Gnomi's Matt Byrne & John Long

Gnomi app is technology-based approach to pointing out media bias

Present

John Adams, Matt Byrne, Janis Clay (executive director), Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, John Long, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams. By phone: Paul Ostrow (chair).

Summary

According to John Long, founder of gnomi, given the current state of the media, there's brainwashing going on, not reporting. He says that's the genesis of the app gnomi, a technology-based approach to pointing out bias. Using gnomi, he says, readers can quickly compare articles on both sides of an issue and see how they feel. He says the idea is to understand yourself and make it hard to hate those with different opinions. Gnomi is available for free download on app-purchasing sites.

Gnomi's Executive Director Matt Byrne notes that attention spans are dropping and credibility and trust in the news is at all-time lows. He says that's led to a trend in the media towards more superficiality and more hyperbolic nations of storytelling. But, he says, that causes a loss of nuance and of the ability to perceive people with views different from your own as equal in dignity.

Long and Byrne explain how gnomi uses artificial intelligence to rate the top 20 or 30 news stories every day according to their left-leaning or right-leaning biases. The app ranks stories from L1 (slightly left-leaning) to L5 (very left-leaning) or from R1 (slightly right-leaning) to R5 (very right-leaning). It pairs left-leaning and right-leaning stories on the same topic, so readers can understand media bias, read different viewpoints and decide their own beliefs for themselves.

Byrne says gnomi's approach is to build both (1) accessibility, through technology; and (2) transparency, by having a very clear, trustworthy and credible process for evaluating different perspectives. Long hopes the app can help people understand both sides of a topic in a good, civic way.

Biographies

Matt Byrne is executive director of gnomi, a news app that grades article bias and pairs left-leaning and right-leaning stories together to support understanding and engagement across different perspectives. His passion for bringing different ideas and people together is fueled by his graduate research in democratic deliberation from the University of Minnesota, work with the Minnesota think tank Growth and Justice, and facilitation and mediation training.

Byrne has a B.A. in political science from Hamline University and a Master's in Liberal Studies from the University of Minnesota.

John Long is founder of gnomi, a news app that grades article bias. With a background in math, computer science and statistics from St. Olaf College, Long has been in the technology field for his entire career.

As the second employee, then president, of a staffing software company, Long decided to start his own staffing-software company, Avionte. Starting in 2005 with four employees, Avionte now has 200 employees and 15,000 users across the U.S. and Canada.

Long is now looking for ways to positively impact the world, trying to leave it a better place for his family.

Background

The Civic Caucus interviewed Matt Byrne and John Long of gnomi, an app that rates the bias in news articles, to learn how gnomi can help readers understand the bias and polarization in the media.

Gnomi is a free app available for download from app-purchase sites. Matt Byrne, executive director of gnomi, said the notion of gnomi is that it looks at the top 20 to 30 news stories each day, pairs articles on the same topic and rates them according to the extent of their

left-leaning or right-leaning bias. Gnomi, which looks at national and political stories, uses artificial intelligence (AI) to rate the articles, he said.

Gnomi founder John Long said St. Olaf Professor Chris Chapp helped come up with a left /right grading system for news articles. Long explained that L1 stands for a little left and L5 stands for very left. Similarly, R1 stands for a little right and R5 for very right. He said the grading system gives readers the ability to see how biased the articles they're reading are. In response to an interviewer's question, Long said there is no zero ranking.

Long said gnomi used a series of human graders from around the country to grade the same 41 articles on the left/right scale. Graders who were inconsistent were dropped from the ratings, he said. Then the graders who remained went through 4,500 articles, with at least three graders per article, to come up with composite articles, he said. "Then we used 4,000 of those to train our AI," he said.

After that training, Long said, AI can go through and see which words or phrases are used most in left-leaning or right-leaning articles. He said there is a statistical relevance for some words between those two. The AI continues to train itself to know when there's a statistical relevance to words.

