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ChatBots as Artificial Intermediaries? Adaptation to Artificial Intelligence in Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

Journalists have long claimed authority regarding the distribution of valid knowledge and hence, have discursively placed themselves in an intermediary role between audiences and the information they seek. Threats to this authority are not new, yet the threats posed by generative artificial intelligence offer a novel presentation of this threat: could the distribution of valid knowledge be replicated by chatbots? This study explores the discursive construction of artificial intelligence in four countries (Canada, Germany, UK, USA) through a dataset of metajournalism articles (n = 177) produced in the early stages of ChatGPT 3.5. We find that journalists perceived potential and addressable pitfalls in working *with* artificial intelligence but worried less about the implications for their audiences.

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Introduction

Journalists frequently grapple with defining the limits of their profession, fearing the replication of their work by entities lacking adherence to the field's normative values. In the initial stages of artificial intelligence development, journalists justified their concerns by asserting that the precision inherent in journalism was inadequately mirrored in AI-generated news (Carlson 2015). The advent of ChatGPT marked the onset of a new AI era that appears poised to fulfill journalists' anxieties–replacing them as an intermediary and potentially supplanting the integral knowledge generation aspects crucial to the field with a more cost-effective and rapid alternative (e.g., Simon 2024). While AI in the newsrooms is overall met with great curiosity, its adaption can also be seen as part of the "Shiny Things Syndrome" as "obsessive pursuit of technology in the absence of clear and research-informed strategies" (Posetti 2018, 7).

The conceptual framework of the study takes the intermediary role of journalists as its starting point, particularly in the context of AI integration into newsroom practices. By analyzing metajournalistic discourse, we examine how journalists reflect on the four core phases of their knowledge processes—generation, verification, selection, and distribution— to understand how the adoption of AI relates to journalistic epistemic authority. Journalists have often centralized their self-conception in regard to their function as

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intermediaries for the public (Neuberger et al. 2023). What journalists perceive then in chatbots reflects an existential fear of losing their primary function. This necessitates a robust consideration of AI's capabilities through the lens of the journalists who perhaps have the most at stake in their livelihood and would naturally feel the impulse to lean into media hype regarding AI (Vinsel and Funk 2022), given this potential threat. The study explores the intersection between coverage of AI-related technologies and the envisioned implications for their journalistic audiences. Furthermore, it unveils a blind spot in this field of research, as the development of journalistic functions in the news distribution process has crucial implications for news audiences. We explore how journalists assess how the four elements of their knowledge production process– generation, verification, selection, and distribution– have been meaningfully replicated through artificial intelligence chatbots.

This study explores journalists' discourse with a specific focus on topics around AI is explored through a corpus of metajournalism –journalists reporting on issues of journalism (Carlson 2016)– in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany (n = 177). We find that while journalists reflected both emotionally and practically regarding the implications for the technology on the profession, they focused little on the implications of the technology on the audience.

The Intermediary Role of Journalism in Knowledge Processes

The advent of ready-to-use artificial intelligence applications like ChatGPT has the potential to alter journalistic practices permanently. As Moran and Shaihk (2022) note, artificial intelligence operates as "a site of contestation for an increasingly broad range of actors to grapple with the survival of journalism within the digital era and how automated technologies may alter the products of journalism and the role it plays within audiences' information diets" (1757). However, this is not the first time digital technologies have altered the profession and its practices. The global network structure of the Internet challenged the gatekeeper function that journalism held for much of the recent history of public communication processes (e.g., Bruns 2018). In other words, it was no longer professional journalism that had the supremacy to tell people what to think about, as other communicative actors started to play a significant role in informing the public (Markov and Min 2023). A second fundamental change was the distribution of public information on digital platforms, like Facebook, or Instagram; a challenge for the journalistic profession due to the speed of information travel, narrow revenue opportunities, and competition from non-professional communication actors or alternative news outlets (Müller and Schulz 2021; Strippel et al. 2024). Digital media have changed journalism's role in distributing information in the public sphere. More specifically, the relationship between journalism, sources, and recipients is different, as digital platforms have made engaging with journalistic content in public news flows optional, and journalism has started to define new services it can fulfill for the public (Bruns 2018; Ohme et al. 2025).

In traditional public knowledge processes, journalism was involved in services of generation, verification, selection, and distribution of information and was thereby holding a key function in informing the public by connecting the source and the recipient of a message (e.g., Bartsch et al. 2024; Bruns 2018). Journalism, hence, works as an intermediary on digital platforms - an informative actor whose services are optional for a public

information flow on digital platforms but yet can add value (Ohme et al. 2025). Here, long-held professional skills of journalism, for example, the verification, simplification, and contextualization of information, but also practices of moderation of discussions or even conciliation of disputes, gave the journalistic profession a new role to play on digital platforms (Westlund and Ekström 2021). Importantly, professional journalistic actors don't intermediate all sources–commonly other intermediaries from outside the field work on the behalf of some sources (see Hanusch and Löhmann 2023). The above-described services can be and are also rendered by other communicative actors, such as influencers or common users (Hanusch and Löhmann 2023; Perreault and Hanusch 2024), should they decide to take the function of intermediaries in communicative interactions.

Towards Artificial Intermediaries

With the entrance of artificial intelligence applications into the work of journalists, the function of an intermediary is subject to change (Dodds, Zamith and Lewis 2025; Moran and Shaihk 2022). Roughly, we can distinguish between the function of non-artificial-intelligence intermediaries (NAII), artificial-intelligence-assisted intermediaries (AIAI), and artificial intermediaries (AI) (see Figure 1).

