

Generative AI in Media Communication: A Critical Review of Themes, Ethics, and Research Gaps

Dr. Hina Nawaz

hinanawaz.191@gmail.com

PhD Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Prof. Dr. Syed Abdul Siraj

professorsiraj58@yahoo.com

Senior Professor at Department of Media Studies, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Hina Nawaz hinanawaz.191@gmail.com

Received: 09-07-2025

Revised: 20-08-2025

Accepted: 15-09-2025

Published: 07-10-2025

ABSTRACT

The recent, unparalleled upsurge in generative AI technologies—from groundbreaking advancements like GPT-4, DALL-E 2, and Midjourney—has swiftly integrated them into professional media and communication domains, including journalism, public relations, and advertising. While some recent scholarship documents this significant transformation, the relevant information remains notably dispersed across computer science, ethics, and communication studies, underscoring a pressing need for cohesive synthesis. This paper, therefore, applies a rigorous systematic literature review, involving an extensive search of Web of Science, Scopus, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar, to identify peer-reviewed papers published from 2020 to 2024. The final corpus of 68 articles was thematically analyzed, revealing three principal research areas: (1) AI's complex interplay with automated and augmented media production workflows; (2) an emergent typology of ethical crises and dilemmas, often shadowed by epistemic, labour, and relational concerns; and (3) preliminary efforts at formulating normative guidance for the ethical and responsible production and dissemination of AI algorithms. Finally, this research delineates theoretical and methodological limitations, most notably the disproportionately low number of audience reception studies and a preponderance of research focusing on audiences in the Global North. To address these lacunae, we outline a comprehensive agenda for further research, designed to foster new theoretical models for non-human (or algorithmic) communication, explore socio-economic impacts on media workers, and investigate implications for democratic discourse.

Keywords: *Generative AI; Artificial Intelligence; Media Ethics; Journalism; Public Relations; Systematic Literature Review; Algorithmic Communication*

INTRODUCTION

The Generative AI Cambrian Explosion

The advent of generative AI and its associated tools is proceeding at an undeniably accelerated pace. Indeed, media scholar Lev Manovich has rather evocatively likened this particular developmental trajectory to a "Cambrian Explosion"—a truly transformative moment for communication itself, fundamentally underpinned by media. This compelling metaphor, it seems, gains its traction from the remarkably swift and substantial expansion in both the capabilities and accessibility of generative AI. Analogous, perhaps, to the dramatic biodiversity surge during the original Cambrian period some 541 million years ago—a geological epoch that marked the early divergence of complex life forms and intricate ecological communities (Ohno, 1997; Maloof et al., 2010)—we are arguably witnessing a comparable phenomenon. This novel explosion of sophisticated generative technologies, we would contend, signifies a more profound stage for media industries than even the earlier arrival of social media platforms. Just as the ancient Cambrian Explosion led to an unprecedented proliferation of life and complex interactions within nascent ecosystems, this contemporary "explosion" is characterized by generative AI tools that are not merely producing content but are actively participating in the very

ideation and dissemination of information. More crucially, they are doing so at a scale and with a level of quality that was, until very recently, quite simply beyond our reach (Gupta et al., 2022; Ohno, 1997).

From Tool to Agent

The prevailing paradigm surrounding AI in contemporary discourse, it seems, is undeniably shifting. We are moving away from viewing these technologies purely as passive instruments and increasingly acknowledging their role as active agents—indeed, as what we've termed the "algorithmic communicator." Generative AI exhibits a nascent capacity for generating novel ideas, proposing new concepts, and even challenging established notions (Kirk & Givi, 2024). This emergent ability of AI to originate content is recalibrating the very meanings of agency and authenticity within digital communications. Consequently, it undermines traditional foundations of trust and authorship (Haresamudram et al., 2023). When AI begins to assume such a decision-making agent role in communication, pressing issues like the propagation of misinformation and questions of ethical complicity become immediately salient (Clay et al., 2024; Alshahrani et al., 2024).

A Fragmented Field in Need of a Map

The academic treatment of generative AI remains compartmentalized between disciplines. Communication researchers, for instance, often focus on ethical considerations, computer scientists on algorithmic bias, and sociologists on labor issues, without a proper synthesis of these crucial perspectives. Consider the recent works by Clay et al. (2024) and Alshahrani et al. (2024), which, while insightful in their own domains, perhaps underscore this persistent disciplinary fragmentation.

