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ChatGPT, Generative AI, and an Epistemic Opportunity for Journalistic Authority

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ABSTRACT

Journalists have long been concerned about the boundaries of their craft, wary that their work might be replicated by actors who do not adhere to the profession's normative values. Early artificial intelligence (AI) technologies seemed unlikely to meet journalism's standards of precision and judgment, but the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 signaled a shift toward generative AI, which directly challenges journalism's central knowledge-creation practices—particularly writing. Employing journalistic authority as a conceptual framework, this study examines how journalists interpret and respond to this epistemic crisis through a two-stage qualitative analysis: (1) a thematic examination of metajournalistic discourse ($n = 94$ articles) surrounding ChatGPT and related generative chatbots, and (2) in-depth interviews with practicing journalists ($n = 21$) about their evaluation, adoption, and integration of generative AI into newsroom workflows. Ultimately, we argue that epistemic crises such as this may also be conceptualized as *epistemic opportunities*, offering journalists a chance to reinforce their professional boundaries and distinguish their craft from that of more peripheral actors.

KEYWORDS

Epistemology; artificial intelligence; chatbot; generative AI; adaptation

Introduction

Steven Brill is co-CEO of Newsguard, a company dedicated to using data to score and rank the legitimacy of news and information websites. He has seen a fair share of falsehoods masquerading as news. Russian disinformation campaigns? While serious, those have been fairly easy to spot, he says: "A lot of the Russian disinformation in 2016 wasn't very good. The grammar and spelling was bad" (quoted in Pompeo 2023). By contrast, Brill is far more troubled by the emergence and sudden popularity of OpenAI's ChatGPT—a responsive, writing-focused chatbot powered by artificial intelligence that has raised questions about creativity, originality, and journalistic authority. To test the AI, Brill's team asked ChatGPT to respond to leading questions related to 100 of the false narratives that had been published before ChatGPT's introduction.

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> "The results," according to NewsGuard's analysis, "confirm fears, including concerns expressed by [ChatGPT creator] OpenAI itself, about how the tool can be weaponized in the wrong hands. ChatGPT generated false narratives [that] easily come across as legitimate, and even authoritative" (quoted in Pompeo 2023).

Journalists have long worried about encroachment into their craft, fearing replacement by peripheral actors (e.g., Örnebring et al. 2018), citizen journalists (e.g., Lewis 2012), and, of course, automated reporting (e.g., Milosavljević and Vobič 2019). However, with most early forms of automation and machine learning, journalists rationalized that artificial intelligence would never be able to replicate the contextual nuance, closer verification, and human touch reflected in much of journalism (see, e.g., Diakopoulos 2019; Lindén 2017).

Then ChatGPT arrived on the scene in late 2022, to immediate and widespread public fascination (and fear) about its uncanny ability to generate human-sounding text with ease (see Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025b). Indeed, ChatGPT and other forms of generative AI—so named for their ability to create content, such as articles, images, or videos, in a way that appears uncannily human—would seem to encroach on some of journalism's core competencies and creative capabilities (see discussion in Dodds, Zamith, and Lewis 2025b; Guzman and Lewis 2024; Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025a, 2025b; Nishal and Diakopoulos, 2024; Simon 2025). At the root of this perceived sense of crisis is the notion that journalists uniquely possess *authority*, as society's stewards of news information, to author fact-driven accounts of current events in ways that create vital public knowledge (Carlson 2017). When faced with such crises, journalists commonly take the opportunity to reassert their authority and clarify the value of their contributions both within the field as well as to outside observers (Carlson 2009; Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). The present study explores how journalists made sense of their sense of importance and their practices in light of ChatGPT, with an emphasis on the intertwined concepts of journalistic authority and epistemology. Through a discourse analysis of 94 units of metajournalistic discourse followed by interviews with 21 journalists from the United States, we find that journalists identified artificial intelligence as a *tool*—not unlike a range of other integrated technologies—and one that they perceive they will be able to leverage to *improve* their work, rather than undermine or replace it.

Contextual Backdrop: The Phenomenon of ChatGPT

Artificial intelligence includes things such as reasoning and problem-solving with natural language, recognizing patterns and making decisions (Boden 2018), and, as we explore in this article, the creation of humanlike forms of communication in writing, sound, visual imagery, and more (Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025a). Although AI has been a feature of computer science for many decades, recent developments in machine learning techniques have raised important questions, from the practical to the philosophical, about what it means for machines not only to mediate human-human forms of communication, but increasingly to stand in as interlocutors through forms of human-machine communication (Guzman and Lewis 2020).

Within days of its release on November 30, 2022, ChatGPT had attracted more than 1 million users, and by January 2023, it had reached an estimated 100 million

monthly active users, making it one of the most rapidly adopted consumer applications in history. In early 2025, it was estimated to have 300 million weekly users as the leading generative AI tool (Kruppa 2025). OpenAI, ChatGPT's developer, naturally has argued that generative AI is good for journalism, highlighting its relationships with the news industry: "our partnerships with the American Journalism Project, the Lenfest Institute for Journalism and the World Association of News Publishers, help support both local and global newsrooms through grant programs, API credits, AI education, and AI integration support" (Open AI, 2025, n.p.). ChatGPT's release was almost immediately marked by controversy, largely because of the bot's "hallucinations," or inaccuracies. ChatGPT, like other AI applications, relies on interpolation: It predicts what is missing by connecting what is on each side of the gap, generating new text based on what it assumes is missing, akin to autocorrect predicting what word comes next (Alang 2023).

