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## “There’s a Rule Book in my Head”: Journalism Ethics Meet A.I. in the Newsroom

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### ABSTRACT

The burgeoning use of artificial intelligence (A.I.) to create journalistic products is challenging the ethical standards in Canadian newsrooms and calling into question the efficacy of existing norms and practice worldwide. Ethical literacy related to the use of A.I. remains low in the industry at large, and with no standardized ethical practice, there is little understanding of how journalistic doxa might need to expand to keep up with technology. Ensuring ethical practice is becoming more critical in a polarized political climate where mis- and disinformation abound, audiences demand transparency, and the very boundaries and definitions of journalism are contested by both journalists and their audiences. Utilizing field theory, through interviews with journalists and analysis of published codes of ethics and existing literature, this article examines how Canadian newsrooms are using A.I., and whether ethical frameworks are adequately evolving alongside technology.

### KEYWORDS

A.I.; ethics; field theory; journalism; newsrooms; Canada; technology; A.I. literacy

## Introduction

Most professional newsrooms in Canada, and the world over, have a code of standards or ethics that falls within larger industry-accepted standards. Choices such as when to identify sources and how to attribute third-party content vary, but sit within an established framework (Canadian Association of Journalists 2023). Journalists also often use what Schultz (2007) describes as their “gut instinct” to determine ethical practice. However, the burgeoning use of artificial intelligence (A.I.) in newsrooms is challenging standards and the efficacy of existing norms (Aissani, 2023).

Bourdieu’s (1969) field theory, introduced more than 50 years ago, is still useful in the analysis of current newsroom practice (Maares and Hanusch 2022). It helps identify a potential lag between the implementation of technology and the development of new ethical standards (Møller and Thylstrup, 2024), or doxa, within a field, and “invites us to think about media and cultural production as a *modus operandi* and not only as an end product...” (Neveu 2005, p. 203). Through interviews with journalists,

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analyzed through the lens of field theory, this article explores two research questions: (1) How is the use of A.I. in Canadian newsrooms expanding practice in the field of journalism? (2) Does existing journalistic doxa allow for sufficient ethical consideration of the use of A.I. in Canadian newsrooms?

There is largely a top-down approach to the early implementation of ethical codes related to A.I. in newsrooms globally (Kahn 2024). There is also consistency to be found in the language and tenor of these public guidelines (Becker, Simon, and Crum 2023), including those of the CBC and *The Globe and Mail* in Canada. These two organizations were ranked highly in terms of experimentation with A.I. and A.I. literacy (ibid). These newsrooms, though, because of their size and resources, don't necessarily reflect what's happening on a wider scale with A.I. in Canada (Hermida 2022). They are two of the largest media organizations in the country in terms of employees, funding, and reach. Canadian newsrooms and newsmakers are not represented at all in many other major studies of A.I. use for journalism (Beckett 2019; Beckett and Yaseen 2023).

Canadian media use audience data extensively in editorial decision-making (Blanchett, McKelvey, and Brin 2022) but, except in a few cases, would seem to lag behind international media in using A.I. to create journalism content (Hermida 2022). Regardless, although the federal government has released a voluntary code of conduct around A.I. in Canada (Thompson 2023), there is no standardized ethical practice related to A.I. in newsrooms at a national or provincial level. While the Canadian Association of Journalism's (CAJ) ethics guidelines are identified as being representative of ethical practice in Canada (Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj 2015), thzcxTF-RDIJ250031 is commonly agreed-upon framework refers briefly to transparency when it comes to the use of generative A.I. to produce "words or images" but does not address the much more complex use of A.I. in newsrooms or suggest what such transparency should look like (CAJ, 2023). Meanwhile, a survey conducted for the Canadian Journalism Foundation (Maru Group, 2023) revealed that 92% of Canadians randomly polled "believe that news organizations should have a clear and transparent policy on how they use artificial intelligence," something also seen in international studies (Marinescu et al. 2022).

Our research suggests the knowledge and understanding of how A.I. methods interact with daily journalism varies depending on an individual's habitus, or role, within the newsroom, something seen in other studies on the implementation of new technology (Blanchett 2021a). While participants in this study said ethical considerations should be a part of any news processes involving A.I., there was no standard approach among newsrooms for creating and adhering to ethics and little evidence suggesting ethical practices were being shared at an industry level or with audiences. Over the course of our research, *The Globe and Mail* (Frehner 2023) and the CBC (Fenlon 2023) did release public statements outlining their approaches to the use of A.I. They pledged that a human journalist would always be involved in creating original content and that audiences would be made aware when A.I. was used to create content. Despite this, our research points to a significant disparity between the need for formulated ethics on the use of A.I. and the creation of any specific, formal, and unified ethical practice.

