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Generative AI and Journalism: Hype, The Always Already New, and Directions for Scholarly Imagination

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This essay pushes against hype about generative AI in both journalism and journalism scholarship. Emergent questions around the black box nature of AI, concerns about information disorder, and problems with the theft of intellectual property are recontextualized with a new focus – one that demands scholars think outside of the newsroom, center the natural and the cultural elements of journalism, and ultimately, remain critical about the always already new of new technologies and powerful companies looking to devalue human labor. A warning is issued about generative AI and journalism more generally, pushing us to study the importance of remembering unequal distributions of power and their connections to the rise of authoritarianism.

Keywords: hype, generative artificial intelligence, journalism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, democracy, environment, information disorder, materiality

There is just one employee and a large language model used by Good Daily, the company behind email newsletters in over 350 communities across 47 states in the US. As *Nieman Journalism Lab* reported, nowhere do these newsletters disclose to readers that generative AI powers the newsletters' summaries, curation, and aggregation of real local news covered by actual newsrooms. Their creator, Matthew Henderson, believes he is leveraging AI to save local news. Journalism detractors say the fake testimonials on the websites and the lack of transparency about AI “undermine the principles of trustworthy journalism” (Deck, 2025).

On LinkedIn, home to the hawking of all that is innovation in its glory, a representative from HuggingFace, “The AI community building the future,” pushed a new feature from the company, “Will we soon all have our own personalized AI news agents?” He continued in the post, “not perfect yet, but you can see where things could go: we'll all be able to build personalized AI agents that curate & analyze news for each of us” (Daudens, 2024).

And at *The Los Angeles Times*, owner Patrick Soon-Shiong has said he hopes to introduce an AI “bias meter” for the newspaper’s news and editorial content, which will be “integrated into articles so that ‘somebody could understand, as they read it, that the source of the article has some level of bias’” (Betts, 2024).

While the examples above are drawn from the US context, they should all feel familiar to digital journalism scholars. Yes, generative AI is new, at least as we are understanding in the age of the GPT and large language model approach to prediction. But these proposed new uses of generative

AI have recent historical antecedents in digital journalism: human-powered content farms of the 2010s (Bakker, 2012); the fights over Google news snippets and the heyday of Facebook as a news platform (Tworek & Buschow, 2016); and the allure of various design nudges to guide news consumers' media literacy (Andi & Akesson, 2020). Since 2013, *Digital Journalism* has been a home to the evolving discourse on technological disruption and its implications for journalism. Digital journalism scholars, then, have a unique opportunity to go beyond our typical set of applied questions and chart new ground. If generative AI reminds us to think more broadly about what distinguishes humanity from computers, we might extend the parallel to ask: what can we contribute distinctively as journalism scholars who have already lived through rapid, disruptive technological change in our object of study, perhaps more so than any other field within social science?

In this commentary, I make a call for augmenting the existing scholarship that about generative AI and journalism with a perspective that takes us outside of news routines, news norms, news business models, and news audiences. Instead, I call for a perspective shift for digital journalism studies scholars: the need to “de-hype” the scholarly imagination associated with generative AI and offer points of departure for a critical turn in digital journalism studies research on generative AI. Ultimately, it is my hope that we can take advantage of our experience as scholars of new technology to focus our attention on larger, societal level questions about what generative AI means for shifts in flows of power, capital, and the value of humanity more generally. I acknowledge my argument is very much framed within a US-centric departure point but given both the US provenance of the big tech companies developing generative AI and the obnoxiously oppressive ideological exportation of US frameworks of journalism, this myopia may be nonetheless productive.

How to De-hype Generative AI: Always, Already, New

First, we must see the hype around generative AI for what it is: belonging to a familiar set of discursive turns around new technology; the form of these debates is predictable, even if the innovation has shifted. For clarity, when I use “generative AI” I am referring to “computational techniques that are capable of generating seemingly new, meaningful content such as text, images, or audio from training data” and does so in “ways that cannot be distinguished anymore from human craftsmanship” as per Feuerriegel et. al. (2024: 116). The introduction of generative AI is “always already new,” as Lisa Gitelman (2006: 2-10) puts it, as generative AI fits into a larger discourse about how new technologies are absorbed by culture. Gitelman identifies three key commonalities in these discourses:

1. The introduction of new media (or new technology) is “never entirely revolutionary” but instead points to a space of negotiation for what matters (and who matters)
2. We give too much agency to new technology (or new media), or we give it too much power that assumes a unified force and deterministic, known “end of history.”
3. Debates over new technologies are “socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such....a view, that is, of the contested relations of force that determine the pathways by which new media may eventually become old hat”