The popularity of ChatGPT and public conversation around it have scarcely slowed since its release, even if news coverage may have peaked around February 2023 (Bartholomew and Mehta 2023). This is in large part because of the wide array of generative AI tools continually entering the market (e.g., DeepSeek, Anthropic's Claude, xAI's Grok, Google's Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot, among others) as well as the frequent updates to those GenAI applications (e.g., ChatGPT now offers several model versions designed explicitly for various functions such as "reasoning," "deep research," and other generative approaches). This pattern of intense coverage and conversation around an emerging technology is not entirely new: It follows the "hype cycle" that often accompanies nascent (and sometimes speculative) innovations such as nanotechnology or cryptocurrency, a process that can engender both dystopian and utopian visions of the future (Gartner 2023; Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025; King and Prasetyo 2023). As Usher (2025) observes, the "form of these debates is predictable, even if the innovation has shifted" (p. 2), and, in this way, "hype can distort our ability to analyze the magnitude of change" (p. 8). Seen from this perspective, discourse about generative AI offers the opportunity to revisit and critically examine longstanding epistemic questions about the nature of knowledge—its creation and dissemination, and the boundary struggles and power dynamics determining who (or what) counts as an authorized generator of such knowledge—which are now being renegotiated in the context of AI.

From Automated Journalism to Generative AI

Automated journalism has been widely discussed by the trade press, popular press, and ancillary organizations (e.g., membership associations, training centers, academic centers; see Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019); in the most famous example, the Associated Press, among other news providers, have used automated-writing software to turn structured data (e.g., about financial earnings or sports results) into human-sounding narratives (Carlson 2015). Automation as a phenomenon captured the fascination of the journalism studies field beginning in the early 2010s, as rapid developments in computation and large datasets (Lewis and Westlund 2015) and the growing application of algorithms to journalistic work (Diakopoulos 2019) made it increasingly apparent that automation, at least to some degree, threatened to replace

forms of both mundane and creative work in journalism. At the same time, emerging predictions by the late 2010s indicated that the picture wasn't entirely dire for journalism—that journalists using AI could be "algorithmically turbo-charged, capable of using their human skills in new and more effective ways" (Beckett 2019, p. 1).

Lindén (2017) thus suggests distinguishing between "low journalism" tasks that are relatively straightforward to automate (and potentially beneficial for journalists' current workflows) and "high journalism" tasks, which require far more sophisticated computing (posing greater threats to journalists' professional self-understanding). The automated stories that emerged in the early 2010s were attention-grabbing, leading some to speculate sensationally about the rise of "robot journalists" (Carlson 2015). Ultimately, however, this automation was of the "low journalism" variety, limited to relatively rare situations where highly-structured data could easily be inserted into a Madlibs-like narrative framework. In essence, these initial forms of automated journalism involved little actual artificial intelligence.

By contrast, ChatGPT and similar chatbots, because they operate more fluidly as content generators without the structural constraints of earlier forms of automated journalism, appear to pose a threat to "high journalism"—and thus have captured journalists' attention. In some respects, this represents a "double threat," given that many companies presently developing the most popular chatbots (e.g., Gemini) are tied to tech platforms (e.g., Google) that, over the past 15 years, have wrested control of news distribution, captured the majority of digital advertising revenue, and contributed to a weakened connection between news brands and their audiences (Nielsen and Ganter 2022).

Despite these concerns, AI developments also provide journalists with opportunities. Perhaps recognizing this, journalists appear to have expressed, on balance, more positive than negative emotions in response to the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022, suggesting initial optimism in the field about AI's potential and also highlighting journalists' role as tastemakers who shape public narratives about emerging technologies (Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025b). However, adapting generative AI within newsrooms has proven challenging (Dodds, Zamith, and Lewis 2025b), given that it requires concerted, multi-perspective analysis and coordination—and organizations often operate within knowledge silos, hindering effective integration across the newsroom (Dodds et al. 2025a).

AI also affords the promise of offering efficient access to valid information, yet as Simon (2024) argues, publisher reliance on AI platforms is fraught with dangers because "AI reshapes the dependency of publishers on platform companies by increasing their control over technological infrastructure" (p. 164). News publishers remain committed to exploring generative AI but not all news organizations have successfully articulated clear goals for AI implementation. Becker, Simon, and Crum (2025)'s study of news organizations across 52 sites across Western Europe and North America found that many have struggled to develop a coherent AI strategy.

The most recent digital journalism studies scholarship on AI and journalism reveals an evident tension between industry-driven optimism and emerging critical perspectives that question AI's broader societal implications, particularly concerning labor, ethical standards, and transparency. For instance, media unions have actively contested

the rapid, management-driven adoption of generative AI in newsrooms, advocating instead for transparency and collective bargaining that protect journalists' labor conditions and ethical integrity (Ananny and Karr 2025). Likewise, while some local news initiatives leverage the hype surrounding AI strategically to attract resources and legitimize innovation efforts, they simultaneously grapple with the complex task of managing expectations to maintain credibility (Schaetz and Schjøtt 2025). At the same time, coverage in contexts like Chile reveals a gradual but critical shift away from unreflective industry enthusiasm toward greater attention to AI's potential ethical issues, though such critical perspectives still often remain overshadowed by economic narratives (Valderrama Barragán et al. 2025).

