

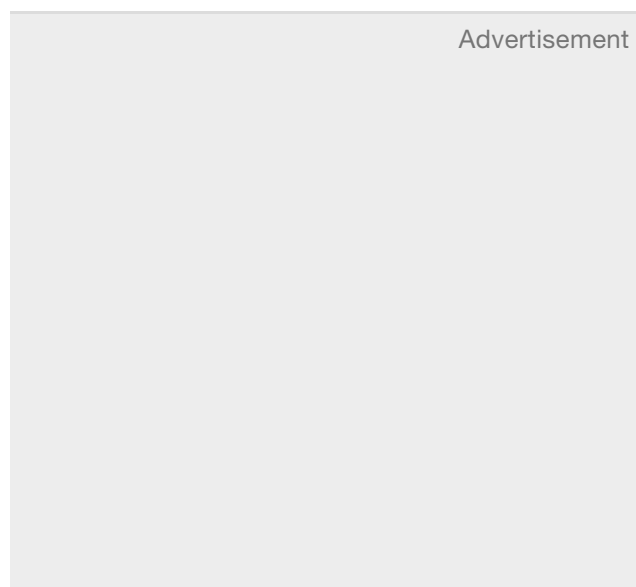
The individual added that the decision to replace humans with software was risky, as the existing staff were careful to stick to "very strict editorial guidelines" which ensured that users were not presented with violent or inappropriate content when opening their browser, of particular importance for younger users.



The team working on the Microsoft site did not report original stories but still exercised editorial control, selecting stories produced by other news organisations - including the Guardian - and editing content and headlines where appropriate to fit the format. The articles were then hosted on Microsoft's website, with the tech company sharing advertising revenue with the original publishers.

Manual curation of news stories also ensured that headlines were clear and appropriate for the format, while encouraging a spread of political opinions and avoiding untrustworthy stories, while highlighting interesting articles from smaller outlets.

Some of the journalists now facing redundancy had longstanding experience in the industry, while for others it offered a foot in the door and a job in an industry which has seen wave after wave of cuts. They now face a tough challenge to get jobs elsewhere when the whole industry is looking to cut costs. Other teams around the world are expected to be affected by Microsoft's decision to automate the curation of its news sites.

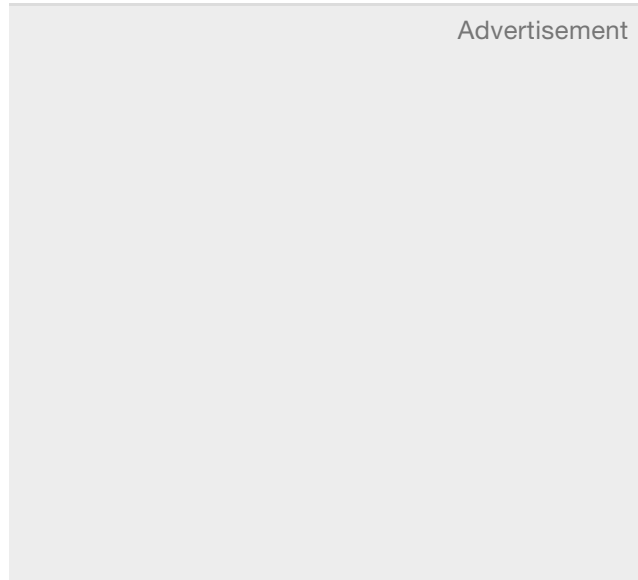


In common with other news organisations, PA Media is facing tough financial challenges and has had to furlough some staff and ask others to take pay cuts. The company has expanded outside its traditional news agency business, recently buying stock image business Alamy shortly before the pandemic devastated the media industry.

A spokesperson for the company said: "We are in the process of winding down the Microsoft team working at PA, and we are doing everything we can to support the individuals concerned. We are proud of the work

we have done with Microsoft and know we delivered a high-quality service.”

A Microsoft spokesperson 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. These decisions are not the result of the current pandemic.”



Many tech companies are experimenting with uses for Artificial Intelligence in journalism, with the likes of Google funding [investment in projects](#) to understand its uses, although efforts to automate the writing of articles have not been adopted widely.

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