KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
MEDIA PROGRAMME SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Navigating risks and rewards
How South African journalists use AI in the newsroom

Centre for Information Integrity in Africa
Stellenbosch University

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Sentrum vir Inligtingsintegriteit in Afrika
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The **KAS Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa** seeks to strengthen the role of free and independent media and improve the framework under which journalists work. The freedom of the press and the freedom of expression are central pillars of democracy. Here in Sub-Saharan Africa, the KAS Media programme seeks to accompany the process of transformation – towards democracy in countries of the region. It seeks to deliver this through:

- supporting the Education of journalism students and the professional development of journalists,
- encouraging pluralism of the media and the strengthening of media law,
- promoting the professionalisation of political communication.

Centre for Information Integrity in Africa (CINIA)

The proliferation of 'fake news,' misinformation, and harmful content on digital platforms poses significant risks to democracy, public health, and social cohesion. As such, CINIA emerges as a crucial initiative designed to combat these threats through innovative research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and public engagement. Located in the department of Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch the centre acts as a bridge between practitioners, academics and policymakers. It provides insights, analysis and practical training for those on the frontlines of journalism as well as policymakers.

About the authors

Karen Allen is a former *BBC* correspondent with over 25 years of experience covering Africa and the Middle East. She now is an independent consultant advising a number of organisations globally on digital transformation in journalism, information integrity and emerging threats. She has undertaken studies on the impact of information interference and manipulation on elections in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda and consults for the Institute for Security Studies, Centre for Information Integrity in Africa (CINIA) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, where she has also delivered training. Allen holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Contemporary war from King's College London and is a visiting scholar in the Department of War Studies. She is also a Fellow at Stellenbosch university and a senior researchers at CINIA. Allen has lived on the African continent for the past 20 years.

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Contents

Foreword

Artificial intelligence is transforming journalism worldwide – at a speed and depth we have rarely witnessed with previous technological shifts. For journalists across the globe, this development carries particular significance: it opens new possibilities to make journalistic work more efficient, more precise, and more diverse, while intensifying existing structural challenges such as limited resources, political interference, disinformation, and profound inequalities in digital access.

Against this backdrop, it is a central priority of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa to not only observe developments such as generative AI, but to actively engage with them. Our Media Programme views media freedom, media literacy, and digital resilience as fundamental democratic prerequisites. The transformation of newsrooms through AI projects touches all these areas – and calls for guidance, ethical frameworks, and practical support for journalists.

This study demonstrates impressively how widely AI is already used in South African newsrooms – often, however, without systematic training, without editorial guidelines, and without tools adapted to African languages and contexts. The interviews make it clear that journalists stand between curiosity and caution. They recognise the potential of AI for research, verification, data analysis, or translation, yet they are equally aware of risks such as algorithmic bias, hallucinations, the erosion of journalistic skills, and possible loss of trust among audiences.

Thus, the central question is less whether AI should be used in newsrooms, but how: responsibly, transparently, critically, and always in service of journalistic integrity. The study shows that many newsrooms still lack the necessary foundations – training, internal rules, structures, awareness of risks, and technological solutions that are not based solely on data from the Global North. At the same time, the willingness to use AI meaningfully is clearly visible, especially where it strengthens journalistic capacity rather than replacing it.

For our regional Media Programme, this creates a clear mandate: across Sub-Saharan Africa, we aim to support newsrooms, media houses, and journalism departments at universities in integrating AI into their daily work and into teaching. This is based on international standards, regional specificities, and the ethical foundations of free media.

This study provides an excellent basis for that mission. It closes an important knowledge gap regarding the actual state of AI usage in South African newsrooms and offers evidence-based guidance for decision-makers, training institutions, and journalists alike.

Our sincere thanks go to the authors, Karen Allen, Herman Wasserman, and Nande Mbekela, who have made a complex and dynamic topic accessible.

Hendrik Sittig
Director, Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa
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Introduction and objective

Technological advances are shaping current and future news environments in an unprecedented way. This at a time when financially stretched newsrooms are having to think creatively about how best to use limited resources; and when the need for journalistic oversight to hold accountable those in political and economic power is arguably more critical than ever. The shifting sands of geopolitics are in some instances threatening to undermine the role journalism plays in democratic life through the use of influence operations, disinformation and attacks on journalists.

Previous technologies, including Global Positioning System (GPS), broadcast and telecommunications, internet and mobile phones, have influenced output – particularly the ability to transmit information, imagery, sound and text – at speed from previously unreported parts of the world. But creating and verifying news content has until recently remained largely a human endeavour, in the hands of journalists.

However, the advent of large language models (LLMs) that underpin generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has enabled some of these tasks, including newsgathering and creating output, to be outsourced to machines. This could mean that journalists are potentially ceding some control over the newsgathering and production process, and this could enable machines to help shape editorial content and do the work of sub-editors.

This study takes the temperature of AI use in South Africa's domestic newsrooms across different platforms, from digital and text-based operations to broadcast media stations

Tasks such as reversioning and reformatting material across multiple languages and varied platforms can be done with great efficiency with AI. AI can also conduct research, manage large amounts of data during investigations, and generate imagery that enhances news storytelling. But AI also comes with risks, including baked-in algorithmic biases reflecting the data, on which AI models are trained, but which may ignore the contexts in which the AI is used.

Also, without careful human oversight and editing of AI outputs, there's the risk that the news copy AI churns out is bland, lacks nuance, texture and colour, and is too generic to appeal to audiences in specific contexts. It can also become indistinguishable from advertising copy.

This study takes the temperature of AI use in South Africa's domestic newsrooms across different platforms, ranging from digital and text-based operations to broadcast media, including

public, commercial and community television and radio stations. It is based on primary research, including a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with a wide range of journalists, to understand the operational uses of AI in the newsroom. It situates these findings alongside other studies, including those conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), which examines AI use in emerging economies and the Global South.

South Africa has a rich legacy of press freedom, with independence of the press enshrined as a constitutional right. The Freedom in the World 2025[1] country report describes South Africa as having a "vibrant and adversarial media landscape" where journalists are not protected from litigation, but where the work of investigative journalists in particular remains highly respected. Many people now access news via digital platforms, with nearly 79% of the population having access to the internet, according to World Bank figures,[2] largely via smartphones.

But the country continues to experience a digital divide,[3] with some citizens locked out of accessing digital services. The high cost of data has long been a concern in South Africa, prompting the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) to amend rules on data rollover to benefit poorer consumers.[4] These high costs limit journalists' ability to use sophisticated imagery – which is data-heavy – and AI-created imagery in news reports.

Many people now access news via digital platforms, with nearly 79% of the population having access to the internet, according to World Bank figures, largely via smartphones

AI is also seen as a threat to the economic viability of newsrooms, with the Competition Commission proposing a range of measures to help news organisations negotiate collectively with AI companies and to opt out of the scraping of their content by AI.[5]

The focus of this study is on how journalists use AI as part of their work, and less so, how AI is received by news consumers. But AI may already be embedded in the output that audiences receive, hence the need to inform and educate journalists about unintended consequences – including AI hallucinations and biases. This is partly attributed to the fact that much of the AI technology consumed in Africa is developed through training data acquired and developed in North America, China and Europe.

1 Freedom House. 2025. Freedom in the World 2025, South Africa. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/freedom-world/2025.

2 World Bank Group. *Secure Internet servers (per 1 million people) – South Africa*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.SECR.P6?locations=ZA.

3 Van Wyk-Khosa, S., Ndumbu, R. & Krönke, M. 2025. *Africa's digital divide is closing, but participation in the digital(ised) economy remains highly uneven*, Afrobarometer, www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/PP95-Digital-divide-in-Africa-closing-but-participation-in-digitalised-economy-still-uneven-Afrobarometer-23aug25.

4 *SABC News*. 2026. Icasa amends mobile data bundle expiry regulations. www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/icasa-amends-mobile-data-bundle-expiry-regulations/.

5 Roper, C. 2025. *Digital News Report 2025, South Africa*, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/south-africa.

Summary of findings

The data acquired from the questionnaire sought to determine the scope of AI knowledge understanding, operational use and training. It reveals that South Africa has an energetic news media workforce that understands the importance of embracing new technology, but which also feels ill-equipped to use the technology responsibly, largely due to a lack of systematic training.

In many newsrooms the use of AI appears predicated on whether there is an individual in the newsroom with a keen interest in the technology, who is self-taught and prepared to share this knowledge with colleagues.

Semi-structured interviews with key newsroom staff shed light on some of the opportunities and challenges that accompany the use of AI. While many respondents referred to the time-saving efficiencies afforded by AI, helping journalists research stories, verify content and reversion and translate copy, many expressed reservations, especially the more experienced newsroom staff.

Many shared worries that "AI loses nuance and idiomatic expressions" and "struggles with vernacular language". This is of particular concern to the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which operates across 14 languages, with journalists from its smaller vernacular stations telling researchers that AI use was "limited".

There were also concerns about plagiarism, journalistic integrity and AI misuse, especially at a time when newsrooms globally face financial constraints and staff cuts. A strong theme emerging from conversations with the most experienced journalists were fears that a younger generation may "over-rely" on AI because they have grown up with digital technology, potentially leading to "lazy journalism" and "bland" news copy that may seem indistinguishable from advertising copy.

