At Least Two Newspapers Syndicated AI Garbage

Slop the presses.

By <u>Damon Beres</u> and <u>Charlie Warzel</u>
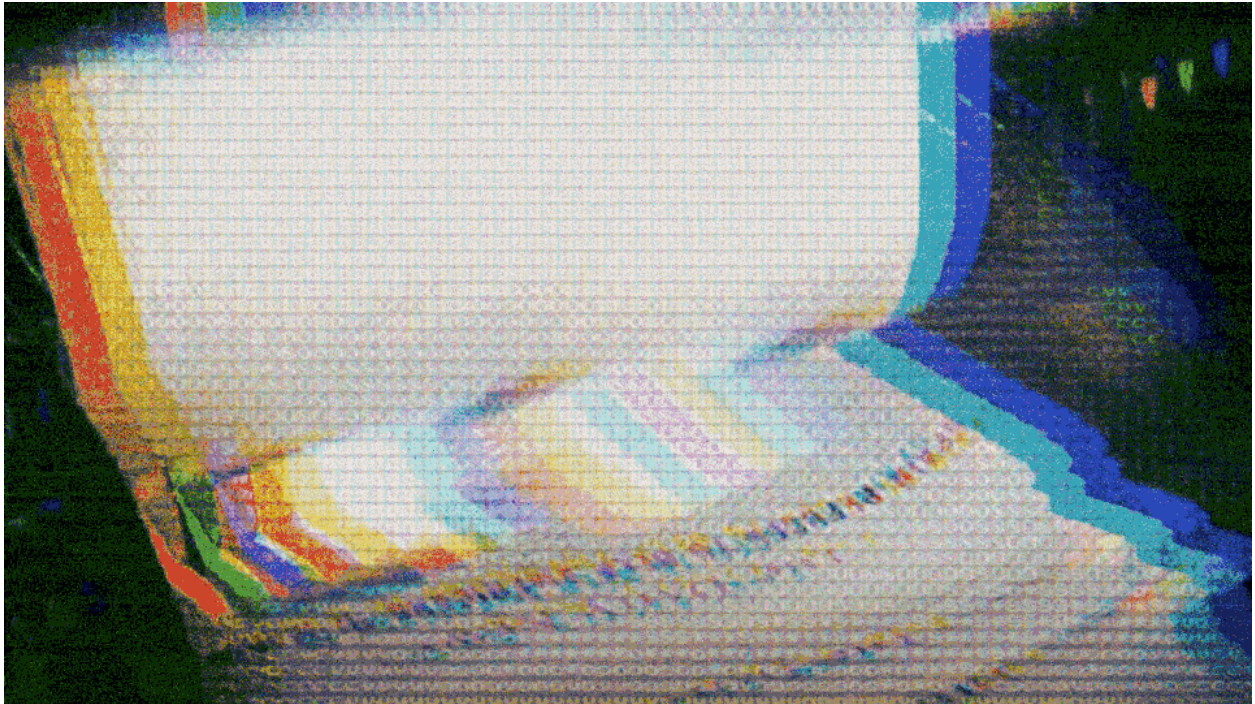

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At first glance, "Heat Index" appears as inoffensive as newspaper features get. A "summer guide" sprawling across more than 50 pages, the feature, which was syndicated over the past week in both the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, contains "303 Must-Dos, Must-Tastes, and Must-Tries" for the sweaty months ahead. Readers are advised in one section to "Take a moonlight hike on a well-marked trail" and "Fly a kite on a breezy afternoon." In others, they receive tips about running a lemonade stand and enjoying "unexpected frozen treats."

Yet close readers of the guide noticed that something was very off. "Heat Index" went viral earlier today when people on social media pointed out that its summer-reading guide matched real authors with books they hadn't written, such as *Nightshade Market*, attributed to Min Jin Lee, and *The Last Algorithm*, attributed to Andy Weir—a hint that the story may have been composed by a chatbot. This turned out to be true. Slop has come for the regional newspapers.

Originally written for King Features, a division of Hearst, "Heat Index" was printed as a kind of stand-alone magazine and inserted into the *Sun-Times*, the *Inquirer*, and possibly other newspapers, beefing the publications up without staff writers and photographers having to do additional work themselves. Although many of the elements of "Heat Index" do not have an author's byline, some of them were written by a freelancer named Marco Buscaglia. When we reached out to him, he admitted to using ChatGPT for his work.

Buscaglia explained that he had asked the AI to help him come up with book recommendations. He hasn't shied away from using these tools for research: "I just look for information," he told us. "Say I'm doing a story—*10 great summer drinks for your barbecue* or whatever. I'll find things online and say, hey, according to Oprah.com, a mai tai is a perfect drink. I'll source it; I'll say where it's from." This time, at least, he did not actually check the chatbot's work. What's more, Buscaglia said that he submitted his first draft to King, which apparently accepted it without substantive changes and distributed it for syndication.

King Features did not respond to a request for comment. Buscaglia (who also admitted his AI use to *404 Media*) seemed to be under the impression that the summer-reading article was the only one with problems, though this is not the case. For example, in a section on "hammock hanging ethics," Buscaglia quotes a "Mark Ellison,

resource management coordinator for Great Smoky Mountains National Park." There is indeed a Mark Ellison who works in the Great Smoky Mountains region—not for the national park but for a company he founded called Pinnacle Forest Therapy. Ellison told us via email that he'd previously written an article about hammocks for North Carolina's tourism board, offering that perhaps that is why his name was referenced in Buscaglia's chatbot search. But that was it: "I have never worked for the park service. I never communicated with this person." When we mentioned Ellison's comments, Buscaglia expressed that he was taken aback and surprised by his own mistake. "There was some majorly missed stuff by me," he said. "I don't know. I usually check the source. I thought I sourced it: *He said this in this magazine or this website*. But hearing that, it's like, obviously he didn't."

