Automation v5\_mixdown

Tue, Mar 25, 2025 4:16PM • 18:07

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

journalism future, computer programming, code learning, student advice, valuable work, listener impact

**SPEAKERS**

Lucas Timmons, Sandra Ingram

**Sandra Ingram**

Do you remember the days when you the already hard working, strapped for time journalists had to listen to your interview recordings and copy the transcript by hand, and more to that point, are you missing them? Most people probably do not technology has taken that tedious process completely out of our hands, but there's plenty more that could be done with emerging technologies and journalism than just transcribing. Figuring some of this out is the job of Torstar automation developer Lucas Timmons. He is currently working on automating parts of the journalistic workload at the Toronto Star. More specifically, he's training computers to write certain kinds of articles.

**Lucas Timmons**

We do them about, you know, break ins and car thefts and DineSafe.

**Sandra Ingram**

We met with Lucas to talk about what we gain by letting some stories write themselves, the dangers of taking technology too far, and why journalists should strive to be Picassos rather than fence painters. My name is Sandra Ingram, and I'm your host for this Pull Quotes episode. Here's our conversation with Lucas Timmons. In your LinkedIn bio, you say you're going to automate Canada's news industry, and it's time to let computers do the tedious work. So we'll just basically start off there. Why automate?

**Lucas Timmons**

I always like to liken it to painting. So imagine you have a Picasso. Why would you waste Picasso's time painting a fence. The Toronto Star, you know, specifically, we have some incredible writers, some people that do really, really good work. It would be a total waste of their time to write a daily weather story, or, you know, to write a roundup of something. So the work that's really rote and really, you know, sort of like painting a fence, as I would put it, let me do that. Let my computer do that, and we'll leave the people who paint masterpieces to paint a masterpiece. There's no point for humans to be doing work that computers do really well when they should be doing work that computers couldn't possibly do.

**Sandra Ingram**

You mentioned daily weather stories. What are audiences responses to these automated stories? Do people really read and engage with them?

**Lucas Timmons**

People are really interested in these, these types of results, especially on election night. And you know, he's about 124 ridings in the province. It's we don't have 124 reporters as much as I would love that, you know, one to cover each ride. And that's just not the way that it works. The economics aren't there right now for for newspapers. So this is a way for us to cover a whole lot, not super deep, but enough that it gets our readers the information that they're looking for without having to invest a reporter in every single writing, which I mean, obviously nobody can do right now.

**Sandra Ingram**

Yeah, well, then just to jump back around to track, newsrooms are looking into automating parts of the workflow more than ever. Now, how far do you think we could take automation in the newsrooms?

**Lucas Timmons**

I focus mostly on the, like I said, the story writing side, but I think there's a lot of opportunity there for automation in terms of getting things published. One of the things that we do now with the content management system that we have, it has an API so an application programming interface, and that interface allows us to connect and to create stories using, you know, sending JSON, which is JavaScript Object Notation, to the API. So, for example, the stories that I create, I don't have to go in and copy and paste them into the content management system and then write a headline and then do all the SEO stuff, we're able to do that all programmatically, and then send that information to the content management system and have it do that for us. So I think there's a lot of opportunity there for us to become more efficient at those sorts of things, which is great because it allows us a lot more time to do like I said before, the reporting that really matters.

**Sandra Ingram**

What you just said, reporting that really matters, do you think automation can be integrated into the deeply researched human interest stories that we associate the best journalism with?

**Lucas Timmons**

Yes, absolutely, 100% but so looking through data. Before I was doing automation, I was doing data journalism work and looking through data can be rough. It's sort of a very specialized skill, and it takes a long time, which in the sort of economy we're in now for media, isn't something that we usually have a lot of so being able to use these tools or write software and code to go through and search the data and find the information you want, or even just to parse it so you can read it and understand it, is certainly Going to make investigations not only easier, but give you the opportunity to be more in depth and to to actually, you know, find the real stories in the data that you have.

**Sandra Ingram**

Would you consider automation be part of the current AI revolution?

**Lucas Timmons**

I think so. I think there's a lot of opportunities to use AI in automation. I would be a bit cautious. One of the things that we always talk about when we work on these things is you obviously understand you're still working in media, and sort of, the value proposition that you have is not only that you're you're giving information to people, it's that they can trust you. And that trust is, you know, built on, you know, the reputation that you developed over a long period of time, and it's very easy to lose. And not only could you lose, you know, the trust, the reputation, but also there's potential lawsuits. You know, there's liable claims, there's there's an awful lot riding on you being correct. And that's why, you know, we're so rigorous. That's why you, you learn that in school about fact checking, and you, you always check everything out. It's not just spelling, it's about the truth. And so with AI in the AI tools that that are available now, you know, we're it's exploding, but we're still sort of in the infancy of it. Human supervision is always going to be needed, at least, you know, in the short term, right now, and probably for for several years.

**Sandra Ingram**

When did these automated stories start at the Toronto Star?