This reinforces the argument that AI is only as good as its underlying training data, and considerable amounts of training data appear to come from the commercial sector. Digital media companies and the Press Council of South Africa are concerned about intellectual copyright issues and reimbursement.[6] Although important to acknowledge, and having gained prominence during the 2025 G20 discussions (and against the background of Competition Commission recommendations about media companies' negotiations with AI companies),[7] this is not the focus of this study.

6 Schiffrin, A. 2025. *AI's impact on the intellectual property rights of journalists*, Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and Press Council of South Africa, https://presscouncil.org.za/2025/07/01/ais-impact-on-the-intellectual-property-rights-of-journalists-m20-policy-brief/.

7 Roper, C. 2025. *Digital News Report 2025, South Africa*, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/south-africa.

Further findings from the study include:

- AI is widely used in South African newsrooms for research, summarisation, and drafting material such as headlines, social media posts and office correspondence like emails. However, most people using it do so with caution, often double-checking the results manually, which erodes AI's efficiency benefits.
- Translation of material into South Africa's 12 official languages (including sign language) currently has only limited use as AI struggles to deal with African languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sepedi. Many journalists see this as a limiting factor for using AI and would like to see more African models developed to address this unmet need.
- Trust deficit was one of the most common responses by interviewees. Fear of AI hallucinations and limits to its verification capabilities were cited as one of the biggest hurdles to rolling out AI more aggressively across South Africa's newsrooms, as this could impact on audience trust and journalistic ethics.
- A growing awareness of mis-/disinformation in the South African information space accompanied by growing frustration at big tech's apparent disinterest in addressing the issues with the same rigour as it would in richer markets signals what is widely seen in news circles as its "disinterest" in the African information ecosystem.
- Respondents cited strong ethical concerns especially around plagiarism. The more experienced journalists expressed worry that financially stricken newsrooms may come to over-rely on AI rather than nurture good newsroom practices (such as double sourcing) and strong writing skills.
- Most newsrooms have no formal AI policies and limited or no training. This results in many journalists having to navigate AI on their own. That brings a level of risk, including inconsistent and poor use, which may result in reduced trust by consumers of legacy news journalism.
- Fears of job displacement because of AI coexist with recognition of the technology's benefits.
- Journalists want in-person, practical AI training, especially for editing, translation, and safe use. They also want AI shaped to local needs with tailor-made solutions for a South African and African news environment, and not off-the-shelf models.

Methodology

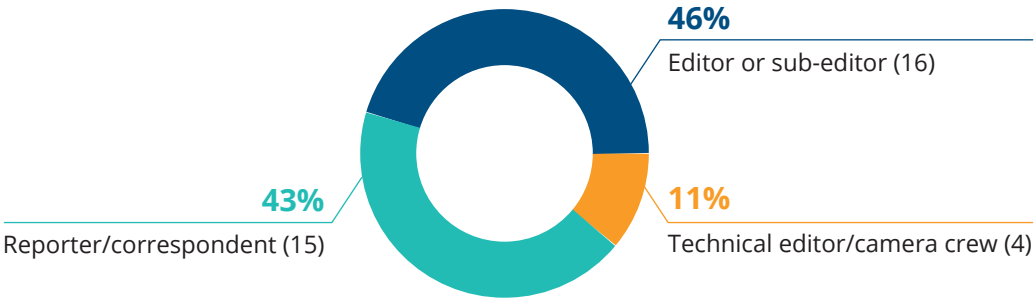
The study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the operational use of AI in South Africa's newsrooms. Data was collected through a survey comprising a structured questionnaire (see Annex 1), followed by semi-structured interviews to provide deeper qualitative insights. Given the recent advent of AI in newsroom settings, literature on the issue is still sparse, especially in the South African context. The TRF's Journalism in the AI era: Opportunities and challenges in the Global South and emerging economies[8] report does however offer some useful comparative material.

Respondents for the AI survey conducted by the Centre for Information Integrity in Africa (CINIA) included journalists working in multiple language newsrooms – for example the SABC, which, as previously mentioned, broadcasts in 14 different languages across multiple platforms. The survey also sought to elicit insights from a range of newsroom staff with different editorial roles, including editors, reporters, picture and sound editors, and digital staff. It focused on South Africa's domestic TV, radio, and digital platforms – but did not include international media houses that operate from the country.

Thirty-six respondents provided answers to the questionnaire, most making themselves available for semi-structured interviews that followed. All names have been removed from the responses as the research team urged participants to be open in their responses, without fear of this affecting their standing among colleagues and management. Most respondents were editorial rather than technical staff (e.g. camera operators, video editors) – with reporters and correspondents representing the majority of respondents.

These roles typically involve newsgathering, interviewing, researching and writing functions, with the more senior staff including editors and sub-editors providing a supervisory role. Consequently, this survey's respondents by and large represented those at the coalface of news journalism, including field reporters and correspondents whose role is to gather and verify news on the ground.

Chart 1: Newsroom roles (number of respondents)



8 Radcliffe, D. 2025. *Journalism in the AI era: Opportunities and challenges in the Global South and emerging economies*, TRF INSIGHTS, Thomson Reuters Foundation, www.trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TRF-Insights-Journalism-in-the-AI-Era.pdf.

Background and literature review

Generative AI technology has the ability to create synthetic sound, imagery and text, and is broadly considered to have "taken off" in 2022 with systems such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Copilot from Microsoft and Google's Gemini leading the way.[9] It has had a transformative effect in the workplace globally, posing both opportunities and risks, but uptake levels have been mixed as government, the private sector and civil society grapple with how to absorb the new technology into their workforce.

South Africa ranks low[10] in the AI-readiness index, with Africa being the slowest adopter worldwide.[11] This is perhaps not surprising given the development challenges, resource constraints and policy priorities the country faces as a whole. However, within the news and broader media sector, newsrooms globally are beginning to experiment with AI and integrate the technology into their workflows.

Numerous surveys, including an Associated Press study,[12] show that journalists are using the technology extensively and independently, although the researchers admit that samples tend to be skewed heavily towards North America, where adoption rates are higher.

Some commentators warn that with more content being AI-generated, originality is under threat, the social relationship between journalists and their audiences is potentially undermined, and journalists risk being transformed from newsgatherers into editors. This as getting AI to do the heavy lifting in routine reporting tasks for efficiency gains appeal.[13] The predominant use is for research or copywriting or reversioning of copy, e.g. for social media sites.

While the most advanced use of AI in newsrooms globally includes the use of chatbots for publications like *Financial Times*, where "bots" are used to answer readers' queries about background information,[14] in many settings the technology's use in newsrooms is still evolving.

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9 Purohit, N. 2023. Google Bard and ChatGPT: Battle of the AI Wordsmiths Unleashed!, *Almonks*. Available at: https://medium.com/aimonks/google-bard-9126747fbc95.

10 SAT Articles. (2026). Studies show SA trails the U.S. in AI implementation by 50%: confirmed by SA's leading digital innovation agency, *South Africa Today*. Available at:.

11 AI Readiness Index 2026: Global, Regional, and Country Statistics. Available at: www.index.dev/blog/ai-readiness-index-statistics. https://southafricatoday.net/technology/studies-show-sa-trails-the-u-s-in-ai-implementation-by-50-confirmed-by-sas-leading-digital-innovation-agency/

12 2Meir, N. 2024. AP survey reveals AI's impact on newsrooms, AP. Available at: www.ap.org/the-definitive-source/products-and-services/ap-survey-reveals-ais-impact-on-newsrooms/

13 Eisikovits, N. 2024. Newsrooms are experimenting with generative AI, warts and all. *The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/newsrooms-are-experimenting-with-generative-ai-warts-and-all-228565.

14 Philip, R. 2025. How Newsrooms Are Using AI Chatbots to Leverage Their Own Reporting – and Build Trust. Global Investigative Journalism Network. Available at: https://gijn.org/stories/newsrooms-using-ai-chatbots-leverage-reporting/.

Academic studies seeking to examine how journalists integrate AI into their workflow highlight what they call an "intelligibility problem". They conclude that journalists use "guesswork and imagination" when deploying technologies rather than acquiring an understanding of how these technologies work to ensure they don't compromise "journalistic norms and responsibilities".[15]

In the South African context, the absence of a systematic approach to AI training and use in newsrooms may also expose vulnerabilities in how journalists understand the challenges that AI may pose to basic journalistic principles.

For journalists in emerging economies and low-income countries, the Generative AI in the Newsroom Project,[16] a non-governmental organisation platform that seeks to share best practices, may be particularly useful to understand best practice elsewhere. A TRF survey into how AI is used in Global South newsrooms is also instructive in highlighting some of the challenges for emerging economies.[17]

Technological innovation and the power of data significantly impact decisions in the news industry, and underscore the need for adaptation and integration of these technologies to ensure sustainability in journalism and its business models.[18] This imperative extends to AI, where scholars argue the case for a pivotal shift in focus from what AI can do to what it should do, as its integration into news workflows deepens and public scrutiny over its impacts intensifies.[19]

Technological innovation and the power of data significantly impact decisions in the news industry, and underscore the need for adaptation and integration of these technologies

This public and policy scrutiny is significant.[20] The policy arena is responding with legislative action aimed at curbing AI-related risks, particularly in the United States with its Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019 and Facial Recognition and Biometric Technology Moratorium Act of 2021. This signifies the need for news organisations to understand public opinions on AI and engage diverse audiences in dialogues concerning its risks and benefits.[21]

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15 See for instance Jones, B., Jones, R. & Luger, E. 2022. AI 'Everywhere and Nowhere': Addressing the AI Intelligibility Problem in Public Service Journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 10:10, 1731-1755. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2022.2145328.\

16 Generative AI in the Newsroom: Exploring the responsible use of generative AI in news production. *Medium*. Available at: https://generative-ai-newsroom.com/.

