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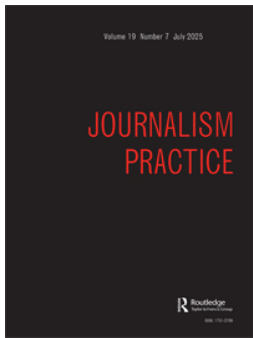
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# “Journalism Will Always Need Journalists.” The Perceived Impact of AI on Journalism Authority in Switzerland

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing adoption of generative AI in news media presents new challenges to journalism, particularly during an era marked by disinformation, audience disaffection, and mistrust towards news media and journalists. The proliferation of voices in news discourse, especially with the rise of social media platforms, has further questioned journalism's authority, which is defined as the socially constructed right to be listened to [Carlson, 2017. *Journalistic authority: Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press]. This paper examines the integration of AI in Swiss news media through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 16 media professionals from various newsrooms across the country. The research aims to understand journalists' perceptions of AI's impact on journalism's authority and to identify strategies for ensuring the responsible use of AI without undermining this authority. Findings indicate that a pluralistic governance approach, emphasizing guidelines and human oversight, is crucial for the responsible implementation of AI in the editorial process. Additionally, maintaining emotional agency in news gathering and storytelling is identified as a key strategy for journalists to reaffirm their authority amidst the growing presence of AI in newsrooms.

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Artificial intelligence; journalism; authority; Switzerland; responsibility; ethics; emotions

## Introduction

The various debates, controversies, and sometimes (contested) framings of developments regarding artificial intelligence (AI) (Cools, van Gorp, and Opgenhaffen 2022) have raised concerns and fueled debates about news media using AI (Kieslich, Diakopoulos, and Helberger 2024; Simon 2024). In addition, it is no secret today that the release of generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, and its adoption across the news industry, fueled debates about the impact of AI on society and put the complex array of challenges and opportunities that journalists and news organizations have been facing for many years under the spotlight (EBU 2024). The greater access to generative AI systems adds further pressure on journalism (Brundage et al. 2018), which is already suffering from competition by social media platforms and alternative media in terms of overtaking audiences' attention and

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the news discourse (Neveu 2019). Consequently, journalism risks becoming just “one communicative form competing for epistemic and cultural authority among many other actors” (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021).

Switzerland is no exception to these trends (Porlezza 2024). The Swiss media landscape is characterized by four elements: First, Switzerland is a small state, and as such bears a limited market, unlike its large neighboring countries like Germany, France, and Italy. In addition, multilingualism causes a further fragmentation of the Swiss media market in language regional markets, making it difficult to operate at the national level. Second, the small and fragmented market limits the availability of advertising and human resources. Third, Switzerland being in the heart of Europe, is characterized by a strong foreign media influence, which is also due to the fact that the language regions and the respective large neighbors speak the same language. Fourth, there is the so-called next-door-giants phenomenon (Künzler 2013): large neighboring countries not only influence the media market with their products, but the influence also occurs at the regulatory as well as the editorial level. Not only have political decisions taken in neighboring countries or in supranational institutions such as the European Union consequences for Switzerland, but the same countries or institutions are also often object of political coverage. Consequently, and due to the critical economic situation of many Swiss news outlets, the media market is increasingly concentrated and saturated. On top of that, the Swiss media market is also characterized by a growing disaffection, news deprivation (Eisenegger and Vogler 2022) and increasing distrust towards journalists and news media. In recent years, trust in news has fluctuated and has now fallen to 41% in 2024 compared to 50% in 2016 (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). In this difficult context, AI adds further complexity to the ongoing transformation processes, not only because there is growing public concern over the use of AI in daily life (Tyson and Kikuchi 2023), but also regarding journalism. In the last years, the implementation of AI technologies in the selection, creation and distribution of media content has progressed at a rapid pace. Nationally, a large proportion of (larger) news agencies, publishers, media houses and broadcasters are already working with AI applications, because there is considerable potential to cut costs and/or produce significantly greater output (Goldhammer, Dieterich, and Prien 2019). However, audience members prefer human-made over (partially) machine-made content, considering AI to be detrimental to news quality (Vogler et al. 2023). The skepticism among people is also confirmed by a recent report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Arguedas 2024):

Our survey data show that, across all countries, only a minority currently feels comfortable using news made by humans with the help of AI (36%), and an even smaller proportion is comfortable using news made mostly by AI with human oversight (19%).