"Then we applied the AI to the other 500 articles and 87 percent of its rankings were dead on," Long said. "It was extraordinary, ridiculously good. What that allowed for is for us to take the humans completely out." He said gnomi has now switched to full AI.

He noted that before an article is analyzed, the source and the author are stripped out, because those things can unintentionally provide a bias. "So, the AI is only focused on the text of the story," he said.

Long said gnomi pairs left-leaning and right-leaning articles on the same topic, so users can read articles with different biases on the same topic. He said gnomi does twice-a-day scraping of articles and it takes four seconds to grade an article. the top stories and their rankings are posted at 7:00 a.m. central time every day, Byrne said, with updates in the middle of the day.

Long said gnomi isn't making a penny of revenue right now. Eventually, he wants to do subscriptions, distribution, big data and advertising. He said there's a potential for gnomi to grade audio news, although the app is not doing that now.

Discussion

There's brainwashing going on, not reporting. John Long, founder of gnomi, made that remark about the current state of the media. "There used to be reporting of what's happening, but it's close to brainwashing now," he said. "That's the genesis of gnomi, a technology-based approach to pointing out bias."

"I love that people have different opinions," he continued. "But it's hard to find articles that report both sides. With gnomi, I can quickly compare articles on both sides of an issue and see how I feel. The idea is to understand yourself and make it hard to hate those with different opinions. It's similar to what the Civic Caucus wants: to have a good dialogue and be respectful of people."

Long said the world has determined you have to be right or left. But, he said, Professor Paul Goren, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota, has determined there are 10 different dimensions, not two.

Long said he had no experience in policy or media, so he needed someone else. That's where Matt Byrne, now gnomi's executive director, came in, he said. Byrne runs gnomi, while Long said he's in the background on the tech side.

What does group decision-making look like? Byrne said he'd done graduate-school research on that question and another: How do we move from super-polarized and hating each other to meaningfully collaborating and solving problems together?

"What you find when you dive into the research," he said, "is that data alone is not enough. We have very few cognitive resources to commit to a problem."

He said when he worked at Growth and Justice, the Minnesota think tank wanted people to do heavy reading and dive deeply into the issues. "We know attention spans are dropping and, at the same time, we have credibility and trust in the news at all-time lows," he said. "There is a trend in media where there's more superficiality, more hyperbolic notions of storytelling and what you lose is nuance and the ability to perceive someone who believes other than you as equal in dignity."

Byrne said he became interested in how you take someone from this space of scarce resources and use those resources in as efficient way as possible. He met Long and realized "When you can flip between multiple perspectives on the exact same story as quickly as a tap, to me, that's a huge win in accessibility. People can see an apples-to-apples comparison that helps them see more clearly."

"If you're serious about getting people to look at the other side, it has to be easy," Byrne continued. "And when you think you've made it easy enough, you need to make it even easier. That's where gnomi really shines."

How do headlines fit into the grading of articles? An interviewer asked that question and said often the headline writer is not the reporter writing the story. Long said the headline is often sensationalism. The media model is based on eyeballs, he said, so the media is associating sensationalism with grabbing readership.

He said gnomi does include the headline in the analysis, but that's only one sentence. The grade on the article is overwhelmingly the grade of the body of the article, he said. "But the headline is an important sentence," he said. "We use that most in the pairing of articles."

Gnomi's technology is imperfect. Byrne made that statement and said it's not intended to be a perfect scorer. AI could never notice, he said, what's missing from an article and how that might be a strategic omission. These ratings are conversation starters, he said, and are not meant to be the end of a conversation. He said gnomi is not a fact checker and is not able to highlight whether a reporter doesn't know what he or she is talking about.

Who decides on the top 30 stories posted on gnomi every day? An interviewer asked that question and Long responded that gnomi has a curator who gleans news websites to decide on the top stories of the day. The curator looks at the following questions in deciding which stories should be posted on gnomi: Is it a top news story? Are there at least two articles with different bias leans-one to the left and the other to the right-on the same topic?