Along with addressing the need for more information on how A.I. is being used in Canadian newsrooms, this study also offers diversity of viewpoint in terms of newsroom size, type, and capacity for experimentation with A.I. Findings hold value for other media environments because shared technology is resulting in more heterogeneous and interconnected practice (Mellado et al. 2024; Blanchett 2021a), particularly in roles related to the use of data (Bisiani et al. 2025). Further, our interviews with newswriters uncover a tension between the ethics journalists consider as doxa – the understood and sometimes unspoken rules of the field (Bourdieu 2005) – and a lack of agreement on whether existing ethics could or should cover the use of A.I. to create journalism content.

## Literature Review

From a journalistic perspective, field theory focuses “on relations of forces” and “the ways in which the end product of the work of journalists within press organizations flows out of constraints” (Neveu 2005, p. 206). These constraints can be both economic – the extent of available resources to perform journalistic tasks – and social/cultural – the need to ensure the journalism produced is valued by others in the field and the audience (Blanchett 2021b). There are two Bourdieusian concepts that allow for specific analysis on the constraints of individual journalists in a newsroom: habitus and doxa. Doxa refers to the implicit and explicit rules that encompass accepted practice within the social space of a field (Willig 2013). The rules in journalism include “professional standards, ethical principles, journalistic norms, etc. that influence how news professionals within it operate” (Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon 2019, p.1239). A journalist’s habitus encompasses their internal and external environment and is constantly being modified by internal and external actors in the field (Benson and Neveu 2005). The concept of habitus helps to identify differences in practice within individual newsrooms or across the field:

Theoretically speaking it is possible to imagine that there will be more specific forms of journalistic habitus within journalistic fields, for example an “editorial habitus,” a “reporter habitus” or an “intern habitus”.... Different forms of habitus can help to explain seemingly different or even contradictory practices in the newsroom (Willig 2013, p.379).

Airoidi (2021) suggests that A.I. generates its own habitus, arguing it is a disruptor that is modifying the environment of many fields. Journalism is shaped by technology (Vos 2019) that can cause “chaos” (Wang 2018) as doxa evolves with journalists seeking “a point of balance of the pushes and pulls in and out of the field” (p. 486). Field theory is an ideal tool to examine considerations around the use of A.I. (Møller and Thylstrup 2024) as it allows for exploration from three dimensions (Danzon-Chambaud and Cornia 2023): media practitioners’ awareness of the impact of external structures; efforts to retain or accumulate cultural capital; and adversarial reactions to the use of A.I. that could change or reinforce the “rules of the game,” including journalistic ethics.

A.I. is being experimented with for newswriting (Beckett and Yaseen 2023; Hamdan et al. 2022). While newsrooms are using rapidly evolving technologies, ethical literacy-related to the use of A.I. remains low in the industry at large (Deuze and

Beckett 2022). There is also a lack of agreement within the industry and beyond about what A.I. encompasses. A.I. is often used as an umbrella term (ibid) with different interpretations across disciplines. Definitions can range from “the training of a machine to learn from data, recognize patterns, and make subsequent judgments, with little to no human intervention” (Broussard et al. 2019, p. 673), to the transformation of communication, described as part of the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Hassan and Albayari 2022). Simplistic tools more accurately identified as algorithms use “linear or logistic regression, decision trees or classifiers” but are nonetheless also often pulled under the A.I. umbrella (Patzner 2023). In the Online News Association guide (Online News Association 2023), for instance, the term A.I. is used to cover many aspects of news production, including the use of audience data. Metrics and analytics can be used to prioritize revenue and clicks (Petre 2021) but also to develop innovative storytelling formats (Blanchett 2021b). Such use of audience data, though, doesn’t always fall within stricter definitions of A.I. which require machine learning.

### ***A.I. Challenges to Ethics Policies***

A.I. is just the latest in a series of technological innovations that have influenced journalistic ethics, from the telegraph (Allen 2013) to the internet (Jenkins 2006). For example, Hansen (2020) found “the adoption and use of metrics and analytics, crowds and engagement, and algorithmic distribution, have disrupted both the practices of journalism and the values guiding journalists’ work.” A.I. systems are now being used in connection with audience data to personalize user experiences (Diakapolous et al. 2024).