17 Journalism in the AI Era: A TRF Insights survey, Thomson Reuters Foundation. Available at: www.trust.org/resource/ai-revolution-journalists-global-south/.

18 De-Lima-Santos, M-F. & Ceron, W. 2022. Artificial Intelligence in News Media: Current Perceptions and Future Outlook. *Journalism and Media*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia3010002.

19 Broussard, M., Diakopoulos, N., Guzman, A.L., Abebe, R., Dupagne, M. & Chuan, C-H. 2019. Artificial Intelligence and Journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96(3):673-695. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/1077699019859901.

20 Yang, S., Krause, N.M., Bao, L., Calice, M.N., Newman, T.P., Scheufele, D.A., Xenos, M.A. & Brossard, D. 2023. In AI We Trust: The Interplay of Media Use, Political Ideology, and Trust in Shaping Emerging AI Attitudes. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 102(2):382-406. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/10776990231190868.

21 Beckett, C. & Yaseen, M. 2023. *Generating change: A global survey of what news organisations are doing with AI*, The London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: www.aiunplugged.io/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Generating-Change-A-global-survey-of-what-news-organisations-are-doing-with-AI-By-Cyber-Gear.pdf.

For South African newsrooms practising in a low-adoption context, with significant resource restrictions, using an "American tool not built for the South African audience in mind",[22] proactively directing the conversation rather than simply responding to it is critical for retaining public trust and legitimising their use of digital tools.[23] The theoretical understanding of the integration of AI technologies into journalistic workflows and practices represents a significant theoretical evolution.[24]

This framework extends beyond traditional views of technology as just a channel or a tool, and considers AI as an intentional source of messages produced and distributed by journalists. This shift in understanding AI's centrality in the journalistic production process is crucial for addressing South Africa's intelligibility problem. Journalists in South Africa still grapple with the professional and ethical implications of adopting AI into their work without a clear theoretical or ethical framework within which to do so.

The ramifications of AI for journalism must be contextualised within the larger ongoing process of media digitalisation, which has transformed business models and routines, and increased information competition in the media industry.[25] AI technologies constitute the latest computational reconfiguration of journalism as part of this process. The introduction of these technologies holds implications for how newsrooms operate, the way journalists increasingly rely on data and automated processes to tell stories, and how journalistic labour is reorganised around the increasingly central place of technologies in journalistic routines and processes.[26]

Moreover, a sociotechnical systems lens is crucial, seeing AI as human-developed technology loaded with human values and biases,[27] and introduced into societies with specific characteristics – such as, in South Africa, significant inequalities of access and use. Its implementation necessitates a reaffirmation of journalistic basic principles, forcing journalists to define their professional logic as a separate "creative process" that gives crucial context and meaning.[28] Journalists should also consider ethical guidelines to avoid creating fear, spreading misinformation and causing disruption when reporting on AI.[29]

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22 Beckett, C. & Yaseen, M. 2023. *Generating change: A global survey of what news organisations are doing with AI*, The London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: www.aiunplugged.io/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Generating-Change-A-global-survey-of-what-news-organisations-are-doing-with-AI-By-Cyber-Gear.pdf.

23 Guzman, A.L. & Lewis, S.C. 2020. Artificial intelligence and communication: A Human-Machine Communication research agenda. *New Media & Society*, 22(1):70–86. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444819858691.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Gil de Zúñiga, H., Goyanes, M. & Durotoye, T. 2024. A Scholarly Definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Advancing AI as a Conceptual Framework in Communication Research. *Political Communication*, 41(2):317–334. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2023.2290497.

27 Broussard, M., Diakopoulos, N., Guzman, A.L., Abebe, R., Dupagne, M. & Chuan, C-H. 2019. Artificial Intelligence and Journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(3):673-695. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/1077699019859901.

28 Ibid.

29 Van Rooyen, F. 2023. Journalism, revolutionary technologies and preventing future harm: Proposing the Flaming Torch Media Ethics Theory and the Ten Tenets Field Guide for responsible and ethical communication on science and technology's cutting edge. Paper Presented to the International Communication Association (IAMCR) annual conference.

Scholars propose three ways in which AI may impact on journalism: it may replace journalism, swallow it, or enhance it.[30] The last of the three suggests that AI tools like GPTs (generative pre-trained transformers) can improve journalistic operations by automating tasks and enhancing accuracy, bias management, and plagiarism concerns, while still valuing the human writer's role.

One way to understand this impact is to study the effect of interactions between diverse actors (people) and actants (things and technologies, such as AI) on traditional journalistic work.[31] This research is essential in understanding computational journalism as it emphasises the wide spectrum of human and non-human players involved, both inside and outside the newsroom.[32]

Another theoretical basis that informs the understanding of AI and journalism is the technology acceptance model (TAM). TAM identifies two key factors affecting user attitudes towards technology: perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness.[33] Furthermore, TAM considers work relevance and output quality, which are critical for evaluating a journalist's decision to use AI tools in the newsroom.

Friction emerges because technologies were not designed expressly for journalism, which relies on a smooth transfer of information based on human interactions

Another critical point to note is that understanding the dynamics of automation in journalism requires an examination of the relationship between technological businesses and journalists.[34] These companies must adhere to journalistic standards while managing the inherent logic of their technologies. This friction emerges because the technologies were not designed expressly for journalism which relies on a smooth transfer of information based on human interactions. There is a wider concern of technology surpassing or bypassing human endeavour such that journalists are reduced to becoming algorithmic agents.[35]

30 Wu, S., Tandoc Jr., E.C. & Salmon, C.T. 2019. When Journalism and Automation Intersect: Assessing the Influence of the Technological Field on Contemporary Newsrooms. *Journalism Practice*, 13:10, 1238–1254. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2019.1585198.

31 Lewis, S.C., Guzman, A.L. & Schmidt, T.R. 2019. Automation, Journalism, and Human-Machine Communication: Rethinking Roles and Relationships of Humans and Machines in News. *Digital Journalism*, 7(4), pp. 409–427. Available at: www.researchgate.net/publication/332592289_Automation_Journalism_and_Human-Machine_Communication_Rethinking_Roles_and_Relationships_of_Humans_and_Machines_in_News.

32 Ibid.

33 Albizu-Rivas, I., Parratt-Fernández, S. & Mera-Fernández, M. 2024. Artificial Intelligence in Slow Journalism: Journalists' Uses, Perceptions, and Attitudes. *Journalism and Media*, 5:1836–1850. Available at: www.mdpi.com/2673-5172/5/4/111.

34 Ibid.

35 Rodny-Gumede, Y. 2024. Deepfakes: journalism, media and democracy in the age of AI, *University of Johannesburg News*, November 2024. Available at: https://news.uj.ac.za/news/deepfakes-journalism-media-and-democracy-in-the-age-of-ai/.

Wu et al.[36] talk about automation in journalism in an attempt to centralise these technologies in the research of AI and journalism. Scholarly studies have not yet focused on technical corporations that provide automation to newsrooms as emerging players in journalism. There is a rising debate about "automated journalism", which Carlson (2015)[37] defines as computer-written news produced using algorithmic methods that translate data into narrative texts with minimum human participation.

Other titles used to characterise this phenomenon are "computational journalism", "algorithmic journalism", "robot journalism", and "machine-written journalism".[38] The introduction of advanced computerised technologies like AI into news-making processes has also led to competing notions of what journalism should be, with technologists applying external "pressures and powers" that are sometimes at odds with journalists' normative understandings of the craft and professionalism required for storytelling.

The introduction of advanced computerised technlogies like AI into news-making processes has led to competing notions of what journalism should be

The friction arising from these competing notions has been seen as a "symptom of the newsroom focus on authority and autonomy".[39, 40] Although the technology is costly, traditional news organisations like *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Associated Press* (frequently called "legacy journalism" to distinguish them from more recent digital outlets) have begun integrating AI into their work. However, even with advancements such as GPT-3, these elite outlets must still progress significantly to fully leverage it. This technology also carries inherent risks, particularly the potential for producing misleading content.

36 Wu, S., Tandoc Jr., E.C. & Salmon, C.T. 2019. When Journalism and Automation Intersect: Assessing the Influence of the Technological Field on Contemporary Newsrooms. *Journalism Practice*, 13:10, 1238–1254. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2019.1585198.

37 Carlson, M. 2015. The Robotic Reporter: Automated journalism and the redefinition of labor, compositional forms, and journalistic authority. *Digital Journalism*, 3 (3): 416–431.

38 Wu, S., Tandoc Jr., E.C. & Salmon, C.T. 2019. When Journalism and Automation Intersect: Assessing the Influence of the Technological Field on Contemporary Newsrooms. *Journalism Practice*, 13:10, 1238–1254. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2019.1585198.

39 Sirén-Heikel, S., Kjellman, M. & Lindén, C-G. 2022. At the crossroads of logics: Automating newswork with artificial intelligence—(Re)defining journalistic logics from the perspective of technologists. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 74(3), 354-366. Available at: https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.24656.