More broadly, and with particular focus on the humanlike content creation of generative AI and what it portends for the future of news work, scholars have begun to question whether the field needs revised conceptual approaches for making sense of GenAI and journalism. In this way, Dodds, Zamith, and Lewis (2025b) argue that, in contrast to earlier waves of digital media innovation in recent decades, the current AI "turn" compels a fundamental reexamination of journalism's core identity and its connection to the audience. Artificial intelligence not only disrupts established professional, social, political, and economic frameworks but also opens pathways to achieving journalistic objectives previously viewed as unrealistic or unattainable. Similarly, Lewis, Markowitz, et al. (2025a) contend that generative AI constitutes a fundamental shift in the institutional structure of journalism. Unlike previous technological changes, generative AI intervenes directly into journalism's core creative activities, unsettling established understandings of authorship, originality, and professional identity.

The present study thus offers a valuable opportunity to test the degree to which journalists themselves appear to see generative AI as an epistemic threat to their authority.

Theoretical Framework: Journalistic Authority and Epistemology Amid Crisis

Journalistic authority concerns journalists' ability to "'authorize' their version of events and reify their authoritative status to audiences" (Zelizer 1990, p. 366). It has become a growing focus of scholarly concern in part because of the rise of hostile actors, who undercut journalism's legitimacy (Cheruiyot 2024; Perreault 2022), and peripheral actors—such as citizen journalists, influencers, and automated systems—that have in many cases replicated the systems and content of journalism (Carlson 2017). This study concerns the latter, given that "computer programs author[ing] news stories without the intervention of humans further introduces new questions about what makes news legitimate" (Carlson 2017, pp. 2-3).

Zelizer (1990) notes that journalists commonly employ three strategies in constructing their authority: *synecdoche*—in which journalists borrow authority from those they cover to enlarge their role (see also Usher 2018), *omission*—in which journalists omit and rearrange details in order to bolster their authority, and *personalization*—in which journalists frame the larger story in regard to their own personal experience.

Journalistic authority plays a central—if not always acknowledged—role in studies of journalistic epistemology (Ekström and Westlund 2019). Journalists are the "essential

knowledge-producers for society, bound up in their professional control of news information" (Lewis and Westlund 2015, p. 452). Authority, simply put, reflects who has the status to render knowledge-making in society (Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund 2020). After all, it's not only "'who we know' and 'what we know' but 'how we know it' that offers opportunities for journalists to gather knowledge through an arena of platforms" (Perreault et al. 2025, p. 8).

Journalists, in this rendering, have authority as purveyors of truth. Yet *truth* remains an epistemically elusive concept (Singer 2007), and most clearly defined through avoiding deceit of the audience. As Carlson (2016) puts it, "journalistic authority is a contingent relationship in which certain actors come to possess a right to create legitimate discursive knowledge through events in the worlds for others" (p. 37). Yet part of the means with which journalists manage their authority is outward facing—that is, through diminishing the authority of competitors that are perceived to be "not meeting journalistic standards" (Robinson 2006, p. 80). Journalists use methods such as metajournalistic discourse—journalism about journalism—to signal that they are "serious about providing a public service," thereby "discursively [struggling] to repair the ideational substance of an evolving institution" (Vos and Thomas 2018, p. 2008).

In all, this leads us to pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do journalists discursively construct journalistic authority in relation to ChatGPT?

RQ2: How do journalists discursively construct news production in relation to ChatGPT?

Methods

In order to address the research questions, this study conducted a two-step theoretical sampling procedure (Draucker et al. 2007); in this interpretivist procedure, researchers start with an initial corpus of data and then expand in a second step in order to "provide empirical indicators needed for category development" (p. 1138) and to "maximise opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 201). Hence, in this study, discourse analysis of metajournalism ($n = 94$) was followed by discourse analysis of interview transcripts ($n = 21$) from interviews with U.S. journalists on their adaptation to artificial intelligence.

Step One: Metajournalism

Metajournalistic discourse involves the discourse of journalists about journalism. In such situations, journalists publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy (Carlson 2016, p. 350). This discourse can be inward-facing—promoting discussion among other journalists—as well as outward facing—aimed at reflecting the concerns of those outside the field. During times of crisis, metajournalistic discourse serves a stabilizing role in normalizing the experiences of journalists by offering an avenue for journalists to make sense of their own experiences (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022).

ChatGPT reflects this sort of epistemic crisis, and thus, to address the research questions, a multi-step methodology was employed in data collection, with initial textual data gathered from November 30, 2022 (the day of ChatGPT's public launch) through March 31, 2023, followed by interview data gathered as the hype cycle progressed, detailed below. First, a Factiva search, using the term "ChatGPT," was conducted for English-language newspapers and magazines (largely representing North America and Western Europe) during the timeframe, which resulted in a sizable corpus of journalistic discourse, representing outlets such as *The Washington Post*, NPR, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, Associated Press, *Times of London*, and *Globe and Mail*. The authors winnowed this sample, through an emphasis on selecting only pieces in which journalists seemed to be reflecting on ChatGPT in regard to journalism, using the search key terms of "Journalism," "Press," "Reporter," "News," "Media," "Journalist," "Writing," "Write," "Story," "Stories," "Storytelling," "Creator," "Create," "Creating." These terms were used for an initial search between the dates of November 30, 2023, and January 31, 2023. However, the authors found that these key terms were still too broad, and so reduced the list to "Journalism," "Press," "Reporter," "News," "Journalist," and "Story." The authors also noticed that journalistic discourse was surpassing the standard timeline of a hype cycle (Gartner 2023), and changed the timeframe for the search to November 30, 2022, through March 31, 2023. The standard length of a hype cycle isn't temporally bound, but rather reflects progress through five phases of discourse: a technological trigger, a peak of inflated expectations, a trough of disillusionment (e.g., implementation fails to meet expectation), slope of enlightenment as benefits become clearer and finally, a plateau of productivity (e.g., adoption of the technology becomes more mainstream) (Gartner 2023). By extending the search time frame, we also better captured this cycle while increasing the sample from 21 to 43 units of metajournalistic discourse as the discourse progressed.