A.I. poses a unique challenge because it has the potential to permeate every level of news production and distribution (Odionyenma et al. 2023), necessitating a reconsideration of ethics at every stage (García-Avilés, 2021). There is a need to recode journalistic roles (Karlsson, Ferrer Conill, and Örnebring 2023) because traditional ethical frameworks are not broad enough to apply to current journalistic practice (Nwanyanwu and Nwanyanwu 2021), including A.I.-driven data collection (Morini, Dörk, and Appelgren 2023). For instance, the verification of sources through identification software and algorithms, sometimes called automated fact-checking (AFC), is being used in newsrooms all over the world (Dierickx, Lindén, and Opdahl 2023). However, “there is increasing evidence of the need to lend meaning and context to the information” (Castellón 2021, p. 99). As defined by the CAJ (2023), “accuracy is the imperative of journalists and news organisations.” It often requires a high level of manual checking that cannot be accomplished through algorithms, coding, or automated sifting through data (Stray 2019). The concern, in other words, is that A.I. isn’t sufficient for the required contextualization of data that is critical to journalistic work. Journalism organizations are discovering the utility of A.I. is limited because there is a significant investment in time and resources required to ensure error-prone tools don’t damage newsrooms’ reputations (Beckett et al. 2024).

Traditional journalism ethics also govern practices related to fairness, ensuring diversity of viewpoints and avoiding stereotypes. Research, though, points to issues with sexism and racial bias when it comes to the use of A.I. and algorithms (Harper 2024, Ntoutsis et al. 2020). Systemic bias is built into A.I. systems throughout their training

with humans (Noble 2018) and this bias can be amplified the more they are exposed to humans and other machines (Airoidi 2021). In terms of newsroom use, researchers have “observed very limited critical engagement with ethical and legal concerns at the level of the input” (Diakopoulos et al. 2024, p. 32) or, in other words, consideration of how “trustworthiness” of the data could be impacted by the way A.I. is trained.

In its ethics guide the Online News Association (ONA) notes “accuracy and balancing the right to privacy against the public interest” (Bradshaw n.d.) are prime concerns of journalism. The internet, A.I., and the right to privacy continue to be topics of heated debate. One of Canada’s highest courts ruled that more protections are necessary for the personal information of citizens (Supreme Court of British Columbia 2024). However, few newsrooms address how they are using, storing, or sharing people’s data (Wilburn 2022).

Serious ethical questions have also arisen as media organizations begin to experiment with using A.I. methods to create journalism products. In Beckett and Yaseen’s (2023) global survey of 105 news organizations they found that more than 60% of participants were “concerned about the ethical implications of A.I. integration for editorial quality and other aspects of journalism.” Other research shows that a need for human oversight of A.I. is a fundamental concern for surveyed journalists (Diakopoulos et al. 2024), and for Canadian news consumers, who say they could lose trust in organizations who are not transparent about the use of A.I. (Blanchett et al. 2024).

Headline-grabbing examples illustrate why this is the case. CNET’s human editors had to correct dozens of stories written by A.I. (Farhi 2023). Gannett paused its high school sports LedeA.I. experiment because it was inserting oddly phrased content and placeholders instead of names (Colton 2023). And *The Winnipeg Free press* paused using A.I. software trained to create audio versions of text stories because the A.I. was making up multiple inappropriate names for the Indigenous premier of Manitoba (Samyn 2024) in what could be described as a type of A.I. hallucination.

Arguedas and Simon (2023) suggest there is much to learn from past integrations of disruptive technology, particularly to avoid the repetition of past mistakes. The Global Editorial Director of *Wired* urged all newsrooms, regardless of size, to establish guidelines about how A.I. is used so the audience “has a clear understanding” (Drummond 2023). This is of particular importance because “unlike journalism, technology companies operate under a different set of values, prioritizing innovation and user engagement over truth and accountability. This divergence creates a critical need for journalists to establish and uphold their ethical standards independently” (Mahadevan et al. 2024, p.10). Experts agree that there is a need to develop A.I. policy now (The Canadian Journalism Foundation 2023) because the field of journalism is in uncharted waters. Our research shows such development is lagging because there is lack of communication and literacy about a complex technology, and an unproven assumption of agreed upon ethical practice, or unspoken doxa, any or all of which could result in significant negative impacts on the field of journalism.

## Methodology

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [Grant Number 895-2019-1010]. Interviews were chosen as the method for

data gathering in order to utilize “Bourdiesian methodology” (Hardy, 2014, p. 249) that requires a researcher to commit “to a process which is relational, cyclic and complex” and that provides “dynamic representation of human activity and ... deepens one’s understanding of the interrelationships between objective structures and personal lived experiences.”

After receiving research ethics board approval, to find participants for this study, we used purposive sampling (Rubin 2021), approaching newswriters individually based on job titles and job descriptions that reflected they might use A.I. in their work, for example, a digital editor or head of product development. We also endeavoured to find participants from newsrooms ranging from large legacy organisations offering national coverage to smaller digital-startups with more local audiences. The organizations in our sample included private, commercial news outlets as well as publicly funded French- and English-language broadcasters and personnel from newspapers, television and radio stations, wire services and web-only publications. To garner a strong understanding of news practices (Garrison 1999), participants also performed a variety of roles including that of reporter, editor, and programmer, and came from newsrooms offering diverse types of media content. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 newswriters from 11 Canadian newsrooms; however, many identified that they had worked at multiple media organizations throughout their careers.