Moreover, the institutionalization of AI in news work poses ethical challenges (Porlezza and Ferri 2022) that news media only slowly address, mainly through self-regulatory means such as guidelines or codes of ethics that generally lack the power to enforce violations (Becker, Simon, and Crum 2025). Consequently, journalism’s authority, intended as journalists’ (self-)declared role as legitimized experts in the field, is increasingly called into question (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021; Edy, Snidow, and Rozzell 2016; Larson 2015). As Larson (2015, 442) points out in his literature review, journalistic authority “is supposedly fading fast in the face of participatory media”. The fact that news organizations avoided looking into ethical issues early on may have contributed to this potential

erosion, even more so as journalists perceive tensions between the industry and the journalistic profession when it comes to the opportunities and pitfalls of AI (Moran and Shaikh 2022) and its responsible use. Defining, however, what responsible use of AI specifically means, is a complex endeavor and requires, as Helberger et al. (2022) point out, a normative approach. First, it means that the media needs to be aware that it is “responsible for determining *how* it uses AI” (Helberger et al. 2022, 1607). Second, both Sax (2022) as well as Lin and Lewis (2022) show that the way towards a more responsible use of AI technology consists in the identification of relevant values on which the use of the technology should be grounded. However, relevant means that these values can differ according to the specific organizational and editorial requirements—but also according to the specific use case of an AI application. On top of that, some values may conflict with each other, for instance when it comes to principles such as transparency and source protection. Once relevant values have been identified, they need to be put into a larger framework of ethical guidelines and a governance system that defines how the responsible use of AI looks like. This “involves developing a concrete idea of what responsible means, but also a better understanding of the conditions under which professional users are prepared and capable of assuming agency and responsibility for the responsible use of journalistic AI” (Helberger et al. 2022, 1615).

Overall, this paper explores, therefore, the perception of AI among journalists in Switzerland, what kind of values they deem relevant to ensure a responsible use, and what they think a responsible use of AI in journalism should look like and on what values a responsible use is grounded to maintain journalistic authority.

## Literature Review

### *AI Narratives and Public Perception*

The growing datafication and algorithmization of society entail significant transformations in media and journalism as well (Loosen 2018; Porlezza 2018), contributing to the “transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices” (Deuze and Witschge 2018, 166). In this era of radical technological disruption (Pavlik 2021), artificial intelligence (AI) plays a crucial role (Túñez-López, Fieiras-Ceide, and Vaz-Álvarez 2021), since it increasingly permeates newsrooms, influencing various aspects of the news-making process from news gathering to dissemination (Cools, van Gorp, and Opgenhaffen 2022; de-Lima-Santos and Ceron 2021).

AI is a multifaceted term that encompasses both a domain of inquiry and a set of technological advancements (Gunkel 2020). Despite its widespread utilization in contemporary society (Epstein et al. 2018), there is no universally agreed-upon definition. This contributes to the complexities in news coverage and perception because it is influenced by different factors such as marketing, politics, and public imagination. AI narratives range from their potential for solving societal challenges to imminent danger (Roe and Perkins 2023). This contrast is also determined by often oversimplified imaginaries from popular culture, such as movies and television, which affect public perception and complicate nuanced news coverage (Brennen, Howard, and Nielsen 2022; Natale and Ballatore 2020; Richter, Katzenbach, and Schäfer 2023). Consequently, journalists’ discourses

shape the public perceptions of AI and automation (Brennen, Howard, and Nielsen 2022) and may inadvertently reinforce familiar narratives and tropes when reporting on AI (Cools, Van Gorp, and Opgenhaffen 2024).