40 De-Lima-Santos, M-F. & Ceron, W. 2022. Artificial Intelligence in News Media: Current Perceptions and Future Outlook. *Journalism and Media*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia3010002.

Part 1: AI policy in SA

Globally, media organisations have been grappling with appropriate policies to guide AI use in newsrooms. Numerous newsrooms have established codes of practice to guide journalists on the use of AI tools. Where guidelines and codes are being developed, these are usually aligned with existing professional codes, and often apply principles found in these codes to the new AI environment. This, for instance, is the approach followed by the non-profit journalism organisation the Poynter Institute, which has created a toolkit for news organisations to develop their own AI policies, rooted in the principles of accuracy, transparency and audience trust.[41]

German public service broadcasters are a case in point with *ARD, ZDF, Deutsche Welle*, and *Deutschlandradio* having signed up to a joint code.[42] A key feature is that the broadcasters commit to using AI only when it adds value and not for its own sake. The objective is to preserve the integrity of journalism and the "trust in journalism content" which the code describes as broadcasters' "greatest asset". Three key principles in the document mirror the ideas enshrined in the European Union AI Act, which came into force in June 2024.[43] It is the first AI act of its kind and seeks to rank the risks associated with AI according to use cases.

Firstly, the code pledges to keep "humans in the loop" to oversee outputs generated by GenAI prompts. Secondly it seeks to maintain "transparency" to preserve audience trust; and thirdly, it advocates "clear labelling of content generated by GenAI". This sets the tone of how GenAI should be integrated into newsroom processes, but does not prescribe how AI is used operationally.

Beyond its operational use, the code suggests a strategic vision committing to "participate in the debate about the societal role of algorithms by informing, contextualising, conducting investigative research" and integrating the issue into their editorial decision making. This approach seems forward-thinking and innovative and recognises the rapid advances in AI technology and a desire for Germany's public service broadcasters to stay ahead of the game.

41 McBride, K. 2024. Your newsroom needs an AI ethics policy. Start here. Poynter. Available at: https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2024/how-to-create-newsroom-artificial-intelligence-ethics-policy/.

42 Common AI Code. 2026. Available at: www.zdf.de/unternehmen/organisation/technik/gemeinsamer-ki-kodex-ard-zdf-deutsche-welle-deutschlandradio-100.html; AI Code, www.ard.de/die-ard/organisation-der-ard/KI-Kodex-104/.

43 European Parliament. 2023. EU AI Act: first regulation on artificial intelligence, *Topics*. Available at: www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20230601STO93804/eu-ai-act-first-regulation-on-artificial-intelligence.

The principles outlined in the German public broadcasters' code are:

- **Added value:** This principle stipulates that AI should be used only when it adds value to the broadcasters' public service mandate by making journalistic and administrative processes more efficient.
- **Diversity through responsible personalisation:** In line with the principle of public service, AI could be used to promote inclusion and access to broadcasters' content through personalisation to enhance the diversity of the broadcasters' offerings. An important caveat is that AI training data contains stereotypes and that broadcasters will strive to counteract these biases and filter bubbles.
- **Editorial control and transparency:** To maintain trust in their journalistic content, the broadcasters pledge to adhere to professional standards even when GenAI is used in the content-creation process. The code therefore emphasises that editorial responsibility and control should lie with humans, and that content generated with the assistance of AI should be clearly labelled as such.
- **AI and data competence:** The code stipulates that AI applications should be developed based only on reliable data with integrity and quality. Employees should be trained and empowered to know the risks and potential of using AI in their work. Broadcasters also provide informed and critical reporting on issues regarding AI, based on investigative journalism, and facilitate discussion in society on the role of algorithms.
- **Exchanges and partnerships:** The broadcasters commit themselves to cooperation in the development and use of AI applications and knowledge exchange with other media organisations, scientific institutions and researchers.
- **Sustainability:** The broadcasters will pay attention to environmental issues, in particular energy efficiency, when fine-tuning and using AI models.

Other international news organisations have also developed guidelines for AI use. These include the Thomson Reuters Foundation, which notes that while 81% of journalists are already using AI in their work, only 13% have established AI policies.[44] With this lack of policies in mind, the TRF developed a set of guidelines designed "to help newsrooms identify ethical risks in their AI applications and take action to mitigate these".

These guidelines are "intended as a starting point for ongoing conversations within your organisation on how to use AI while upholding journalistic values – accuracy, fairness, transparency, and accountability. These principles serve as essential pillars for informed communities worldwide, allowing journalism to fulfil its vital role in society".[45] Other international media organisations that have developed guidelines for their journalists to use AI in the newsroom include the Investigative Journalism Foundation,[46] Associated Press,[47] *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*,[48] *The Guardian*[49] and *Financial Times*.[50] These sets of guidelines vary in their level of detail. Some indicate just broad sets of principles, while others offer practical guidelines.

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44 Three steps to an AI-ready newsroom: A practical guide. 2025. Thomson Reuters Foundation. Available at: www.trust.org/resource/ai-policies-newsroom-guide/.

45 Ibid.

46 AI Use Policy. 2024. Investigative Journalism Foundation. Available at: https://theijf.org/about-ai.

47 Meir, N. 2023. Standards around generative AI. Associated Press. Available at: www.ap.org/the-definitive-source/behind-the-news/standards-around-generative-ai/.

48 Talfan Davies, R. 2023. Generative AI at the BBC. *BBC Media Centre*. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2023/generative-ai-at-the-bbc.

49 *The Guardian*'s approach to generative AI. 2023. *The Guardian*. Available at: www.theguardian.com/help/insideguardian/2023/jun/16/the-guardians-approach-to-generative-ai.

50 Letter from the editor on generative AI and the FT. *Financial Times*. Available at: www.ft.com/content/18337836-7c5f-42bd-a57a-24cdbd06ec51.

In May 2025 the UK broadcaster *Channel 4* published a set of AI principles that in many ways reflect the German public broadcasters' commitments.[51] *Channel 4* is funded through commercial activities but is defined as a non-profit public corporation. While it advocates careful use of GenAI, *Channel 4* also emphasises the need to use AI creatively where it "enhances and supports" this endeavour – including to create content.

Channel 4 gained much publicity after a "stunt" in which its flagship documentary *Dispatches* was presented by an AI avatar – with audiences informed of this only at the end. The programme, titled *Will AI Take My Job?,* sought to demonstrate just how convincing AI avatars can be. It created a media frenzy. However, Louisa Compton, *Channel 4's* Head of News and Current Affairs, Specialist Factual and Sport, told news outlets they would not be "making a habit" of using AI presenters.[52]

Under *Channel 4's* AI principles, it has also explicitly committed to "not use AI where it has discriminatory effects" in recognition of some of the in-built biases that reflect data used to train the AI models – the focus of intense academic study.[53] This is a laudable commitment, but arguably many of the "discriminatory" effects are not always immediately apparent, and are not identified until after material is broadcast or published. It will require broadcasters and publishers to be up to date with new findings about AI bias, and to select their AI applications accordingly.

While few African broadcasters have published clear codes of conduct to define how AI is to be used in the newsroom, Zimbabwe's Centre for Innovation & Technology (CITE) online platform, which boasts Africa's first AI TV presenter, reflects the need for transparency in its operations. CITE clearly labels "Alice" – its AI presenter – as an AI avatar rather than a human being on its online platform.[54] However, in settings where AI avatars have been used covertly for seeding and amplifying disinformation in West Africa, including content that ends up in mainstream mass media, such transparency appears absent.[55]

Zimbabwe's Centre for Innovation & Technology's (CITE) online platform boasts Africa's first AI TV presenter "Alice", which it clearly labels as an AI avatar

One of the biggest challenges with technology is that it is developing at such a speed that it is outpacing the introduction of regulations. South Africa may have the advantage of being able to "borrow" some of the ideas already advanced in other newsrooms around the world, but codes of conduct and rules of use need to be contextually specific and tailor-made to reflect the settings in which they are used.

51 *Channel 4's* AI Principles. Available at: https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/_flysystem/s3/documents/2025-05/Channel4AIPrinciples.pdf.

52 *Channel 4* makes TV history with Britain's first AI presenter. 2025. *Channel 4*. Available at: www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-makes-tv-history-britains-first-ai-presenter.

53 Bias in AI amplifies our own biases. 2024. *UCL News*. Available at: www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/dec/bias-ai-amplifies-our-own-biases.

54 Alice, Centre for Innovation & Technology. Available at: https://cite.org.zw/category/alice/.

55 ADDO, Robot wars: How to build a bot to subvert elections. 6 March 2023. Available at: https://disinfo.africa/robot-wars-how-to-build-a-bot-to-subvert-elections-9f739411aa39.

In South Africa, policies around the use of AI in newsrooms are still developing. While the threat of AI on the trustworthiness of journalism, and its potential to exacerbate misinformation, are topics of concern and discussion for South African journalists,[56] these concerns are only slowly making their way into codes and formal guidelines.

The Press Council of South Africa issued a "guidance note"[57] on the use of AI in newsrooms, but this note is not binding and does not serve as an extension of the Press Code. Noting the importance of upholding ethical principles in the interest of audience trust in journalism, the document urges newsroom leaders and journalists "to be thoughtful when they deploy new AI tools". The guidance note largely follows the outline of the Press Code, and its principles are similar, but they are applied to the AI context.