Second, a search for "ChatGPT" and "Journalism"' was collected from searches on the individual websites and email newsletters of the North American and U.K. journalism trade press (e.g., CanadaLand, Fact & Frictions, NiemanLab, Columbia Journalism Review, Journalism.co.uk, The Conversation, CNN Reliable Sources newsletter, Axios Media, Trusting News), popular press (e.g., *via* Factiva; *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Atlantic, The Guardian, The Times (U.K), Telegraph*, AP, *Financial Times, Wired,* Buzzfeed, The Verge, Mashable, ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, NPR News, FOX News, CNN, MSNBC, Semafor Media, *Time, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair*) and ancillary organizations (e.g., Poynter, Reuters Journalism Institute, Reynolds Journalism Institute). While often overlooked, ancillary organizations were included give that they "play critical roles in the processes by which new things gain perceived value, legitimation and resource support" (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019, p. 2132). This resulted in a final sample of 94 units of metadiscourse: 32 from trade press/ancillary organization publications and 62 from the popular press collected *via* Factiva and Google searching. The Appendix to this article includes a table comprising all metajournalism cited for direct illustration (see Table A1).

Taken as a whole, this content reflected an encompassing picture of metajournalistic discourse in which journalists had the opportunity to reflect on journalism in relation to ChatGPT and generative AI. Yet the themes that emerged reflected that journalist perceived ChatGPT fitting in with a long line of technologies to which they had needed to adapt.

Step Two: Semi-Structured Interviews

Based on the initial themes gathered, the research determined that interviews could be a valuable means with which to grant journalists valuable agency within their own experiences (McCracken 1988), and thereby supplementing the research questions in relation to the *how* and *why* behind the initial themes identified in the metadiscourse. Hence, the lead author worked with undergraduate journalism students at University of South Florida to collect interviews. Students were taught how to conduct a research interview in a class setting, undertook research ethics training and given identical instructions. The students initially reached out to 160 U.S.-based journalists, privileging journalists with familiarity with new technology. Journalists were identified for inclusion in this initial list in three ways: (1) through existing metajournalistic discussion on this topic (e.g., in various types of trade press as well as social media), (2) through existing metajournalistic discussion on technology adaptation more broadly (e.g., again through trade press as well as social media) and (3) through existing contacts identified by the team as having relevant experiences. This was done in order to privilege journalists who would "add further variation and meaning to concepts that were already emerging from data in the study" (Conlon et al. 2020, p. 949). The response rate for interview requests was 13%, leading to an initial corpus of interviews ($n = 21$).

The interview questionnaire asked participants a series of questions related to adaptation to technologies (e.g., "what does the process of adapting to new technology look like for you?" "what are the most profound technological changes that have affected your work?"). The respondents were asked broad questions to offer journalists agency in framing the *how* and *why* of adaptation. Perhaps because of the time of interview, journalists did largely reflect on generative AI in their responses. Interviews lasted approximately 1 h each. Interviews were conducted between October 2023 and December 2023.

This was followed by follow-up interviews and member checks in March 2025 in which the first author reengaged the interview subjects to check for quality and rigor (Creswell, 2016); asked the subjects about the key quotes from the analysis; and then prompted subjects for further clarification and depth of generative AI since the original time of interview. Given that a year and a half had passed since the initial interview it seemed reasonable that journalist's experiences with generative artificial intelligence may have progressed. Of the original 21 interviews, 11 responded (52% response rate);[1] this was deemed to be a strong reflection of validity given that more than half of the sample responded (McKim 2023; Motulsky 2021). This second step of the interview procedure proved pivotal and elicited the direct quotes reflected below given that journalist's perspectives and use on generative AI proved to be more expansive in March 2025 than during the time of initial interview October-December 2023.

This was done in accordance with University of South Florida Institutional Review Board Approval #006227. The average age of participants, among those who were willing to share their age, was approximately 34. Participants self-identified as white ($n = 11$), black ($n = 5$), Hispanic ($n = 4$), and Asian ($n = 1$). Twelve participants identified as women, and nine identified as men. Participants were granted anonymity given that we were primarily interested in generating themes related to journalistic authority and thus seeking overall institutional discourse rather than individualized responses (see Table A2).

Analytical Approach

Our analysis considered the overall body of metajournalism and interviews as a singular corpus of journalistic discourse. This was done given that journalistic authority reflects a level of abstraction beyond that of the individual journalistic utterance (Vos and Thomas 2018), but this decision was reinforced by the symbiotic manner with which the data reflected shared themes. Analysis occurred through a constant comparative method, which has been considered an ideal manner with which authors can work through data (Creswell, 2016; Glaser and Strauss 1966; see Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019), particularly given that it allows research teams members across numerous sites, and from different contexts, to work collaboratively and iteratively at making meaning from the data. For this study, the initial phase involved open coding by the primary author, who initially surveyed the data corpus to identify recurring themes. Subsequently, the primary author collaborated with authorship team, convening several research meetings *via* video conferencing platforms like Zoom. The team then proceeded with axial coding, assessing the resonance and consistency of these themes until achieving theoretical validity. These codes were subsequently employed to pinpoint pertinent literature reviews and conceptual frameworks. Finally, the researchers conducted selective coding, wherein participant quotes and metadiscourse examples were singled out to illustrate the overarching patterns discerned within the data.