Another article in "Heat Index" quotes a "Dr. Catherine Furst," purportedly a food anthropologist at Cornell University, who, according to a spokesperson for the school, does not actually work there. Such a person does not seem to exist at all.

For this material to have reached print, it should have had to pass through a human writer, human editors at King, and human staffers at the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. No one stopped it. Victor Lim, a spokesperson for the *Sun-Times*, told us, "This is licensed content that was not created by, or approved by, the *Sun-Times* newsroom, but it is unacceptable for any content we provide to our readers to be inaccurate." A longer statement posted on the paper's website (and initially hidden behind a paywall) said, in part, "This should be a learning moment for all of journalism." Lisa Hughes, the publisher and CEO of the *Inquirer*, told us the publication was aware the supplement contained "apparently fabricated, outright false, or misleading" material. "We do not know the extent of this but are taking it seriously and investigating," she said via email. Hughes

confirmed that the material was syndicated from King Features, and added, "Using artificial intelligence to produce content, as was apparently the case with some of the Heat Index material, is a violation of our own internal policies and a serious breach." (Although each publication blames King Features, both the *Sun-Times* and the *Inquirer* affixed their organization's logo to the front page of "Heat Index"—suggesting ownership of the content to readers.)

This story has layers, all of them a depressing case study. The very existence of a package like "Heat Index" is the result of a local-media industry that's been hollowed out by the internet, plummeting advertising, private-equity firms, and a lack of investment and interest in regional newspapers. In this precarious environment, thinned-out and underpaid editorial staff under constant threat of layoffs and with few resources are forced to cut corners for publishers who are frantically trying to turn a profit in a dying industry. It stands to reason that some of these harried staffers, and any freelancers they employ, now armed with automated tools such as generative AI, would use them to stay afloat.

Buscaglia said that he has sometimes seen freelancer rates as low as $15 for 500 words, and that he completes his freelance work late at night after finishing his day job, which involves editing and proofreading for AT&T. Thirty years ago, Buscaglia said, he was an editor at the *Park Ridge Times Herald*, a small weekly paper that was eventually rolled up into Pioneer Press, a division of the Tribune Publishing Company. "I loved that job," he said. "I always thought I would retire in some little town—a campus town in Michigan or Wisconsin—and just be editor of their weekly paper. Now that doesn't seem that possible." (A librarian at the Park Ridge Public Library accessed an archive for us and confirmed that Buscaglia had worked for the paper.)

On one level, "Heat Index" is just a small failure of an ecosystem on life support. But it is also a template for a future that will be defined by the embrace of artificial intelligence across every industry—one where these tools promise to unleash human potential but instead fuel a human-free race to the bottom. Any discussion about AI tends to be a perpetual, heady conversation around the ability of these tools to pass benchmark tests or whether they can or could possess something approximating human intelligence. Evangelists discuss their power as educational aids and productivity enhancers. In practice, the marketing language around these tools tends not to capture the ways that actual humans use them. A Nobel Prize–winning work driven by AI gets a lot of run, though the dirty secret of AI is that it is surely more often used to cut corners and produce lowest-common-denominator work.

Venture capitalists speak of a future in which AI agents will sort through the drudgery of daily busywork and free us up to live our best lives. Such a future could come to pass. The present, however, offers ample proof of a different kind of transformation, powered by laziness and greed. AI usage and adoption tends to find weaknesses inside systems and exploit them. In academia, generative AI has upended the traditional education model, based around reading, writing, and testing. Rather than offer a new way forward for a system in need of modernization, generative-AI tools have broken it apart, leaving teachers and students flummoxed, even depressed, and unsure of their own roles in a system that can be so easily automated.

AI-generated content is frequently referred to as "slop" because it is spammy and flavorless. Generative AI's output tends to become content in essays, emails, articles, and books much in the way that packing peanuts are content inside shipped packages. It's filler— digital *lorem ipsum*. The problem with slop is that, like water, it gets in everywhere and seeks the lowest level. Chatbots can assist with higher-level tasks such as coding or scanning and analyzing a large

corpus of spreadsheets, document archives, or other structured data. Such work marries human expertise with computational heft. But these more elegant examples seem exceedingly rare. In a recent article, Zach Seward, the editorial director of AI initiatives at *The New York Times*, said that, although the newspaper uses artificial intelligence to parse websites and data sets to assist with reporting, he views AI on its own as little more than a "parlor trick," mostly without value when not in the hands of already skilled reporters and programmers.

Speaking with Buscaglia, we could easily see how the "Heat Index" mistake could become part of a pattern for journalists swimming against a current of synthetic slop, constantly produced content, and unrealistic demands from publishers. "I feel like my role has sort of evolved. Like, if people want all this content, they know that I can't write 48 stories or whatever it's going to be," he said. He talked about finding another job, perhaps as a "shoe salesman."

One worst-case scenario for AI looks a lot like the "Heat Index" fiasco—the parlor tricks winning out. It is a future where, instead of an artificial-general-intelligence apocalypse, we get a far more mundane destruction. AI tools don't become intelligent, but simply *good enough*. They are not deployed by people trying to supplement or enrich their work and potential, but by those looking to automate it away entirely. You can see the contours of that future right now: in anecdotes about teachers using AI to grade papers written primarily by chatbots or in AI-generated newspaper inserts being sent to households that use them primarily as birdcage liners and kindling. Parlor tricks met with parlor tricks—robots talking with robots, writing synthetic words for audiences that will never read them.