The Brand's Pocket Guide to A Robot Future?

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Tech innovation in market research & insight

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Human vs robot

The robots aren't coming, they're already here…
This isn't the opening line of some trashy, 1950s,
sci-fi novel, it's a statement of fact. The aim of this
Skopos London Pocket Guide is to alert you to what
might be coming along with them, and what these
arrivals might mean for insight gathering.

Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, chatbots are
already on the scene, representing sizeable
opportunities, as well as challenges, for the market
research sector. Completely wondrous, or rather
scary? It depends upon your choice of lens for
future-gazing.

Let's start by unpacking some of the mind-boggling
acronyms (AI, ML, VR, to name but three) always
associated with anything new and shiny!

So, AI - artificial intelligence (yes, you got that one).
ML - machine learning (new to you? Fairly new to
us). VR - virtual reality (yeah, old hat, we all know VR,
don't we?).

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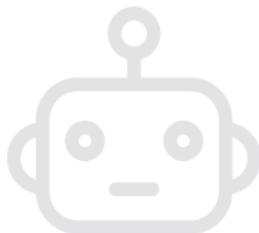
Artificial intelligence - the science bit

In Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, HAL brought artificial intelligence (AI) crashing into popular culture. Almost 50 years later, we are all being exposed to some level of AI in our daily lives: How does Google correct our typing unprompted? How does that holiday ad follow me around the internet?

But what of MR? Yes, AI is 'alive' and well in our sector: Automated alerts based upon performance tracking thresholds? Yep, that's AI. Personalised reminders to survey non-completers? You guessed it, AI. Text analytics based upon key triggers? AI all the way.

So, can AI replace the role of researcher? Not yet: So far AI has no empathy or emotional intelligence. It is fiendishly efficient, but must still be viewed as part of the toolkit, not as the workman.

Skopos London sees the future as one where researchers and AI will work hand-in-hand to create insights. It's a collaborative vision. We must embrace AI to make the best of it.

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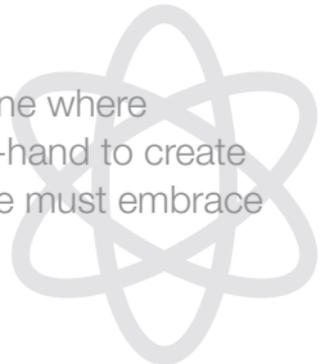
Machine learning - the algorithm bit

A common misconception is that machine learning (ML) and AI are 'one and the same'. Not the case! The academics tell us that 'AI researchers build the smart machines, but you need machine learning experts to make them truly intelligent'. Yes, smart machines still need smart people to make them smarter.

So, how can ML inform our insight activity? One important application lies in the identification of patterns or significance in research findings that might have been overlooked in our initial hypotheses.

Machine learning can evaluate all possibilities from every angle, and can do this for volumes of data beyond the reach of even the most capable analyst. It has the facility to discover more intricate patterns and produce more insight-rich forecasts. The better decision making we all aim for.

However, at the moment, it's a tool. It still requires time, investment and headspace if it is to be deployed to best effect.

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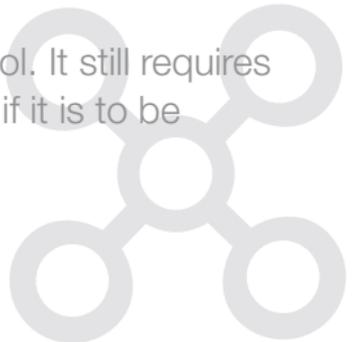
Virtual reality - a brave new world

Virtual reality (VR) is one of the most exciting, and accessible 'robot-generation' tools with market research application. Its advantages are self-evident: Just ask a VR-savvy automotive researcher who would otherwise be setting up an interiors clinic!

In our experience, VR serves to permit the collection of valuable measures of emotional and practical/functional response without the need for 'getting hands dirty'. Additionally, of course, it offers the opportunity to collect response – in 'real time', as the experience plays out.

So the case for VR in data collection and fieldwork is compelling. But there are other uses too: How much more impactful and immersive would your debrief sessions be if stakeholders could interact with data as Jeremy Vine does on election nights? Possibly not quite as far-fetched as it might sound. Real-time data visualisation is already with us. Surely, it can't be too long before VR is on the agenda?

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Augmented reality - a braver NEWER world

The key difference between augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality is that, whilst VR replicates a 'real-world' context, AR looks to enhance perception. AR provides an individual with the ability to experience and then amend or optimise an environment or situation so that it matches the ideal. The research application is clear.

Various technologies are used to deliver AR: Optical projection systems, monitors, hand-held devices, and display apps are all utilised. In the market research context, AR has been applied most successfully in the NPD and product optimisation arenas, allowing brand teams to maximise concepts in a virtual environment without the expense of prototyping.

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Chatbots - intelligent automated conversations

Simply put, a chatbot is a software program which can take the place of a human in a conversation - via text, spoken word or both. Most often used in a customer service context, chatbots use programmed response vocabulary to give the impression of a live conversation.

There are two types of chatbot:

• Rule-based chatbots - operating on the basis of fixed questions and answers (predefined rules).

• Smart chatbots - applying artificial intelligence to learn from their conversations, and so developing human-like conversational counterparts.

Skopos London is already using chatbot technology in the collection of survey data. Parallel testing results have shown a remarkably consistent question response, but the respondent experience is much improved.

Another MR application lies in the moderation of online discussions/communities. The scaling potential here takes us into 'big qual' territory, however, work remains to be done before the deep learning and natural language processing required to replicate a human moderator is achieved.

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It's life Jim, but not as we know it

It's too late to put on the brakes! Change is happening apace, and as insight professionals we must embrace the opportunities on offer. Customers now access and purchase goods through a plethora of different channels and we must be ready, willing and able to understand the processes and motivations that drive their decision-making.

As the bard foretold, "not all that glisters is gold," but insight practitioners should approach innovative technologies with an open mind, examining the potential application and assessing its potential to the full.

Much of robotic development aims to automate and streamline the thankless tasks involved in research. It's not about replacing humans with robots, but more about the freeing-up of headspace for deeper analysis and higher-level, strategic, thought – which can only be a good thing.

So, to round all off, in the famous words of one explorer of new technologies (and worlds). 'Beam me up Scotty…'

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Don't just take our word for it

If you'd like to immerse yourself, a little deeper, in the area of tech innovation and the potential MR applications, the following will provide a good start point:

- Business of Bots: How To Grow Your Company Through Conversation by Adelyn Zhou
- The Inevitable: Understanding The 12 Technologies That Will Shape Our Future by Kevin Kelly
- Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven In Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality by Robert M. Geraci

And/or follow:

- Cathy Hackl: @cathyhackl
- Tek VR: @tekki_VR
- Spiros Margaris: @spirosmargaris

Of course, other experts - including those at Skopos London - are available.

Skopos London has been supporting organisations in the delivery of market research & insight programmes since 2001. We would be very happy to talk things through with you, with no obligation. References and testimonials are, of course, available from our extensive, blue chip, client list.

The Pocket Guide to A Robot Future? is part of a set created by Skopos London.

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