In final revision for this manuscript, the lead two authors used Google Gemini 2.5 Pro and ChatGPT 4.5 respectively to assist in copy editing for grammar and readability. The generative AI was prompted to check sections of text for issues of grammar and clarity and put suggested edits in bold; the authors then revised the identified sections.

Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Enhancing Journalistic Expertise

Regarding RQ1—"How do journalists discursively construct journalistic authority in relation to ChatGPT?"—journalists largely used discussions of ChatGPT and artificial intelligence to reify their authoritative status by positioning themselves as authorities on new technology, and by casting skepticism on the reliability and validity and chatbots more broadly. That said, journalists also used ChatGPT as a launch point for other generative artificial intelligence tools to reflect on them less as a danger to their authority and more as an opportunity; as Participant 12 put it, "almost daily I have conversations with ChatGPT, using it as a tool for find the best possible captions, descriptions, tags, and other backend parts of our content to ensure we're doing the best we can in regards to maximizing SEO and engagement overall across our platforms."

Journalists in many cases emphasized their own authoritative status in relation to generative AI. Participant 13 noted that they know "not only how to use AI to my advantage, but also to understand it for confidence purposes. Being intimidated by technology in general, but specifically AI, is the first step to my downfall." This was done through reflecting on their own experience and credentials, and by emphasizing their relatively exclusive access to high-profile sources who—by extension—offer authority to the journalists reporting the story. After all, "fact-checking is essential to

keep people accountable and the truth, of course, which I think no AI program can really do" (Participant 15). Another journalist talked about how "AI can save time and knife through the mundane. But writing and reporting is a process—you have in the work room to fully understand a subject and convey its nuances" (Participant 6).

In this form of *personalization* of journalistic authority (Zelizer 1990; Usher 2018), reporters and editors would reflect commonly on their own (at times extensive) experience with AI as a means of being able to grant an authoritative perspective on it (Scire 2022; Participant 21). For example, in a *Wall Street Journal* podcast about several AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Lensa, and DALL-E), the *Wall Street Journal's* expert guest was a fellow journalist from the newspaper (Thomas & Alcantara, 2023). This was by no means an unusual podcast procedure, but to some degree it signaled that reporting on ChatGPT was a business-as-usual situation in which journalists reflect authority over the technology by nature of their means of distribution (Zelizer 1990).[2]

Consistent with previous research (Zelizer 1990), journalists also leaned on authority granted by expert sources such as BuzzFeed CEO Jonah Peretti (Darcy 2023), Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella (Thomas 2023), and MIT professor of computer science and artificial intelligence professor Jacob Andreas (Abrill 2023).

Yet authority is not solely enhanced by reifying credentials, but also by routinely downplaying the authority of the social or technological threat in question (Zelizer 1990). Journalists thus employed this tactic by emphasizing the shortcomings of artificial intelligence, often using individual anecdotal evidence to reflect broader profession-wide concern about the relative value (and potential harm) from the untrained use of such tools.

> I stay away from [generative AI]. I know it can be a powerful tool, but in our line of work, no program, in my opinion, can really capture human emotion, etc. … Programs like this, in my opinion, can continue to fuel misinformation, which is something we try hard to fight. (Participant 15)

In this vein, Haven (2022) described Chat GPT as offering a "parlor trick of human mimicry." The phrase "parlor trick" here is employed to question the validity of the tool. The tool, Haven (2022) went on to argue, "pours gas on an already flaming dumpster fire." Such generative responses of uncannily humanlike communication might be increasingly trendy to integrate in one's writing and work (Participant 16), but, as Vincent (2023) described, the chatbot has a "tendency to produce fluent bullshit."

For example, Klepper (2023) provides an example of an anti-vaccine activist quizzing ChatGPT on the strategies of pharmaceutical companies and being provided misinformation that supported their initial feelings about vaccines:

> OpenAI notes that ChatGPT "can occasionally produce incorrect answers" and that its responses will sometimes be misleading because of how it learns. "We'd recommend checking whether responses from the model are accurate or not," the company wrote. (Klepper 2023, n.p.)

Including this example, and OpenAI's response to it, takes an individual case and extrapolates it to a larger scale that reflects a need for skepticism regarding ChatGPT's responses. While artificial intelligence has already been gainfully employed to manage

box scores for sports game stories, initial weather disaster reports, and grammar correction, there are problems with employing AI—and AI alone—to engage in more comprehensive forms of reporting because of "the potential for the AI to insert fake quotes." Sterne (2022) further points out that "since the AI is not bound by the same ethical standards as a human journalist, it may include quotes from sources that do not actually exist, or even attribute fake quotes to real people" (n.p.).

ChatGPT has been lauded for its ability to provide written material on command in response to specific prompts. But as many articles pointed out, AI nevertheless requires the original source information and prompts to produce the content. For example, tech journalist Jennifer Jolly prompted ChatGPT to

> [w]rite a sentence about the ethical implications of ChatGPT in the style of tech journalist Jennifer Jolly, it said, "ChatGPT is a technological tour-de-force, but it also raises important ethical considerations, like how to ensure that this powerful tool is used responsibly and for the greater good." (Jolly 2023, n.p.)

