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Reality Re-Imag(in)ed. Mapping Publics' Perceptions and Evaluations of AI-Generated Images in News Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of generative AI technology has transformed the creation and dissemination of visual content in journalism, raising critical questions about its impact on news production, credibility, and audience trust. While AI-generated text, as well as professionals' views have been the subject of extensive research, the implications of AI-generated images in the news, as well as audience perspectives remain underexplored. This study explores audience experiences with AI-generated content, their evaluations of the use of AI-generated images in the news, as well as how they think media companies can and should cope with these developments without compromising audience trust. By conducting four focus groups, we find that while audiences come across relatively few instances of AI-generated images in the news, they have deep concerns about the use of AI technologies in creating and disseminating visual information. Largely, participants are worried about misinformation and, without any limits to the potential realities that AI can generate, audiences fear the loss of an objective, shared reality as told through journalism. By integrating audience perspectives into discussions on newsroom policies, this research provides valuable insights into how news organizations can navigate the responsible use of AI-generated images. Our findings can inform strategies for fostering transparency and maintaining trust, while also addressing the broader implications of generative AI on journalism. Ultimately, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on media credibility and the evolving role of AI in shaping the news landscape.

KEYWORDS

Audience perspectives; digital journalism; generative AI; information needs; visual journalism

Introduction

The rapid advancement of generative AI (GenAI) technologies¹ has democratized the creation and dissemination of realistic yet fabricated images across the entire journalistic value chain. This advancement has sparked discussions about the capacity in which these GenAI technologies can or should be used in newsrooms. The increasing implementation of such GenAI technologies for text and images has revived concerns in newsrooms, not in the least because similar technologies and tools (i.e.,

the internet, audience metrics tools, recommender systems) have been implemented with arguments that largely relate to efficiency gains. Apart from the impact of GenAI tools on the journalistic profession, similar concerns have been flagged that predominantly relate to the technology behind GenAI. Some examples include copyright infringements, as well as the bias of the training data and the unsustainability of the use of such GenAI technologies (e.g., the amount of water that is needed to cool down the server where GenAI tools operate on (De Jong et al. 2025)).

The wider deployment of GenAI technologies has indeed been disputed, and scholarly work has only started to grasp the uses and perceptions of such technologies. Additionally, research in 2025 has mainly focused on the concerns from the news organizations' and the GenAI technologies' perspective which, in turn, results in two knowledge gaps. First, the attitudes and perceptions of the audience on the uses of GenAI technologies are rarely included in research, although general information needs are front-and-center in legislation documents like the European AI Act and the UK's White Paper on AI, as well as in newsroom guideline documents (AI Act 2025). Second, most research has focused on the uses of text generators like *ChatGPT*, *Perplexity* and *Copilot* in the newsroom, and less so on the deployment of image generators like *Dall-E*, *Midjourney*, *Stable Diffusion*. Mapping audience perceptions and attitudes in relation to text and visual professional generators of GenAI will provide a more nuanced understanding of specific information needs, as recent scholarly work has called for (Cools et al. 2025; Morosoli et al. 2025). Furthermore, the importance of studying visuals in journalism is not only supported by visual communication research (e.g. Grittmann 2007; Krämer and Lobinger 2019; Reißmann et al. 2025) but also comes to the fore as visual media (such as social media and online news media) become the main access points of (political) information. These developments happen against the backdrop of newsrooms increasingly using GenAI for visuals: the *BBC*, the world's largest public broadcaster, announced experiments with AI for images, as did *CBC News*, who are mainly using it for post-editing photos and videos (Thomson, Thomas, and Riedlinger 2025).

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding about the public's evaluation of GenAI images being integrated into news contexts, including concerns about misinformation, ethical considerations, and the overall trustworthiness of news sources (Thomson et al. 2022; Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). Furthermore, we believe it is essential to explore the expectations and demands of news consumers regarding disclosure and responsible use of relatively new GenAI technologies in a journalistic context as these general information needs might further influence trust in the news organizations altogether (Lough and Mortensen 2023).

We therefore pose the following overarching RQ:

How do citizens reflect on their experiences with AI-generated images in the news, and what recommendations do they offer for the responsible use of AI-generated images by news media?

To answer this question, we conduct focus groups with participants in the Netherlands. The results point to limited experiences with, yet abundant concern about the use of AI images in the news. Participants identify the distinct risk of GenAI images (as opposed to texts) in their potential to jeopardize audience's understanding

of reality and underline the responsibilities of media companies to provide transparency and regulation to guarantee audience trust.

Literature Review

The Impact of Technology on Journalism: Toward a GenAI Newsroom?

Major advancements in (AI) technology are (re)shaping journalism, influencing both its processes and products (Schapals and Porlezza 2020; Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon 2019). Pavlik (2020) identified four key areas of influence: (1) journalistic workflows, (2) content production, (3) newsroom structures, and (4) the relationships among news organizations, journalists, and audiences. With GenAI specifically, tools play an increasingly central role in the newsroom, altering journalistic workflows, the production of content, the creation of new positions, task forces and the redefinition of the relationship with its audiences (Diakopoulos et al. 2024).

In 2025, GenAI technologies permeate all stages of the journalistic value chain, from information gathering to dissemination (Matich, Thomson, and Thomas 2025). In information gathering, AI enables automated content aggregation and real-time information retrieval. Automatic transcription and analysis of interviews via speech-to-text models (such as Whisper and Deepgram) streamline the interview process and enable rapid content processing. Visual search and image recognition systems support photo and video verification through reverse image search capabilities enhanced with AI support, helping journalists authenticate visual content. In news production, it facilitates automated writing, multilingual translation, summarization, and speech synthesis. Multimodal content creation tools such as *Synthesia* and *Pika Labs* also enable journalists to combine text, image, audio, and video through unified AI platforms, creating comprehensive multimedia stories more efficiently. Natural language processing (NLP) models, such as GPT-4, enhance text generation and contextual understanding. For distribution, AI systems can rewrite articles for optimal presentation on Instagram versus LinkedIn, for example, tailoring tone, length, and format to platform-specific requirements. At the same time, the technology can be used to potentially personalise content and increase search engine optimization (for a more comprehensive overview of additional uses of generative AI, see Cools and Diakopoulos 2023; Simon 2024).