Press Council of South Africa "guidance note" include:

- **Accountability:** AI-generated material must be checked by human eyes and hands.
- **Accuracy:** Journalists should carefully check facts in an AI-generated text.
- **Bias awareness:** Algorithms reflect and amplify race, gender and other biases that emerge in published material.
- **Transparency:** News organisations should offer their audiences maximum transparency about their use of AI tools. A comprehensive statement of the organisation's policy and use of specific tools should be easily available to audiences, and kept current. If tools have been used in the generation of particular items, this should be indicated clearly.
- **Privacy:** Personal data may be used in the development of AI systems, and member publications should take care that relevant rights and legislation (like the Protection of Personal Information Act, or POPIA)[58] are not infringed.

But they should also highlight values that pertain specifically to the use of AI and which are not typically relevant to legacy media, such as:

- **Targeting:** AI tools used to tailor content to audience preferences should be used in a way that guards against the creation of filter-bubbles.
- **Organisational considerations:** AI tools may relieve journalists of some routine tasks. Media organisations should not use AI innovations simply to cut costs. Any savings should be reinvested in quality journalism. Staff should be given training in the use of AI, to enable them to adapt to new technological requirements.

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56 South African National Editors' Forum. 4 July 2024. *Artificial Intelligence and the Age of Misinformation and Disinformation*. Available at: https://sanef.org.za/artificial-intelligence-and-the-age-of-misinformation-and-disinformation/.

57 Press Council of South Africa. 2023. *Guidance note on Artificial Intelligence*. Available at: https://presscouncil.org.za/2023/11/28/press-council-of-sa-pcsa-guidance-notes/.

58 Press Council of South Africa. 2021. *Protection of Personal Information Act*. Available at: https://presscouncil.org.za/2021/07/27/popia-in-media-companies-newsrooms-and-other-divisions/.

- **Intellectual property:** The training sets used by generative AI use large amounts of data without acknowledging the intellectual property rights of the originators. This includes text published by news media. Though solutions to the problem are not yet clear, journalists and media organisations need to be aware of the issue, both with respect to their own intellectual property and their use of AI tools that may not have fully recognised the rights of others. Care should be taken with exposing journalists' own, unpublished texts available to generative AI tools, to ensure confidentiality and security are maintained.

Drawing from international precedents, the civil society organisation Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) developed an overarching document[59] to help South African newsrooms develop their own set of guidelines. According to MMA, the core principles underpinning any AI code should be:[60]

- Links to existing journalistic principles, to show how AI guidelines align with the fundamental values of journalism.
- Transparency, to disclose as much detail as possible on the use of AI across the journalistic process.
- Human oversight, which is vital for maintaining accuracy and public trust.
- Allowed and prohibited uses should be flagged explicitly in guidelines, to indicate under what circumstances newsrooms would or would not use AI systems.
- Privacy and confidentiality, which entails taking care with allowing AI systems to gain access to sensitive information, to ensure the protection of sources.
- Algorithmic bias should be avoided by taking specific steps to ensure human oversight of AI systems, and train AI systems on local contexts and languages.
- Training and literacy should be prioritised by media organisations, to educate their workforce on how to best make use of AI systems and how to help audiences understand and engage with AI systems.
- Cooperation and dependency between different departments. There is a need for both internal collaboration (within a media organisation, across its various departments) and external collaboration (with media organisations and other organisations such as tech companies, governments, and research institutes) to ensure that AI systems are used ethically in the production of journalistic content.
- Enforcement of the guidelines should be considered, whether or not the mechanisms for enforcement are disclosed.
- Media diversity should remain a goal, and newsrooms should avoid the homogenisation of editorial outputs by AI.

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59 Media Monitoring Africa. *Guidelines for Media Organisations Using Generative AI*. Available at: www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/AI_Media_Guidelines.pdf.

60 Ibid.

One of South Africa's biggest media organisations, Media24, developed a detailed policy to guide responsible AI use across the group.[61] The policy's objectives are described as follows:

> "To ensure that ethical considerations are an integral part of AI development across our Group Companies as this is essential to preserve quality and longevity in AI products and their performance, as well as to maintain public trust. As AI is relevant to our technology and product strategy, we want to ensure that we apply data science and AI to add social value for consumers, partners and the business and at the same time apply globally-benchmarked responsible AI standards, whether set forth in applicable laws, ethical best practices, or voluntary frameworks implemented in the jurisdictions where our companies operate."[62]

The guiding principles underpinning the policy include: using AI as a force for good; ensuring technical excellence and robustness in the AI applications used; ensuring fairness and inclusivity in the application of AI, to avoid creating, reinforcing or exacerbating biases; accountability and transparency should guide the way in which these principles are implemented, monitored and controlled, and should be context-sensitive, transparent and explainable to different stakeholders in appropriate circumstances.

The overall picture is of a fragmented and nascent policy landscape for South African newsrooms. Despite some attempts at coordinating policy guidelines by the Press Council of South Africa, little exists by way of overarching policies governing AI use in newsrooms. In this regard, the country lags behind international trends.

Consistent with TRF research revealing that "journalists are using AI with little guidance", few respondents in the CINIA study said their newsroom had an AI policy in place along with formal guidelines.

- Eight respondents said their newsroom had an AI policy including informal guidelines.
- Five respondents said they were aware that their newsroom had an AI committee.
- At the SABC, a committee exists at a corporate level, with a sub-committee being established at newsroom level, to examine AI policy issues.

The absence of guidelines is perhaps a function of poor leadership as well as management not fully understanding the impact of AI in news. Indeed, as the TFR study found, an ad hoc use of AI without any formal guardrails could lead to "accidental or intentional" misuse of AI in the newsroom.

The absence of overarching policy guidelines may also determine whether individual newsrooms have policies or not. Some newsrooms may be waiting for overarching policies by media organisations or their mother companies before drawing up individual operational guidelines for AI use. A further question for consideration for media organisations is whether an AI policy should be developed for the entire organisation (e.g. enterprise level policies for departments such as human resources, finance etc.), or whether a policy should be developed that focuses specifically on news.

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61 Media24. 2025. *New Media24 Responsible AI Policy*. Available at: www.media24.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Media24-Responsible-AI-policy.pdf.

62 Ibid.

Part 2: Operational uses of AI in SA newsrooms

The primary role of the CINIA research was to examine if and how AI was used operationally in South African newsrooms. The focus was largely on how AI may shape the newsgathering process and editorial content creation, rather than on generic office functions like writing or refining emails. The box below illustrates where respondents mostly used AI.

Main areas of AI use:

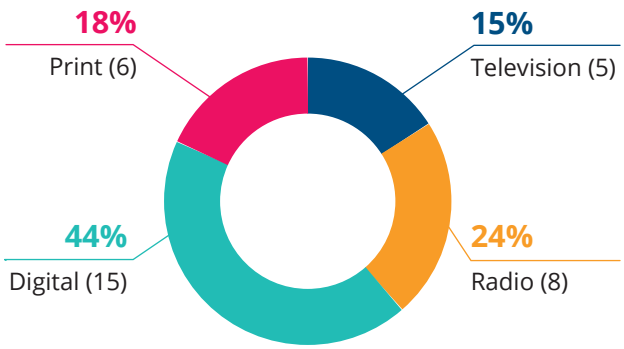
- Confirming authenticity of stories
- Proofreading
- Speech to text
- Headline writing
- Language translation
- Image generation
- Transcription

Nearly half of those surveyed (46%) describe their function as editors or sub-editors whose role is to sign off or approve content before it is made public. One radio journalist with 17 years of experience described AI as being used "discreetly" in her newsroom "but we have started the discussion about AI use because nobody talks about it".

While many respondents work in multimedia newsrooms, an overwhelming majority describe their newsrooms and focus as digital. One could assume that in newsrooms with a digital-first policy (a strategic decision to prioritise online news platforms over traditional broadcast content to maximise revenues, deliver content fast, and offer multimedia content – e.g. embedded), AI adoption might be highest. This is perhaps based on the supposition that digitally focused journalists are more comfortable with tech.

While a direct correlation was not found in the study, the fact that many respondents working in digital environments are among those who have not received any formal AI training should be cause for concern. *SABC News*, *Eyewitness News* (part of Primedia) and Media24 are among South Africa's biggest industry players that have migrated to digital formats over traditional broadcasting or publications – which still exist – as part of a digital-first strategy.

Chart 2: What type of newsroom do you work in? (Number of respondents)



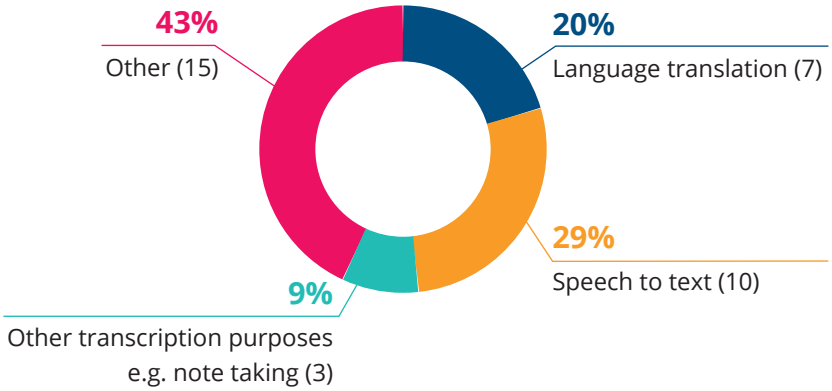
AI tasks

Newsgathering

Translation

In a country where there are 12 official languages, there is enormous scope for AI to be used as a language translation tool or to convert speech to text. In reality, however, newsrooms are struggling to find efficiencies with the applications because of their limited ability to work with African languages. As a result, editors are having to correct or crosscheck the results produced by AI. Recognition of these limitations is itself a useful skill as it illustrates that journalists are engaging with AI tools critically rather than blindly surrendering tasks to the technology.