It is therefore important to understand the adaptation of journalistic functions in a digital public sphere as a spectrum rather than as single-stop events (González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021). A non-AI intermediary (NAII) provides services without the usage of artificial intelligence in the generation, verification, selection, and distribution of public knowledge. An AI-assisted intermediary uses AI technologies to assist human intermediaries in the rendering of these services but does not let AI make autonomous and final decisions (see Harb and Arafat 2024; de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds 2024; Perreault, Lewis, and Ely 2025); rather, it is a human actor who uses AI-technology for parts of these services but oversees the final, published product, similar to the "human-in-the-loop" approach in machine learning research (e.g., Mosqueira-Rey et al. 2023). In this way, journalists tend to view artificial intelligence as an *epistemic opportunity*, given that it offers journalists opportunity to reassert the importance of the human touch in creating knowledge (Perreault, Lewis and Ely 2025). In particular, AI has been employed by comment moderators to assist in identifying and filtering hostile comments (Perreault 2024), as well as transcription and translation (Lewis et al. 2025). At the last stage, artificial intermediaries provide generation, verification, selection, and distribution services independently and without final human review (Pavlik 2023). An artificial intermediary is a digital or automated agent that acts as a facilitator in communicative transactions,

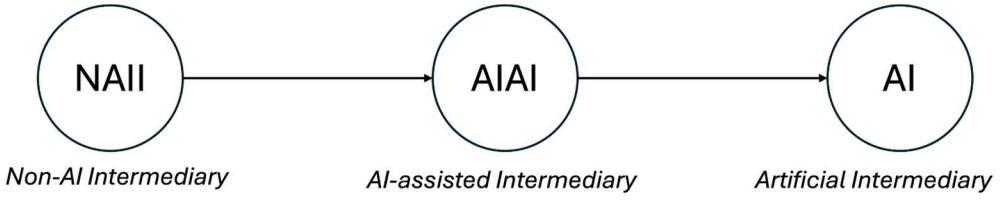

Figure 1. States of artificial intermediaries.

taking on the role of a third party that provides services to the sender, the receiver, or both (see Ohme et al. 2025). Current research shows that individual journalists still emphasize the importance of human agency in automated journalism (Thäsler-Kordonouri and Barling 2025). However, it is an open question what role artificial intermediaries play in the self-reflections of journalists in meta-journalistic discourses. Hence, the current study will explore the state in which professional journalists operate based on the meta-journalistic discourse about artificial intelligence in newsroom practices. Our concerns about the future often say less about the future than they do about the current circumstances in the present (see Cap 2021).

Outside the newsroom, artificial intelligence applications like ChatGPT have made an entrance to the knowledge order, in that people increasingly use this service to ask knowledge questions. However, large language models, which are often used in applications of artificial intelligence, are not primarily meant to be a knowledge source, as they function differently than a knowledge database, such as Wikipedia. Large Language Models retrieve the probability of word sequence (see Zarouali et al. 2024). This often leads to impressive and powerful results, but it can also be restricted, as early examples with ChatGPT show the definition of a Peregrine Falcon as a mammal. While technology develops and Large Language Models become surprisingly exact, this example shows two things: 1. Artificial intelligence challenges journalism's epistemic authority, as it becomes a new source of information in public communication flows (Perreault, Lewis and Ely 2025). 2. Large Language Models differ significantly from work in a journalistic profession, as they do not (broadly understood) generate or verify knowledge but mainly engage in the task of selection and distribution of information (Zarouali et al. 2024; Ischen, et al, 2024). However, if LLMs and other AI technologies become part of journalistic knowledge work, we might be heading into a world where intermediary work is partially or fully done by AI applications.

Metajournalism as Stability for the Intermediary Role

Journalistic knowledge, sometimes thought of as journalistic epistemology, is built through numerous means of interaction with sources and fellow journalists (Carlson 2025). The latter source of knowledge is often considered crucial in how journalists bound and navigate their role within the profession. In this way, *metajournalistic discourse* reflects the "stories journalists tell themselves have the potential to shape the field in powerful ways" (Moon 2021, 1) and which at once (1) explicate journalism for non-journalists and (2) reconstitute journalism for journalists. Metajournalistic discourse is often perceived as being reflected in the work of journalistic press clubs, the trade press, and journalism ethics/socializing bodies, but recent scholarship has also considered specific forms of popular culture, legal documents and more as offering an avenue for *journalism about journalism* (De Maeyer and Holton 2016). Metajournalistic discourse offers a framework, developed by Carlson (2016), which draws a thread through the theoretical traditions of boundary work–which explores how journalists determine the bounds of appropriate and inappropriate actors and actions, paradigm repair–in which journalists respond to crises within the field by putting the crisis into conversation with journalism's normative mission, and journalists as interpretive communities–which see journalists as a shared imaginary who work together in order to make sense of the world.

Journalism's intermediary function is an essential aspect of what grants stability within a field (Reese 2022). In this way, metajournalistic discourse in recent years has helped journalists make sense of the numerous threats to this role: digital avenues between source and audience that effectively exclude journalists, and external actors who would seem to be doing similar work to that of journalists. After all, the normative statements of journalism all assume an intermediary role (e.g., *voice for the voiceless* would assume journalists have an intermediary role, speaking on the behalf of powerless parties). If a robot could be trained to replicate the intermediary role of journalists, this raises a host of questions within the field that would threaten to destabilize core assumptions of journalism's function in society (Carlson 2015). Furthermore, it poses a threat in the creation of knowledge. Journalists have been assumed to be the rightful arbiters of valid knowledge; can knowledge created not just by a non-journalist, but a *non-human* be considered valid knowledge?

But even if the intermediary role of journalists were assumed to be safe, artificial intelligence poses other essential threats–*again, that are not necessarily new*. Journalists aim for an informed citizenry and for access to reliable information, often from those citizens (see Moran and Shaihk 2022). The application of generative AI can be done by a range of actors outside of journalism (e.g., public relations people) that could affect the work of journalism and leave audiences misinformed.

Threats to Journalistic Authority

Journalistic authority is a "site of discursive struggle, insomuch as there is ongoing contestation about the nature and scope of that authority between those who want to maintain it and those would seek to reform, displace, challenge, or erode it" (Vos and Thomas 2018; see also Carlson 2017) and it is through discourse that journalists are able to authorize events and "reify their authoritative status to audiences" (Zelizer, 1990, 366). Yet this discourse is not static. While journalists commonly offer a *first draft of history*, there is also a long tradition of the *second day story* (Usher 2014) that reflects the source-making journalists make in the days, months and years even that follow their initial reporting. Generative artificial intelligence may not pose new threats, but it certainly poses more extreme versions of threats they've faced in the past, and against which they've needed to strengthen their authority in the face of.