GenAI through the Lens of the Journalism Ethics Framework

The integration of GenAI has raised critical questions about journalism ethics. To better understand user perceptions and attitudes in relation to GenAI use, this study employs the journalism ethics framework as a theoretical lens for examining the ethical implications of GenAI in text and images. Journalism ethics, defined as the “application of ethical norms that guide the social practice of journalism in its many technological forms” (Ward 2019, p. 307), is essential for assessing GenAI’s impact on journalistic integrity, principles, and the broader societal implications of information dissemination, not in the least related to the audience they are serving (Paik 2025). In line with this definition, we believe it is the preferred theoretical lens for at least two reasons.

First, the journalism ethics framework historically evolved alongside technological advancements. As most news organizations transitioned from political affiliations to autonomous entities, ethical standards became more formalized, leading to the establishment of editorial guidelines (de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds 2024; Paik 2025). The integration of GenAI continues this trajectory of implemented technologies, emphasizing the need for robust ethical frameworks to uphold journalistic integrity in the digital era. Second, journalism ethics emphasizes the audience perspective, recognizing that journalism serves a crucial societal (and democratic) function by informing and engaging the public. Ethical journalism prioritizes accuracy, fairness, and transparency - values that are essential in an era where AI-generated content threatens trust in news organizations. By incorporating the audience's general information needs, the journalism ethics framework, as a theoretical lens, can help guide us in evaluating news organizations' credibility vis-à-vis GenAI use.

The Integration of GenAI in Visual Journalism

Generative visual AI technologies bring both opportunities and challenges to the newsroom. With the use of generative imagery across digital platforms and news sites we see refueled longtime discussions about 'pictorial evidence' and under which conditions visual information can be trusted or taken for true (see, e.g. De Jong et al. 2025; Lehmuskallio, Häkkinen, and Seppänen 2019; Thomson, Thomas, and Matich 2024). Images are traditionally believed to be objective 'eyewitnesses' (Banks 2013) that provide a form of knowledge or evidence (e.g., Ristovska 2020; Rubinstein and Sluis 2008). In political communication, specifically, the visualization of information has been discussed through the journalistic lens: one of the key roles of images in the news, besides acting as eye-catchers for the articles they accompany, is to serve a democratic role, delivering political information, contexts and background information (Grittmann 2007). A key question then is whether photorealistic AI-generated images will lead to suspicion and distrust in audiences when used in journalistic contexts. Guides on how to spot AI-generated images published by fact-checking organizations or newsrooms particularly encourage checking for inconsistencies or irregularities in the depiction of hands, legs, or facial features. However, rapid advances in AI technology also mean that these irregularities have already (and will even more so) become less frequent over time (Thomson and Thomas 2023). In fact, De Jong et al. (2025) have shown that even professional photographers and photo-editors struggle to differentiate digital photographs from photorealistic AI-generated images.

Some scholarly work points toward growing concerns among news professionals regarding the challenges these images pose to journalism, particularly in relation to risks of spreading misinformation, challenging journalistic objectivity, and labor displacement (De Jong et al. 2025; Matich, Thomson, and Thomas 2025). In interviews with journalists, Thomson and Thomas (2024) found that professionals view AI-generated images as particularly risky, especially when used as a replacement for traditional photojournalism. A central concern among journalists is the audience's ability to distinguish between real and AI-generated images, particularly in digital environments where visual content is consumed rapidly (De Jong et al. 2025; Thomson, Thomas,

and Matich 2024). Still, clear guidelines on how to regulate their use remain scarce. While editors are cautious about implementing blanket policies (Thomson, Thomas, and Matich 2024), little is known about audience expectations regarding transparency and disclosure. Recent scholarly work by Cools et al. (2025) has pointed to a clear ‘transparency paradox’: Audiences simultaneously demand transparency about AI use in journalism while also trusting news organizations to use AI responsibly without overwhelming them with technical details. Therefore, efforts to make AI use in news more transparent have the potential to (unintentionally) lead to a ‘backfire effect’, resulting in reduced trust or even increased confusion (Altay and Gilardi 2024; Epstein et al. 2023; Toff & Simon, 2023).

The growing prevalence of AI-generated images in news contexts underscores the need for scholarly work to examine audience perceptions more closely (Morosoli et al. 2025). The widespread use of social media as a news source has increased public exposure to AI-generated content, yet little is known about how audiences interpret such images, how these interpretations influence perceptions of credibility, and whether AI-generated visuals uniquely impact trust in the news compared to other forms of misleading imagery (Newman et al. 2025). Addressing these gaps can inform newsroom policies by providing insights into how audiences engage with AI-generated images, what concerns they associate with them, and what measures news organizations can adopt to maintain public trust in an era of increasing digitalization.

To explore these issues, we propose the following more granular research questions:

RQ1: To what extent and in what formats do audiences experience AI-generated content in the news?

RQ2: What challenges and opportunities do audiences associate with the use of AI-generated images in the news?

RQ3: What requirements do audiences have for the responsible use of AI-generated images in the news?

Method

Research Design

To address these questions, this study draws on focus groups with audiences in The Netherlands. Focus groups are widely used in exploratory studies such as this one; they entail a focused, purposeful, guided conversation (Brennan 2013), but provide the flexibility needed to respond to subjects’ insights, interests, and areas of expertise (Galleta 2013). The semi-structured nature of the focus groups means that there are pre-established guidelines to the conversation in the form of main questions that are asked, covering the main topics of the research questions. While the participants have freedom to talk about any points relating to those main questions, the researcher monitors the discussions closely to ensure conversations stay on topic enough so that there is sufficient data to answer the research questions. To this end, four focus groups were conducted between 21 October 2024 and 30 October 2024 at the University of Amsterdam.

Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited by the panel company Bureau Fris². A total of 25 participants made up our four focus groups: eight, six, six and five participants, respectively. Participants were specifically recruited to represent a diverse sample in terms of age, gender and education, in order to have a variety of views, experiences and opinions represented in each focus group (see Table 1).

All four focus group discussions were held on location at the University of Amsterdam in the last week of October 2024. Each session lasted one hour and was attended and moderated by both researchers, with one researcher acting as the lead moderator. Before discussions started, participants signed informed consent forms, agreeing to keep the discussions and other participants confidential. Discussions followed a semi-structured guide with three main thematic blocks to guide conversations around the research questions (see Appendix A for focus group questionnaires): in the first block, which largely pertained to RQ1, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with AI-generated content in the news and how they felt about these. They were also asked to consider any attitude differences between how they felt about AI-generated images and AI-generated texts in the news context.

In the second and longest block of the focus groups, which pertained to RQ2, participants were asked to reflect on the use of specifically visual AI-generated content in the news. Respondents were not shown examples of such images. Rather, they were invited to share more general considerations and evaluations about AI and images in the news media. The discussion also covered context considerations (such as different platforms and topics) in their evaluations, as well as possible benefits of using AI-generated images in the news. In the third block of the focus groups, which pertained to RQ3, participants reflected on what measures and information they would like to see in case of news websites utilizing AI-generated content.

Analysis

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed in their original language (Dutch) using the automated transcription software *Google Pinpoint*. These original

Table 1. Focus group participant (FGP) demographics.

		Age	Gender	Education		Age	Gender	Education
Focus	FGP1	33	M	WO	Focus	FGP15	F	WO
Group 1	FGP2	19	F	HBO	Group 3	FGP16	F	HAVO
	FGP3	36	M	MBO		FGP17	M	MBO
	FGP4	50	F	MBO		FGP18	M	WO
	FGP5	45	M	HBO		FGP19	F	MBO
	FGP6	47	M	VWO		FGP20	M	HBO
	FGP7	24	F	WO	Focus	FGP21	F	WO
	FGP8	29	F	HBO	Group 4	FGP22	M	VWO
Focus	FGP9	31	M	WO		FGP23	F	MBO
Group 2	FGP10	42	M	HBO		FGP24	M	WO
	FGP11	23	M	HBO		FGP25	F	WO
	FGP12	50	F	MBO				
	FGP13	35	M	WO				
	FGP14	43	F	HBO				

Note: Average age = 34.4; Gender: $M=52\%$, $F=48\%$; Dutch academic scale: HAVO and MBO compare to Secondary education; VWO compares to pre-university education, HBO and WO compare to Bachelor's and Master's level, with HBO being more practice oriented³.

transcriptions were checked and edited by the researchers themselves, after having listened to the original audio recording. Transcripts were then translated into English (using the software *DeepL*) to ensure accessibility to the data for non-native Dutch researchers, as well as to aid coding in English. Original Dutch transcripts were consulted during the analysis process, if needed.

The transcripts were coded using a thematic textual analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013) from a primarily realist perspective, treating participants' accounts as reflections of their lived experiences. Some discussions, particularly around authenticity, also revealed elements of meaning-making, adding a minor constructionist dimension. Both researchers coded the first two focus groups together in a process of consensus coding: reading together through the transcripts one paragraph at a time, identifying relevant codes and agreeing on the labels of those codes. During this process, the researchers were also able to reflect on their own (and each other's) positionality and potential bias. Through the consensus coding process, agreement was reached in terms of how to code certain paragraphs, statements and interactions. The third and fourth transcripts were then coded separately, discussing uncertainties as necessary.

First, preliminary codes were identified in the data and assigned to transcript segments that represent trends and themes in the participants' answers. The process here was data-driven: all codes were derived inductively from the data. This exposed initial patterns in the answers, leading to a total of 98 unique codes that appeared across all four transcripts. Second, all codes were divided into the research question they addressed. This step involved looking for overlap in the statements and codes, grouping codes around the same topic, and creating topic categories for each research question. For example, the codes "*Concern about AI and polarization*", "*AI is biased*" and "*Concern about AI sources*" was combined under a "*Concerns: misinformation*" theme under the RQ2 (evaluations) umbrella. In a third (and final) step of analysis, these core categories are grouped into more comprehensive themes, guided by the research questions and the theoretical background. The second and third steps resulted in the initial 98 codes being consolidated into eight secondary categories within three overarching themes. A full data structure for each RQ can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Results

The analysis of the focus group data provided valuable insights into the experience and evaluations of the use of AI-generated images in the news, and the conditions on which acceptance of the use of such images hinges for participants. Our findings suggest that, in terms of experience (RQ1), participants have a general lack of awareness of AI use in the news media and a lack of knowledge of AI indicators. Concerning evaluations (RQ2), we observed a leaning toward concerns rather than opportunities, although participants do also see benefits for journalism in the availability of AI tools. Participants' prognoses for the future of the use of generative AI in journalism, specifically in terms of generating and editing images (RQ3) are hopeful, yet cautious: While they voice concerns about the rapid development of AI technologies, they set clear expectations and requirements for the media for a responsible implementation of generative AI in journalism.

User Experiences with Generative AI in the (News) Media (RQ1)

Lack of Recognition

When participants were asked to reflect on where and how often they come across AI-generated content in the news media, discussions mostly revolved around the uncertainty of recognizing content as generated (or even edited) by AI. Participants admitted to having difficulties determining specific indicators of AI use in both texts and images. To this extent, participants also pointed to AI labels as one of the clearest indicators of generative AI use in the news, although they reported not coming across these labels very often. Participants also shared that they tend to trust information, unless it seemed altered in obvious ways. This theme of trust in certain (established) news platforms is one that kept resurfacing throughout all focus groups and is one of the foundations of the findings: consumers allocate the responsibility of ethical AI use to the platforms, and by selecting a trusted platform for news, they also assume that the information they receive is reliable.