If we can see that these discourses are familiar, we can resist the over-essentialized power AI has on our scholarly imagination. Taking a historical long view about how journalism has litigated new technologies, what that has meant for people, and what shifts we have seen at a societal level helps frame the scale of disruption. Certainly, generative AI offers one more chance to relitigate the epistemologies of digital journalism, or which recognizes the fundamental “dislocation” of journalism away from in-newsroom platforms to platforms outside the boundaries of traditional news organizations, unsettling journalism’s knowledge claims, norms, and practices (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

But is this interrogation worth our time? Do we continue to chase yet another adoption of yet another new technology in newswork? How unsettled should we be? We know that new technology often disrupts the way that news is produced, consumed, and valued, both culturally and economically. We do not know what the future of generative AI holds for journalism. But de-hyping is needed: no matter how disruptive the technology might be, we can still see both the discursive and the material questions it surfaces as more of the same. I urge us to do our best to recognize the always already new - and look back at other disruptions and the questions and discourses they have raised. For instance, some of the major worries have emerged among journalists (and have been taken up by journalism scholars) include:

- 1) The “black box” problem
- 2) The loss of idea ownership, intellectual property, and the replacement of humans by machines
- 3) The further pollution of the information environment

I discuss each of these below. I also offer a new, alternative way that digital journalism scholars can approach the already always new questions around technology: the recursive role that nature and the natural world plays in shaping our use and understanding of new technology. While not new to science and technology studies, digital journalism scholarship has not yet engaged this approach.

1. The black box problem

As Arthur C. Clark (1973), creator of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, wrote, “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” These early versions of GPTs do feel like magic: how is it that they are able to, with a prompt, seemingly create a new research paper? Or mimic the style of a legendary artist? Or make it possible to generate remixed video without the help of editing software? Like other technologies before it, generative AI offers one more iteration of the “black box” (Pasquale, 2015). We offer input, the input (our prompt) goes through some process we are led to believe is beyond our comprehension as non-technicians, and boom, this results in an output. The various weights and levers that provide the GPT predictive power are unknown to us, much like the way that Google search once felt like magic to us. The power of Google/Alphabet to keep their search algorithms proprietary information has meant that “how Google” works has been a black box. Yet at this point, people have enough experience using Google and so many algorithmically-

driven forms of content discovery that there are now “folk theories” of how these algorithms work (Toff and Nielson, 2018). Certainly, newsrooms spend inordinate time and effort trying to reverse engineer the algorithmic discovery patterns of Google search, Google News, Meta, TikTok, and various other platforms, fighting for mindshare in the digital attention economy.

To give into the magic of generative AI is to give technologists too much power (Usher, 2023). This technology too, is knowable. It is built on human knowledge, and that math, specifically statistical predictions, not magic, is driving its answers. As tech philosopher Jaron Lanier (2024) argues:

A program like OpenAI’s GPT-4, which can write sentences to order, is something like a version of Wikipedia that includes much more data, mashed together using statistics....The new programs mash up work done by human minds. What’s innovative is that the mashup process has become guided and constrained, so that the results are usable and often striking. This is a significant achievement....but it can be thought of as illuminating previously hidden concordances between human creations, rather than as the invention of a new mind.

The adage from journalists that they became journalists so they could avoid math does not inspire faith in their resilience against mythologizing GPTs. As scholars studying journalism and its adaptation to AI, we need to be aware that many of our research participants do not have a clear definition of what constitutes artificial intelligence, automation, generative AI, or general AI. If journalists are reflecting on generative AI in ways full of wonder, confusion and imprecision, our scholarship also needs to provide context to buttress against the confusion of our research participants. We need to be on guard that their general sense of confusion does not turn our work into mush.

My guess is that we will spend an inordinate amount of scholarly energy trying to audit the output of generative AI. Just like Google’s algorithm before it, the GPTs are surfacing the biases in their training data and those held by their human creators— who are largely working for tech companies headquartered in the US and run mostly by white men. (Indeed, Meta’s first iteration of its AI advisory council was composed entirely of white men (Madori-Davis, Silberling, Wiggers, 2024)). What GPT will and will not have as training data and what it does or does not predict is less important than how these gaps impact and reify existing inequities in society. A fruitful direction for digital journalism studies scholars is to take the biases of these GPTs, including biases of omission, as a given – and think about the implications of these biases at a structural level. Rather than asking “what” questions about the outputs of GPTs, we might instead ask how generative AI reproduces inequalities, both inside and outside of the newsroom.

