

The use of artificial intelligence in journalism

Executive summary

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1. Introduction

The NCTJ has identified the need to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into all relevant aspects of journalism training and assessment, while maintaining high industry standards, as a key priority. Since 2024, the use of AI in journalism and its legal and ethical issues have been included in the Diploma in Journalism's essential journalism programme of study. AI masterclasses and an introductory e-learning course are also offered via the Journalism Skills Academy. To extend and update this knowledge and training across the NCTJ's products and services, a key objective is 'to update research on AI developments and convene a task force of educators, AI experts and industry partners to guide AI integration'. This wider engagement project involves the construction of an NCTJ AI task force. This research forms the first stage of the project and will (i) help build the stakeholder group and (ii) input into the direction of travel of the overall project.

The research has involved qualitative discussions with 14 journalists and editors from leading UK news organisations covering differing sectors of journalism: news organisations (national and regional/local), specialist brand publishers, and broadcasters.

AI use was universal among those consulted, but the majority of newsrooms are taking an approach of 'cautious innovation'.

2. Level of use of AI in journalism

Across the entire UK economy, adoption of AI is still modest. Government research indicates that one in six businesses currently use AI, but most businesses have no active plans to adopt AI.

Looking more specifically at journalism, AI use is likely to be higher than the UK economy-wide average. Among the consultees to this research, AI use was universal, but the level and type of use varied in that:

- while some newsrooms have adopted AI in a progressive way, the majority have adopted an approach of 'cautious innovation' as they explore what AI can be used for in the newsroom;
- there is a distinction between the speed at which some individuals have started using AI (which is now very common) and the speed with which newsrooms are integrating AI into journalistic workflows, which is less common. Indeed, a driver to formally adopt AI is this use by individuals, with management feeling that they need to bring AI's use into a structured approach;
- some newsrooms have spent some time considering the principles which should underpin AI's introduction in the form of AI strategies, while others have adopted an 'evolutionary' approach, examining potential AI developments on a project-by-project basis;
- a factor limiting the introduction of AI is a lack of understanding of what it can do for newsrooms. This lack of understanding is particularly felt to exist among senior management.



3. Types of use of AI in journalism

There is a broad recognition that AI can be used in journalism, with most consultees believing that it can help journalists do their jobs quicker and more easily. AI is being used across the workflow in a number of areas:

- **development of content:** with AI creating ‘low-level’, formulaic content from press releases, emails etc, sometimes supported by specifically created AI-assisted reporter roles;
- **support for content generation:** providing help in idea generation, examination of datasets and literature, monitoring of social media and news websites;
- **repurposing of content:** conversion of content developed for one purpose into content suitable for different publications, geographies, demographics, etc;
- **support for content production:** newsrooms have examined the journalism workflow and identified areas where AI can be used to deliver the production process, including supporting and improving content; and
- **social media distribution:** AI suggests SEO amendments, rewrites of content for different distribution channels and personalises distribution to consumers, boosting engagement.

While individuals use proprietary AI tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, etc), newsrooms tend to have commissioned bespoke AI tools for their use. This is why an issue (discussed below) is cost. These bespoke tools are fitted with ‘guardrails’ which can prevent the AI tool accessing the company’s archive for generic use and can also prevent journalists accessing information sources which are not considered to be desirable.

AI is being used across the journalism workflow, but its use so far has generally focused on improving existing workflows.

All consultees were clear that there were areas where AI would not be used in their newsrooms, although these boundaries varied. Some were of the view that where originality is of primary importance AI would not be used, others that the use of generative AI to create content is not an area they would wish to develop. However, although the principles are easy to state, in practice the situation becomes less clear either due to (i) AI being embedded into all areas of the workflow and (ii) pressures in the newsroom.

The uses of AI so far have, generally, focused on improving the current workflows. Newsrooms are interested in identifying areas where AI could help make a ‘generational shift’, developing new ways of producing news content. The perceived potential of AI is recognised as being huge, but in these early days of its introduction, newsrooms are still searching for ways in which this potential may be realised.



4. Issues regarding the introduction of AI into the newsroom

As with any introduction of a major new technology, there have been issues with its introduction. Consultees' experiences vary; some have found its introduction to be 'bumpy', others that the process has been a good one.