Yet journalistic authority has always faced historic threats—in relation to financial precarity and intervention from powerful forces (e.g., government entities, the religious organizations, corporations; Reese 2019). Financial precarity has proven particularly acute in more market-driven news ecosystems and with relatively weak social infrastructure (e.g., the US and Canada) given that journalists often find themselves working long hours, with low access to resources and high expectations for their work (Torsner 2022). As the financial fortunes of journalism have waned in many contexts, the work of journalism has increasingly been conducted through public relations professionals, lifestyle influencers, in-house media writers, podcasters and the like. Journalists' adaptability has relied in large part on existing with a "soft boundary" which reflects profound overlap in the processes and missions between fields (Perreault and Hanusch 2024, 4). Hence, it is no surprise that weakened financial resources have resulted "an increasing symbiosis between journalism and public relations that creates even more dependency

and intermingling" (Perreault et al. 2024, 350). Such actors that exist outside of the normative expectations for journalism, but provide similar forms of content "challenge journalistic authority and compete with news organizations for the audience's attention" (Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019, 21). While not consistently affiliated with governments, far-right groups have in a similar manner sought to strip journalistic authority through campaigns of intimidation, aimed at pushing journalists to self-censor their work (Perreault 2023; Perreault and Miller, 2022). As Perreault (2023) notes, journalists' technological adoption, often conducted with less than necessary training, has often granted external and hostile actors greater influence in growing spheres of public information. In this way, artificial intelligence poses a substantial threat to journalistic authority as a growing technological domain in which (1) hostile actors have proven particularly adept and (2) amidst historically weak levels of journalistic trust and journalistic economic capital (Moran and Shaihk 2022; Westlund 2021).

In maintaining authority, journalists commonly employ three strategies, which we would anticipate journalists applying to boost and regain their authority in light of this threat: *synecdoche, omission,* and *personalization* (Zelizer, 1990). As Zelizer (1990) notes, in *synecdoche,* journalists leverage the authority of their sources in order to boost their authority; in *omission*, journalists rearrange and remove story details in ways to boost their authority; and in *personalization*, journalists frame their own experience as central to a larger media story.

Connecting these three strategies to the use of generative AI in the newsroom, different scenarios are imaginable where AI can be understood as a threat to journalistic authority. First, journalists could incorporate generative AI and the use of large language models as a source of authority, for example by referring to the use in the analysis of large data sets or real-time analysis of content, but clearly outlining that journalists are the curators that control what parts of the analysis are integrated in their reporting (*synecdoche).* Second, journalists may use AI to increase accessibility of their reporting, for example by letting AI craft more concise and focused narratives; by staying in final control of the story but ultimately delivering a better product, journalists could respond to an authority threat through AI (*omission*). Third, journalists could introduce the use of generative AI in their storytelling. Highlighting their own decisions in the use of generative AI and explaining (dys)functionalities of this technology can furthermore help to boost journalistic authority (*personalization*).

In light of this, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do journalists discursively construct the use of AI on journalistic newsroom routines?

RQ 2: How do journalists discursively construct AI's implications for digital platform communication for news users?

Method

In order to address the research questions, the authors employed a discourse analysis across four countries: Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. These four countries were selected given that they represent *critical cases* of fast-moving adoption countries.[1] These four countries reflect Creswell's *critical case* given

that they are not extreme cases–low infrastructure for adaptation, for example–and while the countries all differ in regards to market structure, they all share large news ecosystems; this allows for "maximum application of information to other cases" (Creswell and Poth 2016, 127). This follows the medium-scope comparative research design (Esser 2013) that aimed for several critical countries, but acknowledges that "bigger does not necessarily mean better, though, as large-scale studies often run the risk of losing depth" (Esser 2013, 115; see also Esser 2019) and hence, intensive and manageable comparisons prove to be a valuable means of promoting conceptual progress.

Metajournalism offers shape to an experience well rooted within professional studies: the experience within the profession of talking about the activities of the profession (Carlson 2016). In journalism, this of course happens formally–as in the trade press, oped pieces, obituaries of journalists, and through government documents–as well as informally–with journalists' water cooler chatter. Given that this study is concerned with journalists' largely *internal* metadiscursive dialogue, the research team gathered a corpus of trade press articles (n = 177). Data collection began with the introduction of ChatGPT 3.5, on November 30th 2022, and continued through December 31, 2023 in order to reflect the wave of chatbots with which journalists contended during the year following ChatGPT 3.5 (Bard, Co-Pilot, Gemini, etc.). Using the search term of "artificial intelligence"/ "Künstliche Intelligenz," metajournalism was gathered from *NiemanLab* (n = 24; USA), *Columbia Journalism Review* (n = 20; USA), *Review of Journalism* (n = 9; Canada), *J-Source* (n = 2; Canada), *Medium Magazine* (n = 17; Germany), *BildBlog* (n = 55; Germany), *Übermedien* (n = 10; Germany), *journalist (n = 8; Germany); Press Gazette* (n = 29; United Kingdom), and the *Reuters Institute* (n = 3; United Kingdom). In order to support transparency and engagement with this research, the data and the study research plan are publicly available via Open Science Framework (link: https://osf.io/bwkez/?view_only = 6d142b7ffbcb493b92ae3af911648e59). For each case, we chose the sites for metajournalism through a theoretical sampling approach aimed at identifying the sources of data best able to address the research questions in a constructive manner (Draucker et al. 2007). In theoretical sampling, interpretive researchers expand the dataset to "offer empirical indicators necessary for category development" (1138) and this process continued until the authors assessed that they had reached theoretical saturation (e.g., evidenced through there being no new categories that emerged from the data). In many countries, metajournalism emerges from scholarly-professional collaborations and with sites hosted at universities. This led us to include *NiemanLab* (Harvard University, USA), *Columbia Journalism Review* (Columbia University, USA), *Review of Journalism* (Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada), *J-Source* (Toronto Metropolitan University and Carleton University, Canada) and the Reuters Institute (Oxford University, United Kingdom). In other countries, metajournalism occurs through independent trade magazines and trade blogs (*Medium Magazine*, Germany; *Übermedien*, Germany; *journalist*, Germany; *Bildblog*, Germany; *Press Gazette*, United Kingdom). The goal across these sites was to gather data that aimed to maximize opportunities for application, while at the same time being sensitive to regional factors in terms of popularity and format. Simply put, we aimed to gather from sources that reflected the discourse within the national journalism scenes, while at the same time picking forms (e.g., independent magazines and webblogs, university-professional partnerships) that are common in the wider world of metajournalism.

