AI can write you a poem and edit your video. Now, it can help you be funnier

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University of Sydney researchers have used an AI-assisted application to help people write cartoon captions for cartoons published in The New Yorker Cartoon Caption Contest.

Twenty participants with little to no experience writing cartoon captions wrote 400 cartoon captions: 200 captions were written with the help from the AI tool, and the remainder were written without assistance.

A second group of 67 people then rated how funny these cartoon captions were. The researchers found jokes written with the help of the tool were found to be significantly funnier than those written without the tool. Comparatively, ratings for the AI assisted captions were almost 30% closer to the winning captions in The New Yorker Cartoon Caption Contest.

Participants said the tool helped them piece together humorous narratives and get started, helping to understand nuances and funny elements, and to come up with new ideas.

Almost half, 95 out of the 200 jokes written with the help of AI were also rated as funnier than the original cartoon captions by The New Yorker.

"The AI tool helps people be significantly funnier, but more importantly, it may be a cure for writer's block," said Dr. Anusha Withana from the School of Computer Science and Digital Sciences Initiative.

AI helps non-native speakers be funny in a new language

Dr. Withana and his team conceived the tool to help [non-native speakers](#) understand humor in their new language. The results also showed non-

native speakers found the tool more helpful, bringing them 43% closer to the winning caption.

Born in Sri Lanka and having lived in Japan, Singapore, Germany and now Australia, Dr. Withana said understanding local humor could often be a "minefield" for a new arrival.

"In a new country I would often find myself 'off-key'", he said. "For example, I once made a sarcastic comment that didn't go down well in Germany. Here in Australia, it would have gotten a laugh."

Hasindu Kariyawasam led the research project as an undergraduate research intern. The findings are [published](#) in the *Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Intelligent User Interfaces.*

"Humor is such an important way to relate to others," he said. "It is also important for emotional well-being and creativity, and for managing stress, depression, and anxiety. As a non-native speaker myself, I found the system helped me write jokes more easily, and it made the experience fun."

How can AI help us understand humor?

The original aspiration for the research was to use technology to help get creative juices flowing and get words down on the page. Alister Palmer, a master's student and amateur cartoonist conceived the idea to engage more people in cartooning.

The tool works through an algorithm which assesses incongruity. It analyzes the words in a description of the cartoon and generates incongruous words as hints for the cartoonist.

For example, in one cartoon where a person is depicted wearing a rabbit

suit to the office, the tool suggested the words "rabbit" and "soup" (derived from the incongruity with the word "suit"). One of the pilot study participants came up with the caption "I meant the rabbit soup, not suit." The winning caption at The New Yorker competition was "It's not just Henderson. Corporate laid off the entire bunny division."

Professor Judy Kay said this approach means we can explain how the AI works: "With AI playing a bigger role in our lives, our team wanted to create this tool so that people can feel in control."

Dr. Withana said, "Ultimately, humans are still the ones creating the humor, but this research is a great example of how AI can augment and aid our social interactions."

Provided by University of Sydney