Chart 3: What tasks do you use AI for? (Number of respondents)



The above chart shows that transcribing speech to text and language translation make up the majority of use cases of AI in the sample of journalists surveyed. Others use it as a note-taking device, for example during interviews, press conferences and meetings. Shorthand is no longer practised extensively among journalists, and pressure to turn material around quickly makes technological solutions attractive time-saving options to build into the journalist's workflow.

Interviews with journalists provided more detail on the limitations of many AI tools as translation aids. One respondent said that in her experience, when dealing with vernacular languages, "Google Translate does word-for-word translation and loses the meaning." This is a function of the training data used to educate the chatbot. Much of this training data is acquired outside of an African setting, hence the tool's frame of reference is limited, rendering it incapable often of being able to correctly spot and accurately translate African languages.

Worryingly, another respondent observed that: "It mistranslates political or cultural terms," highlighting the inability of such AI tools to pick up nuance and context. This is a potentially hazardous flaw when trying to understand cultural and racial identity issues, and where accuracy is instrumental to news storytelling, and establishing trust and credibility with an audience.

By creating what one journalist described as "bland copy" when delegating translation tasks to AI chatbots, such nuances or contextual understandings are lost. In a country like South Africa, where political and cultural terms have been weaponised by disinformation practitioners, the potential for journalistic credibility to be lost is high if newsrooms do not carefully understand and manage how their teams use AI.

If an AI tool fails to understand and correctly identify context, or political or cultural terms, there is a danger that it repeats its mistakes or generates terminology that is flawed, and amplifies it. This is sometimes referred to as "content poisoning". The infamous example of X's AI chatbot Grok regarding the debunked myth of a "white genocide" in South Africa comes to mind. The chatbot drew on disproved conspiracy theories regarding "white genocide" to generate content and responses to prompts discussing this issue. X blamed the fault on what it called an "unauthorised modification to the chatbot's system prompt".[63]

Likewise, xenophobic terms or so-called dog whistles – language or cues aimed at singling out particular communities – highlight the potential risks of AI models that don't understand context or local sensitivities or idiomatic expressions. Given the role of journalism to be a trusted source of fact, and to offer audiences context and analysis, what some people describe as the "humanness" of journalism, this is a hazardous limitation.

Journalists are a trusted source of fact and offer audiences context and analysis, what some people describe as the "humanness" of journalism

Furthermore, as amplifiers of content, audiences rightly expect journalists to check their facts. The risk of careless use of AI amplifying errors because of an AI hallucination underscores why human oversight is needed when AI is used in this way. However, the sentiment for future AI to be better was strong, with one respondent commenting: "The systems are very new for … South African audiences. Language, especially Nguni [languages], is still not understood by AI, and the more the app is 'fed' that information, those algorithms will kick in."

63 Vanian, J. 2025. Musk's xAI says Grok's 'white genocide' posts resulted from change that violated 'core values'. *CNBC*, 16 May 2025. Available at: www.cnbc.com/2025/05/15/musks-xai-grok-white-genocide-posts-violated-core-values.html.

Research

South African newsrooms use AI mostly for research purposes – to research facts for a story, or verify facts or visual imagery – either material provided by freelancers or user-generated content. Reverse image search tools such as Google Lens are favoured, and have proven helpful in identifying mis-/disinformation and manipulated imagery.

The extent to which AI appeals to South African journalists as a research tool varies. By and large younger staff appear more willing to try the technology, while more experienced team members emphasise the need to double-check AI-generated outputs. Furthermore, the utility of AI to help verify and organise vast amounts of data during news investigations is hailed by a minority of journalists as "very useful". Below are some of the use cases offered by respondents who lean on AI as a research tool.

Use cases: AI for research

"I use it when I need to do a background of a story quickly."

"I use AI to help source sometimes hard-to-find documents, such as court cases, also to summarise a technically difficult subject involving the law – for example, changes to the National Credit Act and how this impacts the consumer. I use mainly Grok. I have also used it to test stock trading algorithms (in which case I compare different AI engines)."

"We utilise ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini for research purposes. I prefer Copilot and Gemini as they give you the source links to crosscheck. Research obtained via AI must always be crosschecked in our newsroom."

"I do not specifically use AI offerings. I continue to research facts through reputable – and multiple – online sources, via internet and telephone. I have good reason not to trust what is now on offer as AI assistance."

"We do not use any specific AI tools. However, we do sometimes use various free/available tools – to verify pictures, summarise documents, etc."

"I personally use Perplexity AI as a departure point for research. But it should never be taken at face value. The actual sources Perplexity finds should be read and assessed by journalists themselves."

"We also often use reverse image search to ensure the photographs submitted by freelancers are their own property, or to investigate some stories. I have found NotebookLM useful in the past, but we've had run-ins recently where it is over-relied on and provides a trite, dumbed-down summary of a report that could have been much more interesting. The reporter did not read the actual report but rather relied on the NotebookLM summary, which provided the wrong emails. Pinpoint is very useful for extracting datasets and making PDFs searchable."

One respondent pointed out that many of the applications were of no use to visually impaired people. But all expressed hope that with more investment in South African technology platforms, localised versions may generate refinements that would make them more accurate and attractive to use.

Output

Many newsrooms in the UK, US and Europe have developed proprietary AI models to service their own particular audiences and needs. This may be a tactic that some South African newsrooms or groups of newsrooms explore in the future. However, this was not the focus of this research.

Editing, sub-editing and reversioning

As newsroom roles change over time, AI has the potential to fill the gaps, assume some of the more mundane or repetitive tasks, and secure efficiencies. One respondent to the AI survey said she used AI to augment the work a sub-editor would do, i.e. verify copy, check for grammar and spelling, and write headlines. This mirrors use cases across the industry globally. Others may use it to give them ideas for stories or news angles.

A risk of this type of use of AI to develop content is that it may erode the creativity, diversity and independence of individual journalists to make editorial decisions and come up with individual angles and approaches. In this regard, concerns about the potential homogenising influence of AI on journalistic content is not dissimilar to earlier criticisms of so-called churnalism,[64] which initially focused on journalists' recycling of wire copy and press releases, but has been amplified by the rise of the internet. In the new digital landscape, the "recycling and repurposing of news" has been enabled on an unprecedented scale, driven by algorithms and access to big datasets.[65]

Some sceptics[66] argue that AI fundamentally shifts the relationship between reporter and audience as reporters are effectively "turned into writers and editors", suggesting a mechanical relationship that strips content of its humanity. According to this view, "the process of writing out a story is inseparable from the ideas that give rise to it. Ideas change and take shape as they are written out. They are not preexisting entities patiently floating around, perfectly formed, simply waiting to be translated into words and sentences".[67]

While many newsrooms face deadline pressures that do not allow their journalists time to mull over ideas and meander through their thoughts before committing them to copy or recorded material, this concern about the minimising of human input into journalistic storytelling is a recurring one.

Many journalists tasked with subbing content favour the writing assistant Grammarly (rebranded in 2025 as Superhuman). This despite public reviews that suggest that like other AI assistants, it may have its limitations. Much of Grammarly's focus is on American English, and some users complain that it yields many false positives – flagging up errors that don't exist. In South African newsrooms where Americanisms such as "gotten" and "likely" have increasingly passed smoothly across the editor's desk, this may not be a problem. Styles of English are the prerogative of the news organisation.

South African news platforms are increasingly adopting multimedia models with the need to make stories stretch across multiple platforms to maximise audience reach. However, the journalist news force tasked with gathering inputs has not expanded proportionately. News journalists are increasingly expected to create news content that must be presented in a variety of styles and across different platforms.

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64 Davies, N. 2008. *Flat Earth News*. London: Chatto & Windus.

65 Johnston, J. & Forde, S. 2017. Churnalism: Revised and revisited. *Digital Journalism*, 5(8), 943–946. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1355026.

66 Eisikovits, N. 2024. Newsrooms are experimenting with generative AI, warts and all. *The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/newsrooms-are-experimenting-with-generative-ai-warts-and-all-228565.

67 Ibid.

One survey respondent described AI's utility in repurposing material for digital use and content creation. "I use it to draft social media posts, but I will edit the captions myself."

Others use it to create multiple versions of stories.

Similar distinctions have been made by journalists working in international contexts. According to Gary Rogers, newsroom transformation director for Reach, the UK's largest commercial news publisher, and who was interviewed separately for this research: "There is a difference between reversioning copy – which is a linguistic tool – and reformatting copy that requires a formatting too."[68] The former *BBC* and *ITN news* executive continued: "There are some stories which are localised and there are some stories which are just good stories and should be shared."

He speaks of the potential to use AI to tailor-make or reversion stories for a particular audience – for instance across a network's multiple platforms, including online, digital and broadcast. It's being tried with a proprietary tool across numerous UK publications. "Where you take the URL from one story and put the URL into the AI and it delivers you a different rewritten version of the story – and it can do that in about a minute."

