Creating Chatbots to Improve Audience Engagement



Alison Dunn and her students are helping aspiring entrepreneurs access the services that put them on the path to success.

Through her project Creating Chatbots to Improve Audience Engagement, Journalism professor Alison had her students write, develop and deploy a chatbot for SURGE as part of the Advanced Social Journalism course.

Mohawk's SURGE offers free one-on-one mentoring to Mohawk students and alumni who are entrepreneurs or want to become entrepreneurs. While the Centre has limited resources (just two full-time staff), it's got a huge audience that includes Mohawk students, staff, faculty and community members. Those factors result in long waits for students to access one of the Centre's experts. However, chatbots -- computer programs that engage people in conversation -- can solve this by letting users "chat" with the Centre on social media platforms.

It turns out that modern media outlets are facing similar challenges in the digital age. "We've been doing a lot of (research on) how news organizations are tackling the 21st century problems of journalism - there's decreasing audience engagement, there's declining revenues and a lot of publications are looking for ways to boost their audience engagement," said Alison.

"We thought it would give Journalism students a real competitive advantage compared to other Journalism programs. To my knowledge, we're the only Journalism program that has taught any type of Artificial Intelligence or chatbot technology to its students in the area," said Alison, adding many students in Mohawk's program won't enter traditional journalism but can take their newfound skills into careers in content creation, public relations, freelancing and other pursuits.

The project, which ran for 14 weeks from September through December, was added to the curriculum for the Social Journalism course. By the end of December, the students had created a functional chatbot and set up a beta test page on Facebook so the Mohawk community could put it through its paces and provide feedback. It was officially launched in January on SURGE's Facebook page, and communicates with users via Facebook Messenger.

Now that she's built a proof of concept, Alison looks forward to continuing to deploy it out and reaching out to other media and non-profit organizations who need help in this area. There are also plans to make it part of Mohawk's journalism curriculum, "which I see as having great long-term influence both over the program and in the community in general. If every year, the students get the skills and every year somebody in the community benefits and improves their audience engagement, that's my goal."

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