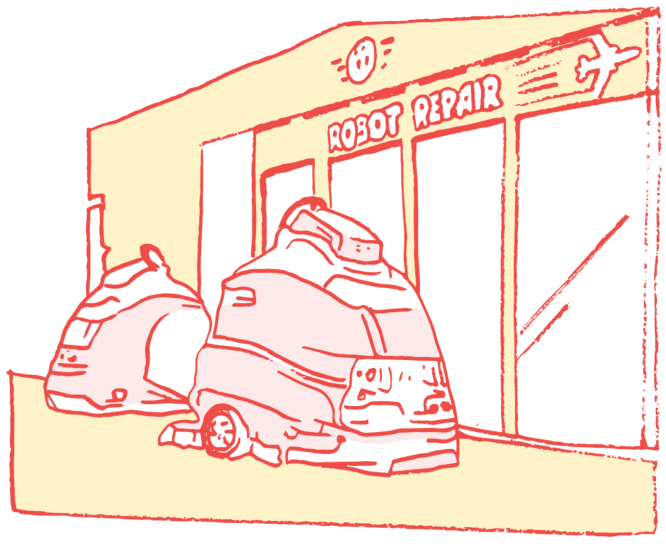
DON'T BE A DRONE

Tips for Better Reporting on AI in Essential Work Sectors

It's difficult to think of a technology that has received more recent media attention than Artificial Intelligence, or AI. This is especially true since the emergence of Covid-19, with AI being presented as a possible solution to many of the challenges faced by the critical sectors that rely upon essential workers to continue functioning in the face of the pandemic.

Employees on the frontlines of the battle against COVID-19 face serious challenges. Despite this, media coverage about the installation of AI and automated technologies in critical sectors tends to omit the perspective of workers while elevating the benefits of the machinery, as perceived by executives. After witnessing these limitations in our recent study of news reporting on recycling sorting, we are providing journalists and others invested in the rights and issues of essential workers with three frameworks through which to develop and diversify their coverage of AI and automation. Though our research was primarily focused on the critical sector of recycling sorting, these recommendations can be widely applied to a variety of news stories that cover technology and innovation.



ON SOURCING: WHO TO TALK TO

Don't let executives be the only voice in your story.

WHY?

In our media analysis of 48 articles spanning five years, not a single one included a quote or summary from the perspective of a recycling sorting worker. Instead, news stories about automation in the essential work sector of recycling were dominated by quotes from managers, CEOs and other executives of recycling and technology companies.

Executives have a vested interest in portraying a certain image of their products or business. If they end up as the only stakeholder in an article, then the narrative is skewed in their favor. To stay as ***unbiased*** as possible, it is important to add other sources and perspectives in the story of AI adoption and essential work.

HOW?

If you're reporting on-site, talk to workers who interact with the technologies on the ground:

- Workers who repair the machines
- Workers who perform their duties directly before machines (cleaning, sorting, etc.)
- Workers who perform their duties directly after machines (quality assurance, etc.)
- Supervisors who have recently been promoted from on-the-floor jobs.

If you're reporting remotely, ask executives for contact information of the workers listed above. Alternatively, if workers are represented by a union or affiliated with worker advocacy organizations those groups may be able to put you in contact with sources.

If you can't talk to workers directly, talk to academics and scholars who have done field research. They can bring in a new perspective that's based on the experience of workers and they might also have contacts to share.

Keywords: Labor, The Future of Work, Human-AI Collaboration, Computer Supported Cooperative Work, Design Justice, Algorithmic Management

ON FRAMING: QUESTIONS TO ASK

Don't recite company propaganda.

WHY?

A lot of coverage about automation in essential work echoes popular talking points from company press releases. These narratives frame AI as 1) allowing recycling facilities to overcome the day-to-day challenges of the recycling industry 2) saving the industry in moments of crisis and 3) overcoming the limitations of human workers through technical superiority.

These narratives uncritically laud the promises of AI and automation without covering potential limitations and actual set-backs during implementation. In our field observations, we see that recycling sorters still have to make waste streams compatible with innovative machinery by sorting out non-recyclables. Machine components still need to be repaired and replaced. To build ***trust*** with your audience, it is important to question the authority of company narratives.

HOW?

As you are researching, interviewing, and writing, think through questions that follow a longer timeline beyond the moment the technology is introduced. After invention and installation, you might inquire about processes of:

Introduction

- What challenges emerged at the site when the technology was introduced? Did workers receive new training? Do machines need to be calibrated or trained, and who does this work?

Operation

- What happens when a machine malfunctions while performing its duties? Does anyone regularly observe the machine? What other tasks and responsibilities were added in the workplace to care for these machines?

Maintenance

- What happens when a machine breaks down? Who is tasked with troubleshooting and repairing them? How often does machine software need to be updated? What does this entail?

ON VISUALS: WHAT TO SHOW

Don't leave workers out of the picture.

WHY?

Visual portrayal of automated technologies and workers in critical sectors tend to follow several patterns. News photographs depict robots functioning independently, as workers are relegated to difficult hand-work before the machines are implemented. Executives were the most common subject of profile shots. These types of images reinforce the narratives found in news articles about the benefits and the necessity of robotics, pushing workers to the peripheries. The photographs thus present an unrealistic vision of what automation in recycling facilities is actually capable of doing independent of human assistance. Based on our field observations, machines are always working alongside and being worked on by other employees. To add ***transparency*** and ***accuracy*** to your coverage, it is important to include workers in the visuals.

HOW?

- Photograph worker-machine interaction. This allows for a more realistic interpretation of how the machinery functions.
- Only have promotional images available? Either add a disclaimer or layer on a graphic with workers present that depicts how machines will operate in practice.

TEXAS The University of Texas at Austin

These reporting tips are based on a news media analysis of English-language news articles published in local and national newspapers in the United States between 2015-2020. Analysis was conducted by Estefania Rodriguez and Dr. Samantha Shorey at the University of Texas at Austin. Supported by NSF Grant #2037261

For more information visit our website www.EssentialLabor.tech