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Note: Images available at:
Immediate Release

NYU Researchers Secure \$200,000 Grant to Bring Novel AI-Tool to Support Under-Resourced Newsrooms Across the U.S.

BROOKLYN, New York, Wednesday, December 15, 2021 – [Mona Sloane](#), faculty at NYU Tandon and Senior Research Scientist at the [NYU Center for Responsible AI](#) (R/AI), and [Hilke Schellmann](#), professor of journalism at NYU's Graduate School of Arts and Science, have been awarded \$200,000 grant from the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation to bring an innovative AI tool to under-resourced newsrooms to significantly scale up their investigative capacity and democratize access to FOIA records.

The project will integrate the NYU-developed Gumshoe prototype — a Natural Language Processing Tool that identifies relevant and irrelevant sections in large text corpora — to help journalists effectively comb through thousands of Freedom of Information Request (FOIA) releases and other document sets. NYU will collaborate with [MuckRock](#), an open source journalism platform used by tens of thousands of journalists across 4,000 newsrooms to help request, analyze, and publish public documents. The effort will unlock decades of valuable information, data and history contained in federal government records released under the Freedom of Information Act.

“Effective use of the Freedom of Information Act is a key public tool to encourage transparent, accountable government activity,” said Vilas Dhar, president of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation. “This innovative application of AI by New York University and MuckRock makes important records accessible to under-resourced newsrooms that are shining a light on our country’s most important social justice stories.”

Gumshoe is an innovative NLP-based text analyzing tool that was developed in a collaboration between Schellmann and Sloane and a team of graduate students at the NYU Center for Data Science, under the supervision of Julia Stoyanovich, professor of computer science at NYU Tandon and director of R/AI. Gumshoe sorts and ranks content in FOIA requests for journalists. Because it is based on NLP technology, Gumshoe understands the meaning of words in context and “learns” about the individual investigation of the journalist over time - like a shoe that fits better with every walk.

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“We built this tool, because as a freelance journalist I was frustrated with combing through large Freedom of Information requests. I knew other journalists had the same problem and I am so delighted the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation is making it possible for us to bring this AI-tool to small newsrooms across America that really need this,” said Schellmann. “Journalists in underserved newsrooms need this AI tool and the training MuckRock will provide to hold the powerful accountable and help strengthen democracy.”

Through integration with MuckRock’s open source DocumentCloud platform used by tens of thousands of journalists around the world, Gumshoe will help journalists on a wide variety of critical stories.

“Combining AI innovation, social research, and investigative journalism is extremely important for advancing the public interest in technology”, said Sloane. “We must work together to advance innovation in the right direction and level the playing field of journalistic practice across the U.S. and beyond.”

“We’ve seen a widening disparity between the newsrooms that get access to the advanced tools and support needed to tackle complex analysis and those that struggle to fund basic resources and training,” said Michael Morisy, MuckRock’s co-founder and chief executive. “I’m grateful for the McGovern Foundation’s support of this collaboration with Hilke and Mona, which will help us start to address that gap while supporting local accountability reporting.”

Over the past year, MuckRock has been expanding the way that it collaborates with local organizations, particularly those serving communities of color and innovative new outlets helping fill the voids left through news deserts where legacy media no longer exist. This includes extensive editorial partnerships helping dig into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a revamped FOIA training and coaching program. These expanded collaborations, which have resulted in tens of thousands of newly released documents, provides the perfect opportunity to rapidly scale the impact of Gumshoe by integrating with MuckRock’s platform while further expanding editorial and investigative support to newsrooms around the country.

Along with access to the tool, the collaboration will offer select newsrooms additional training, editorial guidance, and financial support in the form of microgrants and training stipends to ensure that key stories in communities around the country can be told while journalists from a wide variety of backgrounds have an opportunity to put advanced technology to work in their reporting. These close collaborations will be leveraged to iteratively improve both Gumshoe and MuckRock’s approach to building intuitive and impactful transparency tools.

The [Patrick J. McGovern Foundation](#) is a global 21st century philanthropy bridging the frontiers of artificial intelligence, data science and social impact to create a thriving, equitable and sustainable future for all. The Foundation’s work focuses on bringing together academia, practitioners, and civil society to pursue the potential of AI and data science to address some of the world’s most urgent challenges.

About the New York University Tandon School of Engineering

The NYU Tandon School of Engineering dates to 1854, the founding date for both the New York University School of Civil Engineering and Architecture and the Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute. A January 2014 merger created a comprehensive school of education and research in engineering and applied sciences as part of a global university, with close connections to engineering

programs at NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai. NYU Tandon is rooted in a vibrant tradition of entrepreneurship, intellectual curiosity, and innovative solutions to humanity's most pressing global challenges. Research at Tandon focuses on vital intersections between communications/IT, cybersecurity, and data science/AI/robotics systems and tools and critical areas of society that they influence, including emerging media, health, sustainability, and urban living. We believe diversity is integral to excellence, and are creating a vibrant, inclusive, and equitable environment for all of our students, faculty and staff. For more information, visit engineering.nyu.edu.

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