Interviews with participants were conducted over 12 months from July 2022 to July 2023, with some follow-up emails to clarify practice. Invitations to participate were sent through social media and email and there were chain referrals. Of the 58 newswriters contacted, 13 agreed to an interview, a result consistent with previous research identifying the difficulties that arise with recruiting participants from journalistic environments (Blanchett et al. 2023).

Participants were not meant to be representative of their entire newsroom or all journalists in Canada. Each allowed a view into their particular workspace, or habitus, from the perspective of someone familiar with the use of A.I. in a news environment.

Interviews ranged from 12 to 47 min with a 25-minute average. The shortest interview (12 min) provided a diverse perspective from several French-language newsrooms. The participant was familiar with A.I. and had spent significant time reflecting on its implementation and use, providing succinct answers. This supports previous research that shows the value of an interview is not necessarily related “to the length of the interview” (Thorsteinson 2018, p. 1), as also seen in ethnographic work (Pink and Morgan 2013), particularly when those doing the interviewing have experience in the field and understand the doxa of participants (Rinaldo and Guhin 2022). The research team consisted of media professors all of whom have worked as journalists. As Cottle (2000) noted, professional experience can provide deeper insight into journalistic practice.

Interviews were used for data gathering based on evidence they are an effective tool to help explore the opinions, behavior, and experiences of participants (Tracy 2019). Existing literature identifies the efficacy of such interviews to find out the “why” (Fylan 2005) by keeping the interview as conversational as possible with “broad” questions prepared in advance. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, provide a “better

understand[ing of] the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon" (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021, p.1360).

All participants were asked two questions.

1. How is A.I. used in your newsroom?
2. How do ethical considerations shape the use of A.I. in your newsroom?

The first question aimed to determine the use of A.I. within each participant's journalistic habitus and the second to establish how doxa or ethical standards are evolving in the field. Conversations flowed from these questions in accordance with best qualitative, iterative interview practice, which avoids delimiting the interview to a researcher's "predetermined agenda" (Rapley 2004, p. 18).

Interviews were all conducted *via* Zoom, recorded and transcribed. Both the identities of the participants and their newsrooms were de-identified to encourage candid discussions. Interview data were aggregated to establish patterns of practice and narratives surrounding the ethics of A.I. Thematic analysis was applied using the best practices outlined by Vaismoradi et al. "in a non-linear, recursive, reflective process" (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013, pp. 398–405).

Throughout the research process, we tracked patterns of answers to interview questions and identified themes that included general use of A.I. in the newsroom; use of analytics; expressed concerns over the use of A.I.; human intervention and A.I.; journalistic doxa, and journalistic ethics, a subtheme of doxa. We then grouped relevant quotes from all participants for each identified theme for more focused analysis (Rubin 2021). This analysis more explicitly revealed where commonalities and differences existed in participants' experiences or, in other words, areas where all or most participants had, in their interviews, narrated similar understanding of A.I. ethics or newsroom practice. Individual quotes that exemplified broader patterns were then selected to represent identified themes. Data from interviews were further contextualized with both publicly accessible and internal newsroom ethics policies (shared by participants) and standards of practice of news organizations and other journalistic bodies such as the CAJ. The U.S.-based Online News Association (ONA), the Journalism A.I. project (based out of The London School of Economics (LSE) in the UK), The Poynter Institute, the Applied A.I. Institute in Montreal, and the Knight Centre for Journalism all provide resources that address A.I. advancement in the field. For example, a webinar hosted by The Knight Centre on using ChatGPT to create journalism (Knight Centre, 2023) contributed to our overall understanding of the spectrum of A.I. practice in journalistic organizations and resulting ethical challenges.

## Findings

Our findings provide a temporal window into the roll-out of A.I. in Canadian newsrooms, beginning with very few conversations about the ethics of using A.I. for journalism, and ending with burgeoning conversations about best practice and more guidance from newsroom leadership on the ethical use of A.I. However, the depth (the level of detail discussed) and breadth (the frequency of interactions or number of people taking part) of discussions about ethical use of A.I. remained inconsistent

between Canadian newsrooms. What remained consistent was that newswriters assumed there was agreement over the ethical use of A.I. in the journalistic field, or unspoken shared doxa. Our research also revealed inconsistencies in what might be deemed acceptable to publish without human intervention and a lack of codified standards of practice specific to A.I. Such inconsistencies were resulting in invisible, or at least unacknowledged, destabilization of doxa that had the potential to negatively impact the quality of content and the public's trust in journalism.

