#NT100IS5 ONE TO WATCH: WYSA

AN AI CHATBOT FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

By Wysa

Project URL: https://www.wysa.io/
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The problem

When father of two Lovkesh Joshi was facing redundancy while working at a tech firm in India, he didn't want to burden his family. At the same time, he was facing anxiety and depression, and didn't know what to do.

By 2030, a lack of access to mental health services will cost the global economy $6 trillion per year according to the World Health Organization. Only 30% of people with mental illness receive treatment in high-income countries, this figure dropping to below 10% in low- and middle-income nations. A big factor is labour shortage – there are only 3,800 psychiatrists currently registered in India – about three per 1 million people.

The response

Ramakant Vempati and Jo Aggarwal, both tech consultants from India, are addressing the problem with their AI chatbot Wysa, which uses deep learning and natural language processing to 'converse' with people experiencing mental health issues and provide advice based on established techniques like cognitive behaviour therapy.

Developed in collaboration with researchers at Columbia and Cambridge Universities, as well as mental health practitioners, each technique is rigorously tested and clinically validated for use in a self-help context, with all interactions anonymised for privacy.

The chatbot is accessed through a free smartphone app. The company, which has secured $1.3 million in investment and took part in Facebook's incubation programme, earns revenue through licensing its AI to large-volume clients.

The potential

Joshi is one of 1.25 million users in 30 countries so far. The company says that 45% of users reported reduced symptoms of depression. "Three people wrote to us to say that Wysa saved their life," says Aggarwal.

While the service is not intended to replace therapists, it can provide a bridge across cultural, geographical and economic barriers for people who need mental health care but cannot easily access or afford it.

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