

Scholarship Essay: With newsrooms now regularly using generative AI to assist with the reporting of stories, what kind of guardrails and verification processes would you recommend to combat the growing proliferation of deep fakes, maintain journalistic integrity and ensure the public's trust when it comes to the use of AI?

“Ethically, there are a lot of issues with AI. It can incorporate ‘hallucinations,’ or false information into its responses. In a news article or broadcast script, presenting misinformation to the public soils the reputation of the news station and the reporter. AI is a tool, not a solution. Using it to assist with the flow of a broadcast script or the first draft of a web article speeds the dissemination of information to the public. It frees up time for reporters to get out in the field and interact with community members. But, no matter how a journalist uses AI, the final message must have the human touch, verification from an actual person. From my perspective, humans are more likely to catch nuanced mistakes, like mischaracterization of sources and quotes or tonal bias often found in generative-AI content.

If AI is used during the reporting or writing process, I believe the public has the right to know. Journalism is about being a watchdog and exposing the truth for audiences; it is our ethical calling to be transparent. When our audience finds out about undisclosed AI use, we lose their trust. In 2023, Sports Illustrated faced a scandal over matching fake names with AI reporting. Once investigated, Sports Illustrated explained that many of the articles came from another service, but still faced backlash from the public, reducing their credibility.

AI shows up in other places too. During the summer of 2025, a video of rabbits jumping on a trampoline went viral, spreading across social media. It was a cute, heart-warming moment, but it wasn't real; it was AI. Many news outlets went deeper, investigating the source of the rabbit video to verify its validity. And guess what, the account was not real. The video's widespread reach is an example of how AI-generated information created by bad actors could mislead the public on an exponential level.

Tips from the community are invaluable because many stories wouldn't be told without the public's help. However, in a time of deepfakes and generative AI (like the rabbit video), it can be hard to distinguish between real and fake tips. News outlets must now confirm tips with a wider investigative lens to ensure they don't become facilitators of fake news. Just because the tip includes a video or photo as evidence, does not mean it is an indicator of its validity. Reporters must be trained to identify AI-generated content and remain educated on the advances in AI. In the future, I see reporters becoming experts in identifying AI so they can continue to serve the public with integrity.

No matter how far-reaching AI becomes, journalists have the advantage of connecting with the community on personal and emotional levels. AI gathers information randomly without seeing the unspoken elements of a story, situation, or circumstance. Journalists get in the trenches, dig deep to uncover the truth. It is this passion for true communication that will continue to fuel the truth in media coverage.

(Essay by Charlotte Pfabe, Elon University, winner of the 2026 Bob Shilling Memorial Scholarship)