German data was gathered, analyzed and translated by a native German speaker; all results will be presented in English. Qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative descriptive analysis are used to interrogate the journalistic metadiscourse regarding the development of large language models. Based on these results, we derive potential implications for news audiences in a typology to further this field of research as it is ultimately relevant for how AI changes knowledge foundations in digital societies.

It is worth noting that all methodological choices come with limitations, and the same is true in the case of our study (Creswell and Poth 2016). Hence, at the end of the discussion you'll find that we highlight limitations in our sample selection and time frame selected in particular.

Analysis was conducted through an iterative, grounded theory-style analysis of the textual data. Such constant comparative work can be applied for both *etic* and *emic* research, and has proven particularly valuable for research conducted by teams in multiple contexts (see Ferrucci et al. 2017). Given that the research team is international, working with two languages, and collecting data from multiple sites, it was deemed essential that the discourse analysis allow team members to *present* open codes, themes, and examples across several levels of analysis in order to better "understand how the practices and assumptions … differed or overlapped" (Belair-Gagnon, Owen, and Holton 2017, 564). In the data analysis, quotes will be used to reflect the broader themes from the data, and, for readability, will be cited by article number. A table in the Appendix offers the details for the metajournalistic discourse articles sourced.

Findings

Overall, the discourse analyzed for this study reflected on artificial intelligence in a remarkably consistent manner–that overall AI still is far from ready to stand in for the work of journalism. That said, and taken through the lens of our conceptual framework, we do see important discrepancies between the European countries, United Kingdom and Germany, and North American countries, United States and Canada. The later discrepancies, and inline with the overall goals of comparative research, will be addressed in the discussion (see below). However, given this consistency, the results section is organized to emphasize this unified strain in the data.

An Imprecise Tool

In regards to RQ 1, journalists discursively constructed AI as a newsroom tool that required precision for effective use in newsroom routines. This was evidenced through journalists' work in verifying the potentials and the pitfalls of generative AI by applying it to newsroom tasks; and also, foreshadowing future routines through journalists' discussion of the growth of *prompting* jobs in a range of industries.

In the months after the release of ChatGPT 3.5, a common refrain in journalism about ChatGPT was reflected in lines such as "was written by ChatGPT" (Article 88), "was generated by AI" (Article 33), and "was generated by the text prompt" (Article 44). In general, such lines evidence a larger overall trend of journalists engaged in the work of verifying the potential of AI for newsroom tasks, although it was mentioned that in the beginning, no one really talked about using tools like ChatGPT, but the clearer and more accessible

texts gave it away, beyond the note of being written "created with the help of machine support" (Article 173). Moreover, conversations with chatbots were described to unravel the creative potential of a topic (Article 173). However, also the opposite was mentioned: letting AI do routine tasks helps to save time that journalists can use for creative work (Article, 176).

Journalists also described "conversing with chatbots" across the year (Article 24), often pointing to elite newsrooms that were integrating artificial intelligence into their routines (e.g., *The New York Times*)

> What I find exciting is how we can use AI to make the people and processes behind our work more available and accessible to more people. That's at the heart of our work," said Alex Hardiman, chief product officer at the Times. "I agree that we're wholly uninterested in AI replacing human expertise and judgment, but we're seeing more and more ways that AI can amplify it in responsible and accurate ways. (Article 24)

Journalists talk about the act of news creation, with a specific focus on the ideation process when they mention the potential of AI applications. "Nevertheless, ChatGPT and its colleagues can be helpful in journalism. And exactly where you least expect it from a computer: when it comes to creativity" (Article 5). A two-out-of-ten strategy is mentioned here: When preparing questions for an interview, ChatGPT will give you ten questions, of which two can be useful (Article 5). Another way to use generative AI that is mentioned is to develop counter-arguments journalists have not thought of (Article 5).

There is an indication of great unity that content produced by AI tools need to be verified. As one article put it, "The source of inspiration is the editor, who checks and revises the information and the article. The human has the final responsibility" (Article 163). Moreover, there is an agreement about the need for transparency for audiences to label content that has been produced automatically (see Article 19; Article 46; Article 66; Article 78; Article 163). However, when it comes to specific applications, different understandings about the level of verification appear. One journalist talks about how it is often easier to ask Chat-GPT about common facts, mentioning that it is important to verify the output through Google. This shows a circular understanding of verification, as in both cases, a digital platform, driven by algorithmic selections is used to verify facts:

> Nevertheless, there are sometimes questions that ChatGPT can help with. Let's say you're looking for an artist's place of residence, but it's always at the bottom of the articles you find. Or you want to know what a historical figure said about a certain topic. It is often quicker to ask ChatGPT and then verify the place of residence found using Google (Article 5).

Journalists furthermore described the pitfalls of generative AI, noting their own experiences in testing generative AI only to find it woefully unprepared for the task at hand. For example, in one piece of metajournalism, author notes, "most worryingly, there are serious concerns about the accuracy of ChatGPT that call into question whether it can really be relied upon to support solid journalistic work. It has a lot of answers, but are they the right ones?" (Article 66). Hence, the author tests ChatGPT with a range of prompts to find the accuracy–checked against verified sources–to be mixed with some results (e.g., "What makes the monarch butterfly migration in North America unique?") more successful than others (e.g., "When was the most recent outbreak of the plague?"). There were also more applied tests, where journalists offered a video of a brutal mugging in Argentina and then tasked generative AI with creating a news story.