### ***Tracking A.I. Use in Canadian Newsrooms***

Participants described a wide range of A.I. methods. These included scraping large data sets to identify patterns, or what the Knight Foundation describes as “augmenting reporting capacity” (Keefe 2023), harnessing basic analytics to drive real-time changes in the display on the home page, and determining which content would be visible to particular audience members. Automatic story generation, where a story is generated entirely by a machine using natural language generation, with no human intervention before publishing, was another form of A.I. described by participants.

### ***Inconsistent Definitions***

As interviews unfolded over 12 months, later participants identified an increase in internal discussions surrounding A.I. These conversations, however, were still limited considering the speed at which tools such as ChatGPT were being released publicly. Confusion about whether externally generated content, such as news agency wire copy, was produced using A.I. was a recurring theme. So was lack of agreement as to when an A.I. process moved from a formula-based algorithm or data analytics into an A.I. method or if A.I. was being used at all. As Journalist 9 told us, “So, it could be an A.I.- generated paragraph. It could be an A.I.- generated complete story ... it's hard to know.”

Participants acknowledged flatly they were confused about what constitutes an application of A.I. Journalist 12 exemplified this struggle when discussing tools used to track pathways from social media to a website:

...back to that problem with the definition ...That's actually artificial intelligence, but it's not generative, really, but it's identifying and flagging for us breaking news based on unusual activity ... these are sophisticated programs. I just don't know if they would qualify as A.I.

No common definition emerged from the interviews as to what qualified as an application of A.I. Some considered the use of analytics as A.I. even though the use of analytics doesn't always meet the strict technical definition, where the machine must exhibit learning and application of the learning to be distinguished from a formula or algorithmic method. Those who reported using the more narrow machine-learning definition of A.I. to create journalism content agreed that their news organizations still involved humans in the process of “unpublishing” or correcting errors in A.I.- generated content. Human decision making was also still involved in determining who should have access to content. “The one thing that we are very

particular about when we use this technology is that our editors always have the ability to override what the machine is doing” (Journalist 4).

Participants discussed the use of A.I. methods to help create “non-controversial” stories, or content they said did not require a human reporter/editor to provide context: “We generally don’t pick [A.I.] projects that have judgment calls” (Journalist 1). For example, a story about the quality of water on local beaches could be generated using an A.I. method that pulled data from a municipal database. Previously, human journalists used the same data source to report the stories. Other examples included community crime reports and historical traffic data.

The interviews also revealed that it often falls to those who are the most comfortable with technology to develop A.I. methods and the ethics around them, even if they have little editorial experience. As noted by Journalist 3 in relation to a potential project that would identify the ethnicity of political donors, “We have a data science intern who is reading up on it, seeing how reliable this is, how ethical it is to do this.” The development of A.I. for journalism or ethical practice surrounding A.I. was often done in isolation or in small groups.

### ***Analytics and A.I.***

There was use of A.I.- powered analytics software to make editorial decisions, or determine what Kristensen (2023) described as news media significance, by participants in our study. The use of analytics/A.I. to influence story choices in newsrooms was addressed in more than half of our interviews, including stories that as one journalist observed “would never pop up on our radar” (Journalist 4).

But again, human decision-making wasn’t completely absent from the process. Participants identified the importance of using editorial judgment to override the statistical popularity of story themes: “You can’t please everyone, and you can’t always bend to what the popular will is. Sometimes you have to do things that are representative of a minority because you’re there for everyone” (Journalist 9).

Promoting content was referred to as “grunt work” – a term commonly used to describe tasks better performed by A.I. One journalist said, “None of us became editors to move articles up and down the page by following an analytic system” (Journalist 4). They felt good use of technology allowed humans to focus their time on the creation of stories.

However, interviews revealed that newswriters working in the same newsroom might have a different understanding of which choices were being made by humans and which were made by an A.I, including the placement of content, social marketing of content, and the paywalling of content. Additionally, not everyone working in newsrooms is aware of the level of machine intervention in common news website elements. For example, whether a list of “trending” stories on the sidebar of a news story, or a link within an existing story to another story labeled “you might be interested” was created by a human, or with a simple algorithm tied to analytics, or through an A.I. method programmed to display different content to different users using automated display.

This automated, personalized news-display (Li et al. 2010) means each person looking at a story might have a different experience, something noted by our participants. For example, *Sophi.io*, an A.I. developed by *The Globe and Mail* decides who

might be asked to pay to see certain content. Franklin (2016) described “feeding” the audience using analytics as an accepted journalistic practice, as seen in research on newsrooms internationally (Blanchett 2021a). It’s still, however, a source of tension when it comes to upholding journalistic standards or traditional doxa and so is the use of large datasets in reporting: “If you trust computers too much, there is always a risk that the models you’re generating and relying on aren’t necessarily fully truthful if you’re not careful” (Journalist 6).