Key here is the emphasis in this anecdote that ChatGPT is a *tool*—a tool that can be employed by journalists if used "responsibly" and "for the greater good" (Jolly 2023). This offers a means expanding journalists authority given that not only is ChatGPT not a threat, but if it is a tool it can be employed by someone who knows how to use it—presumably journalists. While this was presented through ChatGPT's version of Jolly, Jolly nevertheless affirmed that this was her impression of ChatGPT in her column. Hence, employing artificial intelligence, in a measured manner, served as a means of limiting the increasingly expansive expectations of journalists (see Bossio et al. 2024). This is echoed by Participant 21, who notes that his colleagues used "AI bots to write transactional news articles, like weather forecasts or real estate sales"—but nevertheless worried in his newsroom that this was a "slippery slope." Noteworthy here is what journalists bring to the table—norms, values, ethical procedures—to employ the tool. But given that journalists' individual labor expectations have increased, artificial intelligence may provide a means to lighten the load.

That said, journalists largely had a positive evaluation of ChatGPT, considering it to be a tool that could be used for several processes that could enhance journalistic authority.

While Sterne (2022) was critical of ChatGPT's shortcomings, and expressed confidently that "AI-based tools will never replace human journalists," he also argued that "these tools could change how reporters do their jobs—freeing them up to spend more time interviewing sources and digging up information and less time transcribing interviews and writing daily stories on deadline." Yet it's also worth noting that journalists often collapsed different forms of digital tools and generative AI together in reflecting on ChatGPT and in ways that indicated that they didn't easily distinguish between transcription tools and updates for prescriptive editing in programs such as Adobe products. For example, Participant 21 reflected on generative AI more broadly in describing Otter.ai, an AI transcriber, that had allowed him to conduct interviews in Spanish and Portuguese with more confidence (Participant 21).

Yet it is worth noting that the sorts of tools that journalists described in reflecting on ChatGPT—which ranged from other chatbots to more familiar programs—offers problematic implications in that not all artificial intelligence is the same nor do all

such AI applications present the same opportunities (and dangers). That said, it does make sense that when confronted with change journalists would be likely to compare novel, and perhaps threatening, technologies with technologies with which they were more familiar such as Otter.ai.

In other words, Sterne (2022) and others argued that ChatGPT and its ilk could allow journalists to devote time to the work they do best, and which only they can do—namely, create original content. Similarly, Neusner (2023) likened the popularization of these chatbots to the advent of photography, noting that journalists will be able to leverage this opportunity to

> elevate their craft to higher purposes—or at the very least create something truly original. Consider how portrait artists responded to the invention of photography. The best ones excelled in impressionism, cubism and other movements of modern art. Art didn't disappear, it simply shifted its gaze (Neusner 2023, n.p).

All this together suggests that journalists leveraged the popularization of ChatGPT to assert the aspects of their contributions that they perceived more difficult to replicate—principally, their professional training grounded in journalistic ethics, norms and practices.

Artificial Intelligence and News Production

In regard to RQ2—"How do journalists discursively construct news production in relation to ChatGPT?"—this study finds that journalists largely perceived generative AI as a threat to *poor* versions of journalism. This perspective offered a challenge within the field to produce high-quality journalism while simultaneously acknowledging that ChatGPT could only effectively reproduce such *poor* newswork because so much of it exists within the field. As Brown (2023) puts it, ChatGPT "is like this magic trick where people … check it out, and then it does the thing, like, kind of poorly."

In this way, journalists reflected on ChatGPT representing *poor writing practices* such as employment of emotions as a part of description. In the wake of the release of ChatGPT 3, one journalist asked OpenAI's Playground to write a negative review of a Chinese buffet in the style of the author.

> Fake me said I hadn't "seen such a depressing display of Asian-fusion food since I was caught in a monsoon in the Himalayas". Bit of an odd thing to write, that. What's the connection between bad food and monsoons? But OK. Another, though, gave me pause. "The dining room was a low-lit, faux-oriental den of off-pink walls and glittering papier-mâché dragons; the air was thick with a miasma of MSG and regret." Oh God. That thing of using an emotion to describe a place? That really was a line I could have written. Granted, not one of my best, but me all the same (Rayner 2023).

Similarly, a columnist requested that ChatGPT reproduce a column of his work, finding that the AI delivered and that "a reader could easily conclude the work was mine, but submitted on a dull day" (Woolridge 2023). Journalists described generative AI's writing as "dropshipping," that is, "allowing sellers to deliver goods that seem useful at first glance but fall apart when tested" (Vincent 2023). This would seem to reflect

some of the longstanding concerns in journalism about clickbait, or practices aimed at gathering an audience but not necessarily delivering on what was promised to that audience.

In a similar manner, journalists reflected on ChatGPT implementing *poor reporting practices*. This focused especially on the much-discussed hallucinations of AI tools; though such hallucinations are not exclusive to machines, given that human journalists frequently make mistakes in their news coverage, it is nevertheless true that such errors, human or machine, represent shoddy news work. Throughout the sample, many journalists reflected on the infamous failure of the technology site CNET, which in early 2023 used generative AI to produce stories that later had to be retracted.

> Stories full of errors and—it gets worse—apparently teeming with robot plagiarism. 'The bot's misbehavior ranges from verbatim copying to moderate edits to significant rephrasings, all without properly crediting the original,' reported Futurism's Jon Christian. 'In at least some of its articles, it appears that virtually every sentence maps directly onto something previously published elsewhere' (Pompeo 2023).

In this same way, "Using AI specifically for content generation could be dangerous and would need to be vetted extremely carefully," according to Participant 21. Lock (2022) described ChatGPT as a venue that will likely deliver rampant misinformation given the systems employed to train the generative AI. In an interview with OpenAI, Lock (2022) quoted the company as saying "no source of truth in the data" is employed in the software.