The result? A write-up that appeared to bear all the structural cues from journalism–short, pinchy sentences and clean inverted pyramid style–but with errors that the *Press Gazette* news editor flagged immediately:

- You got the name of the victim wrong
- The age of the victim wrong
- The location of the crime wrong
- The description of the video didn't match the footage
- Said the perpetrator was unidentified when we have a name and an age
- Said the perpetrator was at large when he was arrested
- Appear to have fabricated a quotation by the mayor of Buenos Aires
- Got the name of the mayor of Buenos Aires wrong
- Appear to have fabricated a quotation by the victims' children (Article 99)

Yet journalists simultaneously were reflexive in their criticism of the errors of generative AI in that many of them could have also been easily made by humans. In one piece of metajournalism, the journalist noted the complex ethical situations that generative AI worked through immediately producing a crime story that was problematic, but no worse than others the writer had seen: "The story that resulted was purple-prosed in places (like calling the shooting "tragic" three times) and a little racist (like gratuitously mentioning "several black men" who were allegedly standing nearby)" (Article 31).

Taken together, this points toward a layered discursive construction of AI as a tool filled with both possibility and peril.

Yet, it is worth noting that several pieces of metajournalism also noted the development of generative AI prompting positions as relevant to newsroom routines. Taken through the lens of journalists' other technological adaptations, such *prompting* positions would seem to have little long-term viability (e.g., early social media adoption in newsrooms was accompanied by the development of "social media coordinator" positions, early digital website adoption was accompanied by the development of "online reporting" positions). Newsrooms often try to outsource adaptation through hiring individuals who already have the skillset (see Ferrucci and Perreault 2021). That said, while such singular positions have become more rare, it is also true that digital publishing and social media have become an inescapable part of news routines.

> AI is here to stay, because after the internet, iPhone and social media, it is being treated as the third milestone, "disruption." Whether privately or in the company, "promptness" is now the order of the day. This means: brief ChatGPT as accurately as possible and find out what the tool can do. (Article 12)

In this way, it is worth pointing toward journalists' discussions of prompting as a new, position-specific skill. For example, *NiemanLab* pointed toward the potential of *prompting* positions in which the journalists would effectively manage AI to be more effective (Article 35). There is a clear need for such positions in the metajournalistic discourse.

Prompting proved so important that journalists warned of the rise of entire positions related to it:

> That's how important the right prompt is. ChatGPT and its colleagues have already created a whole new profession: the so-called "prompt engineer." Some media companies are already

> employing specialized people for the task of giving artificial intelligence the right commands. That makes perfect sense. Because what comes out of artificial intelligence depends very much on the prompt you give it. That's how good prompts work: They are detailed, as much thought as possible has already gone into them (Article 5).

All of this together reflects the degree to which journalists constructed generative AI as a tool, one with both potential and peril–as with all other tools, and which they perceived to have a future as a central aspect in the work of journalists.

Emotional Discourse on AI's Implications for News Users

In regards to RQ 2, journalists discursively constructed AI's implications for the potential and pitfalls for news users with largely anecdotal and emotion-driven language, offering little in the way of empirical *evidence* of effects on news users but more commonly articulating their *fears* of effects of prompting on news users.

Journalists at times linked the potential of generative AI to pop culture, science-fiction depictions of artificial intelligence with journalists "worried about the Borg" (Article 27)–a reference to a destructive technologically enhanced group from *Star Trek*–and "having the *Terminator* movies' Skynet in mind" (Article 59, see also Article 21) when considering generative AI. In a similar vein, journalists often offered anecdotes regarding their own use of generative AI as a way to make broader statements regarding its implications. As one journalist described, "Their headlines were boring. Their social posts sounded like they were written by overcaffeinated marketers" (Article 24).

Journalists would utilize their use of generative AI as evidence of their expertise (e.g., "We—an investigative reporter, a data journalist, and a computer scientist—have firsthand experience investigating AI. We've seen the tremendous potential these tools can have—but also their tremendous risks;" Article 58) and shared details of how they assessed the tool (e.g., "we decided to run a little test;" Article 66; "A survey conducted on an AI article found that 70 percent of readers rated the text as very good"; Article 174). Similarly, another article described a common assignment in training journalists: having student journalists write a police story with a range of documents. The author gave the documents to ChatGPT, noting the numerous mistakes made by the generative AI, "The story that resulted was purple-prosed in places (like calling the shooting "tragic" three times) and a little racist (like gratuitously mentioning "several black men" who were allegedly standing nearby)" (Article 31).

Many journalists, beyond using pop culture references, offered practical pitfalls of generative AI, in particular the fear that journalists would lose their jobs and that news readers would lose valuable access to independently verifiable information. Journalists offered existential fears, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* noted in their roundup of headlines, which included "Bing's A.I. Chat: 'I Want to Be Alive. 😈,'" "AI could kill humans and there might be no way to stop it," and "What is AI chatbot phenomenon ChatGPT and could it replace humans" (Article 60). In this way, journalists writing turned emotional at times warning that humanity needed to work on "mitigating the risk of extinction from AI" (Article 59). More practical fears included the sentiment that "AI is just going to take everyone's jobs" (Article 70) and in this way, newsrooms braced for the "potential impact AI could have on the financial viability of journalism" (Article 72).

Journalists yearned for ethical standards to apply to AI, noting that "Our industry must coalesce around a set of standards soon, or it will be too late. The AI bosses will already be in charge" (Article 62). A piece in *NiemanLab* noted that generative AI reflected the same pitfalls as a search engine, but more extremely:

> We'll also look back on this time when we gladly gave up volumes of personal information to search and social media companies in exchange for the value we perceived in using them. But will we also remember that we didn't solve the problems of misinformation, bias, and abuse when we had the chance? AI just exacerbates these dilemmas (Article 26).

In particular, journalists perceived the pitfalls in the fact errors generated by AI and even as it advertised "current and authoritative information" to users (Article 81). The *Review of Journalism* in Canada, reflected on the CNet scandal for example, in which media leaders employed generative AI, without disclosure, to create a range of "explainer" pieces. When called out CNET hastily updated the pages for all of them to disclose the use of AI, but more troubling, journalists noted was that a later "CNET audit revealed that roughly half the AI-generated explainers included factual errors" (Article 68). "Explainer" pieces don't prove very explanatory if they're wrong. Indeed, attribution could even be assigned incorrectly via generative AI as a journalist complained "ChatGPT made up a fake article by me and put my byline on it" (Article 85). Users were also considered as critical readers and error detecting mechanisms in the case of misuse of AI in journalism. While it was noted that "Machine support is clearly indicated to employees and readers" (Article 163), they also admitted that "Then you also have to live with the fact that there will be criticism and accusations if you don't work carefully." (ibid.) While implications for users were implicitly discussed in these pitfall stories, they were mainly direct, as seeing false information is problematic. Wider implications, such as the competitive situation about user attention that journalism and I might experience or the loss in trust of journalistic information when using AI received almost no consideration.