Others are using similar tools to create summaries of written digital news copy. "One of the big Swedish titles,"[69] Rogers reminds us, claimed "they got a lot more 'scroll time' and 'reads' with people who read the summary first, then went on to read the story."

While more research is needed to test whether audiences switch from summaries to source material, it provides the potential for AI to write teasers or selling points for a story and direct user traffic to the main text.

Video, audio and text editing

AI tools for creating audio, video and text content are increasingly gaining traction in newsrooms. Journalists from TV and radio backgrounds may be less resistant to taking up new technologies, as broadcast technologies have shifted rapidly in recent decades. An example is the move from satellite transmission with systems like Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) to combined cellular-, ethernet- and Wi-Fi-based live transmission systems such as LiveU. Even journalists with non-technical roles have been expected to have a general grasp of such technology.

Journalists from TV and radio backgrounds may be less resistant to taking up new technologies, as broadcast systems have shifted rapidly in recent decades

In the survey, traditional broadcast journalists could see merit in using AI more extensively. A radio journalist said he would like to see it integrated more into his workflow. For example, he said they relied on X to do much of "live transcription of speeches or press conferences", and said as more journalists became desk-bound, rather than being sent out into the field, such AI tools could prove "invaluable".

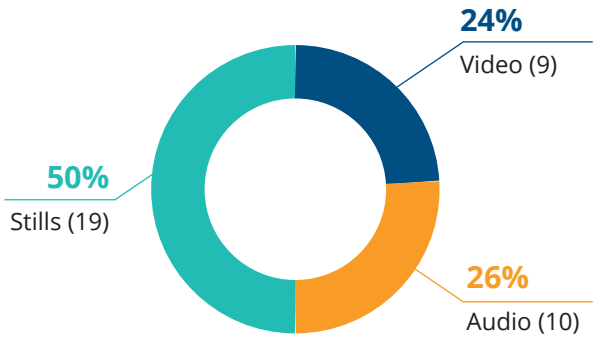
68 Rogers, G. 2026. Personal interview. 2 February 2026.

69 Case Study: Sweden's Aftonbladet Built AI-Driven Editorial Tools and an Election Chatbot. *Online News Association*, 8 October 2024. Available at: www.journalists.org/news/case-study-swedens-aftonbladet-built-ai-driven-editorial-tools-and-an-election-chatbot#:~:text=AI%2Dgenerated%20article%20summaries%20were%20integrated,readers%20aged%2019%20to%2036.

AI tools can also be used to create graphics and other data visualisations at speed, making them attractive for fast-turnaround news stories or visual explainers. Although not an issue raised by survey respondents, they can also help overcome copyright or archive constraints by generating "fresh" audio or visual material that is not subject to reusage fees.

Labelling and generic AI

Chart 4: Do you use AI for editing the following media? (Number of respondents)



Filling the void left by human journalists

Financial constraints have resulted in many job losses across the news industry globally.[70] South Africa has not escaped such cuts. In April 2024 *Daily Maverick* launched a controversial campaign shutting down its website for one day to draw attention to newsroom job losses.[71]

Commenting on the shutdown, Frayintermedia further noted that: "In 2020, Associated Media Publishing which published *Cosmopolitan*, *House and Leisure* and other titles was forced to shut down, alongside about 80 community publications, while significant job losses were announced at Media24, Independent Media, Tiso Blackstar, Primedia and *e.tv/eNCA* in the same period."

As a result, newsrooms increasingly rely on content produced by outside sources – the most common being public relations companies. One journalist lamenting this development told CINIA researchers that "being able to develop an AI system that aids us monitoring news rather than rely on a PR-type approach might definitely improve the quality of journalism if people are trained and understand the limitations of AI".

Furthermore, if newsrooms increasingly depend on public relations companies for content, then clear AI guidelines surely need to be implemented and adhered to by those third parties to preserve trust in South Africa's newsrooms.

70 Wits Centre for Journalism. 2024. *State of the Newsroom, A Wits Centre for Journalism Project*. Available at: https://journalism.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/State-of-the-Newsroom-2024.pdf.

71 Daily Maverick shutdown highlights the desperate state of SA's media. *Frayintermedia*. Available at: www.frayintermedia.com/post/daily-maverick-shutdown-highlights-the-desperate-state-of-sas-media/.

What AI technology is available in newsrooms?

Two different kinds of AI, off-the-shelf (available commercially) and proprietary (developed by the news organisations themselves), are used. Interviews suggest the following are the main applications: ChatGPT, Pixels, Google Lens (reverse image search), Grok, Gemini, Otter.ai, Copilot and Grammarly.

What are the benefits and risks of AI use in newsrooms?

Benefits

- Basic research tool to research stories, context and contacts.
- Helps gather information and interviews through speech-to-text functions.
- Enables journalists to work with large data sets and analyse them at speed, saving time.
- Enables rapid translation of commonly used languages (but performs poorly with African languages).
- Adds professionalism to engagement with interviewees, especially if English is not a first language.
- Frees up journalists from doing repetitive tasks like reversioning of news copy, allowing them to focus on primary source journalism or going out into the field (subject to editorial discretion).
- Saves time.
- Enables journalists to reformat copy for different uses, e.g. to create social media posts, blogs or scripts across multimedia formats.
- Enables the creation of summaries of complex documents/investigations, which can be used to attract audiences to anchor content.
- Supports data-driven investigations i.e. open-source intelligence (OSINT) allowing for geolocation, temporal analysis, visual and audio analysis, etc.
- Helps verify user-generated or third party-generated content, e.g. reverse image search to identify the authenticity of imagery and call out mis-/disinformation.
- Assists with creating output and storytelling – e.g. graphics, obscuring the identities of sensitive subjects, visual explainers.

Risks

Much of AI's training content is not translated into local languages. This creates the risk of AI exclusion and presents challenges in ensuring safe and responsible AI use in South African newsrooms.

- One-directional AI regarding languages: AI models used in South African newsrooms struggle to translate many African languages. This is a function of the underlying training data used to develop the AI models.
- Biases in terms of search: AI models used in South African newsrooms often cannot pick up nuances and political terminology, idiomatic expressions and syntax, creating the risk of inaccurate interpretation and news reporting.
- Lack of guardrails: As many AI technologies are developed in the Global North, hallucinations and deliberately manipulated content (disinformation) may not be flagged because the developers do not appreciate the South African context in which their applications are used. Automated models trained to spot particular instances of misinformation that exist in other contexts may not be triggered by context or language-specific innuendos, slurs or connotations. Numerous studies and experiments have tested this hypothesis.[72]
- Dependency dynamics: Growing dependence of newsrooms on big tech platforms potentially complicates the task of ensuring new technologies work in the interests of news organisations and the publics they serve. This is especially pertinent in African contexts where most AI offerings are trained on data from the Global North. It arguably makes the need to invest in and develop localised AI more pressing.
- Over-reliance and lazy journalism: The technology can encourage journalists to take shortcuts, creating bland copy devoid of human nuance, sentiment and ethics.
- Trust: If not carefully monitored or used carelessly, AI can erode audience trust if the limitations of the technology are ignored.
- Transparency: Absence of labelling where material is AI-generated (e.g. in content) can erode audience trust and credibility.

How are generative AI tools used globally?

Various uses have been noted in international settings:

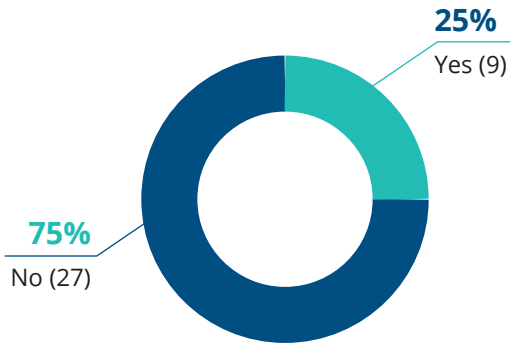
- Text and research tools
- Using LLMs for background research
- Summarising documents
- Drafting interview questions
- Creating structured briefs
- Language translation and multilingual newsgathering
- Image/video generation and verification
- Deepfake detection tools
- Reverse image search workflows
- Forensic analysis (shadows, compression patterns, metadata)
- Using AI to detect manipulated media

72 Allen, K. and Nehring, C. 2025. *Ai-Generated Disinformation in Europe and Africa – How Elections Are Influenced and What We Can Do About It/Uses Cases, Solutions and Transnational Learning*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Available at: www.kas.de/en/web/medien-afrika/einzeltitel/detail/-/content/new-study-ai-generated-disinformation-in-europe-and-africa.

Part 3: Training

CINIA questionnaire respondents were asked to describe their level of AI training. As alluded to earlier, an observation in South Africa and mirrored in other settings is that many journalists using AI are self-taught, often relying on colleagues for support or online help. Seventy-five percent of respondents confirmed they had not received any formal AI training from their news organisations.

Chart 5: Have you undertaken any AI training in your newsroom? (Number of respondents)



CINIA's preliminary research indicates a fragmented training environment with little systematic education and support for newsroom staff in South Africa. Most of the AI tools used in newsrooms are off-the-shelf generic models developed outside of an African context. Except for one newsroom which has a proprietary AI application, all use commercially designed AI applications. These have all been developed (and use training data gathered) largely from outside Africa. This presents a real risk of hallucinated content, disinformation and bias, and makes using many AI models for tasks such as translation extremely limited in a South African context.