2. Overbroad worries about our polluted information environment

Scholars, journalists, and other public stakeholders have broadly declared that we are in a post-truth era, where there is little consensus on fact and expertise. But it is always already new to presume that

there was ever a shared agreement on facts— as Waisbord (2018) puts it, a “new chapter in the old struggle over the definition of truth” (1866). Certainly, the new/old worries that generative AI further democratizes the ability to craft mis and disinformation are worth taking seriously (Arguedas and Simon, 2023). Indeed, the world of generative AI’s hallucinations and now even *more* layers between news consumers and news discoverability presents yet another challenge to fact-based journalism and journalistic authority more generally. But the impact on politics may be less important than we think – and we might ask ourselves why. In 2024, 3.7 billion eligible voters in 72 countries went to the polls in what was called by some the “biggest year for elections in human history” (Schneier and Sanders, 2024). The deep-fake-ification of electoral manipulation did not come to pass, but the world still tilted its votes toward right-wing authoritarianism.

Nonetheless, the temptation will be, as it was in 2016, to throw money at a social problem that is diagnosed as an information problem. The financial support for fact-checking and fighting fake news continues to power research—and it may be that we have overproduced research as a result. We can see the financial support for the study of AI reaching a similar apotheosis, with existing centers receiving new attention and, in some cases, new donations, and new centers emerging. New knowledge creation is good. But worrying about AI as a threat to our information environment (and thus a threat to democracy) oversimplifies the problem. We are witnessing renewed, global antagonism against pluralism and tolerance of difference. A focus on fixing our information environment is a band-aid to the real problem - an unequal world where flows of capital favor a few winners.

3. The loss of control: idea ownership, intellectual property, and displacing human labor

GPTs seem to produce knowledge, but really, their contributions are the result of their training data—of which structured, fact-checked, and verified knowledge from news publishers is ideal. Rightfully annoyed, news publishers are now facing the second round of tech capture as the tech companies build large language models by hoovering news content without the consent of news organizations. (The first round of tech capture: the rise of digital intermediaries/platforms, see Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). As the *New York Times*’ lawsuit against Microsoft and Open AI explains, “Defendants seek to free-ride on The Times’s massive investment in its journalism...using The Times’s content without payment to create products that substitute for The Times and steal audiences away from it” (Grynbaum and Mac, 2023). In round one, news publishers largely capitulated to the dominance of big tech, unable to truly negotiate terms with platform companies that might adequately support their financial losses. This go-round, some of the largest news organizations are trying to extract licensing deals with OpenAI and other generative AI companies so at least the news organizations might receive some compensation.

We can play an important role in drawing historic parallels to this new iteration of journalists and news organizations who are hoping to assert their cultural and economic power through claims to

intellectual property and idea ownership. This is an always already new way to challenge the incursions of new actors using new mediums to spread information— and it generally has not worked out in the long term. For better or worse, the historical record suggests that journalists hoping to hold on to their authoritative control over knowledge so that they might resist the encroachment of new media technologies have largely failed. Newspaper journalists tried to fight the incursion of radio by limiting radio's live broadcasts - which worked, briefly (Jackaway, 1994). Then, both newspapers and radio tried to exert control over television broadcasts by limiting the timeliness of content shared on the medium (Ponce de Leon, 2015). But the nature of news, not just as an information good but also as a public good, makes idea ownership slippery. Once news - as information- is out in the world, it is hard to recapture it and hold it captive (Hamilton, 2004), although paywalls provide some block against the recall of content.

Digital journalism studies scholars would also do well to focus on the arrival of what Couldry and Mejias (2019) call “data colonialism” in journalism. News organizations have become as vulnerable as individuals to the predation of data by tech companies; their knowledge, collected at great expense, is being refashioned and repurposed without compensation or recognition. Even as part of large media companies, the human activity of journalists past and present is now subject to data colonization—gobbled up and repurposed to enhance the predictive power of large language models. But the theft of intellectual property is minor compared to the greater harm it underpins: the diminished value placed on human labor. When tech companies rip this labor for “free” and display so little understanding about just how much work it takes to do original newsgathering and analysis, their behavior is tantamount to an assault on the value of what humans contribute to journalism. Journalists make news not just through the crafting and organization of knowledge, but with their bodies in space and time, their emotional relationships, and ultimately their personhood. This tech theft is a delegitimization of journalism as a form of material labor, not just the snatching of ideas and intellectual property. This clash between the value of material labor is a rich conflict that deserves our scholarly attention: newswork, as it is understood by journalists and digital journalism studies scholars, and newswork, as it is understood by AI tech companies—just as mere data for generative AI models. From a normative perspective, pushing back against the diminished value of the human experience, in addition to the exploitation of labor by capital, needs to be a central preoccupation in the work we do.

As scholars, most of us have remained committed to a normative democratic orientation that the endpoint of a good society is a democratic one that protects the rights of individuals and the press and centers the role journalism plays in civic life. But these normative commitments are out of step with the larger, global momentum of authoritarian triumph. Perhaps our intellectual departure point needs to center anti-authoritarianism as much as it values the promise of liberalism - and this realignment of our research questions necessitates moving past descriptive empirical work about the hype of generative AI.