Prompting appeared to be the aspect of news users' use of AI, which journalists took umbrage with most given that offering knowledge was a journalistic task, but one which AI seemed to have a more systematic way of offering to the audience. The *Press Gazette* for example offered warnings of how people may use prompting mechanisms for news given that "people spend longer on articles with AI-generated summaries" (Article 85). Summarizing, though, was primarily where journalists perceived the strength of generative AI given that chatbots "can't put its finger on why [a] problem is happening or anything like that, because it doesn't have an awareness of the world around it" (Article 87). But what generative AI can offer, unlike journalists, is responsiveness.

> Type "teddy bears working on new AI research on the moon in the 1980s" into any of the recently released text-to-image artificial intelligence image generators, and after just a few seconds the sophisticated software will produce an eerily pertinent image (Article 44).

This strikes to a core concern of journalism, serving the audience, which generative AI seemed poised to address. Interestingly, good prompting is seen as a skill that especially journalists have, forgetting that users can do the same thing, either to get news or other information. Understanding prompting as a new, professional journalistic skill might miss the possibility that users can find an alternative in generative AI over journalism. The metajournalistic discourse had not considered these possibilities, reflecting on their

audiences behavior. Also, an article that published all prompts by journalists used to improve several German newspaper title pages shows that the audience is not included as objects in the prompts (Article 173). Only in two of 100 prompts, readers were mentioned and in both cases did not help make a text more accessible or make the chatbot consider specific needs of the audiences. This shows that journalists perceive themselves to know what the audience wants and need and only use AI to implement these ideas ("I want to protect my readers from accidentally stumbling upon beheading videos on the internet. What advice can I give them? Please write down 10 tips."; Article 173).

Taken together, journalists reflected on AI's implications for potential and pitfalls for news users, largely relying on their own experiences and emotion-driven language. In particular, journalists identified the threat of the "prompt" as a system that seemed designed to offer something to users that journalists felt ill prepared to match in their working routines.

Discussion

Metajournalistic discourse across four countries is overwhelmingly consistent in their assessment: artificial intermediaries—automated agents that generate, verify, select, and distribute knowledge—who can replace journalists are far from a reality. However, the function of journalists as intermediaries on digital platforms - providing a service for recipient and/or sender of a message by qualifying the content - *with the assistance of AI* is already underway to a notable extent (de-de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds 2024). The analysis in this study shows that generative AI is applied in a variety of cases, from the generation of content to the verification of content (Perreault, Lewis, and Ely 2025). Journalists predominantly portray themselves as AI-assisted intermediaries. While they do not view AI as an inherent threat to their epistemic authority, concerns are raised about audiences potentially bypassing journalistic quality controls by turning directly to Large Language Models, thereby weakening journalism's role in public knowledge flows.

In regards to the two research questions, journalists discursively constructed AI in regards to potential, pitfalls, and prompting–the innovative offering of generative AI. In regards to the first research question, journalists discursively constructed AI in relation to their own roles, seeing generative AI as a tool and one that, while offering challenges, also offered entirely new lines of work. Here, the story finds that the state of AI application comes close to that of journalists as AI-assisted intermediaries (AIAI). In regards to the second research question, journalists discursively constructed AI in relation to news users and here perceived generative AI as far more dangerous, offering materials through a means journalists could not match and which, journalists argued, could pose an existential threat for humanity.

Clearly, these two research questions reflect a discrepancy within journalists' discourse: a more measured consideration of what generative AI could mean for journalists and a more dystopian image of what generative AI could mean for news users.

First, it's worth considering that the discourse in this dataset does not distinguish between knowledge, content, and text. It does not reflect whether generative AI is used to assist in the correction of text, the development of new content, or, indeed, as

a source of knowledge. While drawing this boundary seems arbitrary in a news work context, whether and when this fine line is crossed can make a big difference when defining where on the spectrum between a non-AI assisted intermediary and an artificial intermediary we currently reside (Moran and Shaikh 2022). The fact that specifically in the verification practices, journalists in their discussion referred to examples where ChatGPT is used as a second source in the traditional two-source principle (in our case for the verification of a birth city) shows, that boundaries between enhancing human-produced knowledge and building on knowledge gathered via an LLM are blurry (Carlson 2015; Müller and Schulz 2021). It also shows us how long-rehearsed journalistic working principles, such as a two-source verification, can become easily undermined in a situation where the second "source" is actually a large language model (Robinson 2007). In this way, the boundary between using generative AI as a source for knowledge, easier content production, or enhancing human-produced content receives more attention in future work - and in the news room - than journalist's audiences.

A second finding is that the "human-in-the-loop" principle (Mosqueira-Rey et al. 2023) was mentioned frequently and without counter-examples. The metajournalistic discourse reflects that there is agreement that the final decision about published content produced with the help of generative AI has to come from the journalist. This would seem to support the notion of AIAI or artificial intelligence-assisted intermediaries. However, although there seems to be widespread agreement, some stories present a look into the crystal ball. The first German AI radio station that operates fully automated has two artificial hosts that entertain listeners and present songs. They have not read the news yet and humans are still in the loop, which shows the problem consciousness of the editors: "That is why the editorial team has "set itself ethical rules based on journalistic standards', such as a four-eyes principle. So the AI works autonomously, but nothing is published "that has not been heard by human editors beforehand". In automated broadcasting, there is "a kind of emergency stop by our human colleagues'" (Article 170). However, the metajournalistic story questions why it is necessary to have an emergency stop at all if everything that is published is indeed pre-listened. This shows that the tipping point of independent publishing through AI is at hand and gives reason to suspect that in situations that are perceived as unproblematic, generative AI is used without full human control.

