

AI generates fresh challenges for journalists

by Eric Wishart

The launch of generative artificial intelligence tools capable of producing high quality text and images has triggered much discussion about their impact on the future of journalism.

AI was seen for many years as a useful tool that spared journalists from the drudgery of mundane tasks such as typing out company results and transcribing interviews.

That changed with the arrival of GenAI tools such as ChatGPT and Midjourney, which seemed to pose an existential threat to the journalism profession.

Who needs reporters when you can input the minutes of a town council meeting and ask ChatGPT to produce a news story focusing on a particular angle of community interest? Who needs photojournalists when a text-to-image tool such as Midjourney can produce photorealistic images to illustrate a story?

Although the arrival of GenAI tools was the main topic of discussion in journalism for much of 2023, the use of automation in news gathering and publication is not new.

The Associated Press started automatically generating quarterly corporate earnings reports in 2014. Thanks to automation, the agency said that it increased the volume of its quarterly earnings reports by tenfold to 3,000, and at the same time freed journalists to do more original reporting.

However, the automated production of business or sports results from clean data is quite different from publishing news reports using AI tools. At a time when trust in the media has been eroded in many societies, news consumers should be confident that what they are reading and seeing is the work of professional journalists and not third-party AI tools.

Newsrooms have long used narrow AI for specific tasks, such as speech-to-text transcription and automatic translation. The game changer was the arrival of generative artificial intelligence tools that mimic human creativity and produce high quality text, images and audio based on text prompts.

In a sign of its potential impact on the news industry, media organisations quickly drew up guidelines for its use.

My news agency AFP published detailed internal guidelines on the use of AI and added a new AI section to its [code of ethics](#) in the first major update of the document since it was published in 2016.

The AFP rules are very similar to those adopted by other news organisations.

The agency does not publish content directly created by generative AI including text stories, images, graphics, videos or audio, but its journalists can use it to help research and prepare stories.

AI tools can be used for tasks such as carrying out research, suggesting interview questions or story ideas, proposing headlines and summarising texts. They are also useful for providing quick translations and voice-to-text transcription.

However, the AFP guidelines warn the agency's journalists that the technology is likely to produce "inaccurate, biased, stereotypical and dated results". The guidelines stress the importance of checking everything that is produced by GenAI tools, which are notorious for "hallucinating", the industry term for when they produce erroneous or nonsensical results.

The AFP guidelines are similar to those at media organisations large and small around the world. The independent news outlet the Hong Kong Free Press for example added AI guidelines to the code of ethics that is published on its [website](#).

"Stories written with generative AI have been proven to introduce undeclared errors or 'hallucinated' content, as well as produce biased, outdated or plagiarised content", said its editor-in-chief and publisher Tom Grundy. "HKFP decided to limit its use to translation, transcription, data crunching and research assistance, with such tools approved beforehand."

The AFP guidelines warn against attributing human characteristics to chatbots or other AI creations such as avatars. Called anthropomorphism, this is when people attribute human characteristics or behaviour to non-human entities. Journalists should not be lured into treating chatbots like sentient beings because of their human-like responses to prompts. Journalists can illustrate a story by quoting a chatbot response to a prompt, but should not describe the result as an "opinion", which implies the AI tool has the capacity to reason like a human being.

There are important security and legal considerations to be taken into account when using GenAI.

There is no guarantee of confidentiality, so journalists should not include private or sensitive information in their prompts. OpenAI [says](#) that user data is used to improve its products: "We may use the user's prompts, the model's responses, and other content such as images and files to improve model performance".

Journalists should not upload sensitive interviews to online transcription software tools and put themselves and their interviewees at potential risk.

When it comes to intellectual property rights, the lack of transparency about what data is used to train large language models means that copyright-protected content can be recycled in the answers to prompts. This has set the stage for a battle between content creators and GenAI giants such as OpenAI, whose GPTBot crawls web pages for content that it can use to train its [LLMs](#).

According to the website [Originality.ai](#), the GPTBot has been blocked by leading news organisations including The Guardian, CNN, The New York Times, Bloomberg and the Washington Post.

In a [story](#) about the paper's decision to block the GPTBot, a spokesperson for the Guardian News & Media said: "The scraping of intellectual property from the Guardian's website for commercial purposes is, and has always been, contrary to our terms of service".

When it comes to images, AI tools are being used to create photorealistic images, including to illustrate events in the news, or are being employed by bad actors to spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, hoaxes and propaganda.

Adobe Stock, which sells illustrations for commercial use, announced that it was banning contributors from supplying images that depicted news events after AI-generated images of the conflict in Gaza appeared on its site.

In a [blog post](#), Adobe said it was updating its submission policies "to prohibit contributors from submitting generative AI content with titles that imply that it is depicting an actual newsworthy event".

"Stock content should always be clearly marked when used in editorial content to help ensure people are not misled into thinking a real event is being depicted by the stock content", it said.

GenAI tools are prone to bias, and a [report](#) by Bloomberg news agency revealed just how much they amplify stereotypes and prejudices within society.

The report, headlined "Humans are biased. Generative AI is even worse", analysed the racial and gender breakdown of thousands of images created by the text-to-image generator Stable Diffusion based on a variety of prompts.

"The world according to Stable Diffusion is run by White male CEOs", Bloomberg concluded. "Women are rarely doctors, lawyers or judges. Men with dark skin commit crimes, while women with dark skin flip burgers".

Sensational headlines that greeted the arrival of GenAI asked if it could mean the end of journalism as we know it. While AI tools can streamline newsroom workflows and help journalists work more efficiently, direct human involvement is still essential for the production of trustworthy content. And as the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine have shown, there is still no substitute for having events covered by journalists on the ground.

Eric Wishart is the standards and ethics editor of AFP news agency.