Despite critical discourses on its societal impact are becoming more frequent (Nguyen and Hekman 2024), general media coverage tends to portray AI positively (Brennen, Howard, and Nielsen 2018; Cools, van Gorp, and Opgenhaffen 2022), often based on industry sources that uncritically accept claims about the technology's current and future capabilities, thereby fueling the hype cycle (Nielsen 2024); This is also the case for Swiss media who covered AI with a mix of sensationalist fascination and fear (Barassi et al. 2022). Furthermore, research has shown similarities in national AI strategy papers portraying AI as an inevitable and disrupting technological innovation by building on rhetorical devices such as a grand legacy and international competition (Bareis and Katzenbach 2022). However, when it comes to the public perception about the application of AI in news media and journalism, the empirical findings are somewhat ambiguous. While some studies point to critical views about the use of AI in news media both at the European level (Arguedas 2024) and the Swiss level (Vogler et al. 2023), others show that people have mixed feelings about "the use of AI in news writing and dissemination and while they fully understand its benefits, there is a consensus that the widespread use of automated news will lead to yet more misinformation and confusion amongst the public" (Marinescu et al. 2022, 307). Some studies also show that people have positive feelings about AI, for instance in the case of news broadcast by AI simulated anchors (Sun, Hu, and Wu 2022).

In the case of journalists' perceptions of the impact of AI on their work, studies indicate that there are ongoing cultural conflicts between narratives of technological progress and technologically induced concerns over a further rationalization of the profession (Simon 2024). This tension between the visions of the (big tech) industry and the journalism profession becomes increasingly emergent, in particular when it comes to dependencies on tech companies, their infrastructures, and products (Beckett and Yaseen 2023; EBU 2024). Overall, with the growing pervasiveness of AI and the emergence of generative AI, the potentially "negative impacts of generative AI on media quality as well as economic impacts dominated" for different media and journalism stakeholders (Kieslich, Diakopoulos, and Helberger 2024, 20).

### ***Journalistic Authority***

As early as 2014, Carlson (2014) pointed out that tensions would arise regarding the potential impact of AI technology on journalism's authority as an institution worth of being listened to. According to the author, these tensions concern "issues of the future of journalistic labor, the rigid conformity of news compositional forms, and the normative foundation of journalistic authority" (Carlson 2014, 416). Carlson points out that authority refers to the way journalistic knowledge production is socially and culturally accepted, in the sense that journalists need a specific "epistemic authority", which Carlson then defines through Gieryn (1999, p. 1) as "the legitimate power to define, describe, and explain bounded domains of reality". The definition also shows that journalism's authority cannot be determined by practitioners only, but it rests with the audience's decision of whether and to what extent to ascribe it.

In his later works, Carlson (2017) further elaborated on the idea that journalistic authority can be understood as a social construction of the right to be listened to, a notion derived from relations among a fluctuating set of actors, which allows the news to be believed and legitimated, and thus it enables journalism to exist. Similarly, following the ideas of Starr (1984), Anderson (2008, 250) describes authority as a “cultural form of power, that is, (...) a form of domination considered largely legitimate by those who both exercise and are subject to it”. In their discussion of the notion of authority, both Anderson and Carlson refer to Zelizer’s (1992) seminal work. In her book *Covering the Body: the Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, Zelizer (1992, 1–2) investigated the question of how journalists “established themselves as the story’s authoritative spokespersons” when reporting about John F. Kennedy’s assassination. She analyzed what underpins journalism authority, which she defined as “the ability of journalists to promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of ‘real life’ events” (8). The way journalists can demonstrate their authority and legitimacy is mainly through the discursive construction of their expertise, but also, as Anderson highlights (2008, 255), through other forms of power not grounded in narrative, such as sociotechnical systems being used for editorial purposes. However, journalistic professionalism is not the only central element that determines epistemic authority, technology such as AI applications do so as well (Waisbord 2013). For instance, Swiss audience members are skeptical about the use of AI in news production because of the concern “that an increasing use of AI in news production would result in an increased proliferation of misinformation in reporting” (Vogler et al. 2023, 6). Both the presence as well as the use of emergent technologies such as AI application in the entire news cycle do have the potential to negatively impact journalism’s authority. Hence, Møller, Skovsgaard, and de Vreese (2024, 1) state that journalism “to uphold its professional authority in the future, it needs to brace for the impact of artificial intelligence”.