**Lucas Timmons**

When I, when I was hired at the star for TorStar, basically, that was what I came in to do. So we started doing water quality reports for beaches, and now we run those in the summertime, and we have them updated every hour on the hour all summer long. So you can, you can go to the Star or any one of the papers in Metro land and find what the water is like at your local beach based on the latest information that's out there. And you can use that to, you know, decide whether or not you're going to go swimming or if you want to avoid E coli. We do stories about the real estate markets everywhere, which people love because who doesn't love reading about real estate, whether you're doing it because you want to buy a house or because you have schadenfreude or whatever it is, those are incredibly popular stories. We do them about, you know, break ins and car thefts and dine safe what's, you know, what restaurants have been expected lately, and which ones haven't passed the inspections or were given mornings and that type of thing. So we've been doing that at the star specifically, since about 2021, and, you know, it's information that, like I said, it's usually pretty rote. When we build these things, we build them out so that, you know, we handle, we can handle any sort of data input to put out what we want or to fail gracefully. And it's something that people are really interested in, and it's not something that a person should be doing, because a computer can do it so much better.

**Sandra Ingram**

Yeah. Well, the reason why I actually brought that up is because I wanted to see, was there any like resistance from the audience to take in these stories when you started doing them?

**Lucas Timmons**

I know there's always pushback when, when there's new things, but I think the thing is, with these stories, they're, you know, they're accurate, and there's stuff that people are interested in. And you know that we work at a news I work in a newspaper. You know, people are always angry about what's in the newspaper, it seems.

**Sandra Ingram**

In 2023 you were on Pull Quotes episode, and you said that you don't think we're anywhere close to the widespread adoption of generative AI deep learning models that can generate high quality text, images and other content based on the data that they were trained on, which could really take processes out of the hands across newsrooms and create content. Now, we seem to be on the verge of technological revolution. What's your assessment on where we are today? Two years later?

**Lucas Timmons**

I still don't think we're close. I think it's going to happen anyway, but I think it's fraught with danger. You know, the places that are willing to do this and are willing to cede human control over something they don't really understand or really know how it works. I think they're setting themselves up, you know, for a potential disaster. That doesn't mean they're not going to do it. And look, you know, with the financial situation that news media is in, everywhere, I can certainly see the appeal, like having something that generates stories that you don't have to think about, that that'll drive traffic to your website that you can sell advertising against. It sounds like magic, right? It sounds like the silver bullet. It's going to save you. But again, what happens when the computer makes a mistake? Who's really responsible for that? You know, do you really want to trust your reputation against a system like that? Maybe some do. I'm sure that some do, and I don't think the media that truly cares about being correct is is going to switch over to any type of system like that very soon.

**Sandra Ingram**

Well, you mentioned just a second ago about the dangers of it. What are the dangers that you are worried about?

**Lucas Timmons**

Sure. So one of the things that we've been experimenting with is retrieval, augmented generation, rag. So it's a it's an AI system, and basically the interface would be a chat bot, let's say, and I've trained it on information. So I've been able to pull out all of the the politics stories, the provincial politics stories from the Toronto Star for the past year, let's say, and this is actually something I've built and that we've demoed internally, and, you know, we're we're looking at it. So basically, you can ask it, tell me about the Ontario Science Centre, what's going on there. And it distills down all that information. It'll say, okay, the Ontario Science Centre has been closed down because of this issue. Here's what the critics say. Here's what Doug Ford says. So what was true in 2022 about the Ontario Science Centre is not necessarily true about it in 2024 or 2025. So now, when you're asking it to generate that answer, it's going back, and it's looking through all these things, and if you haven't done a follow up story that explains what has changed from where it is now, it's going to use the information that's that's in there right now, and so it has the potential to provide information that's no longer correct, that's out of date, and that sort of thing, and then you're publishing it as if it's true. And so if you care about reputation, that's a big deal. And if you start asking questions about different people, as opposed to say the Science Centre, like, tell me what's going on with Doug Ford, and it presents some some out of date information, there's a chance you're going to get sued, and there's a chance that your reputation is going to be in tatters. And like rag like retrieval, augmented generation is where we're using, you know, actual data to power the answers, not just the chat bot and what it thinks. So you know, if you don't have up to date data, you're going to get not up to date answers. And there is, there's a lot of danger there.

**Sandra Ingram**

Another danger that some journalists see in this technology is it eventually replacing us. Do you think these technologies could eventually take journalists jobs?

**Lucas Timmons**

I think it will replace some of the stuff that journalists do. But I'll go back to what I said right at the beginning. You know, don't be a fence painter. Be a Picasso. There is stuff that humans do that computers are never going to be able to do. Well, they just aren't. It's not, not in our lifetime, at least, and that's where you need to go. If you're a J school student right now, you're looking to break in the industry, you need to develop those skills that can't be replaced by a computer. You know, if you know, if you have that, I mean, I can't guarantee you employer, but that's certainly going to make you a lot more employable than someone who could only do things that a computer could end up eventually replacing. What you need to do is put yourself into sort of a future proof position by doing something that computers can't do.