Medium Matters: Social vs. News Media

Without being prompted to make a normative evaluation of different platforms, participants differentiate between social media and news media sites in terms of expectations. Overall, they report encountering AI generated content mostly on platforms that are geared toward entertainment and not toward quality information dissemination.

Within news sites, participants make a distinction between “soft” and “hard” news, giving examples of various ways in which they have seen AI used in, for example, illustrating economic trends in graphs or animations of artwork in cultural or human-interest news. Here, GenAI use would be largely supplementary and timesaving, creating visual aids for information that was created and written by a human. When it comes to politics, a “hard” news topic that came up in the discussions, the use of AI is mainly raised in connection with non-news websites and outlets. Participants reflected on instances of political information being shared on social media by non-news sources. Participants were critical of the content, alluding to a distrust in AI generated content stating, for example, that *“If I see that [the information] is AI, then I am more likely to double-check it.”* (FGP12).

With regards to the social media sites, Instagram and TikTok were frequently mentioned. This is worth noting in the context of the paper as these are platforms for almost exclusively visual content, with images and videos as the dominant formats of communication. While participants were not yet asked about image-specific considerations, the conversations gravitated organically toward AI use in visual content. This focus does not seem accidental but rather implicative of the importance that participants place on visual communication (within and outside of the context of the news), as well as the trust they place in news media and sources (as opposed to social media). These findings on social and news media elaborate on RQ1, particularly in relation to differences of media use and exposure.

Modality Matters

Discussions about different ways in which participants encountered AI use in the news were also dominated by a distinction between the modalities. Echoing

reoccurring themes of image versus text evaluations, participants pointed to the differences in their abilities to detect AI in texts and images.

Participants voiced that familiarity with news texts, as well as AI-generated texts, can help detect when the former starts to sound like the latter. For images, the same rule counts: familiarity with real photographs helps respondents identify AI-generated images by looking for irregularities in lighting, for example, or visuals that show no imperfections and are just “too perfect”. Sentiments like these tend to imply a minimum level of AI literacy - a baseline familiarity with AI generated content that aids in identifying patterns of AI in content that is not explicitly marked as such.

If you use AI to help you write a text, then at some point, you will recognize how AI writes texts. So then yes, I think I would recognize it in articles. I've used it a few times now and I would recognize it if I saw it in a news article. – FGP5

For both images and texts, participants also voiced that often it simply does not look/sound right, relying on a gut feeling more than anything else in terms of authenticity assessment criteria. One important difference that did crystalize in the evaluation of images versus texts is that participants lacked options for fact-checking the information within images, whereas they were more able to come up with verification options for text. This distinction between textual and visual information, and the different messages it can carry, is also a recurring theme in participants' reflections about the concerns for AI use in images.

User Evaluations of the Use of AI in News Contexts (RQ2)

When asked to reflect on how they respond to and feel about the use of generative AI in the news context specifically, participants were rather pessimistic. This is reflected not only in what they say, but also in the amount of time that was dedicated to the discussion of concerns in all four focus groups. Most codes of the evaluations analysis fell into this category, which is indicative of the general sentiment that participants shared about the use of generative AI in the news. Although it mostly had to be prompted, participants did also see some opportunities in their evaluations. A detailed discussion of both follows below.

Concerns about AI Use in News Images

Perhaps the clearest theme in terms of evaluations of AI use in the media - particularly with visual information - is overall concern and skepticism. Participants across all focus groups agreed that their biggest concern is the potential of generative AI for the creation and spread of misinformation. This concern was voiced from a few different angles.

Sources. One of the reasons for distrust of AI-generated information is the lack of transparency about the sources. Participants voiced that the sources AI uses to generate content are typically opaque or undisclosed. Moreover, even if the sources are identified, the weighting of different sources is not guided by informed judgement, as would be the case for a journalist considering multiple viewpoints and opinions, but instead occurs through processes that are neither transparent nor consistent.

I think it's a bit tricky that if you write something on AI, you don't know which sources are used, so that the newspaper, for example, then wouldn't know where the information came from. It could be that it sourced it from [a reliable source] but you just don't know. – FGP3

As a result, AI may fail to differentiate between credible information and that which is biased, misleading and drawn from unreliable sources. Here, the lack of verification and fact-checking options that was briefly discussed earlier is also referenced. Even if they wanted to, participants stated, they would not know how to verify visual information. The sources of an image are less clear, whereas sources for written information are usually indicated (sometimes even in the form of hyperlinks) so that they are much easier to check.

Visual vs. textual information. Returning to themes of images versus texts, participants noted the passive nature of processing visual information compared to the active engagement required when reading textual content: Users of both news and social media can scroll past a photo and immediately internalize the information it contains. By contrast, engaging with written text that they have committed to reading generally involves a more critical and active process - one that is more difficult to replicate when interpreting visual material. The potential of exposure to misinformation and misrepresentation of events is therefore seen as much higher with visuals, allocating a more immediate threat to the use of generative AI in images rather than texts. The threat of visuals as vessels for misinformation is also referenced in terms of polarization, especially on digital media: Participants fear that the potential of being exposed to images that reinforce existing biases and misconceptions is amplified by algorithmic content curation. Coupled with the immediate and un-critical internalization of visual information, the threat of epistemic destabilization – especially of visual truth – became a central discussion point for participants of all four focus groups.