Numerous freelancers regularly working for newsrooms said they had acquired some AI knowledge on their own, with some gaining skills through courses offered via the Udemy online learning platform. While many of these courses are not tailor-made for newsrooms, they do provide exposure to some of the use cases and the unintended consequences of using GenAI – including hallucinations. These respondents generally appeared more confident in using the technology.

One newsroom staffer said they had participated in the six-month TRF Mentorship Programme,[73] which supports AI adoption in newsrooms, and had gained help from the TRF on developing AI policies for the newsroom. Others said they had been exposed to other training provided by vendors such as Microsoft or Marfeel, which focus largely on audience metrics and optimising engagement.

73 The Thomson Reuters Foundation. 2024. *TRF Mentorship Programme for Newsrooms: Supporting AI Adoption*. Available at: www.opportunitiesforafricans.com/the-thomson-reuters-foundation-trf-mentorship-programme-for-newsrooms-supporting-ai-adoption/#google_vignette.

One of the challenges of commercial vendor-driven training is that the courses offered are often product-specific, and are aimed at selling a solution rather than building generic operational awareness.

Newsrooms arguably have very specific training needs reflecting the editorial choices journalists must make as part of their job and the unique trust relationship legacy media enjoys with its audience. Therefore, tailor-made training is arguably the most suitable, as it is optimised for newsroom use.

A handful of respondents explained that they had been exposed to workshops and seminars including those offered by the University of the Witwatersrand's Wits Centre for Journalism, CINIA's Information Integrity Summit at Stellenbosch University (July 2025), and Reuters' AI-Powered News and Sports Content webinar (March 2025). However, one-to-one targeted training is largely absent, despite senior staff in numerous newsrooms having requested training.

One said they were "feeling their way through without guidance", yet many showed an awareness of some of the pitfalls of AI. This suggests that a generic awareness of risks and benefits of GenAI is broadly present among journalists in South Africa's newsrooms – but there is an institutional gap in providing operational training. Indeed, one respondent went as far as to criticise the limited training they had received, observing that the training had been "fanatical and they downplayed the risks".

The SABC's efforts are perhaps noteworthy, as they arguably set the tone for training and capacity building within the industry as a whole locally, despite financial and management challenges. Respondents included current SABC staff, as well as former employees now in the private sector. They said some SABC staff attended a 2024 workshop on responsible AI in the newsroom, organised by the Public Media Alliance, and a media training workshop on using AI to combat mis-/disinformation organised by the United Nations and South African National Editors' Forum.

Respondents were asked about their willingness to undertake training, and what form that training should take. A large proportion (69%) said their preference would be for in-person newsroom-based training or a hybrid model – i.e. in the newsroom followed up by online training.

In terms of who to train, some respondents indicated the need to train both management and editorial staff with targeted customised training. A one-size-fits-all approach clearly does not work, with some respondents indicating that AI often came under a broader commercial policy of a news organisation, without considering the nuances and needs of the newsroom. Put simply, the AI needs of a human resources or finance department of a broadcasting or publishing organisation will be very different to those of newsroom staff. Thus, a highly focused approach is advocated, with a train-the-trainer model possibly being the most cost-effective and efficient.

There is clearly an industry-wide gap in operationalising AI use in newsrooms in a systematic manner

There is clearly an industry-wide gap in operationalising AI use in newsrooms in a systematic manner and providing the training to ensure safe and consistent use. One respondent urged future AI training to "incorporate journalism ethics" – a reflection perhaps of a need to remind staff of the basics of journalism, such as sourcing, critical thinking and editorial balance, as well as future-proofing the industry with technological skills.

Part 4: Conclusion and recommendations

Many newsrooms are using AI "under the wire", to borrow the assessment of one respondent; and an overwhelming sentiment appears to be that newsroom staff are having to play catch-up with the technology and learn from each other.

While there is a broad awareness of AI's possibilities and pitfalls, there seems to be a generational gap in how risks are perceived. This is evidenced by one senior journalist at a private broadcaster, who said she was concerned that without operational guidance on how to use AI responsibly, newsrooms would witness a decline in critical thinking and journalistic skills. It was a sentiment echoed in the interviews:

> "Young journalists will lose the ability to research for themselves."
>
> "People want shortcuts instead of building skills."

Indeed, it seems there is a disconnect between the most experienced journalists, who tend to be older, and a younger cohort who generally appear more willing to experiment with the technology. The more experienced journalists seem aware of what could be "lost" to technology, not just in terms of workforce issues but journalistic integrity and trust.

News organisations in other settings, including the UK, have experienced similar challenges. Rogers explains that much of the evolution of AI technology in newsrooms has been user-driven as journalists and senior editorial staff try to keep pace with the technology their audiences are using. This is an important point because as newsrooms compete to maintain market share, there needs to be capacity building to ensure newsrooms are "AI-fit for purpose".

Drawing on the above, several recommendations could be made:

- Operational training and policy development should be developed concurrently. Newsrooms should not wait for policies to be put in place before setting out guidelines and training for operational use.
- Training needs to be multilayered and focused. It must target management, editorial staff and field reporters, and be offered in multiple languages.
- Training should be newsroom-specific and not vendor-driven. Journalists have expressed a need to understand how existing tools work generically, without feeling they are being sold a solution by big tech.
- Training should be experiential and where possible in-person and newsroom-based. Trainers should develop context-specific exercises delivered by experienced journalists who know how newsrooms work and who understand the region.
- Newsrooms in South Africa need to benefit from other countries' experiences. In addition to operational training, on-site visits to other newsrooms globally should be considered.

Annexes

Survey: AI use in South African newsrooms

This survey is being conducted on behalf of the Centre for Information Integrity in Africa (CINIA) in the Department of Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch in order to understand the use of Generative AI (GenAI) in newsrooms across Africa. Responses will help to shape policy and assess future training needs, and focus on the operational use of GenAI among practising journalists across print, broadcast and digital media in South Africa.

1. **How long have you been working as a journalist for?** _____

2. **Please indicate your age** ☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–50 ☐ Over 50

3. **Please state your gender** ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Non-binary ☐ Prefer not to say

4. **What is the language(s) of your publication/media output?** _____

5. **What type of newsroom do you work in?** ☐ Television ☐ Radio ☐ Digital Print

6. **How would you describe your role in the newsroom?**
   ☐ Editor/sub-editor ☐ Reporter/correspondent ☐ Technical editor/camera crew

7. **Does your newsroom have an AI policy that you are aware of? If yes, please give details below**

   _____

   _____

   _____

8. **Does your newsroom have an AI committee to guide operational use of AI? If yes, please give details below**

   _____

   _____

   _____

9. **Do you use AI for any of the following tasks?**
   ☐ Language translation
   ☐ Speech to text
   ☐ Other transcription purposes e.g. notetaking

10. **If you answered yes to any of the above, please give more details**

    _____

    _____

    _____

11. **Do you use AI for any of the following tasks?**

☐ Researching facts for stories ☐ Verification e.g. reverse image search ☐ Other

12. **If you answered yes to any of the above, please provide details, and if possible, share details of the AI applications you use**

13. **Do you use AI for content creation – e.g. reversioning copy, creating social media posts, etc.? Please give as much detail as possible below**

14. **Do you use AI for editing the following media?**

☐ Video editing ☐ Audio editing ☐ Stills editing

15. **Have you undertaken any AI training in your newsroom?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

16. **If you answered yes to the question above, please give details, including dates of training and types of training undertaken**

17. **Would you be interested in receiving AI training for you and your newsroom colleagues?**

☐ Yes ☐ No

18. **Would you be willing for our research team to undertake a brief online interview with you (max 10 minutes) to gain more insight into your AI experience? If yes, please supply your name and contact details, which will be used only for the purpose of this research project.**

Chart 6: Use of AI key applications – potential and pitfalls

Use of AI	Key applications	Potential	Pitfalls
Summarising and editing	Grok ChatGPT Pixels	Saves time by analysing and summarising press releases Condenses long text to find angle Edits photographs	Erosion of journalistic skills Fear of job losses Trite or dumbed-down content produced in summaries
Confirming authenticity	Google Lens ChatGPT	Helps verify pictures, names and numbers Geolocation and verification of images	Fabricated or incorrect information (hallucinations) sometimes provided
Translation and proofreading	ChatGPT Copilot Google Translate	Reversions copy Fixes grammar and spelling Improves writing Translates copy	Inaccurate translation and proofreading in vernacular languages Cultural and political meaning of original lost in translation Plagiarism is a risk if used in a cut-and-paste way, and not used just for improvement
Speech to text	Gemini Otter.ai Scribbr	Can present radio stories in absence of staff Transcription of interview recordings	Job losses Erosion of translation skills
Headline writing, intros, stings[74]	Chat GPT Copilot	Can improve search engine optimisation Helps to generate ideas	Erosion of journalistic skills Fear of job losses
Image generation	Grok	Image generation for use on social media summaries of stories Creates representations of data	Can create inaccuracies or hallucinations
Research	ChatGPT Copilot Gemini NotebookLM Grok Perplexity	Saves time Provides background and context	AI does not indicate sources or provide references, undermines trust Makes journalists lazy, losing research ability Fear of job losses Lack of training in AI use

74 A sting is a "bit of music or sound (with pictures if on TV) used to punctuate the programme. Stings are often used at the beginning or the end of a report or to highlight the headlines". *Peach TV*. Available at: https://peachtv.co.uk/tv-jargon/#:~:text=Sting,or%20to%20highlight%20the%20headlines.

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