### ***The Human Connection***

There was general agreement from participants that A.I. generated content produced in news organizations should be “passed through” a human editor and that a human editor should be responsible for all post-publication corrections. Participants talked about the importance of not allowing A.I. methods to replace human journalists. Instead, they insisted, it should be used to alleviate journalists’ workload by doing, as described previously, the “grunt work.” One compared it to inserting a screw with a screwdriver versus a faster, more efficient drill:

It’s still the same job that you’re trying to achieve, you only do it faster with more efficiency. And after that, you can reinvest your time and efforts, in something which will add much more value to your operations (Journalist 5).

There was a lack of agreement on whether A.I. methods could help eliminate bias in news content and if audiences believe A.I. helps eliminate such bias. However, recent studies show there are issues of audience trust when it comes to the use of A.I. (Blanchett et al. 2024; Longoni et al. 2022). Other research shows that A.I. propagates systemic bias (Noble 2018; Ntoutsi et al. 2020). Journalist 4 recognized this with regard to creating journalism and modifying the homepage: “What we’re really keen to ensure doesn’t happen is that the A.I. introduces the bias.”

A lack of technical literacy was a common area of concern and contributed to tensions associated with the introduction and use of A.I. in Canadian newsrooms where there have been drastic cuts to resources (Wechsler 2023).

I think my frustration personally comes from again the lack of openness to have this conversation about A.I., and the urgency of it, because I think ... we’re so busy trying to survive, we don’t realize that having this conversation about A.I. will help us survive. (Journalist 11)

### ***Practice Seen through the Lens of Field Theory***

Proof of ethical practice was tied to knowledge of the field of journalism and journalistic doxa:

We do a lot of really robust testing because we never want to publish something that isn’t true... I’m not just a developer. I was a reporter before I did this. We’re not trying to do anything that’s sneaky or illegal. (Journalist 1)

Interview participants frequently referred to what Bourdieu identified as unspoken doxa/ethical standards. As described by one, “There’s a rule book in my head” (Journalist 2). Another (Journalist 13) said that journalists working at other organizations shared

the same standards as they did, although they offered no evidence of how they could confirm this to be true.

Most Canadian newsrooms have codified journalistic standards and practices, or a JSP that are often public-facing. Those in leadership positions said they had direct influence on how often and when JSPs were updated. However, they did not think updates were necessary, even though their JSPs did not include A.I.-usage language. They believed the rules did not change based on a new technology being introduced to the workflow: “We went through the code of conduct together and looked at various areas. And we were satisfied that there’s an interpretation of those areas that apply to A.I. ...We didn’t have to get super explicit” (Journalist 13).

The complex process required to update JSPs also makes it challenging to do so:

There is a formal process around those JSPs (like the principles). But those principles are decided within ...news teams, and then they’re bubbled up to the vice president and the president and the board of directors actually signs off on the JSP. And that’s a process that happens every five to eight years. (Journalist 12)

When the interviews were conducted, few of the public-facing ethics policies on the websites of participants’ newsrooms addressed the use of A.I. methods in producing journalism content. Some organizations, though, were identifying content where A.I. was used. In other words, no general statement related to A.I. ethics were offered, but individual stories that had elements of A.I. in their development or writing were being labeled. However, when Journalist 10 tried to share an example of the labeling of an A.I. generated story, they discovered the example wasn’t labeled and noted it had to be corrected.

In terms of internal transparency, participants indicated they relied on the hiring process and repeated internal story meetings to provide a shared understanding of the ethics in the newsroom. As an example of preconceived notions of industry doxa, when asked how they could know that their ethics were the same as the person sitting next to them, Journalist 4 said that if they were hired at the same media company, then the hiring process would ensure that they shared the same ethics and understanding of those ethics: “I’ve worked there for 14 years now ...I can’t think of anyone whose ethics I would disagree with.”

There was general agreement, though, that both newsroom personnel and audiences need to be made more aware of how and when A.I. methods are used to produce and publish content.

### ***A.I. Transparency***

One common area of assumption about shared ethics and A.I. was related to wire copy and if there was a concern about how much of that content was generated by A.I.: “Not that we suspend our ethics, and not that we suspend our critical thinking, but the assumption is that if it’s coming from a credible source, you know we’re not going to be overly concerned about these things [verifying information in stories/confirming whether they are A.I. stories],” (Journalist 9).

Using A.I. to determine what the audience sees is also becoming accepted, but that doesn't mean the audience is aware of the process or how their data may be used by news organizations. As Journalist 5 said,

I must admit that we have never told anyone outside of our organization that we're using that kind of tool, and I must say that I'm pretty at ease with this decision because ... it's only ... for the sake of optimizing the delivery of content, for gaining efficiency to be more spot on, to gain more traction on social media.