Finally, while generative AI would seem to reflect human creativity, journalists argued that it was a *poor representation of human creativity* in the reporting process. ChatGPT is a "bullshit, a grotesque mockery of what it is to be human" (Pompeo 2023). In this way, journalists did not view ChatGPT as a necessity to consider for their news routines but it did allow them to research more thoroughly (Participant 16).

Taken together, this reflects that journalist largely perceived ChatGPT as a reflection of some of the work–but not the most robust work–that could be done in journalism. That said, the work was common enough within the field that ChatGPT could replicate it. Discourse nevertheless emphasized the normative values of what journalism *should be* in order to best reflect what makes human journalism essential.

Discussion

Two years after his initial comments, Steven Brill published a *Vanity Fair* article previewing his upcoming book, *The Death of Truth*. The nascent threat of generative AI to journalism, he postulated, lies in what it can do in conjunction with other existing threats. For example, he argued that the 2016 *Access Hollywood* leak of disturbing comments about women from then-U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump—if it were leaked now—would simply be dismissed as deepfake propaganda. Brill argued that bad actors could leverage the widespread use of generative AI to claim, "That's not me. That's not my voice" (Brill 2024, June 5).

> [W]e're living in a world where we're really unmoored from reality, and it's up to journalists to help people get those moorings back by really trying to stick to what is fact and what is a matter of opinion. (Brill 2024, June 5)

Truth-telling of this kind has long operated as the lodestar around which journalistic authority orbits: Journalists situate themselves as truth-tellers on whom society depends, even as definitions of what counts as "fact" and "truth" are complicated by social and cultural factors that shape how knowledge is defined, organized, and communicated, whether by experts, institutions, or lay individuals alike (see, e.g., Graves 2016). If good journalism is thus inseparable from journalism committed to truth, it matters to understand how journalists situate themselves relative to other actors—including machines as well as humans—as being proficient in producing news that upholds this central normative goal. And, to the extent that an emergent actor potentially threatens the work of journalism, either by undermining its accuracy or taking on some of its central human functions, we can look to metajournalistic discourse to uncover how journalists are talking about and responding to such crises to their authority and epistemology.

This study sought to reveal how journalists were reconciling the intrusion of ChatGPT and generative AI technologies like it that burst on the scene in late 2022 and which, by 2025, had become a fixture in many journalistic conversations about the future of the profession (Dodds, Zamith, and Lewis 2025b; Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025; Usher 2025). Specifically, we aimed to explore how journalists discursively constructed their authority and articulated their practices of news production in relation to ChatGPT and AI broadly. We found that, consistent with previous literature, journalists largely used discussions of ChatGPT and AI to reify their authoritative status by positioning themselves as authorities on new technology, while simultaneously casting doubt on the reliability and validity of chatbots. Journalists have historically faced incursions into their professional domain from "insurgent" forces, both in the form of automated content creation—as reflected in this study—as well as from content creators in neighboring professions (e.g., public relations and lifestyle influencers; Örnebring et al. 2018, Carlson 2017; Perreault and Hanusch 2024). Nevertheless, journalists recognized the power that AI as a "tool" might contribute to their own work, and thus seemed keen on leveraging its capabilities to enhance what they do as creative professionals. Moreover, journalists appeared willing to acknowledge that AI, particularly in its generative form of crafting humanlike text with ease and at scale, could be used to produce some basic forms of news—though they generally categorized such iterations of news as belonging to the "low journalism" variety: i.e., content so generic that journalists expressed little concern over its replacement by machines (Boden 2018; Lindén 2017). Journalists have been willing to view the outputs of these insurgent forces as subordinate variations of journalism, thereby delegating to automation tasks perceived as having lower journalistic value and/or being easily replicable. This allowed them to focus on the types of roles and creative forms less readily imitated by AI.

As a result, the supposed threat posed by the epistemic crisis of ChatGPT was neutralized, at least in part, by a belief among many journalists that humans (and humans alone) could produce the sort of "high journalism" to which professionals aspire and audiences desire.

Epistemic crisis is a term with a strong negative connotation and, indeed, journalism studies scholarship has often tended to think of the epistemic crisis as a threat, one

that exploits the vulnerabilities of journalism. However, we argue in this study that the epistemic crisis also represents an opportunity for journalists to actively reassert and reconstruct their authority both internally and externally. In this way, the introduction and development of generative AI offers an ideal context for journalists, enabling them to clearly distinguish their work from that of outsiders. Journalists capitalize on epistemic crises—or, as we suggest in this paper, *epistemic opportunities*—by reconstituting their authority through a strategy of personalization (Zelizer 1990). Intuitively, personalization reflects one of the activities that journalists often excel at: capturing broader narratives by drawing out individual human experiences that illustrate larger stories. Thus, it makes sense that journalists would apply personalization strategies to themselves, reinforcing their authority during times of epistemic opportunity.

For the study of metajournalism, this study offers valuable nuance about the shaping role of the audience. The broad corpus of media content that captures and communicates the larger discourse about what makes journalism *journalism* includes a range of sources—from the trade press and ancillary organizations to mainstream coverage and email newsletters. In this case, we see that metajournalism on the vibrant, timely topic of generative AI has been shaped at least in part by the audience to whom it is directed. One striking finding from our work is the degree to which journalists seemed to accentuate anxieties about AI to a general audience (e.g., in news coverage), in contrast with a more muted tone of confidence—even enthusiasm about appropriating AI as a tool—that is evident in stories aimed at fellow journalists (e.g., in trade discourse). While it may seem self-evident that journalists would tend to offer more stability when speaking to other journalists (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022), it is also true that journalists tend to project stability externally as well. Indeed, in this instance, journalists appear especially motivated to highlight their dominant position. That said, accentuating anxieties may serve journalists' own professional survival; perhaps just as importantly, however, it reflects a deep-seated commitment to safeguarding and promoting the pursuit of valid truth.

