There's some bloke called Mac who's after your job

By David Patton, campaignlive.co.uk, Thursday, 29 May 2014 08:00AM Be the first to comment

Programmes can already turn data into news stories for sport and finance. Professor Philip M Parker is one of the most prolific authors on Amazon, thanks to the 200,000 computer-generated books he has "created". A programme could easily turn product information into a message and image from a data bank of options, create a banner, place it, test responses, refine it, use webcam face- and eye-tracking to gauge emotional response, refine again and rapidly not only create but optimise an effective ad - with no human creativity needed at all. If Google can create a driverless car, it can surely manage this. If a magic spark is lacking, will many clients care if it is proven to be effective and dirt-cheap?

At Goldsmiths College in London is a professor called Simon Colton. What he is working on may spell the end of advertising agencies. Colton works in "computational creativity". The creative industries may regard this as an oxymoron. But Colton has produced programmes that can paint original pictures and write original poetry with sufficient skill to engage learned critics.

We are used to technology changing media and, with it, how agencies work. Yet, despite each new medium, the old ones – print, radio, TV – evolve to survive. History says that advertising is an industry that thrives on change – or, at the very least, survives it.

So should we confront the possibility that technology will eliminate agencies from the advertising industry? If it can paint pictures and write poetry, could a single computer conceive, write, execute and place ads?

Technologists and economists predict that this is not a question of "if" but "when". It’s also a frightening future far closer than we might fondly imagine.

Economists warn of the displacement of white-collar jobs by computers. Computers can already diagnose better than lab technicians and run accounts better than accountants. We shouldn’t fool ourselves that creativity and originality will protect advertising agencies.

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There is hope, however. The Harvard economist Edward Glaeser observes that computers might be efficient and effective, but they aren’t always personable. He notes: "I cannot imagine a world where wealthy people are unwilling to pay for pleasant interactions with a capable service provider."

Agencies’ stock-in-trade remains managing how clients interact with creativity and innovation – be that a creative department or an algorithm. Our future lies not in defending the old-fashioned, handmade artisan modes of production that still dominate in today’s agencies, but reinventing the relationship with new sources of creativity for clients – at least until they are replaced by computers as well.

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