Over and above this, common areas emerge with consultees noting issues regarding:

- **accuracy and hallucinations**, with AI notably making errors in many areas;
- **verification**, with concerns about the increasing difficulty of verifying AI-produced inputs, with an ongoing (age-old) need for journalists to be held responsible for checking their sources;
- **staff take-up**, though experiences here are mixed. Some newsrooms report positive acceptance of AI as journalists recognise its value and with some newsrooms reporting considerable levels of pushback;
- **cost**, with this being a limiter on the rate of take-up;
- **skills issues**, with widespread reports of shortages of AI literacy in newsrooms. The introduction of AI will create wider skills demands, other than those relating specifically to the use of AI. Skill sets of journalism jobs are anticipated to change, with (possibly counterintuitively) the introduction of AI leading to a greater emphasis and a re-focus on traditional journalism skills;
- **skill development activities**, with newsrooms recognising that skills needs will have developed. Most journalists will have self-taught themselves AI skills, but these will have been augmented by newsrooms providing training in different levels of AI.

There are widespread reports of shortages of AI literacy in newsrooms, while AI could lead to a greater emphasis on traditional journalism skills.

5. Ethics of AI use

Respondents identified two main areas around the ethics of AI use: transparency and the need for a ‘human in the loop’:

- on transparency, the consultees believe that it is important that the use of any AI is disclosed to the audience to maintain trust.
- on the need for humans in the loop, all consultees stress the importance of this, and all have constructed systems in which journalists (or editors) retain decision-making control. To maintain this, it is important that the outputs of AI remain ‘suggestions’ rather than changes which are automatically made. Questions are raised about whether this intent can be maintained in practice under newsroom pressures.

Consultees note that these ethical considerations are not new. There may be aspects which need to be considered in an AI context, the principles are those of traditional journalism: the journalist remains responsible for verifying the information on which their content is based and for anything that is published in their name.

All consultees stressed the importance of keeping a ‘human in the loop’, with journalists or editors retaining decision-making control.

6. Impacts of AI use

Where AI has been introduced, there have been impacts in the areas of:

- improving job quality, with AI improving the quality of journalists’ jobs by removing the more administrative tasks, creating space for more rewarding tasks;
- increasing productivity, allowing journalists to produce the same amount of (or more) content while reducing costs;
- increasing quality, enabling journalists time to improve the quality of their work;
- expanding services, with AI allowing services to be expanded into new sectors or geographies.

There are, of course, concerns that the introduction of AI will lead to journalism job cuts, as businesses take advantage of the increased productivity noted above to produce the same content with fewer journalists. No consultees reported that, at this stage, their introduction of AI had directly resulted in reductions of the number of journalists, and, in some cases, journalism numbers had increased. However, all note that it is very early days, and none could predict what would happen in the future. It is worth noting that the assumed direct link between the introduction of AI and job cuts is seen as being too simplistic, with the reality being more nuanced and complex. Journalism has been the subject of enormous commercial pressures in recent years: identifying which job losses are the result of the introduction of AI and which are the result of other pressures (perhaps facilitated by AI) is complex. While the jury remains out over whether there will be job cuts as a result of AI, there is more consensus that jobs will change and new roles will emerge, leading to changing skill needs.

There is no evidence yet of a specific ‘AI premium’ for those journalists who have more developed AI skills, but there seems to be little doubt that those journalists with AI skills will be more employable and may well progress faster in the newsroom.

7. Messages for the NCTJ

There is a need for greater clarity in the debate about AI in journalism, with a wide range of practice from AI-generated content to AI-supported content. There is wider acceptance of the latter, although some would draw the line of the former, but all is being 'lumped together' in the context of 'using AI'.

Consultees believe that AI literacy needs to be more firmly embedded into all journalism-related education provision. The emphasis on this should be high level: ethics (why it is OK to use AI in some instances and not others), potential of AI, and pitfalls of AI use (hallucinations, verification).

In all this, it is emphasised that this is in addition to the teaching of the fundamentals of journalism, not replacing any of these. AI is an additive technology, not a replacement one.



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