The strong focus on "prompting jobs', i.e., the skills in extracting high-quality information from a generative AI based on the input given to a chatbot, received relatively high attention in the metajournalistic discourse. This is somewhat surprising, but shows how quickly innovations in journalistic work routines get focused on technical issues. There is a similarity with the academic discourse, which quickly moved from the question of *whether* generative AI should be used in academic work to the question of *how* large language models can be trained so that they enhance academic work, for example, in analyzing digital trace data (e.g., Stöhr, Ou, and Malmström 2024). Finding a similar direction in the metajournalistic discourse shows us the professionalization in engaging with generative AI. Rather than the question of whether it should be used in journalistic work routines, the metajournalistic discourse shows that the "how" question received already, in the heyday of early ChatGPT, higher attention. Interestingly, this does not mean that there is a strong discussion on the quality of generative AIs output and how strongly it adheres to journalistic standards of content production, but rather the quality of input

levels in the form of prompts. This pragmatic, techno-social approach shows that while generative AI output is not discussed as a direct alternative to journalistic content on the production and distribution side, the quality of the output still matters to journalists because they have already incorporated generative AI into some of their work routines. Worries of journalists that such content is published "with their byline" underline this concern.

In terms of threats to journalists' authority, the metajournalistic discourse shows some ambiguity here. While there is no strong, explicit expression of concern that AI will threaten journalistic work long-lastingly, the discourse is very explicit about the shortcomings of current tools. Interestingly, this is not mentioned with a strong focus on potential detrimental outcomes when using AI in the newsroom, but rather to express superiority from a journalistic standpoint (Vos and Thomas 2018). Several articles employ humor regarding the current functions of generative AI. However, this belittling may be interpreted as a sort of self-affirmation that, in the end, generative AI will not threaten journalistic authority while actually not being so sure about this. In the metajournalistic discourse we observe, the strategies used by journalists to boost their journalistic authority regarding AI on the basis of Zelizer (1990) come closest to *personalization*. Many stories include personal experiences on how generative AI has been used and most often did not deliver, clearly outlining the journalistic authority journalists still hold compared to AI (Carlson 2015). We see little discussion of journalists discussing how to use the capabilities of generative AI to improve reporting, for example, by being able to analyze large data corpora or information coming in in real-time (e.g., real-time fact-checking). Also, the functions of generative AI in producing a more coherent and accessible story are not often discussed. While this is a far-fetched interpretation, one could argue that the journalistic discourse is still not self-confident enough to admit and actively discuss how AI can help to address the difficulties that the journalistic profession is facing, especially regarding financial cuts, limited resources for larger data analytics projects and subsequent reporting, or offering stronger accessibility of reporting to audiences. However, since the quality of output is still very uncertain at this moment, one can also interpret this as journalists simply being cautious in getting too enthusiastic following the technology hype (Ferrucci and Perreault 2021).

Yet, for all the focus on the work of journalists, it is noteworthy how little attention the audience received in the journalists' discourse. There is a strong self-focus on the profession, individual work routines, and journalists' own experiences. The discursive construction of the impact that the inclusion of generative AI has on audiences is hardly noticeable in our results. This is surprising, since generative AI might not only be included in journalistic routines but also become a direct competitor to journalistic work. As we describe above, the function of an intermediary, as a prime function that journalists take on digital platforms (e.g., Neuberger et al. 2023; Ohme et al. 2025) is not exclusive to the journalistic profession. Political actors, influencers, and citizens can, in theory, fulfill a similar function (Perreault and Hanusch 2024), with the open question of quality. Since the intermediation function is defined as fulfilling a service for two users in a dyadic relation on platforms, it is imaginable that artificial agents can fulfill such a service as well, like the first example from open source intelligence communities show (Charlton, Mayer, and Ohme 2024). The first examples of this already exist. Meta now uses generative AI to summarize user comments under certain posts (Roth 2024).

Summarizing and providing context has been defined as a core service of intermediaries on digital platforms (Ohme et al. 2025). If we take a look into the crystal ball, it is imaginable that artificial agents interact as personas on digital platforms and provide more intermediating functions, such as verification or content moderation. Hence, audiences are likely to meet artificial intermediaries in their daily information usage routines. The open question is, whether journalists will be in the loop here or simply have to watch how their audiences increasingly interact with artificial agents that - on a superficial view - can also produce flawless, convincing pieces of text and videos that are perceived as informative - a product that the journalistic profession has worked for decades to have the supremacy of distributing in public discourse (Carlson 2017).

Finally, comparative research should "guide[] our attention to the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for communication outcomes" (Esser 2013, 116) and hence, it's worth noting that there were meaningful ways in which our sample diverged. In particular, we see that in countries with more limited social safety infrastructure (e.g., US, Canada) the fears related to the replacement by artificial intelligence are more pronounced (see Article 31; Article 70); yet in countries with more robust social safety infrastructure (e.g., UK, Germany) the focus on applying AI to existing tasks is more pronounced (see Article 5; Article 72; Article 163). While these emerge from individual articles, it is important to remember–and to the purpose of comparative research–that individual news items come from "within news organizations, which in turn are nested within larger news systems" (Esser 2019, 684). This would also seem to reflect Moran and Shaikh's (2022) contention that "the division between optimism and skepticism appears to align with economic priorities" (1769).

This research has several limitations. First, this study focuses on countries in the Global North/ Global West in the metajournalistic discourse with the four countries included. While our analysis includes several leading outlets of metajournalistic discussion that are also read in non-Western countries, there is, of course, valuable metajournalism in other contexts that may not be represented here. Future research should expand the scope of the metajournalism, understanding that our field–as a global field–needs consider a wider global scope of metajournalism. Second, we only include a time span of one year after the global introduction of ChatGPT. While this can give a comprehensive overview of the journalistic debate as a direct reaction to the easily accessible use of generative AI, it, of course, is possible that this is a discussion that may progress across different phases, with this study only reflecting initial journalistic metadiscussion; journalism, as with many fields, tends to be rather dystopian at the initial introduction of new technology. That said, our work gives insights into the direct reaction to newly introduced technology to be utilized in journalistic work, giving insights into immediate (and thereby more elaborate and less toned-down) reactions of journalists.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable, multinational insights into how journalists adapt to new technology, with generative AI integrating into their professions. There is high agreement that AI will not be able to substitute journalist work, while hopes are expressed that it can simplify certain processes and help redistribute resources. There is also agreement that the human-in-the loop principle also applies to journalists using AI. However, fault lines become visible when AI is suggested to verify information or in real-time radio programs with an "emergency button" (Article 170). No explicit authority threat is expressed by journalists. However, the language used is partly belittling, expressing

uncertainty about the future role of AI in their profession. Little focus is given to the audiences in this discussion, potentially missing the opportunity to develop strategies for responsible innovation. While we are far from having artificial journalistic intermediaries based on our analysis, artificial intermediaries that work with journalists are well underway.