Re-imagining reality. These reflections on the lack of transparency in sourcing, the challenges of verification, and the influential nature of visual information culminated in statements such as “*How do we then know what is real, anymore?*” (FGP14). The overarching point of the discussion was not only that images are a powerful tool for communicating information, but also that there is an implied guarantee of authenticity. Images depict events as they happened, in the moment they happened. With photographs, there are still limits to altering reality. AI, as one participant put it, has no such limits, meaning that any reality can be created and presented as real:

If I use a photo, then the image is real. Of course, you can write a story around it, but the images are real. But if I suddenly have two politicians sitting next to each other that have never met, then I am looking at something that is not real. And that, I think, is the danger. – FGP11

Moreover, participants referenced earlier discussions about biases in the technology, noting that AI-generated images may reflect these biases and, in turn, propagate them visually. As with the example above, the visual element creates a (mental) image of a false reality, which could be internalized as the norm. This applies to depictions of families, for example, as well as to gender biases in certain professions, as illustrated by one interaction:

I recently read about... AI being quite racist and sexist. As in, if you ask [it] to give you a picture of a happy family, you're much more likely to get a picture of an American dream family - a white family, a man and a woman with their children - than a mixed-race family.
- FGP22

Or if you ask it to show a doctor you get a man, and if you ask it to show a nurse you get a woman. - FGP25

The theme of the loss of an “objective reality” emerged as participants’ primary concern and was identified as the rationale for resisting the use of AI in news images. Participants returned to the questions of necessity and concluded that, in light of these concerns, the rationale for employing AI does not seem justified. While some opportunities for the use of AI could be identified (albeit only once prompted), participants reported that these benefits were negligible when compared to the risks of an AI-generated reality. These findings are particularly important to RQ2, as they question the necessity of GenAI use, which is also addressed in the opportunities section, below.

Part of the conversations about generating reality were also considerations about how fast and far it spreads. This is another interesting distinction the participants make: the risk is not inherent in the image itself, but in the speed with which it can be disseminated and the extent of its potential reach. The dangers, therefore, of this constructed reality are manifold: the limitless possibilities of realities that can be created, the compact and highly shareable nature of the information, and the ease with which it can capture attention and be accepted as truth.

I think the difference between GenAI texts and images is that pictures can be shared passively faster. Forwarding a photo has so much more effect than an article. All your friends are not going to read an article. But they will put that photo on their [Instagram] story or forward it to a group. And so the image starts to live its own life. In that respect, I think the impact of a picture is much greater than a text. – FGP19

Threats to journalism as a profession. Participants in all four focus groups mentioned the loss of skill as a threat to the profession of journalism, if generative AI is implemented in the newswriting process. This is worth noting, not only because it represents a different dimension of concerns – namely away from content and more within the context of journalistic production – but also because there is a recurring theme of a need for a ‘human element’ in the process. Without being able to verbalize it exactly, we heard statements from participants such as “*I would just find it a shame if there was not a human behind the text anymore.*” (FGP12) and “*I just want a human to do it.*” (FGP14). This need for the involvement of journalists was very pronounced and evident throughout the focus groups, albeit not always expressed in connection to explicit consequences. This could be due to an internal struggle between the perceived efficacy resulting from using GenAI (as elaborated in the *Opportunities* section below), and an ethical value of and attachment to a human contribution in journalism. This is also important for considerations of future implementations of generative AI into journalism: references to generative AI in connection to the profession of journalism seemed to most closely revolve around this need for a human element in the loop⁴.

Opportunities for AI Use in News Images

Illustrative vs. Informative. When prompted, participants did also identify some opportunities for generative AI use in news images. For example, when one participant raised the example of an AI generated graph to depict economic trends and patterns over years, others in the group agreed that they had no objections to this, as is shown in one interaction:

If it has a guiding function, then I don't have much objection to it. So, illustrative, or a graph or something like that. So then the topic doesn't really matter in that respect [only the type of image]. – FGP12

AI images can be used just fine. Just cartoons or imitations... – FGP10

... But not for images in [political subjects, like] war. -FGP14

In fact, this raised the discussion of efficiency: using AI to free up more of the journalists' time to dedicate to other tasks. Participants stated that these kinds of visualizations are also attractive to the reader and that in the digital media environment, where animations and graphics like these can attract readership and interest, generative AI can have its place. Participants re-iterated that they make a distinction here between not only the visual characteristics of the image (illustrations and cartoons rather than photo-realistic images) but also the function that the image serves within the topic of the news piece.

Tools vs. Users. A theme that echoes throughout the discussions but crystallizes in the context of opportunities is participants stated (mis-)trust in platforms. Participants state that AI, if used responsibly and transparently, can be helpful, but that in the wrong hands it can be dangerous. With that, most agree that they trust their selected news outlets and would therefore also trust them to interpret what responsible AI use means. Participants allocate trust and confidence to the news platforms themselves, placing the responsibility of balancing the threats and opportunities of implementing generative AI to the platforms, trusting that they will cope with these challenges with their readers best interest at heart. This is central to answering RQ2, as evaluations are deeply dependent on the outlet within which the technology is used.

On the other hand, participants also make this point by highlighting that misinformation, misuse of sources, polarization and other dangers of generative AI are not an issue that is unique to this technology. Again, it is the user that is the inherent problem, not the tool. These users can range from the individual journalist to the large tech companies that are monopolizing the media landscape:

It is also those tech companies that are becoming more and more powerful and they are also building those AI engines. They are the innovators of AI. And if we then allow it to be applied in our news use, they indirectly influence our news. – FGP13

Looking Ahead: Consumer Needs and Expectations (RQ3)

Fear for Future (Generations)

The last part of the focus group discussions concerned participants' needs. While our research interest here centered around possible future solutions for media and news

companies, we must note that participants were very vocal about their worries for the future.

Future of technology. Participants shared that their concerns regarding generative AI use in the news are only exacerbated in their future outlook. On the one hand, participants noted that the rapid technological developments will make it more difficult to discern real content from AI generated content. On the other hand, they acknowledged that the very same developments will make this technology more accessible and indispensable in the work of journalists.

Future generations. These concerns were more pronounced in their considerations of younger generations. Participants referenced their children or students, pointing to these younger generations never having experienced news or any other kind of media that was purely created by humans (i.e., no filters, image editing, etc.), so that they are missing the benchmark for evaluating the authenticity of information.

