

Arena Group fires CEO in wake of Sports Illustrated AI articles scandal

Publication Date: 2023-12-12

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Section: Technology

Tags: Artificial intelligence (AI), Magazines, Newspapers & magazines, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/dec/12/arena-group-ceo-ross-levinsohn-fired-sports-illustrated-ai-articles>



The Arena Group, publisher of Sports Illustrated, has fired the magazine's CEO not long after it was revealed Sports Illustrated had published articles written by fake authors with AI-generated headshots and biographies. The Arena Group's board announced on Monday that CEO Ross Levinsohn had his employment terminated, with Manoj Bhargava named as interim chief executive. The board said it followed a meeting on actions to "improve the operational efficiency and revenue of the company". The release did not mention the AI scandal from November, which was spurred by an investigative report published by the science and technology news publication Futurism. Among fake profiles uncovered by Futurism was that of purported author "Sora Tanaka" which claims she is a product reviewer. The page said: "Sora has always been a fitness guru, and loves to try different foods and drinks. Ms Tanaka is thrilled to bring her fitness and nutritional expertise to the Product Reviews Team, and promises to bring you nothing but the best of the best." Tanaka is not a real person. The Arena Group, which acquired Sports Illustrated in 2019, denied the allegations, and said the articles in question were sourced commercial content from a third-party advertising company, AdVon Commerce. A spokesperson for the Arena Group wrote in a statement at the time: "Today, an article was published alleging that Sports Illustrated published AI-generated articles. According to our initial investigation, this is not accurate. "A number of AdVon's e-commerce articles ran on certain Arena websites. We continually monitor our partners and were in the midst of a review when these allegations were raised. AdVon has assured us that all of the articles in question were written and edited by humans ... However, we have learned that AdVon had writers use a pen or pseudo name in certain articles to protect author privacy – actions we strongly condemn – and we are removing the content while our internal investigation continues and have since ended the partnership." The company cut ties with AdVon and removed its content from Arena websites. Sports Illustrated, first published in 1954, is known as well for its swimsuit issues, often featuring covers of fashion models, athletes and other celebrities in bikinis. But, as Futurism noted, it also once published contributions from famed writers such as William Faulkner and John Updike. After a round of layoffs earlier this year, Levinsohn indicated that Sports Illustrated would incorporate AI into its journalism, but said it would never replace journalism. "While AI will never replace journalism, reporting, or crafting and editing a story, rapidly improving AI technologies can create enterprise value for our brands and partners," Levinsohn said in February. Last week Arena terminated the employment of operations president and COO Andrew Kraft, media president Rob Barrett, and corporate counsel Julie Fenster. Bhargava is the founder of the company behind the 5-Hour Energy Drink product.