In other words: AI technology is changing both the role of the human communicator and of human-machine communication (Guzman 2018). Consequently, journalists might no longer remain—and be perceived—as authoritative for producing news, particularly concerning journalism’s social and democratic function (Lin and Lewis 2022). The first research question is therefore:

RQ1. What is the perception among journalists regarding AI’s impact on the authority of journalism in Switzerland?

### **Responsible Use of AI**

Ethical issues related to AI technology are complex and manifold, not only because the increasing institutionalization of AI and machine learning in journalism has led to a “retooling of the news” (Simon 2024, 5). In addition, ethical issues have not been a primary concern of news organizations in the early stages of AI technology adoption in newsrooms (Porlezza and Ferri 2022). However, since the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, ethical concerns have developed from a peripheral concern to a central task in journalism (de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds 2024). For instance, the LSE’s latest JournalismAI report highlighted that “ethical concerns are central to the debate about AI in all industries and journalism is no exception” (Beckett and Yaseen 2023, 39). Recent research within global news media contexts reflects this shift, with studies by Becker, Simon, and



Crum (2025) and Cools and Diakopoulos (2023) analyzing AI guidelines and showing a significant increase in the number of specific codes of ethics concerning the use of AI in news work.

However, applying ethical principles to AI in journalism poses significant challenges. For instance, a concept such as transparency is complex to implement across various AI applications such as content generation, fact-checking, or news recommendation. The extent to which AI use should be disclosed, especially when used as an aid, remains unclear (Ananny and Crawford 2018). In this regard, Newman argues that “interestingly, transparency is important, but the public does not want AI labels everywhere, only when it is materially important” (EBU 2024, 115). On top of that, institutions of media self-regulation like press councils often lack specific AI regulations (Porlezza and Eberwein 2022), also because the opacity of AI algorithms limits understanding and scrutiny of decision-making processes, hindering accountability (Diakopoulos and Koliska 2016). Additionally, the enigmatic nature of AI systems raises concerns about bias and discrimination (Möller et al. 2018). The second research question focuses therefore on the responsible use of AI in newsrooms:

RQ2. What can be done to ensure a responsible use of AI in Swiss newsrooms?

## Method

This paper presents the findings from an exploratory focus group that lasted 100 min, conducted in October 2023 with five participants from Italian-speaking Switzerland. The collected material was complemented with 11 semi-structured interviews of an average of 40 min conducted between May and June 2024 with 2 interviewees from the German- and 9 interviewees from French-speaking Switzerland. Interviews allowed for deeper explorations of areas identified in the focus group. We recruited participants who had different positions in different news outlets (print, radio, TV, digital-only) both in private news organizations and from the public service media (PSM) (see Table 1). Interviews and the focus group conducted by the authors in the interviewees’ respective languages, included 13 journalists, an editor-in-chief and 2 directors of media groups. The interviews and focus group centered around the overarching question of journalism’s relevance in the context of an increasing algorithmization and automation of the media as well as on the use and perception of the integration of AI in the news production. Questions explored interviewees’ perception of journalism’s authority, the challenges it currently faces, and the impact of AI on their work as well as interviewees’ perception on how to assure an ethical use of AI in news-making.

There are three main reasons why to look at Swiss journalists: first, the audience’s trust in news media overall is comparatively high (Udris and Eisenegger 2024). In addition, the audience’s perception regarding the quality of news production is also (still) comparatively high (Medienqualität Schweiz 2024), while the use of AI in the news media is seen critically (Vogler et al. 2023). Overall, both the high trust in the media as well as

**Table 1.** Number of respondents by type of media.

	Print	Radio	TV	Web	Media group
<b>Private</b>	4	2		1	3
<b>PSM</b>		3	2	1	

the existence of empirical data on the audience's perception of AI in journalism make it an interesting and relevant case study.