Conditions for Acceptance

In light of the above, participants also note that acceptance of these technologies is not a choice. They reference the dawn of the internet and search engines, alluding to similar worries that were raised then and stressing that resistance may not be useful. Instead, they raise some conditions for the acceptance of generative AI use in the news media context. For one, participants point to the importance of context: generative AI, according to those participants who propose a solution, has no place in politics. Once again, the trust in the media organization is raised: participants name various (legacy) newspapers as examples of outlets that (they believe) would not outsource the production of important, democratic information to an AI system. This points again to the allocation of responsibility toward the medium and the level of trust that this requires from the readers.

Participants also demand regulation. Acceptance, according to participants across all groups, hinges on the implementation of regulations and rules for a responsible use of these technologies. This argument seems to go together with the inevitability of AI use in journalism: if the users are expected to accept it, media companies must demonstrate what they have done to regulate it.

Recommendations: For Media and for Users

Participants also shared examples of what kinds of regulations they would find useful, such as: transparency. They state that it must be transparent and apparent *that* AI was used, as well as *how* it was used. Here, some examples that participants came up with are: logos; watermarks; indicators for sources and disclosure of what kind of AI tool was used; as well as what prompts were used to generate images.

For example, if you do use an AI image, put a logo in the corner of the image, just like an advertisement, in a way that it cannot be ignored.... If you look at it for two seconds, you have to be able to realize within those two seconds that it is AI. – FGP20

What is typed in, like: 'we want a picture of this'. Maybe that should be necessary because it gives away a lot – what the search terms are, what the assignment (prompt) for the AI is. – FGP21

However, participants also suggest the creation of a separate entity, a kind of “AI police” that is not part of the media but rather an enforcer of universal (or at least European) regulations on the use of AI. Participants do acknowledge the difficulty of enforcing and monitoring these laws but also stress that it is up to the user to ask and push for movements in this direction. There are also participants who allocate the responsibility to the user. Education and literacy on the side of the users is stated as a way of encouraging critical consumption of media content. This, according to some participants, should come both in the form of formal education, and should be offered for older generations through online resources. Only an informed reader, they seem to suggest, can be a critical reader.

I think that it is important that you also keep teaching people that they shouldn't just believe everything they see and read... and that you make people aware of the dangers of AI, so that people know that things can be generated that are not true at all. – FGP2

Conclusion and Discussion

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how the public evaluates AI-generated images within news contexts, including concerns about misinformation, ethical considerations and the overall trustworthiness of news sources (Thomson et al. 2022; Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). Furthermore, we explore the expectations and demands of news consumers regarding their conditions for acceptance of these technologies by news outlets. We find that participants are largely unaware of AI use in news media, but that they also raise serious concerns, including that of a potential loss of a shared reality. We also find that participants place a large amount of trust in news outlets, and that they have specific demands for media outlets in terms of generative AI use.

These findings contribute to the scholarship on digital journalism, visual communication as well as human-computer interaction by incorporating aspects of GenAI into the discussion of editorial considerations and audience perspectives. Below, we highlight four key contributions for our study, and how it adds to earlier scholarly literature.

Bridging Professional and Audience Perspectives

We supplement research that explores the considerations of news professionals about the challenges of AI generated images in journalism (Matich, Thomson, and Thomas 2025) with insights on audience perspectives. Our findings echo recent reports on generative AI and journalism that outline both journalist and audience perspectives (Thomson, Thomas, and Riedlinger 2025), confirming that our audiences are, like news professionals, concerned about the authenticity of information when it comes to generative AI. We also add to these recent reports audience perceptions that are image-specific: participants in our study raise concerns about the representation of reality and questions about authenticity of images in the media, which we take for granted as representations of an “objective reality”. This also directly aligns with journalists' concerns (Thomson and Thomas 2025). Notably, we observe parallel anxieties: journalists worry about audiences' abilities to distinguish between real and AI-generated

images on the one hand (Thomson, Thomas, and Matich 2024), while our participants admit to a general lack of awareness about AI-generated visuals in the media, on the other – specifically on platforms where visual content dominates (e.g., Instagram).

Highlighting the Importance of (Visual) Authenticity

Participants' discussions about the re-construction of reality and markers of GenAI visuals online are also reminiscent of academic discourse of authenticity within the visual communication sphere. For example, one marker of AI visuals that participants pointed to when talking about spotting synthetic images was the characteristic of an image being "too perfect". These findings complement current academic discourse about visual authenticity, specifically the importance of imperfections as new markers of image authenticity (Krämer and Lobinger 2019). The same goes for the re-creation of an "objective reality": Krämer and Lobinger argue that consistency between the online portrayal of realities and the way these realities are experienced offline is another important marker of authenticity (2019). Our findings also expand existing theories of media credibility or post-truth discourse (e.g. Metzger and Flanagin 2013; Tandoc, Yao, and Wu 2020), in that the erosion of visual trust – heretofore taken for granted – complicates these discourses. Our findings suggest a similar sentiment from our participants: they are unsure about the ability of GenAI images to capture this consistency and prefer analog authenticity over synthetic perfection.

Understanding Concerns for a Manufactured Reality

One of the strongest themes was the concerns for a manufactured, re-imagined reality through the generation of AI images that is taken as 'pictorial evidence': visual information that is trusted and taken for true (Lehmuskallio, Häkkinen, and Seppänen 2019; Thomson, Thomas, and Matich 2024). This is especially relevant as participants' reflections pointed to social media being both a major source for (political) information but also almost exclusively being made up of visual content, with videos and images as the dominant formats of communication information. The study contributes to our understanding of how participants point to the danger of GenAI images being treated the same as photographs and interpreted as factual representations and objective evidence of reality (Banks 2013). The gravity of trust in images as representations of reality is evident when it comes to political information and topics of conflict, as voiced by participants. Previous scholarship on visualizations of war and terror speak of the assumed credibility, authenticity and emotional caliber of images that carry information from worlds beyond the perimeter of users' experiences (e.g. Fahmy and Kim 2008; Müller and Knieper 2019). Our study reflects these findings in user perceptions: a clear line is drawn between synthetic images visualizing seemingly arbitrary information pertaining to entertainment and soft news on one hand, and the visualization of the reality of politics and conflict, on the other hand. Voiced dangers center around polarization, fragmentation and the erosion of a common core – sentiments relevant to GenAI today, as they were to polarization, personalization and selective exposure research some years back (see e.g. Stroud 2010; Trilling, Van Klingeren, and Tsfati 2016; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2016).