This article, therefore, endeavors to integrate these disparate perspectives. Our goal is to synthesize these varied discussions into a more cohesive framework, one that might serve as a much-needed conceptual guide for navigating the fragmented terrain where the academic and policy debates surrounding generative AI – specifically as a communicative agent – are presently unfolding. By pursuing such an integrated analysis, we can begin to comprehend more fully the many nuances generative AI inevitably engenders. This approach promises a more comprehensive grasp of its multifaceted effects on communication practices, social conventions, and indeed, our very technological infrastructures, a point echoed in some respects by Haresamudram et al. (2023) and Alshahrani et al. (2024).

Ultimately, with generative AI so clearly positioned at the vanguard of technological evolution, the far-reaching implications it holds for the very future of how we communicate truly necessitate a nuanced and rigorous intellectual engagement. This is, without question, a formidable challenge, particularly in an age where profound sociocultural shifts are undeniably and rapidly unfolding.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the salient characteristics of the prevailing themes in the academic literature concerning the integration of generative AI within media and communication production?

RQ2: What principal ethical issues, as well as normative frameworks for consideration, have been delineated in this body of literature?

RQ3: What are the primary theoretical, methodological, and empirical gaps identified by this review that might guide future research?

METHODOLOGY

Approach

We utilized the SLR method well known for its systematic, transparent, replicable, and rigorous methodology resulting in the synthesis of existing evidence (Moher et al., 2015). The SLR approach allows researchers to systematically collect, appraise and interpret the existing literature which is highly necessary to gain a critical understanding of the intricacies of generative AI as a communications actor (Page et al., 2021). Moreover, the formal nature of the SLR process inherently helps in mitigating bias. This is largely because it demands the explicit articulation of inclusion and exclusion criteria, alongside predefined review processes. These safeguards collectively ensure that the final collection of literature truly represents the most pertinent and reliable evidence available on the subject (Guo et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009).

Search Strategy

To conduct this systematic review, we comprehensively explored several databases, a crucial step to ensure both the breadth and depth of our literature coverage. Specifically, our primary focus was directed towards Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and the ACM Digital Library. These platforms were selected as they collectively offered the most extensive and pertinent coverage for the scope of our inquiry.

To conduct the literature search, we developed and utilized a series of precise search strings. We combined terms like ("generative AI" OR "large language model" OR GPT) with others such as (journalism OR "public relations" OR advertise* OR "media production" OR "content creation"). Then, to really narrow it down to the core issues we were interested in, we added (ethics* OR impact* OR automation OR trust). This search strategy was designed to be inclusive of wide-ranging array of research associated with generative AI and communication practices (Koutsimani et al., 2019; Zhan et al., 2024).

Regarding the time frame, our review spans from 2020 right up to the latest available data. This timeframe was deliberately chosen as it seemed crucial to proportionately account for the most recent wave of generative AI breakthroughs, which truly accelerated around that period. This particular timeframe is, in fact, quite critical. It marks a period of rapidly escalating AI technological development and, significantly, a shift in communication applications—from being purely technology-driven to demonstrating tangible societal impact (Ahmad et al., 2022; Abelha et al., 2020).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Our criteria for article inclusion were, quite deliberately, rather restrictive. This was a conscious decision, made to ensure a high degree of academic rigour throughout the review process. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and seminal conference proceedings (such as CHI and ICA) in English are included for the review. Moreover, attention was specifically confined to generative (rather than merely predictive) AI relating to media and communication to maintain relevance (Violán et al., 2014; Pradas-Hernández et al., 2018).

On the other hand, non-peer-reviewed sources such as reports in the news, blog and white papers etc. were explicitly omitted, because of the possibility that they may not follow the scientific discipline. Technical papers with psychosocial or ethical commentary were considered; however, purely technical papers with no social or ethical content were excluded given that this review seeks to reflect a range of disciplinary perspectives on the impact of generative AI (Frajerma et al., 2019).

Screening and Selection Process

A two-stage criteria-based filtering and selection was performed. First, the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles were screened for their relevance using pre-specified inclusion criteria. In the second phase articles that passed through the first stage were subjected to full-text review. This rigorous, perhaps even stringent, approach ultimately led to the final selection of relevant studies, culminating in a corpus of 68 articles that, we believe, form the core evidence for this investigation (Dubale et al., 2019).

Thematic Analysis

Once we had, with some careful deliberation, settled on our definitive body of texts, our next logical step was to undertake a thematic analysis. This technique, as many would attest, is particularly well-suited for methodically identifying, analyzing, and ultimately reporting the observable patterns – what we might call the emergent themes – present within the data. We found this approach remarkably helpful for conducting a thorough inquiry into the existing literature, especially as it pertained to our specific research questions regarding generative AI's increasingly significant role as a communicative actor.