4) New to us: The Natural and the Cultural: Generative AI and Journalism

The extent to which technology becomes sublimated as infrastructure has been a key concern for scholars of science and technology. John Durham Peters (2015) urges us to flip the metaphor of “media as environment” to “environment as media” and reminds us to see that media— and by extension journalism — should be “understood as both natural and cultural” (2-6). I want to go one step further and issue a reminder to our field to query what the intersection of generative AI and journalism means for the natural world— this is my call for digital journalists to literally *go outside* the newsroom.

The field has considered how journalists attempt to control time and space as part of their newsgathering, dissemination, and analysis — as well the impossibility that journalists face trying to do so. Journalists are not fortune tellers, nor can the most robust and imaginative news organization counter the reality that the world operates in different time zones — and people need sleep (Tenenboim-Weinblatt et. al, 2022; Usher, 2015). Mental health and well-being have become a growing concern in our scholarship, both for journalists and for news audiences (Bélair-Gagnon et. al, 2024). News avoiders seek to control their environments—natural and cultural— by moderating the regular blasting of pain and suffering on the news (Gorski, 2023).

One of journalism’s fundamental roles is “orientation” - enabling people to move through daily lives in the real world more safely, more effectively, and able to meet the physical world with the requisite knowledge needed to give it order (to put it simply, think about weather and traffic news). While the news could be less “depressing as hell” (Palmer and Edgerly, 2024), much of what makes news is the power that the external, natural world retains over both humanity and digital technology. We have lost sight of that physical dimension of orientation in our work. Journalists’ ability to interpret, translate, and communicate both the natural and the environment may be a primary distinguishing feature of the human importance to newsgathering. Generative AI taxes the natural world too: physical resources are needed for AI to work - water to cool servers, metals for chips and storing and repurposing energy. Server farms house our technological clouds, not clouds, and the internet travels across the ocean via undersea cables that trace the path of the “wireless” telegraphic wires that came before it (Starosielski, 2015). Generative AI, much like the Cloud, or Bitcoin, and many other software technologies, are imagined as invisible infrastructure happening in the sky. This once again gives too much power to tech companies to create false imaginaries of what technological innovation can and cannot do.

While I do not have a set of ready-to-go research questions about this connection between the natural and the cultural for generative AI and Journalism Studies, I do know that generative AI has larger environmental consequences and that our discipline, like many others, could do more to center the global climate crisis. One direction may be to go beyond the typical empirical study of production, consumption, and content to center the recursive relationship between the natural world and the continued digital evolution of journalism. I encourage us to think about how we might translate Peters’ charge into scholarly action: “What if we took technologies not just as tools that

chip away at solid materials, but as means by which nature is expressed and altered, at least for human beings?” (4).

Toward Scholarly Imaginations for Generative AI and Journalism

Hype can distort our ability to analyze the magnitude of change. De-hyping requires more analytical precision, and we are up against significant challenges for this newest round of the always already new. As Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us: “Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands.” We should recognize the familiar discourses, illustrated briefly by the examples at the beginning of this commentary: the fear of the new and what it means for seemingly settled flows of power; utopian hopes of a new dawn; and a more mixed effort to adopt and to incorporate, without knowing exactly what that might mean. Much of our empirical scholarship has chronicled one of three streams: production, consumption, or content – and more recently, a fourth, distribution, has been added to this mix (Braun, 2021). We have a head start as scholars used to dealing with disruption: our work has centered the contest between old and new forms of journalism and the role of technology in challenging old logics.

Here, I have considered three particularly salient concerns that have emerged as early contenders for new research directions for digital journalism studies scholars: the Black Box problem- known input, received output, no understanding of the channel or process; information disorder and the further pollution of our information environment; the loss of control over idea ownership. My aim was to offer a way to move beyond the obvious, already always new scholarly inquiry these research directions inspire – pushing digital journalism scholars to think about the natural, the cultural, the human, and the environment.

However, more than any one specific research direction, I believe the best way to de-hype scholarship and journalism about generative AI is to see generative AI as just another proxy for even more unbalanced concentrations of power and capital. With each new technological era, the powerful have done what they can to exploit the value of human ingenuity and potential, harnessing labor to enrich a select few. It would be tempting to let generative AI take center stage in our work—to be taken by the shiniest, newest, and presumptively, one of the most disruptive new technologies. Maybe this is unavoidable. Still, when we think about the rising tides of authoritarianism and the crisis facing democracy, we should be connecting the dots between journalism, generative AI, humanity, and the natural world and this latest greatest triumph of capitalism.

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Note: Claude 3.7 Sonnet was used for ordering and formatting the reference list.

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