### **Industry Standards**

Based on interviews, there was no awareness of a unified plan for developing a Canada-wide A.I. ethics policy by an outside group like the CAJ. There was also push back at the idea of the CAJ or other journalism associations developing wider, industry-mandated guidelines for content labeling because of the assumption that good practice was implicitly understood: "I like the CAJ, but I wouldn't want to be beholden to anything that the CAJ would say, because ultimately, it's also a political organization...I believe I've acted ethically" (Journalist 1).

### **Discussion**

Our findings show the communication and transparency about the use of A.I. and the actual experimentation and exploration of A.I. technology are not moving at the same pace. Although other studies support that there is a lag between emerging technologies and development of the doxa of the newsroom (Møller and Thylstrup 2024), primarily due to organizational culture and financial constraints (Blanchett 2021a), we have identified that this lag is more pronounced with A.I. because of the complexity and growing ubiquity of the technology and a lack of A.I. literacy, amplified by the assumption that everyone is innately following the same rule book.

The belief in a shared doxa, or idea that there are shared ethics across most newsrooms and amongst most journalists came up in almost all of our interviews. There was no agreement, however, on whether ethical standards were broad enough to cover all news processes involving A.I. There was also no defined methodology for creating and adhering to these spoken and unspoken rules for the use of A.I., or sharing ethical practices at an industry level, newsroom level, or with the audience. Standards were often filtered through the individual or habitus level. This lack of overt expression of ethical requirements could result in a variety of editorial mistakes including issues with the sourcing of data, a reliance on A.I. that is not fully understood and that could contain bias, missed A.I. hallucinations, and/or misunderstandings about who or what is writing and creating content. Even the use of "non-controversial" data to automatically generate stories, such as water quality reports or crime-reports, could be considered problematic. Is it acceptable journalistic practice to trust the information governments and the police share without applying a more critical lens, whether using A.I. or not? Perhaps the answer to that question is in motion. As noted by Willig (2013),

"Good journalism" is only good in relation to "not so good" or even "bad" journalism, and what is considered "good journalism" will change as the different relations in the field

change; for instance...when new media, such as the internet, challenge the definitions of journalism (p. 383).

Our findings are consistent with the literature suggesting journalists in multiple jurisdictions recognize A.I. can produce efficiencies that could potentially improve the work and lower the workload of the newsworker (Aissani et al. 2023). Saving time was seen as a key benefit of A.I., but study participants also voiced concerns about what will happen if there is a rush to use systems without identifying or clearly defining a tool's purpose. As noted by Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon (2019), "the technological field is influencing journalism in terms of who is hired and has the ability to redefine what 'journalism' is in the long run" due to "its focus on audience needs, its enabling of widespread access to data, and its tendency towards easy-to-consume products" (p. 1252). As one editor explained: "If I have a worry, it's that the reliance on these tools to save time may have led to people not being as thoughtful about how they use them" (Journalist 2).

In keeping with previous studies (Blanchett, McKelvey, and Brin 2022), journalists interviewed agreed the responsibility for content produced is ultimately the responsibility of the humans who are a part of that media group, whether or not they had a direct hand in the creation and use of A.I. at any stage of production. In other words, if a mistake was made by the A.I. systems and published, the blame rested with the humans, not the A.I. itself. As other recent studies have concluded, (see, for example, Diakopoulos et al. 2024) our findings suggest journalists in Canada also believe best practice for the use of A.I. incorporates human oversight. Participants were frequently "re-emphasising their human potential" (Danzon-Chambaud and Cornia 2023, p. 180).

## Conclusions

Our research shines a light on the disparity between the narrated efficacy of existing ethical practice in using A.I. to create journalism content, supported by assumed agreement, and what is actually required to ensure ethical practice. Although the use of A.I. is becoming ubiquitous in the field of journalism, from transcription to story generation to decisions about what goes behind a paywall, there is a lack of reflection about its impact. A.I. is destabilizing doxa in newsrooms, but the embedded nature of that doxa is preventing journalists from recognizing the disruption: "...any common-sense reflection on existing rules is necessarily mediated – and therefore restricted – by day-to-day experience, by established practice, in short by what is" (Deer 2014, p. 118). Issues surrounding a lack of reflection with the use of A.I. are amplified because it is a complex technology that many journalists don't fully understand, and that can be invisible to the user, leading to further assumptions the status quo can suffice.