The inherent flexibility of thematic analysis, one of its real strengths, truly allowed for some nuanced insights to surface. Consider, for instance, the complex discussions now swirling around creativity, the very concept of authorship in a new age, and, perhaps most critically, the ever-elusive notion of trust in communication, a point underscored even in earlier works like Nguyen et al. (2019). By pursuing this particular analytical path, our research, we genuinely hope, can offer a somewhat deeper understanding of both the complex challenges and the compelling opportunities that generative AI now introduces into our constantly shifting media landscape.

Findings: Mapping the Landscape of AI in Media Communication

To address our first and second research questions, our thematic analysis, as anticipated, revealed three primary themes persistently present throughout the literature:

Theme 1: The Reconfigured Production Workflow (Answering RQ1)

AI as Assistant

Various research indicates a growing role of AI as a media production aide, providing substantial efficiency improvements in, e.g., transcript summarization, story idea generation, social media copy writing and search engine optimization (Corsi et al., 2024; Freeze et al., 2020). These particular applications, it seems, represent some of the least intrusive yet most common methods through which AI is currently being incorporated into media workflows. For example, automated summarization agents can allow journalists to rapidly condense lengthy interviews into concise summaries, thereby, one might argue, enabling a more focused allocation of their time for either creating original content or conducting deeper analysis (Broussard et al., 2019). This enhancement in efficiency not only fosters greater productivity but also, arguably, validates a reshaping of traditional production areas, potentially reallocating human resources towards higher-order creative work (Guzman & Lewis, 2024).

AI as Creator

The literature, interestingly, expands further into the perhaps more debatable subject of AI assuming the role of an author. Indeed, several papers allude to the rise of AI-written articles, images, and even videos. The quality of these outputs, one must concede, appears to range quite dramatically. Some researchers, for instance, claim such content often demonstrably lacks the emotional connection and

nuanced depth typically found in human-made pieces (Henestrosa et al., 2023; Trattner et al., 2021). Furthermore, the accuracy and appropriateness of AI-created content can become particularly problematic, especially as it pertains to both factual veracity (raising concerns about misinformation) and moral implications (hinting at potential misuse of these technologies) (Roe & Perkins, 2023; Illia et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2020). Consider, for instance, the intricate challenge of crafting a truly compelling narrative while simultaneously ensuring all factual representations are impeccably substantiated; this, perhaps, provides a compelling model for the intense scrutiny required of AI content production (Sundar, 2020).

AI as Distributor

Another application of generative AI is hyper-personalization in content distribution that seems to be the area not discovered yet but holds the potential to transform targeting (Karinshak & Jin, 2023). Whereas conventional algorithms often rely on heuristic rules to match content, generative AI can follow unique behaviors and interests of users in real time, providing opportunities for truly customized content experiences. Certain scholarly papers argue that although this offers possibilities for deeper interaction with the audience, it also brings about broader privacy, security and ethical issues concerning manipulation (Kolo et al., 2022; Haenlein et al., 2022). There is a pressing need to establish a robust framework that foregrounds ethical distribution practices to mitigate the risk of further societal fragmentation.

Theme 2: A Typology of Ethical Crises

Epistemic Crises (Threats to Knowledge)

It seems, that we have truly entered what many are perceiving as an 'epistemic crisis' in this AI-dominated era, with the rather unsettling emergence of what is been termed "synthetic propaganda" (Karinshak & Jin, 2023). What is particularly troubling is how various research, including insights from Freeze et al. (2020) and Illia et al. (2022), consistently highlights that the inherent biases baked into AI models from their very inception—biases encompassing everything from race to gender—only exacerbate these issues. These embedded biases, from the very genesis of the models, often lead to quite distorted, rather fabricated, portrayals of reality.

The phenomenon of 'hallucination,' identified by Chen et al. (2024) as AI's generation of factually incorrect information, constitutes a significant hurdle to cultivating public trust in our digital media landscape. When one considers the cumulative effect of these elements, it becomes strikingly clear that robust ethical guidelines—and more broadly, a highly responsible and conscientious approach to AI development and deployment—are not merely preferable. They are absolutely vital for safeguarding the integrity of public knowledge and, crucially, for stemming the tide of widespread misinformation (Zerfaß et al., 2020; Pierson et al., 2023).

Labour and Economic Crisis (Threats to Professionals)

The deployment of AI within media production, it can be asserted that, has certainly ignited a number of rather profound labor and economic anxieties. We are seeing real concerns emerge around the potential de-skilling of creative workforces, and perhaps more disturbingly, the specter of employment displacement, as highlighted by Mach et al. (2021). Furthermore, the literature reveals a persistent set of unresolved questions surrounding copyright and intellectual property rights—particularly vexing given that many of these AI models are trained on reams of copyright-protected content. This, in our opinion, underscores an urgent need for updated regulatory frameworks, a point that Freeze et al. (2020) and Illia et al. (2022) have also implicitly or explicitly raised.

