

Journalism in the Age of Technical Generability

Media-Ethical Perspectives on Authenticity and Artificial Intelligence in Journalism. *By Lukas Kick*

Artificial intelligence is being used more and more in professional fields and is having an increasing impact on existing work routines in those areas. A distinctive feature of artificial intelligence is its technical innovation in taking on increasingly complex tasks, such as generating coherent text segments or summarising content (cf. Mühlhoff 2025). This technical development also has implications for the field of journalism like changing workflows in newsrooms, and related issues such as the resulting implications for media ethics (cf. Graßl et al. 2022; Dörr 2023).

Regarding existing literature, significant differences in the definitions of artificial intelligence used in journalism can be identified (cf. Graßl et al. 2022; Dörr 2023). Given the wide range of technical characteristics of artificial intelligence, a further distinction between different forms like symbolic and subsymbolic seems necessary. Symbolic systems are based on clearly defined rules, where in contrast subsymbolic systems do not use rule-based structures but instead generate content based on probabilities derived from the underlying data, which leads to difficulties with the traceability of generated contents (cf. Mühlhoff 2025). In the context of journalistic use this subsymbolic form of artificial intelligence is associated with significantly more challenges and risks.

Therefore, the role of artificial intelligence as an assistant in journalism is central, enabling it to perform tasks that were previously carried out solely by human journalists (cf. Graßl et al. 2022; Dörr 2023). Whilst these technical developments increase efficiency in production, they also raise critical perspectives, such as the potential biases and preconceptions that artificial intelligence may entail due to its data sources (cf. Graßl et al. 2022). The characteristics of subsymbolic systems entail significantly greater risks due to the difficulty of verifying and investigating their results, even when used in a journalistic context.

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This highlights the potential risks arising from the reproduction of existing discriminatory content and structures by generative artificial intelligence (cf. Graßl et al. 2022). These aspects of generative artificial intelligence, which are often difficult to trace, must also be taken into account when used by journalists.

Regarding existing quality standards for journalistic products a crucial aspect of the debate on artificial intelligence is that these quality criteria apply not only to the finished product but also to the process of its creation. The significance of journalistic products thus derives not exclusively from the outcome of their production, but also from the conditions under which they are created. When using generative, subsymbolic systems, however, the question arises as to whether the human labour involved is itself becoming an increasingly important indicator of quality. This is essential in any case due to the final assessment of content and its quality assurance, which can only be carried out by journalists (cf. Dörr 2023).

For this new relation between humans and AI in the execution of various journalistic production steps, Walter Benjamin's (2011) theoretical considerations can be drawn upon, particularly the concepts of "Echtheit" and "Aura", as well as the related concept of authenticity. As noted in the previous discussion, quality standards apply not only to the finished journalistic product but also to the individual production steps. The execution of these steps by journalists is thus an essential component of the journalistic product. In relation to Benjamin's concept of "Aura", this means that the "Echtheit" or "Aura" of a journalistic product does not arise solely from the final form presented in the media, but also the context of its creation (Benjamin 2011). The authenticity of a journalistic product is thus also generated by the human production factors it contains. Applied to journalistic pieces created with the aid of artificial intelligence, the authenticity of these journalistic products consequently arises only through the involvement of journalists in their creation.

When assessing these, it is not only the final classification of the finished product that is decisive, but also the context in which it was created, as can be illustrated by the example of authenticity in photojournalism (cf. Godulla 2014). As Godulla (2014) describes in his examination of press photography, the technical aspects of new technologies must also be included in the media-ethical consideration. With regard to the concept of authenticity in the use of artificial intelligence in journalistic productions, following Godulla (2014), quality standards must be applied to all individual production steps and not merely to

the final product. This makes the assessment of the proportion of human labour more significant.

This also opens up technology-specific perspectives that examine new technical and digital possibilities in comparison with existing guidelines for journalistic practice, and supplement them where necessary, without undermining fundamental values, as in the case of photojournalism (cf. Godulla 2014). With regard to the use of artificial intelligence and the concept of authenticity discussed here, it can be stated that authenticity cannot be achieved through the exclusive work of journalists alone but is also measured by other factors. At the same time, however, decisions regarding the entire production process must be shaped by the human factor. The element of authenticity – namely the responsibility to uphold professional standards and quality requirements – can only be guaranteed here across all stages of production by human journalists. This does not preclude technical support from artificial intelligence, but at the same time does not reduce the role of journalists to mere ‘quality control’ of the final journalistic product.

In summary, when considering the various technical implementations of artificial intelligence in journalism, it can be said that the resulting ethical challenges extend beyond the purely technical level of application. This is demonstrated by the diverse use of artificial intelligence in journalistic practice and its underlying definitions (cf. Graßl et al. 2022; Dörr 2023). Nevertheless, the specific characteristics of generative forms of artificial intelligence create new ethical challenges for journalists regarding the verifiability of displayed research results and the potential reproduction or amplification of ‘bias’ contained in the source data (cf. Graßl et al. 2022; Dörr 2023). These issues must be considered by media professionals and addressed within journalistic frameworks. To ensure the authenticity of journalistic products, in terms of their credibility and relevance to public discourse, the involvement of journalists in every stage of production is essential. Whilst this does not introduce authenticity as an entirely new feature, it does gain significance due to the need for human-led journalistic quality control at every stage of the production process supported by artificial intelligence. The human element is an essential component of journalistic content, as journalists do not merely carry out a quality check on final products, but are the very ones who make that quality possible in the first place.

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Full Article

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