Before the interviews, participants signed an informed consent form. Both the focus group and the interviews were recorded for analytical purposes. Once we stopped the recording, we debriefed the participants and asked them about their interview experience and their general feelings regarding the topic of AI. Many expressed that it was a timely topic and that they enjoyed discussing it, and no one voiced concerns.

In the second step, the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were transcribed and then manually analyzed by the authors using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013), which is a suitable qualitative method for the (textual) analysis of interviews. First, we read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Then, we did a line-by-line coding to code all the transcriptions. We used research questions as initial pre-set codes that we developed and modified as we worked through the coding process, finding new (sub-)themes relevant to our research. This included rationales for using AI, concerns over its use, or governance strategies adopted by news organizations for the implementation of AI systems. This entailed moving forward and back between transcripts and codes to organize our data in a systematic way. The analysis also looked at the interviewees' views on the impact of AI on the relevance of journalism. These codes allowed to identify meanings that lie more or less "beneath the semantic surface of the data" (Braun and Clarke 2012). Such features are described in the following results section and summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes and sub-themes emerging from the interviews.

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**Challenges to journalism's authority**

- Financial difficulties
- Market concentration
- Alternative voices that overtake journalistic discourse, dis- and misinformation
- Difficulty to reach audiences and to adapt to their perceived expectations

**AI adoption in newsrooms**

- Uses: translations, spelling and grammar checks, interview transcriptions, summaries, social media posts, support to find new ideas (e.g., headlines for news articles)
- Reasons for using AI: efficiency, especially in terms of time savings; having guidelines
- Expectations: AI potentially fosters investigative journalism, but concerns of increased journalistic multitasking

**Maintaining journalists' authority with regards to AI**

- Human oversight central to news making
- Keeping deontological standards
- Contextualizing information, fact-checking
- Being out in the field and able to decode non-verbal communication
- Fostering emotions in storytelling
- Imprinting a personal journalistic style

**Ensuring a responsible use of AI in news-making**

- Human oversight
  - Drafting guidelines and standards; onboarding of experts and journalists in the drafting of guidelines
  - Transparency
  - Critical reflection on AI technology
  - Media and AI literacy and professional training
-

## Results

### *The Paradox of Journalism in the Age of AI (RQ1)*

Respondents highlighted that the proliferation of information sources, driven by the rise of social media platforms, has sparked fierce competition for audience attention. With journalism losing its dominant role as gatekeeper, the public's perception of journalism, its function, and societal role have shifted. In this context, journalists denote a "lack of interest" from audiences in their work and a reluctance to pay for it, coupled with a decline in credibility of journalists and media outlets in Switzerland. A journalist working for a French-speaking radio stated: "I see it everywhere, below the articles from any news outlet, whether it is considered reputable or not. In the comments, people constantly question the words of journalists, regardless of the number of sources or the length of the article" (Journalist 6, private radio). To some extent, journalists think this is due to an insufficient understanding of journalism, including journalists' roles, their routines, as well as their norms and values, e.g., what it means to be "impartial". This incomprehension is also associated with audiences' mistrust of news media and journalists. An editor-in-chief noted: "Unfortunately, there is a growing number of people who believe there is some sort of conspiracy, summed up by the saying: 'They're not telling us the truth'" (Editor-in-chief 1, public TV).