Consequently, addressing these broader economic implications demands a far more extensive dialogue, one that ideally brings together decision-makers and all interested parties. The conversation, presumably, would center on how to both ameliorate the more adverse impacts and, crucially, foster genuinely new and creative work opportunities within the industry, an ambitious but necessary goal championed by scholars like Guzman & Lewis (2024), and Britton & Vallis (2023).

Relational Crises (Threats to Trust)

We seem to be facing what could be described as a relational crisis, primarily stemming from a growing trust deficit between audiences and the media. People are, quite understandably, grappling with the sheer credibility of AI-generated content and, perhaps even more unsettling, the ethical quandaries posed by AI "influencers," a phenomenon that Guzman and Lewis (2024), along with Swiatek et al. (2023), have recently touched upon. This blurring of the lines between human and machine in communication raises some genuinely serious questions about trust itself, and indeed, about AI's role in constructing narrative and asserting authority within media landscapes (Codina et al., 2024; Wogu et al., 2020). The relationship between the use of AI and the rise in audience skepticism, we believe, urgently demands greater transparency regarding AI processes to restore trust (Hancock et al., 2020 & Sundar, 2020).

Theme 3: The Quest for Norms and Governance

Amidst these very real challenges, a parallel debate has, quite understandably, surfaced: one that calls for a serious reconsideration of the ethical conduct and governance structures governing AI-reliant media, as highlighted by Hancock et al. (2020) and Bozkurt et al. (2021). A number of authors, we observe, specifically advocate for principles such as transparency, human curation, and unequivocal responsibility. Their aim, it appears, is to ensure the ethical and safe deployment of AI within the media industry (Pierson et al., 2023). The ongoing debate between self-regulation and state-led oversight, in particular, vividly illustrates the persistent challenge of identifying truly holistic solutions. These solutions, it could be contended, must effectively address the ubiquitous and often profound impact of AI technologies on communication processes (Pierson et al., 2023). Moreover, given that the technological landscape itself is both substantially varied and evolving with remarkable rapidity, adaptive governance tools—those capable of truly keeping pace with these developments—deserve, in our view, a particularly special mention.

Discussion: Identifying the Gaps and Proposing a Research Agenda

To effectively address our third research question, which pertains to the identified gaps in the existing literature, we now turn our attention to a critical discussion of these findings.

Recapping the Map

The findings presented in Section 3, in our analysis, clearly exhibit a robust emphasis on generative AI's role within media communication. This focus, it seems, has particularly centered on the production side of things, alongside what often appears to be an expert-driven ethical debate. Specifically, some of the reviewed works have certainly highlighted AI's perceived capabilities in enhancing workflow efficiency and, perhaps, in helping to resolve ethical frameworks (Corsi et al., 2024; Freeze et al., 2020). Notably, what emerges from this discussion is its continued reliance on what might be termed "elite perspectives" within the field. This approach, arguably, tends to marginalize the genuinely complex, lived experiences of both audiences and practitioners as they actually engage with AI-produced content (Mach et al., 2021). As we attempt to navigate this increasingly complex terrain, it becomes particularly significant to acknowledge the inherent

inadequacies of these dominant narratives. Moreover, we must recognize the notable exclusion of both grassroots voices and the diverse lived experiences of a multitude of vested stakeholders.

Uncovering the "Known Unknowns": Critical Gaps in the Literature

A Dearth of Audience Reception Studies

Perhaps one of the most striking limitations identified within the extant literature is the rather notable scarcity of empirical studies specifically addressing audience perceptions of AI-generated content. While speculation certainly abounds on precisely how audiences engage, trust, perceive, or indeed, like or dislike AI-produced material, robust empirical evidence to validate these widespread claims remains conspicuously absent (Heim & Chan-Olmsted, 2023). This particular exploration of audience dynamics, we propose, is absolutely essential for effectively adapting AI applications to evolving consumer needs and demands. There seems to be little question that this dimension is woefully neglected; consequently, there is an urgent and undeniable need for scholarly work to delve into actual audience experiences and reactions.