Byrne said the top criterion is viewership, but the curator is also looking for paired stories with left or right leans. He said the top stories and their rankings are posted at 7:00 a.m. central time every day, with updates in the middle of the day.

Byrne said right now, gnomi focuses on national and political stories, but they could create a regional app. He noted that gnomi has paired stories by *MinnPost*, a Minnesota nonprofit, online news source, with stories by the Center of the American Experiment, a Twin Cities-based conservative think tank.

What's the definition of left and right? An interviewer asked that question and Byrne responded that there are trends to how self-identified left-leaning and self-identified right-leaning articles will use terminology. By evaluating those word choices, the AI can start to find correlations for the key words.

Long said St. Olaf Professor Chapp defined left and right as traditional: left for Democrats and right for Republicans. "So, it's a political analysis," Long said.

The value gnomi adds is the contrast between articles leaning to the left and those leaning to the right. Byrne said it's not as helpful to contrast centrist stories that are ranked at, say, L1 and R1. When an interviewer said the centrist stories are what she wants to read, Byrne said gnomi allows the user to set a filter so that the app only shows stories ranked between L2 to R2. He said reporters are doing a good job if they have an article

ranked as L1 or R1. He also said it's important to include the centrist perspective, even as gnomi is trying to highlight the polarization of media.

Long added that if publishers change their articles or reporting and move from, for example, L5 to L1, L2 or L3, "that's a win for gnomi."

Gnomi's approach is to build transparency. Byrne said people often look back to better days of the news-a sort of "Walter Cronkite moment" of news. "But if you look at the history of media, that was an aberration in the normal experience of news," he said. "Nowadays, because there's an overload of information, it's the ability to navigate this deluge of information. It overwhelms to the point of disengagement. That's what you see happening."

Byrne said there are several approaches toward dealing with this problem. The first is to try to recreate Walter Cronkite. "You rebuild the newsroom with transparency in the process, quality reporting, admission of mistakes-trying to rebuild trust one step at a time," he said.

But Gnomi's approach is to build transparency and accessibility into the process of reading the news, he said. "It's not about building your favorite brand of news," he said. "It's about having options and understanding that newsrooms won't be perfect and objective. It's about being able to navigate the fact that there are multiple perspectives and you can triangulate what you believe after reading both sides."

You're trying to give me a tool to improve my civic literacy. An interviewer made that comment and said he doesn't seek out news sources with which he disagrees.

Long said gnomi has a gentle reminder system that gives people a warning when they read too many articles-say, 70 or 80 percent-biased to one side. He said the warning gets triggered at 10 to 20 articles.

"Open mindedness is not an on-and-off switch," Byrne said. "It's something you have to train in yourself every day. Gnomi is a tool that helps you along the way."

He said gnomi's readership is in the thousands. Byrne said gnomi's target audience is news junkies, people who are deliberately interested in hearing from both sides on an issue, people who appreciate subtlety and that it's a gray world, and people who are crunched for time.

Gnomi does not do source-level bias ranking of media. But, he said, another company, AllSides, does that type of source-level ranking by looking at online versions of stories on different media outlets, including newspapers, television and radio.

The University of Minnesota journalism school is interested in using gnomi as a tool for its students. Long made that comment and said a more immediate use will be in middle schools and high schools.

Conclusion

The Civic Caucus and gnomi have similar goals. Long said the Civic Caucus is about the ability to have a meaningful debate. He said the Civic Caucus brings what is going on in the world to people who can make their own decisions.

He said gnomi's goals are similar. He hopes the app can help people understand both sides of a topic in a good, civic way.

Byrne said the most important words are accessibility and transparency. "Access means technology in our case," he said. "Transparency means having a very clear and trustworthy process for evaluating different perspectives. Our long-term success depends entirely on being perceived as having a trustworthy, credible process."