Journalists perceived AI as generating further complexity, making the situation "even more dangerous" (Director 1, media group). AI is described as a driver of disinformation, making verification and fact-checking harder. In this regard, many journalists highlighted a contradiction: at a time when journalism's authority is increasingly challenged, the spread of dis- and misinformation makes journalists' work more essential. Journalists claimed that "paradoxically, facts have lost their importance, and everyone feels entitled to regard their opinions as definitive truths" (Journalist 9, public radio). At the same time, journalists argue that the need for verified information, especially when AI serves as an amplifier for disinformation, could lead to a renewed appreciation for journalistic work:

I have been told that my job will be replaced by AI. I think we should not make the mistake of fearing it. I believe that the human factor will always be important. Journalism will always need journalists (...) Perhaps a re-evaluation of human work and of the figure of the journalist could come out of this. (Journalist 2, public radio)

Journalists view AI primarily as a support to their practice, a means of making the workflow more efficient. AI systems help reduce the time it takes to complete a story. Most of the interviewees use AI for tedious and time-consuming tasks like transcribing interviews, spell-checking, and translations. For other editorial tasks such as writing news flashes, the verification and editing exceed the timesaving. Most journalists rely on systems such as DeepL or ChatGPT, and to a lesser extent, on in-house systems. Several journalists thought that integrating AI in newsrooms could positively impact journalism's authority and relevance in the Swiss society, if the time saved on completing tedious tasks allowed journalists to conduct more investigations and focus on complex data analysis. At the same time, they are skeptical about these possibilities because the implementation depends on corporate policy decisions, ultimately driven by profitability. In other words: time savings would lead to fewer journalists in newsrooms, obliged to multitask even more. As a journalist from a digital-born news outlet put it:

I feel that, as with all other technological advancements, [AI integration] will result in more tasks for us. It will not lead to more journalists in the field or to more investigations. This is especially true in a system where productivity is almost a religion. (Journalist 10, private digital-born news outlet)

In addition, journalists are skeptical about using (generative) AI for content production rather than just for back-end purposes (for instance like automatic tagging or archiving) because audiences may perceive the content negatively and because the risk of errors in synthetically produced content is just too big.

## **The Human Element as an “Insurance Policy” to Safeguard Journalism’s Authority (RQ1)**

The findings reveal a significant antagonism between the interviewees’s ability to “contextualize” editorial content and their perception of AI technology’s capacity to do the same. This is reflected in journalists asserting the need for human oversight of content production by AI, also because journalists have little confidence in AI-generated content, as the inner workings of AI systems are opaque. While they acknowledged that AI is capable of processing large datasets, they pointed out that they are often unaware of the data source, how data were collected, and whether any biases may be hidden in the data. The interviewees also criticized that the tech companies that develop AI systems are not based in Switzerland, with an increased risk of manipulations. Therefore, the use of AI as a source of information is regarded as problematic.

Generally, journalists take a cautious approach to AI, doubting that the machine will be able to produce multifaceted stories, give voice to different people, and explain the context in which a story unfolds. Several journalists pointed out that generating an acceptable story needs too much time in terms of refining prompts using an application such as ChatGPT, in particular, if one also needs to check the results. Journalists consider themselves responsible for the accuracy of the information they publish. When speaking about the need of labeling content (partially) produced by AI a journalist stated: “For me, there’s no need because it’s never going to be an excuse if there’s a mistake in it. If there’s a mistake in it, it’ll be my mistake” (Journalist 5, private newspaper). Critically examining content (i.e., source verification, fact-checking, and personal knowledge and expertise) appears to be a key role of journalism practice in the age of AI. As a journalist of a media group claimed:

As humans, we are not immune to errors, but AI isn’t either, at least for now. I believe that verification, tracing the source of information, and involving the most knowledgeable people on the issues we cover, is the main role that journalists play in relation to AI. (Journalist 3, media group)

Journalists also emphasized their uniquely human capacities to be out in the field, to reach out and meet people, to interpret non-verbal communication, and to understand humor. They point out a specific human sensitivity needed when making news. The ability to rely on and produce emotional storytelling was seen as a unique feature of journalists vis-à-vis AI systems. For example, a radio journalist commented: “I love puns, anything with a lot of imagery, hidden meanings, things that aren’t explicit. My impression is that ChatGPT is not yet capable of doing this” (Journalist 6, private radio). Moreover,

journalists repeatedly bring up these creative skills, which they see as a core feature of their craft. Producing news that draws on emotional experience and reporting it with a personal style—that is, a “human imprint”—could create a connection with the audience. As one journalist articulated:

