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## **Preface**

Discourse on the role and impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on journalism tends to veer from fears about robots replacing journalists to hopes that machines could assist boost quality journalism. Perspectives on AI are shaped by normative ideas of what journalism was, is and could be. Those ideas are shaped by the expertise and experiences of practitioners, scholars and audiences. As Moran and Shaikh write, “optimism and critique of technological tools sits within wider debates about the boundaries and boundary objects of journalism—how do these technologies advance or hinder a particular normative vision for journalism?” (2022, 1757).

It is all eerily familiar to the early 2000s and 2010s, when the internet and social media were either going to save journalism and foster a more democratic media space, or create a dystopian era where journalism withered and viral falsehoods spread. The reality lies somewhere on the spectrum between hope and disillusionment. The challenge is that it is almost impossible to conceive of the future of AI in journalism without the constraints of past norms, values and practices. In the words of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, “when faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror,”(1967, 73).

Current approaches to AI in journalism show how an industry trudging backwards into the future, as McLuhan might have said. Broadly, AI has been deployed to support, extend and enhance existing journalistic practices in newsgathering, news production and news distribution (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023). These range from using AI technologies to discover trends on social media to generating headlines and summaries to recommending stories for readers. The adoption of AI technologies has been driven by a desire to increase productivity and efficiencies. This is a double-edged sword as it can either free up time for journalists to take on more in-depth and relevant work, or for publishers to pursue efficiencies and cost-savings.

## **Living in the now**

At the core of the debate over AI in journalism is how far the use of these technologies is shaped by the vision and priorities of journalists, editors and publishers, against a context of declining revenues, fragmented audiences and the lack of a strategic vision. It is surprising that by 2023, only a third of newsrooms had an AI strategy or were working on one (Beckett & Yaseen, 2023), despite the relentless pace of these technologies. Generative AI is one such example that illustrates the speed at which AI is progressing. ChatGPT was only released by OpenAI in November 2022 but within a year reached one hundred million people using it every week (Porter, 2023).

The promise of AI to perform existing tasks faster, cheaper and more efficiently than humans is evident in the widespread use of AI for news production, specifically in automated news writing. National news agencies such as the Press Association in the UK and Canadian Press in Canada have been using automation to produce news stories at scale for some time now, even before the recent advances in generative AI. In the UK, RADAR, (Reporters And Data And Robots), enabled a team of five journalists to file over 400,000 articles in the three years since launch in 2018 (RADAR, n.d.). Such automated content is considered particularly valuable for local newsrooms with limited resources (Thäsler-Kordonouri & Barling, 2023).

Automated news production highlights one of the fault lines in the adoption and implementation of AI in journalism. Producing more with less is an appealing prospective to newsroom leaders and business executives, particularly given the continuing financial tribulations of commercial journalism enterprises across Western media markets. But it is a daunting prospect to journalists who fear their labour may be usurped by technology, undermining not just their jobs, but also their professional identity and role in society (Moran and Shaikh, 2022).

Moreover, automated news writing raises a more philosophical question about the use of AI in journalism. Essentially, robo-stories serve to reinforce the traditional news pyramid form of news writing. The origins of the news story can be traced back to the invention of another revolutionary communication technology, the telegraph. As American scholar James Carey explains, “the lingo of the cable provided the underlying structure for one of the most influential literary styles of the twentieth century,” (1989, 211). It seems ironic that a writing style shaped by a 19<sup>th</sup> century technology is being replicated by another technology in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Thinking the unthinkable**

As the chapters in this book demonstrate, there is much more to AI in journalism than automated news writing, from fact-checking to translation to multimedia creation. At the centre of all of this lies a fundamental question on the purpose of using new technologies and who they serve. AI in journalism needs to be more than about saving money or cutting jobs. It needs to be more than reproduce existing ways of working with machines that work faster and harder.

The fallacy of looking in the rear-view mirror to replicate traditional norms and practices with AI technologies leads to a utilitarian approach that falls short of the potential to rethink and reinvent journalism. There is a pressing need for scholars, journalists and technologies to shift the discourse on AI and journalism beyond the now. This doesn't mean abandoning established ways of doing and thinking. But it does requires taking a broader mindset where the fundamentals of journalism can be questioned and nothing it taken as sacred.

The ongoing advances in generative AI have added an urgency to such discussions. Generative AI is more than about making existing processes more cheap, quick and efficient. The key breakthrough is the ability to create something new out of existing text, audio or video. It is confounding to note that in 2023, a survey of news leaders from around the world found that only 21% believed that generative AI would fundamentally transform every role in the newsroom. The majority – 74% of those surveyed – believed generative AI would help newsrooms be more efficient but not change the essence of what journalists do (Cherubini & Sharma, 2023). The risks for the news industry is miscalculating the potential impacts of technologies such as generative AI. Over more than a decade, smartphones and social media have radically changed how, where, when and from whom people get the news (Hermida, 2020). To paraphrase American scientist and futurologist Roy Amara, media practitioners and scholars may end up overestimating the impact of AI in the short-term and underestimating its long-term potential to transform journalism (Amara quoted in Ratcliffe, 2016).

Perhaps it is time to think the unthinkable, to think about how technologies like generative AI could end up taking on journalistic tasks and usurping many, if not most, of the roles of journalist. That future may already be here. The Newsroom, for example, is one media start-up already using AI to select and write news summaries, providing context and links to relevant content, with the final content checked by a journalist (Cherubini & Sharma, 2023). Hovering in the wings are initiatives such as Google's Search Generative Experience (SGE) initiative. Such initiatives use generative AI to provide short summaries in answer to search queries not just links. For journalism, this could mean Google offering summaries in response to queries about events and people in the news, conceivably even for breaking news in real-time. These news snippets may enough for many people who may end up not clicking on a link and going to a news website. The notion of losing most of the visits that come from search is inconceivable for news publishers yet it is possible.

Unthinkable, too, is the idea that generative AI could take on reporting duties. Having AI-driven chatbots trained to seek and interview members of the public to get their reaction to events is not implausible. After all, journalists have long used social media to find sources to interview. Imagine AI-driven chatbots scouring the internet and social media, searching for sources and interviewing them for a news story that is written by generative AI.

These notional scenarios are intended as a wake-up call to journalists, scholars and policy-makers about the potential transformational impact of AI, and particularly generative AI, on journalism. It is imperative to reorient approaches to AI in journalism that go beyond a response to the immediate priorities of today. Journalism as a profession and public service is too important to be left behind by AI. There is a pressing urgency for practitioners and scholars to go beyond the here and now, to stop looking at the future through the rear-view mirror, and instead embrace the uncertainties, challenges and opportunities ahead.

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