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Special

Introduction. Our relationships with GenAI and the media: Testing the limits of transparency, trust and moral agency

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Abstract

We present the last part of this special issue on *Use of Artificial Intelligence in Communication: Ethical Implications for Media*. This editorial examines the role that humans should play in the responsible use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in the media. It provides an overview of transparency as an ethical obligation in relation to trust and truthfulness when using GenAI to create different kinds of content. Finally, it enters into the debate about the moral status of machines as we anticipate ethical questions in the study of ethics and GenAI in the media. Six articles complete this special issue with studies examining implications of GenAI for semiotics research, public relations, advertising, fact checking, information literacy and journalism education.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, ethics, transparency, trust, information literacy, public relations, advertising, journalism education, fact checking, semiotics.

1. Introduction

Use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in the media is increasing. But so far media professionals are proceeding cautiously as they test various applications and figure out how to deliver high-quality content while being transparent with their audiences. Audiences, for their part, are not very knowledgeable about GenAI and tend not to trust GenAI-assisted news content (Arguedas, 2024; Cubero, 2024). These assessments may change as GenAI improves and we learn how to optimize its uses in the media. Nevertheless, this snapshot reminds us that the responsible application of GenAI depends greatly on human inputs and oversight.

If ethics is about human flourishing and human moral agency, then it makes sense, as Sison *et al*. (2023) suggest, to view the ethical pluses and minuses of AI in the media through the lens of something like the Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI) framework. This framework proposes assessing AI on the basis of reliability, safety and trustworthiness when it comes both to mitigating its negative impacts and promoting its best uses.

HCAI sees ChatGPT and other GenAI as tools similar to scientific instruments used in experiments. This means AI are not moral agents. This matters because moral agency means you have the capacity to make and be responsible for your own ethical choices. Sison *et al*. (2023) argue that AI does not have this capacity and, thus, it is a "cognitive error" to give a large language model (LLM) a byline or credit. As they explain, "Humans alone can accept the legal, scientific, moral and social responsibility for their publications or consent to terms of use and distribution" (p. 7). You cannot shun or sue AI if it violates ethical norms. And AI cannot develop or exercise virtues –such as honesty or justice– or vices –such as cruelty or dishonor.

The "human in the loop" principle is germane because it charges humans to take responsibility for the impact of how they interact with AI. This principle says the responsible use of AI always requires human supervision and accountability (Sison *et al*., 2023). But even the best-intentioned human does not actually understand many things that AI can do, giving rise to the so-called "black box" problem. Until scientists are better able to understand what is going inside the box, it is not possible to have robust transparency (Blouin, 2023).

And yet transparency is important for both trustworthiness and accountability. Thus, in the first part of the special issue dedicated to the theme of *Use of Artificial Intelligence in Communication: Ethical Implications for Media*, we suggested that transparency is a non-negotiable ethical obligation for media professionals who use AI to create, curate and recommend content (Codina *et al*., 2024). If algorithms themselves are inscrutable "black boxes," however, what does transparency mean?

In practice, transparency usually means a disclaimer such as: "This image was created using ChatGPT." This avoids deception and respects the agency of individuals, who are now in a better position to evaluate what they are reading, hearing or seeing. However, with little else to go on, they may still be unclear about how exactly AI was used. How much detail is needed for them to understand the extent of AI use or precisely what it generated?

2. Transparency, Truthfulness and Trust

We also cautioned in our first editorial for this special issue that AI's ethical mission requires advancing the news media's obligations to the truth, to public service, and to processes of verification (Codina *et al*., 2024). Of course, not all media have the same responsibilities. For example, Deaver (1990) suggests that responsibilities to truthfulness are different for different communication practices, depending on their intent, completeness, allegiance and audience expectations. He places communication practices on a truthfulness continuum, with practices intended to fully and accurately inform without bias, such as journalism, on the "truth" end of the continuum and practices intended to deceive, such as lies told to avoid hurt feelings, on the "lies" end of the continuum. In between are practices intended to persuade with selective information, such as public relations and advertising, and practices that deal in non-truth but are not intended to deceive, such as fictional TV dramas or novels.

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If Deaver (1990) is right, there should be corresponding standards of transparency based on audience expectations: Practices closer to the "truth" end should have higher standards of transparency, and practices closer to the "lies" end should have lower standards. For example, a news story sourced by AI should have a detailed disclaimer warning audiences about this editorial choice, including the rationale, possible risks and safeguards to manage those risks. In contrast, a disclaimer that an advertisement uses AI-generated audio might be ethically acceptable if it reveals little more than that fact.

Indeed, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that transparency about how the news is made is the single most important factor influencing which outlets audiences trust (Kleis Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024). Does transparency by itself take care of all ethical concerns about GenAI use? Sometimes we see this kind of logic applied to consent as a moral remedy. Consider, for example, the recruitment of contestants for reality TV shows: As long as the vulnerable party consented, anything goes. This reasoning overlooks factors that may impede understanding or contribute to coercion. The same is true of disclosure.

In fact, disclosure may introduce additional worries. As with conflict of interest –another ethical area where disclosure is recommended as a remedy– excessive or vague disclaimers about AI use may highlight a moral concern without clarifying if there is an actual problem or just a potential one. This introduces uncertainty about media performance that can weaken trust, especially among individuals lacking familiarity with GenAI and whose trust is already shaky (Arguedas, 2024). The fact that AI disclaimers concern the technology most blamed for amplifying disinformation only adds to the problem.