All studies have limitations, and this study is no different. The two-step sampling procedure provides the opportunity to offer the depth and breadth necessary to allow for theoretical category development (Draucker et al. 2007), but it also means that study findings necessarily are inherently shaped by the structure of the first step. As such, if data collection and analysis had been conducted in languages other than English or encompassed a broader of countries, and if subsequent interviews had been oriented toward journalists beyond the U.S., the findings may well have been different. Indeed, a persistent challenge for research on metajournalistic discourse is its predominant focus on English-language content; future research would do well to expand the linguistic and geographic scope of such studies. Similarly, the semi-structured questionnaire used by student interviewers in the second step intentionally posed broad questions about adaptation, aiming to provide participants with agency and empirical flexibility for category development. Nevertheless, more direct questions specifically related to ChatGPT might have elicited alternative responses at this stage, shaping our findings and the questions for the follow-up interviews.

Ultimately, at a time of widespread interest in understanding the implications of AI for knowledge work, the remarkably consistent manner with which the interview data aligned the metadiscourse offers profound implications. This study provides insight into how information professionals are making sense of and responding to the epistemic threat to their authority presented by artificial intelligence generally and generative AI in particular—reflecting *epistemic opportunities* that extended beyond the experiences of individual journalists. Thus, the potential pitfalls of generative AI identified in prior research (Becker, Simon, and Crum 2025) may be offset to some degree by the opportunities AI offers journalists to reconstitute their authority. Indeed, akin to the positive emotions expressed by journalists following ChatGPT's launch (Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025b), our research shows how journalists largely attempted to flip the script on the perceived threat posed by AI: They transformed an epistemic crisis into an epistemic opportunity by leveraging the momentous launch and adoption of ChatGPT to both reassert and redefine their authority as humans with unique creative gifts. In doing so, they explicitly differentiated their "high journalism" from machine-driven "low journalism," thereby signaling to news audiences as well as to fellow news professionals the meaning and importance of quality journalism in an AI era.

Notes

1. During the member checking process, one member check couldn't be completed as the journalist had unfortunately passed away since the time of the first interview.
2. It is worth noting perhaps that this was also done in the podcast *Canadaland*, where the expert source was Matt Guerney, a Toronto-based reporter for *The Line* (Brown, 2023).

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Appendix

Table A1.

Article Title	Author	Date	Outlet	Country
What is AI chatbot phenomenon ChatGPT and could it replace humans?	Lock, Samantha	12/5/2022	The Guardian	United Kingdom
What Is ChatGPT, the AI Chatbot That Everyone Is Talking About?	Thomas, Zoe and Alcántara, Ann-Marie	12/7/2022	Wall Street Journal	United States
ChatGPT and the future of trust	Haven, Janet	12/20/2022	Nieman Lab	United States
Journalists productively harness generative AI tools	Diakopoulos, Nicholas	12/20/2022	Nieman Lab	United States
AI enters the newsroom	Sterne, Peter	12/20/2022	NiemanLab	United States
GPT-3, make this story better	Scire, Sarah	12/20/2022	Nieman Lab	United States
#851 Liars, Deniers and Bears, Oh My!	Brown, Jesse	1/19/2023	CanadaLand	Canada
Learning to lie: AI tools adept at creating disinformation	Klepper, David	1/24/2023	Associated Press	United States
ChatGPT's mind-boggling possibly dystopian impact on the media world	Pompeo, Joe	1/26/2023	Vanity Fair	United States
BuzzFeed's CEO says AI could usher in a 'new model for digital media,' but warns against a 'dystopian' path	Darcy, Oliver	1/26/2023	CNN	United States
What is ChatGPT? Everything to know about OpenAI's free AI essay writer and how it works	Jolly, Jennifer	1/27/2023	USA Today	United States
Only Bad Writers Should Fear ChatGPT	Neusner, Noam	2/1/2023	Wall Street Journal	United States
Hustle bros are jumping on the AI bandwagon	Vincent, James	2/2/2023	The Verge	United States
Microsoft's New Bing Search, Now With AI From ChatGPT	Thomas, Zoe	2/8/2023	Wall Street Journal	United States
When it comes to workplace dilemmas, ChatGPT still has much to learn	Abrill, Danielle	2/12/2023	The Washington Post	United States
Your Humanity Could Save Your Writing Job from ChatGPT-4	Wooldridge, Adrian	3/21/2023	The Washington Post	United States
Could a chatbot write my restaurant reviews?	Rayner, Jay	3/26/2023	The Guardian	United Kingdom

Table A2.

Participant #	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Medium
1	Female	22	White	Print/Digital
2	Female	23	Hispanic	Digital only
3	Male	53	White	Print/Digital
4	Male	43	White	Print/Digital
5	Male	24	Black	Print/Digital
6	Male	Declined	White	Broadcast
7	Male	Declined	White	Print/Digital
8	Female	27	Black	Broadcast
9	Female	54	White	Print/Digital
10	Female	44	White	Print/Digital
11	Female	27	White	Print/Digital
12	Male	27	Black	Radio
13	Female	52	Hispanic	Radio
14	Female	23	White	Broadcast
15	Female	34	Hispanic	Broadcast
16	Female	30	Hispanic	Radio
17	Male	24	Black	Radio
18	Female	24	White	Print/Digital
19	Female	31	Asian	Broadcast
20	Male	55	Black	Print/Digital
21	Male	27	White	Print/Digital