Tackling the Transparency Paradox

Findings that point to participants' advice for media companies in terms of conditions for the acceptance of generative AI technologies in the domain of image creation provide valuable insights into audience expectations. These findings address a knowledge gap, as to-date little is known about audience expectations regarding transparency and disclosure, and editors are cautious about implementing blanket policies (Thomson, Thomas, and Matich 2024). Our results reveal a complex "transparency paradox" in audiences' information needs regarding AI-generated news imagery. Although participants consistently expressed a desire for clear disclosure of AI-generated content, they simultaneously demonstrated uncertainty about what specific information they needed and how they would use such disclosures. This paradox manifests in audiences wanting transparency while lacking frameworks for meaningfully processing that information – a tension that complicates straightforward calls for mandatory AI labeling in news media, which has also been consistent with findings from earlier research (Cools et al. 2025; Morosoli et al. 2025).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study also presents some limitations. While focus groups offered valuable insights into audience perspectives on the use of AI-generated images in the news, the concept of news within this study may need reevaluation. While our aim was to focus, contextually, on news media, this was not immediately clear to the participants. Participants did reference news websites and apps in the discussions, but conversations also centered around political information on other platforms – some of which referenced news websites. This reevaluation of the terminology warrants careful thought, as political information is not unique to news media. In the context of this study, we focused on news media because we are positioned – theoretically as well as empirically – in the journalism arena. However, to better reflect audience experiences, future analyses may want to consider including terms that are more inclusive of contemporary access and consumption of (political) information.

Related to the diversity of information and access points, our participants pointed to a gap in our study that we could not address: young generations. While empirical evidence on the evaluations of generative AI within news (and the political information environment) is scarce, research that concerns how young adults cope with these developments is even more rare. Specifically with our findings pointing strongly toward a reliance on trust in (legacy) news outlets, reevaluating how young generations who may not rely on these outlets (and therefore not find these standards a useful benchmark) cope with GenAI is both beyond the scope of this paper, as well as immensely relevant. We would encourage future studies to focus specifically on this demographic, given their diverse news media diets in terms of platform and sources, as well as the push for education and literacy measures in the context of GenAI. Furthermore, we can only hypothesize about the uniqueness or generalizability of the Dutch context and therefore encourage replication in other political and media contexts, as well as comparative studies.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the current academic and professional discussion about integrating GenAI technologies into the newsroom. Overall,

we shed light on audience perceptions and attitudes when it comes to AI-generated images used in the news media and provides a more nuanced understanding of specific information needs. Professional news organizations are increasingly implementing GenAI tools for various purposes, but how this affects audiences in terms of perceptions, trust and attitudes, specifically when it comes to visuals, is still under-explored. This study provides a first step in uncovering the answers to these questions, not only from a communication science perspective, but also has interdisciplinary relevance, contributing to fields such as visual communication or human-computer interactions. Practically, it also confirms the responsibility that legacy news outlets have toward their users, especially in times of uncertainty.

Notes

1. Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers from the input it receives how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments (OECD 2023). GenAI is considered a subset of AI and is similarly based on machine learning models that are trained on vast amounts of data to generate persuasive content and conduct human-like dialogues (Shi and Sun 2024).
2. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Amsterdam Ethics Committee.
3. Sources: World Education News and Reviews and Eurostat.
4. It should be noted that the need for journalists to double check sources and output of AI was clearly stated as a requirement for acceptance of AI in journalistic products. This will be addressed in the section "Looking ahead", below. However, the human element here pertains to the creative process of content production and warranted a separate elaboration.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Edina Strikovic**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Hannes Cools**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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Appendix A. Focus Group Questionnaires (English and Dutch)

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Duration focus group: 1 h.

INTRO: Introduction of the researchers and of the research topic (5 mins)

PART 1

How does the Public Experience AI-Generated Images (RQ1)

We'd like to know what your experiences are with AI-generated text and imagery in news, in terms of:

1. Do you come across AI-generated text and images in news online?
If so, where?
2. What do you think about AI-generated text and images in news online?
3. Are you worried or not? If so, what are you most concerned about?
4. Is there anything different between AI-generated text and images in news?

Part 2

To what extent do AI images differ from non-AI images? Are there differences between news and non-news images? (RQ2)

We would like to talk a little more about images in particular:

5. Is there a difference between AI-generated images and your assessment of them based on their context (between news and non-news images).
6. How do you evaluate the authenticity of images online?
7. What about the AI-generated images makes them more/less threatening, as opposed to real images?
8. Do you see opportunities for AI-generated imagery in news? Are there any instances where you think AI visuals are better or have advantages (or at least there is no difference)?

Part 3

What are the requirements for the public regarding the use of AI-generated imagery for news organizations? (RQ3)

We now want to know what practical steps we can take to balance the pros and cons:

9. What are your needs or requirements when AI-generated images are used in news? What information are we talking about, and how should it be shaped?
10. If you could advise editors and media companies on AI-generated images, what would your advice be? Would your advice differ when it comes to AI-generated texts?
11. Finally, is there anything else you would like to add that fits within this discussion?

VRAGENLIJST FOCUSGROEPEN

Duur focusgroep: 1 uur.

INTRO (5 mins)

DEEL 1

Hoe ervaart het publiek AI-gegenereerde afbeeldingen (RQ1)

We willen graag weten wat jouw ervaringen zijn met AI-gegenereerde tekst en beelden in nieuws, in termen van:

1. Kom je AI-gegenereerde tekst en beelden in nieuws tegen online? Zo ja, waar?
2. Wat vind je van AI-gegenereerde tekst en beelden in nieuws online?
3. Maak je je zorgen of niet? Zo ja, waar maak je je het meest zorgen over?
4. Verschilt er iets tussen AI-gegenereerde tekst en afbeeldingen in nieuws?