**Sandra Ingram**

Well, you kind of just set me up for my next question. Are there any bigger risks not learning how to use these technologies in the newsroom?

**Lucas Timmons**

Yeah, I think so. I think, you know, newsrooms are always going to be looking for ways to do things cheaper, uh, ways to, you know, be more efficient, ways to make more money. It's just sort of where it is. We're in a spot now where there is definitely a money crunch. And, you know, the digital advertising, the lower subscriptions, like, we don't have the same amount of money that we who we had before. So these sort of things are going to find their way into newsrooms. They're going to be used to do things, to make, you know, jobs faster, to help out reporters. And so if you have the opportunity to learn something like this. You're, you're giving yourself a leg up. You're making yourself more indisposable than somebody who doesn't understand these tools. And also, if you learn them, you can know what to avoid. So say, you learn really well how to use, you know, something like chat GPT. You learn how to deal with with chat bots and stuff. You'll, you'll learn about the pitfalls that are there, how, how it works, you'll you'll be able to better understand what to avoid. Or when you're reading something that someone else has written and you see the word Delve, and you know they don't ever use the word Delve when you're talking with them, you're going to know that aI had a hand in writing it, and that's going to make you smarter and better, better informed on how you're going to do your reporting, too. So you know, when it comes to learning things that stay curious. I don't think there's, you know, there's, there's very little that if you spend the time learning, it's not going to help you in some way.

**Sandra Ingram**

Do you feel as if, like, the fear of journalists is what's causing there to be a resistance in learning this? And do you think that they should kind of alleviate their fears and start to learn instead of trying to be fearful of what the changes are being made.

**Lucas Timmons**

I understand the fear completely, and I think it's justified, like, if technology is disruptive, you can try to resist it, and that, I think, generally, doesn't ever work. Resisting technology usually seems to not work well for the people resisting it. You can get on board with it and learn it and try to make things better for yourself, and that's probably the better play at this point. You know, maybe if you're a late career journalist, you've been around for 30 40 years, you're looking at retirement in a year and a half. You know, maybe not if that's if that's how you want to live. You know, God bless and you do you. But I think if you're looking to get into journalism right now, um, trying to pretend like these technologies don't exist is is to your folly. It's only going to make things harder for you. So if newsrooms don't adopt these new technologies or see how far they can take automation, what consequences or effects do you think they could have? You know, that's that's a tough one, like if, if newsrooms refuse to innovate, you know, they're probably going to continue to see their competitive advantage disappear, and eventually they're going to get to the point where they have to decide what type of publication they want to be if your publication is heavily researched, thoroughly produced stories, deep investigative work, maybe you're gonna be okay. You publish once a month, or something like that. You do it in a magazine format. You might be okay there. I think if you're looking at sort of a daily news thing where being fast is important, embracing this top knowledge, refusing to embrace this technology, is probably going to hurt you in the long run. I mean, to use an example that gets, gets used a lot. Look at Craigslist and look what it did to the classified sections of all the Metro newspapers. They used to make so much money on classified ads. People used to post jobs there you could buy and sell anything. There it was. You know, people would post missed connections. The listeners this podcast might be too young to remember that sort of thing. But, you know, the you know, the classified ads made a ton of money for newspapers before the internet came along, and they had an opportunity when Craigslist and Kijiji and all that was just starting up to be the place. They could have done that on their websites, but they didn't. And all that money is gone now. And you know, Craig Newark is a billionaire, and like it's it was there, and they chose to ignore it. And now, you know, they've got a lot less money to operate, so ignoring these things is at your own peril.

**Sandra Ingram**

Okay, well, I'll say thank you so much for coming on this episode of Pull Quotes, Lucas. Do you have any last thoughts or piece of advice for our listeners?

**Lucas Timmons**

For the students out there, there's still a good future in journalism. I believe, I think, you know, one thing that you should be learning to do is learning some computer programming. Learn how to code, even just a little bit. It's going to help you. It's going to give you, you know, great opportunities to do different sort of work, and to do work that is valuable and that people are interested in. My journey to where I am now. You know, the first job I had was working the web desk at the Ottawa Citizen like it's not, it wasn't a reporting job, but it, it built into what's there. So if you want to work in daily news, if it's something that you really, really want to do, you know, it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to get that reporting job way out of school. There are other paths in the way that you can do that is really to diversify your skill set and to really learn things that are going to be valuable for you and for potential employers going forward. And the really great part about living in 2025 is that you can do it all for free. There are so many resources on the internet to learn computer programming, and they're completely free. You can work at your own pace. And you know, if this is something that you want to do, there's the opportunity is there. You just, you just have to really want it, especially now.

**Sandra Ingram**

Oh, thank you so much.

**Lucas Timmons**

Yeah, for sure, you're welcome. Like, it's an exciting time, I have to say,

**Sandra Ingram**

I'm your host. Sandra Ingram, this episode was produced by Olivia diering and myself. If you enjoyed this episode, explore all of our podcasts and the podcast tabs at the review of journalism.ca. Thanks for listening.