

“It doesn’t judge you”: Interrogating the anthropomorphic framing of AI-powered social robots and virtual assistants in the South African press

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Abstract

News media outlets frame artificial intelligence (AI) in ways that shape the general public’s perception of this emerging technology. Anthropomorphic framing of AI is particularly pervasive, and reflects journalists’ propensity to attribute a human-like form/human traits to AI or to conflate machine and human intelligence. It is the former type of anthropomorphism that is interrogated in this paper because although it may be desirable to humanise AI when, for example, designing robots with ‘social presence’ or ‘social behaviours’ to facilitate acceptance of and interaction with them, this tendency may also result in unrealistic or entirely false expectations about AI’s capabilities. Guided by framing theory and employing qualitative content and discourse analysis methods, this paper examines how and the extent to which four major South African online newspapers anthropomorphised AI-powered social robots and virtual assistants. The findings indicate that although several journalists attempted to mitigate a sensational or alarmist tone in their reports, the construction of anthropomorphic tropes to some extent overtook the reality of what AI technologies currently encompass, essentially obscuring these technologies’ epistemological and ethical challenges. It is critical that journalists interrogate how they contextualise and qualify AI, given that it is disrupting almost every aspect of our lives.

Keywords: Anthropomorphic framing; Artificial intelligence; Online newspapers; Paper presentation