DEEL 2

In welke mate verschillen AI beelden van niet-AI beelden? Zijn er verschillen tussen nieuws- en niet-nieuwsbeelden? (RQ2)

We willen het graag wat meer hebben over beelden in het bijzonder:

5. Is er een verschil tussen AI-gegenereerde beelden en jouw beoordeling ervan op basis van hun context (tussen nieuws- en niet-nieuwsbeelden).
6. Hoe evalueer je zelf de echtheid van beelden online?
7. Wat aan de AI-gegenereerde beelden maakt ze meer/minder bedreigend, in tegenstelling tot echte beelden?
8. Zie je mogelijkheden voor AI-gegenereerde beelden in nieuws? Zijn er gevallen waarin je denkt dat AI-beelden beter zijn of voordelen hebben (of dat er in ieder geval geen verschil is)?

Deel 3

Wat zijn de eisen voor het publiek met betrekking tot het gebruik van AI-gegenereerde beelden voor nieuwsorganisaties? (RQ3)

We willen nu weten welke praktische stappen we kunnen nemen om de voor- en nadelen met elkaar in balans te brengen:

9. Wat zijn je noden of vereisten als AI-gegenereerde beelden in nieuws worden gebruikt? Over welke informatie hebben we het, en hoe moet dat vormgegeven worden?
10. Als je redacties en mediabedrijven zou kunnen adviseren over AI-gegenereerde beelden, wat zou je advies zijn? Zou je advies verschillen als het gaat om AI-gegenereerde teksten?
11. Tot slot, is er nog iets dat je zou willen toevoegen dat binnen deze discussie past?

Appendix B. Full Data Structure (by RQs)

EXPERIENCES (RQ1)			
	Medium matters: Social vs. News media	Topics matter: "soft" news vs "hard" news	Modality Matters
Lack of recognition			
Lack of awareness - does not think about it	Experience on entertainment sites dominant	Experience in non-political news (culture)	AI literacy helps detect it
Lack of awareness - reality lines blurred	AI on social media platforms	Experience in non-political news (economy)	AI text does not sound authentic
Lack of confidence in AI recognition		Experience in TV news	AI text harder to detect (than image)
Lack of verification options for AI images	Experience with AI images in news; AI images do not look real: sometimes purely illustrative		Difficult to assess authenticity of AI images - purely visual
Lack of awareness - does not think about it with certain sources	AI on social media platforms (Insta/TT) --> Image formats		Difficult to assess authenticity of AI images - what criteria ?
AI images do not look real			Experience in TV news
AI literacy helps detect it			Experience with AI images in news; AI images do not look real
			Images harder to detect, unless obvious
			Lack of verification options for AI images

EVALUATIONS	
Concerns	Opportunities
Threat to journalism as a profession	Opportunities for AI image use
Threat to journalism - text specific	Opportunities for AI image use - illustrative
Threat to journalism	Opportunities for AI image use - illustrative; Context dependent

EVALUATIONS	
Concerns	Opportunities
Misinformation: image and news specific	Opportunities for AI image use - news specific) danger = human use)
Concern about AI sources	Opportunities for AI image use - non-news
Concern about AI misinformation	Opportunities for journalism
Concern about AI misinformation - image specific: what is real?	Opportunities for journalism - editing texts
Concern about AI misinformation - image specific; lack of verification options	Opportunities for journalism - editing texts; requirement: human verification
Concern about AI misinformation; Concern about AI sources; Accessibility to AI and spread is dangerous	Opportunities for journalism - saves time
Concern about AI misinformation: worse than human misinformation, Re-writing reality; Cannot un-see things	Opportunities for journalism - saves time; requirement: human verification
Passive consumption of images is dangerous	Tool vs User
No place for AI in news! Trust in legacy media; Mistrust in images in media, specifically;	

(Continued)

Appendix B. Continued.

EVALUATIONS		
Concerns	Opportunities	
<p>Concerns about AI in terms of polarization</p> <p>Concerns about AI in terms of polarization - image specific</p> <p>Confirmation bias</p> <p>Concern about speed/reach of misinformation</p> <p>No place for AI in news - quality issue (also image specific)</p> <p>No place for AI in news - quality issue</p> <p>No justification for AI=human harm</p> <p>Threatening reality</p> <p>Re-writing reality - danger</p> <p>Re-writing reality - danger: tech companies in charge of that reality?</p> <p>Re-writing reality - danger: AI not necessary for images</p> <p>Re-writing reality; what is real?</p> <p>No justification for AI; re-wrting reality</p> <p>No justification for AI - humans can do it; loss of skill</p> <p>No justification for AI - humans can do it; loss of trust</p> <p>No justification for AI - just want a human to do it</p> <p>Creating a whole new image of reality/things:</p> <p>Concern about AI bias - image specific: creating a picture of the "perfect family"</p> <p>Concern about AI bias</p> <p>Concern about AI misinformation: worse than human misinformation, Re-writing reality; Cannot un-see things</p> <p>Re-writing reality - danger: AI not necessary for images</p>		
LOOKING AHEAD		
Conditions for acceptance	Fear for Future	Recommendations: for media and users
Acceptance non-negotiable	Concerns will get more real/worse	requirement: education and literacy
Acceptance non-negotiable; need regulation	Danger of tech companies - fear for future; re-writing reality	requirement: education and literacy - how realistic is it/ requirement: government regulation
Acceptance of AI images context dependent - not politics	Generational difference: more worried for the younger generations	
Acceptance of AI images context dependent - not politics; opportunities = illustrative	Quality and Trust not a unique AI issue	Requirement: human verification
Trust in platform/legacy media	Re-writing reality - danger: tech companies in charge of that reality? Re-writing reality; what is real?	Requirement: platform guarantee of trust; stance; transparency Requirement: transparency Requirement: transparency - not enough. Process. What was changed? Requirement: transparency about sources requirement: transparency about what kind of tool was used Requirement: transparency: about processes requirement: user push for regulation