Trust in the news media is already low. The Reuters Institute's 2024 *Digital News Report* found that only 40 percent of those surveyed in 47 markets said they trust most news (Kleis Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024). Trust matters less for the media's effectiveness than it does, say, for doctors. Nevertheless, as we noted in the first special issue, the breakdown in the "consensus on reality" has also broken down the consensus about which media content to believe, if any (Codina *et al*., 2024, "Ethics and transparency", para. 2). Without such a consensus, media professionals are just shouting truth into the wind.

The problem is compounded when we are discussing media further away from the "truth" end of Deaver's (1990) continuum. After all, audiences have an external standard –accuracy– they can use to judge the reliability of media content using GenAI. What about creative media, such as film or advertising? How can audiences judge content using subjective standards such as authenticity or aesthetics? In the context of conflict of interest, Stark (2001) suggests that professions lacking recourse to an external standard would do better to avoid conflicts of interest altogether, rather than take chances with clients' trust. Using this reasoning, it may be a good idea for media critics and creatives to avoid delegating core tasks to GenAI, rather than impose on audiences' expectations.

Even with accuracy as an external standard, most audiences are uncomfortable with the use of GenAI to create news content. They are especially wary of synthetic videos and images that look real, even with a disclaimer. Audiences also think the human element is fundamental when it comes to analysis and consequential news that requires sensitivity. In fact, news organizations with best practices for GenAI have so far concentrated its use in backend processes (Arguedas, 2024).

3. The moral status of GenAI

But the race to squeeze efficiencies from GenAI in the media is ongoing. Already, there have been instances of news outlets publishing "journalism" written entirely by AI without disclosing this to audiences and giving little or no notice to their newsrooms. Where there are not yet AI regulations or robust in-house ethical standards, journalists and their unions are pushing to negotiate the boundaries of responsible AI use to support responsible journalism by and for humans (Nolan, 2023).

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Which brings us back to the moral status of GenAI. Gunkel (2023) suggests that the Western instrumentalist view that GenAI is merely a tool for human use does not fit our social experience. We tend to anthropomorphize "others," such as seemingly intelligent machines. Thus, there is not a neat distinction between person and thing –moral agent and otherwise. He advocates a "relational turn" in which we grant moral status not only to other humans, but to non-human "others." Such a turn, he argues, may allow us to better take responsibility for ourselves and for "others" we encounter, including GenAI.

We turn now to the six contributions in this third part of the special issue, which opens with two articles that examine how young adults are using GenAI in the media. Alberto Sánchez-Acedo, Alejandro Carbonell-Alcocer, Manuel Gertrudix and Jose Luis Rubio-Tamayo, all from the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, present results from a quasi-experiment. The findings suggest that the young Madrid residents who participated focused so much on the convincing images created by GenAI that they failed to pay attention to contextual cues revealing the images were visual forgeries.

M. Ángeles Fernández Barrero, Isaac López Redondo and Luisa Graciela Aramburú Moncada, all from Universidad de Sevilla, look at the potential of GenAI to help Spanish university students master journalistic writing techniques. The authors suggest that students find GenAI most useful for routine tasks, such as translation and grammar correction, rather than creative tasks, such as writing headlines. Instructors asked to assess GenAI output for a writing assignment suggested that the technology falls short of professional standards, especially those concerning specialized techniques for different journalistic genres.

In the third article, Roger Cuartielles, Marcel Mauri-Ríos and Ruth Rodríguez-Martínez, all from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, report that fact-checking professionals in Spain question whether they need to disclose use of GenAI tools for routine tasks under human supervision. In fact, the team's content analysis of fact-checking websites in Spain suggests that disclosure of GenAI use is a bit of an afterthought and that these sites lack detailed protocols and manuals for GenAI.

Next, Francisco Arbaiza and Jazmine Arias, both from Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas, and Kelly Robledo-Dioses from Universitat de Barcelona look at the way advertising professionals in Peru are experiencing the impact of GenAI on their creativity process. Based on semi-structured interviews and analysis of AI-influenced advertising campaigns, the authors conclude that GenAI has exceeded expectations. However, participants acknowledged ethical worries, including data privacy, originality and authenticity.

The theoretical article written by Carlos A. Scolari from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra-Barcelona shows how semiotics and AI research have mutually informed each other since the 1950s. Scolari's article illustrates a point we made in our second editorial: that the study of AI and communication –and we would add ethics– is necessarily multidisciplinary. Scolari argues the time is ripe for a semiotics applied to generative AI that can improve the functioning of this new technology.

Finally, the article by Camelia Cusnir and Anamaria Nicola, both from the University of Bucharest, looks at how Romanian PR practitioners are using GenAI. Most participants said they had adopted GenAI, the large majority using ChatGPT. They saw GenAI has mostly beneficial to PR practice, especially with regard to efficiency. However, they expressed some concerns about output quality and human supervision.

As we conclude this special issue, we return to Gunkel's (2023) argument that we may need to seriously consider not only the human uses of GenAI, but the status of GenAI as a tool. If we take his view seriously, we have to ask whether it will be necessary to question the very foundations of ethics and, therefore, our current frameworks for understanding the ethical implications of GenAI in the media. Whether our answer is to grant moral status to GenAI or to center humans in GenAI applications, we have important work ahead.

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