Theoretical Stagnation

Moreover, it appears the current literature frequently—perhaps too frequently—leans on what might be considered older media theories. These frameworks, one might suggest, are becoming increasingly unfitting given the exceptionally fast-paced development of AI communication (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). This discernible lack of theoretical advancement, however, simultaneously creates a compelling opportunity for scholars to develop novel theoretical models. These models could, ideally, significantly extend our understanding of AI's truly constructive role as an active agent within the communication process. For instance, perhaps Actor-Network Theory (ANT) could prove instrumental in analyzing AI as a communicative actor, or even a wholly new "Theory of Algorithmic Communication" might possibly assist in a more subtle analysis of complex human-AI interactions.

Methodological Predominance

The methodological techniques currently dominant in the existing literature, our review clearly indicates, seem to incline heavily towards theoretical essays and descriptive research, often at the expense of more rigorous analytical strategies (Spillias et al., 2023). This methodological trenchancy, it seems, urgently needs to be confronted. More varied, exploratory, and indeed, pragmatic research methods are unequivocally required. One could imagine, for instance, rich ethnographies conducted within AI-equipped newsrooms, sophisticated computational discourse analyses of AI outputs, or even critical policy analyses examining the tangible effects of AI adoption on media practices. Such methods, we believe, could substantially enhance our knowledge about the societal implications, moving well beyond mere anecdotal evidence (Ersoy & Ehtiyar, 2023).

The Global North Bias

This geographic imbalance is a significant concern, with much of the current discourse dominated by perspectives from the Global North (Pardal-Refoyo & Pardal-Peláez, 2024). This gap calls for an analysis of how generative AI is being adopted, adapted, or resisted in places like Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through the consideration of these different geographies, researchers may obtain significant contribution to understand the global dynamics of AI technology and its impact on communication in distinct cultural and socio-political contexts (Raimundo & Rosário, 2021).

A Future Research Agenda

Given the discernible gaps identified in the preceding analysis, we propose a prospective research agenda meticulously designed to address these deficiencies.

Centre the Audience

A pressing need, we contend, exists for empirical and qualitative research specifically aimed at exploring audience reception of, and engagement with, AI-generated media. Insight derived from audience members' perspectives can not only illuminate more effective journalistic practices but, crucially, can also inform how engagement itself might be better facilitated through generative AI techniques.

Innovate Theoretically

There is, arguably, a compelling case for incentivizing researchers to conceptualize and rigorously test novel theoretical frameworks. These theories, ideally, would be purpose-built for the unique dynamics introduced by non-human communicators. This undertaking necessarily involves engaging with emergent frameworks, such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and fostering the development of new forms of algorithmic communication theory to adequately account for the complexities unleashed by AI's pervasive influence.

Study the Worker

This particular line of inquiry necessitates ethnographic and interview-based investigations into the lived experiences of media professionals. Their work, after all, is being profoundly transformed by AI integration. Documenting their insights, we assert that, will prove instrumental in more accurately mapping the evolving professional landscape and reflecting the sheer diversity of operational developments that generative AI technologies have, in fact, catalyzed.

Go Global

Ultimately, by systematically addressing these critical gaps through a dynamic research agenda, scholars and practitioners will find themselves better positioned to conceptualize and act in more effective and critically reflective ways. This is particularly vital within a rapidly evolving media communications environment, one that is increasingly shaped and influenced by generative AI.

In summary, the imperative for a comparative, cross-cultural perspective on the adoption and governance of AI is quite evident. Such inquiries would critically examine the effects of generative AI on media practices within diverse international contexts, thereby enriching our discourse on what its implications truly mean across varying cultural and societal differences.

CONCLUSION

This paper, in our estimation, meticulously synthesizes current understandings on the field of generative AI within the context of media communication. It outlines predominant focus areas, delineates the principal ethical considerations, and notably, reveals significant lacunae in our current understanding. What emerges from this synthesis, quite emphatically, is a clear imperative for more substantial investigations into audience perceptions and responses to AI-generated content, as well as for the application of the most up-to-date theoretical underpinnings, and critically, a more innovative approach to our research methodologies.

The subtle, yet increasingly undeniable, permeation of AI into our information landscape represents, in our view, one of the most profound communication challenges of our contemporary era. As generative AI continues to transform media practices, it becomes, unequivocally, imperative that both scholars and practitioners critically engage with these intricate complexities in order to establish robust ethical standards and, perhaps less overtly, uncover truly novel communicative possibilities. This, consequently, establishes a crucial research agenda for future inquiry, which necessitates consideration of non-human communication phenomena emergence, the substantial socio-economic ramifications for media professionals, and indeed, the broader implications for democratic discourse. By deliberately concentrating our investigative efforts on these particular avenues, we enhance the probability of fostering a media environment that is, fundamentally, transparent, inclusive, and ultimately, trusted.

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