Changes in the field of journalism related to the use of A.I. can be analyzed through three areas of tension identified by Danzon-Chambaud and Cornia (2023): external structures, adversarial reactions within the field, and cultural capital. In discussions about A.I.'s limitations during interviews, our research uncovered an inadequate understanding about the impact of external structures on journalistic practice related to A.I. – such as the variety of systems that amplify bias in data. The existence of such bias in technological tools used for journalism or in large language models writing journalistic stories have the potential to impact adherence to accepted standards without the journalist

even knowing. This reveals a tension between the ethics participants considered as *doxa*, whether those ethics could or should cover the use of A.I. to create journalism content, and how many journalists have a full understanding of which ethics might be compromised. In these early days of using A.I. to gather news, generate journalism, and display and distribute stories, it would seem the perfect time to collaborate on a shared ethical framework and find the “point of balance” (Wang 2018) between journalistic and technological goals. Particularly as “these machine learning systems are no less than social agents, who shape society and are shaped by it in turn” (Airoldi 2021, p. 14).

Using data culled from a diverse set of participants who work in journalistic organizations of varying sizes and types, our findings support that there are “quiet integrations” (Newman 2023) of A.I. happening in journalism. Our research makes it clear, though, that those integrations raise new ethical questions that are not, depending on who you talk to, covered by existing *doxa*, and reveal, if not adversarial, at minimum inconsistent reactions within the field. In addition, the data we gathered show that newsroom *doxa* related to A.I. and ethics is often considered by only a few people—the minority of newswriters who have high A.I. literacy and are experimenting with A.I. directly in their work, or those at the management level who might have limited technical understanding. Or, sometimes, like the intern in charge of exploring A.I., newswriters have technical capability but little journalism experience. In their preliminary research, Becker, Simon, and Crum (2023) suggests this surface-level approach to A.I. ethics development is akin to a form of virtue signaling to the rest of the journalism field; it is more performative than practical.

As seen in previous research, the level to which newsrooms experiment with technology is directly tied to the resources available to them, and there can be vast discrepancies in those resources (Blanchett 2021a). In addition, the *habitus* of a newswriter involved in A.I. work is often markedly different than that of their coworkers and they often work in isolation. This aligns with the survey results from JournalismAI, “that many newsrooms have not reached an institutional level of A.I. integration” (Beckett and Yaseen 2023). It also appears that contrary to previous studies (García-Avilés 2021) where journalists regard “new practices as a challenge to the established standards” (p. 3), in terms of A.I., perhaps due to its limited use thus far, for many there is an underlying belief that existing standards could suffice and much reliance on “gut instinct” (as also seen in Diakopoulos et al. 2024) to determine what is acceptable use.

The lack of transparency and explicit communication about the use of A.I. to create journalism in Canada both within newsrooms and in relation to the audience was another finding of this research. This is of particular concern as Canadian news consumers have identified transparency around the use of A.I. as a matter of great importance (Blanchett et al. 2024). Although some information about the use of A.I. is being publicly disclosed (see, for example, Fenlon 2023), the public should be more fully engaged in conversations about how their data is being used and how news content is created and displayed using A.I. Audiences already don’t trust the media (Brin and Charlton 2023) and the consequences of not fully disclosing the use of A.I. could only exacerbate this situation, further diminishing journalism’s social/cultural capital (Mahadevan et al. 2024).

Bourdieu identified that an influx “of new agents into the field can serve as either forces for transformation or conservation” (Benson and Neveu 2005, p. 5) of existing practices. It remains unclear how A.I. will impact the ethics of journalism, because journalists themselves don’t agree on whether a transformation is required to develop

more comprehensive new ethics, or if existing standards will suffice due to the lack of A.I. literacy and A.I.'s complexity and invisibility. A.I. is changing practice, however, and more newswriters need to talk about A.I. to better measure how its implementation is disrupting doxa, or at least recognize the disruption is well underway.

## Limitations

The ever shifting environment of newsrooms captured over the course of our conversations with participants shows a need for more qualitative work that teases out how A.I. is being used and by whom. However, this is also needed in quantitative research. For example, a Muck Rack survey (Muck Rack 2024) found less than 30% of journalists are using A.I. in their work, while an Associated Press (AP) survey (Diakopoulos et al. 2024) found 70% and a Cision survey (Cision 2024) found 47%. The AP survey included “business uses” of generative A.I. and more than 50% of respondents were editors or executives, in other words, not those performing reporting and newsmaking roles. A lack of shared understanding of what constitutes journalistic use of A.I. (as we found in our own research) could impact understanding of how much A.I. is being used in journalism, and, as a result, if and how doxa/ethical standards are changing.

Lastly, deeper research is needed to explore how journalists could fully participate in the reevaluation of ethics particular to the development of A.I. in journalism, including issues of bias and use of audience data; how A.I.-generated content could and should be made transparent to the audience; and if/when the use of A.I. will cause the ubiquitous shift in practice seen with other technology, such as the internet and platforms that share audience data.

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