I’m not a huge fan of [using AI] because I feel we lose some of the charm of what makes our job special (...). Our listeners like feeling that there are emotions in our headlines, and our news briefs, even if there are negative emotions. For example, if we make a mistake live on air because we’ve written our brief badly. I have the impression that this also shows people that we’re human ... and that there’s just a radio between us and them. (Journalist 4, private radio)

Journalists also perceive AI’s output to be less interesting compared to human content. A media group director noted when comparing human- and machine-produced content:

The first (human-made article) was full of emphasis and very inaccurate. The second was absolutely dry in the description of the event, but very precise. I prefer the emphasis, the color much more (...) I think the machine cannot replace what humans do. (Director 2, media group)

One journalist mentioned discussions among colleagues about the idea that the “human-made” label would be a distinguishing criterion between Swiss news organizations that increasingly rely on automated content to cut costs, and those committed to man-made journalism. Interviewees mention that such a position could serve as a marketing instrument and further underline the value of emotions and the specific capacity human journalists bring to their craft. Findings show that journalists’ ability to contextualize editorial content—selecting and verifying information based on journalistic criteria and producing emotional storytelling—is regarded as a key role of journalists to legitimize their work. This ability serves therefore as an “insurance policy” for the human contribution to safeguard journalism’s authority in society.

## Avoiding the Headless Chicken Syndrome: Four Approaches to a Responsible AI Use in Newsrooms (RQ2)

In an age where technology continuously evolves, journalists are increasingly tasked with balancing the benefits of AI with the need to preserve their authority and credibility and prevent further erosion of the audience’s trust in journalism. Four main approaches through which to ensure a responsible integration of AI technology into journalism practice were identified.

First, journalists claimed that it would be beneficial to **establish common standards** in their own news organizations regulating the use of AI thereby putting all collaborators on an equal basis. Except for one, none of the Swiss news organizations where the interviewees worked at the time of the study had issued guidelines related to AI. Guidelines were considered useful in deciding what AI systems would be of better use for specific tasks, what kind of systems and uses are allowed, and to be aware of the potential risks. Interestingly, the limited adoption of AI in newsrooms was sometimes seen as a cause, sometimes because of the lack of guidelines. In any case, interviewees perceive a governance vacuum about the use and implementation of AI in newsrooms. Moreover, even though the Swiss Press Council has recently released guidelines on the use of AI applications in

newsrooms, no interviewee mentioned them. When confronted with these guidelines, the reactions to the professional guidelines on the use of AI were overall critical due to their generality.

They also believed that there should be an early onboarding process of journalists and experts in the drafting of guidelines, which should constantly be updated:

It would be good if these were rules that everyone could discuss. On the one hand, even if it's a top-down procedure, journalists, who will have to use these tools, could give their opinion. On the other hand—perhaps I'm living in an ideal world—they should also be able to discuss it with scholars, to find out what's being done, because we have the inside view, but we don't necessarily have a more global perspective (...). It would also be good if they weren't carved in stone because things are evolving so fast that we can't have guidelines in 2024 and then say in 2030 that we're still following the same ones. (Journalist 4, private radio)

Where they exist, the drafting of guidelines was described as a necessary process driven by the awareness of AI's transformative potential and the risks associated with its use. As a senior manager mentioned:

Last year I had to issue an internal circular banning the use of ChatGPT by journalists noting that the results given by ChatGPT were not 100% reliable. (...) In the last five, six years AI is the technology that scares me the most. I think you must be really conscious about using it. (Director 1, media group)

The scenario of chaotic and uncoordinated adoption of the technology also drove the setting of boundaries regarding the use of AI, in an approach aiming to balance innovation with responsibility:

There was also the risk that it would go off in all directions and that everyone would do a bit of nonsense; we used to refer to it as headless chicken. This was something we absolutely had to avoid. As a public service medium, and with all our responsibilities, we quickly came to the conclusion that we had to define a framework indicating what we should and should not do, at least for the time being (...) The idea was to remind people of our ethical foundations and link them to artificial intelligence, and to say: 'We're moving forward cautiously'. (Journalist 9, public radio)

Second, journalists believed that **transparency** regarding the use of AI in newsmaking could help reinforce audiences' trust and understanding of their work. Transparency, in this context, refers to indicating when content is produced with significant help of AI. However, they also considered the current uses of AI—such as transcriptions, translations, assistance with headlines—as internal editorial tasks under their supervision and validation that do not warrant explicit labeling at this stage. In any case, the definition of what constitutes significant use of AI remains elusive.

