Advances in Automatic Text Summarization

Inderjeet Mani and Mark T. Maybury (editors)
(MITRE Corporation)

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It has been said for decades (if not centuries) that more and more information is
becoming available and that tools are needed to handle it. Only recently, however,
does it seem that a sufficient quantity of this information is electronically available to
produce a widespread need for automatic summarization. Consequently, this research
area has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the past few years, as illustrated by a 1997
ACL Workshop, a 1998 AAAI Spring Symposium and in the same year SUMMAC: a
TREC-like TIPSTER-funded summarization evaluation conference. Not unexpectedly,
there is now a book to add to this list: *Advances in Automatic Summarization*, a collection
of papers edited by Inderjeet Mani and Mark T. Maybury and published by The MIT
Press. Half of it is a historical record: thirteen previously published papers, including
classics such as Luhn’s 1958 word-counting sentence-extraction paper, Edmundson’s
1969 use of cue words and phrases, and Kupiec, Pedersen, and Chen’s 1995 trained
summarizer. The other half of the book holds new papers, which attempt to cover
current issues and point to future trends. It starts with a paper by Karen Spärck Jones,
which acts as an overall introduction. In it, the summarization process and the uses of
summaries are broken down into their constituent parts and each of these is discussed
(it reminded me of a much earlier Spärck Jones paper on categorization [1970]). Despite
its comprehensiveness and authority, I must confess to finding this opener heavy going
at times.

The rest of the papers are grouped into six sections, each of which is prefaced
with two or three well-written pages from the editors. These introductions contain
valuable commentary on the coming papers—even pointing out a possible flaw in the
evaluation part of one. The opening section holds three papers on so-called classical
approaches. Here one finds the oft-cited papers of Luhn, Edmundson, and Pollock and
Zamora. As a package, these papers provide a novice with a good idea of how basic
summarization works. My only quibble was in their reproduction. In Luhn’s paper,
an article from *Scientific American* is summarized and it would have been beneficial to
have this included in the book as well. Some of the figures in another paper contained
very small fonts and were hard to read; fixing this for a future print run is probably
worth thinking about.

The next section holds papers on corpus-based approaches to summarization, start-
ing with Kupiec et al.’s paper about a summarizer trained on an existing corpus of
manually abstracted documents. Two new papers building upon the Kupiec et al.
work follow this. Exploiting the discourse structure of a document is the topic of the
next section. Of the five papers here, I thought Daniel Marcu’s was the best, nicely
describing summarization work so far and then clearly explaining his system, which
is based on Rhetorical Structure Theory. The following section on knowledge-rich ap-
proaches to summarization covers such things as Wendy Lehnert’s work on breaking
down narratives into plot units and two papers on creating summaries from numerical
data such as sports results and military testing logs. This is an area I know little about,
but I found all papers in this section to be easily understood and clear.

After this is a section on evaluation, which contains papers that cover well the
issues of this important area, with perhaps a slight let-down at the end. The first
paper describes human inconsistency in summary generation. The second shows the
leading paragraphs of newspaper articles being better than automatic summaries. In
contrast, the third illustrates genuine utility from summarization. The fourth and final
paper describes the creation and results of the TIPSTER-backed SUMMAC exercise.
What is disappointing, however, is that the smaller dry run of the exercise held in
1997 is described rather than the much larger-scale version held a few months later.
Unless there were some pressing editorial deadlines for this book that prevented the
larger SUMMAC being written up in time, it really is a shame that this earlier paper
was allowed in.

The final section covers new problem areas of summarization, for example, pro-
cessing multiple documents and summarizing multimedia data, such as images or
combined video and text. The multimedia papers stood out as being the most inter-
esting, with the video and text paper of Merlino and Maybury presenting a number
of interesting user evaluation studies; the image-summarization paper, while being
new work with little concrete to present, was an intriguing introduction to a poten-
tially new field. I thought there were two areas missing from this section, however:
summarization of translated documents is very active these days with work from the
CRL group at New Mexico State University and Philip Resnik’s gisting paper (1997).
The other aspects that seem little investigated are the human-factors issues of sum-
maries: how they are presented and how users might interact with them. It would
have benefited the book to have these areas covered as well.

I don’t have a wide knowledge of past summary papers, so it is hard for me to
think of historical ones that might be missing. After reading through the references
in the book, however, it was clear that papers by Chris Paice are well thought of and
perhaps one of his should have been included.

Despite these complaints, I found this book to be most informative. Reviewing it
led me to conclude that it isn’t intended to be read from cover to cover; instead it’s
something to be dipped into on occasion. It is accessible and I imagine that anyone
with a basic understanding of text processing will be able to follow most of the papers
in this book. As a rather nonacademic footnote, I must mention the physical feel of
the book itself. The design and finish of the cover are high quality. More importantly,
the type of binding used allows the book to stay at whatever page it’s opened. These
may seem trivial points, but they very much added to the pleasure of its reading.

References
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