Note

1. This is reflected well in Esser's (1999) comparative study of tabloidization in the press which similarly studied the UK, Germany and the USA. Esser (1999) finds that while the media systems differed widely, the countries shared a connection between journalists' adaptation to new values and audience members' dissatisfaction with those values.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

AI Disclosure Statement

Google Gemini 2.5 Pro was used to assist in copy editing for grammar and readability in revision. The AI was prompted with individual sections and asked to identify areas that needed to be addressed for grammatical clarity, which the lead author then addressed.

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Appendix

Table A1.

Title	#	Site	URL/Page	Country	Date
Was Sie wirklich über KI-Tools wissen müssen	5	Medium Magazin	p. 54–68	Germany	2/2023
Trends. European Publishing Congress	12	Medium Magazin	p. 36–38	Germany	3/2023
To build trust, news outlets prioritize transparency	19	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/to-build-trust-news-outlets-prioritize-transparency/	USA	12/2023
The algorithm will be the message	21	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/the-algorithm-will-be-the-message/	USA	12/2023
Humans hold their own against the robots	24	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/humans-hold-their-own-against-the-robots/	USA	12/2023
AI changes everything … and nothing	26	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/ai-changes-everything-and-nothing/	USA	12/2023
What does OpenAI's rapid unscheduled disassembly mean for the future of AI?	27	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/11/what-does-openais-rapid-unscheduled-disassembly-mean-for-the-future-of-ai/	USA	11/2023
Google wants you to let its AI bot help you write news articles	31	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/07/google-wants-you-to-let-its-ai-bot-help-you-write-news-articles/	USA	7/2023
Writing guidelines for the role of AI in your newsroom? Here are some, er, guidelines for that	33	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/07/writing-guidelines-for-the-role-of-ai-in-your-newsroom-here-are-some-er-guidelines-for-that/	USA	7/2023
AI will soon be able to cover public meetings. But should it?	35	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/06/ai-will-soon-be-able-to-cover-public-meetings-but-should-it/	USA	6/2023
Text-to-image AI is a powerful, easy technology for making art — and fakes	44	*NiemanLab*	https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/12/text-to-image-ai-is-a-powerful-easy-technology-for-making-art-and-fakes/	USA	12/2022
The world grapples with how to regulate artificial intelligence	46	*Columbia Journalism Review*	https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/artificial_intelligence_biden_order_uk_summit.php	USA	11/2023
How to report better on artificial intelligence	58	*Columbia Journalism Review*	https://www.cjr.org/analysis/how-to-report-better-on-artificial-intelligence.php	USA	7/2023
Q&A: John Mecklin on AI as an existential story	59	*Columbia Journalism Review*	https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/john_mecklin_ai_existential_story.php	USA	6/2023
How the media is covering ChatGPT	60	*Columbia Journalism Review*	https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/media-coverage-chatgpt.php	USA	5/2023
ChatGPT, artificial intelligence, and the news	62	*Columbia Journalism Review*	https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/chatgpt_ai_fears_media.php	USA	4/2023
ChatGPTrue or False?	66	*Review of Journalism*	https://reviewofjournalism.ca/fact-checking-gpt/	Canada	4/2023
Sophi's Choice	68	*Review of Journalism*	https://reviewofjournalism.ca/sophis-choice/	Canada	7/2023
STAYING ALIVE: THE RISE OF AI IN NEWSROOMS WITH GAVIN ADAMSON	70	*J-Source*	https://j-source.ca/staying-alive-the-rise-of-ai-in-newsrooms/	Canada	5/2023

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

Title	#	Site	URL/Page	Country	Date
How can news media bounce back in 2024? 18 leaders share their insights	72	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/news-predictions-2024-challenges-opportunities/	United Kingdom	12/2023
Telegraph journalists told use of ChatGPT will result in same sanctions as plagarism	778	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/nationals/telegraph-generative-ai-guidelines-policy-copyright/	United Kingdom	11/2023
Major news publishers block the bots as ChatGPT starts taking live news	81	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/platforms/chatgpt-publishers-news-bing-google/	United Kingdom	10/2023
Generative AI and journalism updates: Guardian joins publishers blocking ChatGPT from trawling their content	85	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/generative-ai-journalism-updates/	United Kingdom	9/2023
Sky News identifies the major "red flag" around AI-powered news reporting	87	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/broadcast/sky-news-ai-reporter/	United Kingdom	7/2023
Why action is needed to save quality news from destruction by AI and big tech	88	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/media_business/dominc-ponsford-olsen-lecture-st-brides-2023-journalism-generative-ai-threat/	United Kingdom	7/2023
Journalists: ChatGPT is coming for your jobs (but not in the way you might think)	99	*Press Gazette*	https://pressgazette.co.uk/media_law/journalists-chatgpt-jobs-ai-copyright/	United Kingdom	3/2023
Kinderkrankheit oder "krasser Sündenfall"? Wie Ippen Media KI einsetzt	163	*Übermedien*	https://uebermedien.de/83278/kinderkrankheit-oder-krasser-suendenfall-wie-ippen-media-ki-einsetzt/	Germany	4/2023
101 Prompts für die bessere Seite eins?	173	*journalist*	https://www.journalist.de/werkstatt/werkstatt-detail/101-prompts-fuer-die-bessere-seite-eins/	Germany	6/2023
Recherche in der Blackbox	174	*journalist*	https://www.journalist.de/werkstatt/werkstatt-detail/recherche-in-der-blackbox/	Germany	6/2023
"Wir sagen ja zur KI - aber als Werkzeug"	176	*journalist*	https://www.journalist.de/werkstatt/werkstatt-detail/wir-sagen-ja-zur-ki-aber-als-werkzeug/	Germany	6/2023