This is also linked to a third point raised by journalists, which is the idea that they are to **use the technology critically**. As a journalist stated:

I don't think it's right to say: 'My God! We've got to tell the people we've used artificial intelligence'. It's up to us to be responsible, to use it responsibly, that is, in the back office, like a computer program. That is not part of our industrial secret, but part of our in-house arrangements. (Journalist 5, private newspaper)

Journalists stressed the need to reflect on how to integrate AI into their practice. They underlined the importance of being critical about AI, ensuring that benefits are harnessed

while potential drawbacks are mitigated. As a journalist for a private media group said: “What’s important now is for the media to stop for a moment and think about the potential use and risk of artificial intelligence for the profession. This also means to avoid being eaten up by AI” (Journalist 3, media group).

Finally, journalists mentioned **media and AI literacy and training** to reinforce the responsible use of AI in newsrooms. This not only means equipping journalists with the necessary technical knowledge and skills to use AI effectively and responsibly for their practice, but also raising awareness about the ethical challenges AI poses to journalism. Such training could be delivered by experts like journalism scholars, focusing on specific use cases. As a journalist mentioned: “It’s always good to go through concrete cases, because sometimes the guidelines are theoretical and it’s not always clear how to apply them in all the situations they cover” (Journalist 3, media group). Overall, journalists perceive a declining journalism authority, which is why they also believe that educating audiences on journalistic news production could foster trust in the news media and journalism. Highlighting the need for a pedagogical approach to their work, one journalist observed the importance of media literacy, stating, “I think about media literacy: explaining our job, how we work, opening our doors to the public, for example” (Journalist 10, private digital-born news outlet). According to the interviewees, shedding light on sourcing and verifying information would eventually help demystify journalistic practices and offer orientation to audiences in terms of AI integration in newsrooms.

## Discussion

The adoption of AI in Swiss newsrooms is complex and presents both opportunities and challenges. Consistent with existing literature, AI is recognized for its potential to significantly enhance workflow efficiency by automating repetitive or time-consuming tasks, such as transcribing interviews (Beckett 2019a; Beckett and Yaseen 2023). Consequently, AI is predominantly utilized to streamline routine operations rather than to produce news content, with journalists maintaining a central role. AI is therefore primarily viewed as an assistive tool rather than a replacement for journalists (Graßl, Schützeneder, and Meier 2022). Moreover, human journalists play a critical role in the operation of generative AI systems, as the outputs generated by these systems require thorough review and contextualization to ensure high-quality news content. This necessity for human oversight dispels the notion that AI can replace journalists and reinforces the perceived authority of journalists as essential gatekeepers in the news production process.

While AI is generally perceived as a tool of assistance for journalists’ daily tasks, it is also recognized for its potential to radically transform journalism. However, AI is not yet viewed as a substitute for journalists. Instead, it is seen as a means to free up time for journalists, allowing them to focus more on verification and investigative work. In an information-saturated public arena, the role of journalism is to provide accurate, accessible, diverse, relevant, and timely news to inform citizens and help them understand current events (Nielsen 2017). AI can support this role by saving time for more thorough and precise reporting and, therefore, enhance accuracy, accessibility, diversity, relevance, and timeliness (Lin and Lewis 2022). This, in turn, can strengthen journalistic authority by bolstering its legitimacy and expertise. Despite these potential benefits, journalists remain skeptical because AI implementation decisions are made by senior management,

who control organizational strategy and working conditions. Statements like that of Mathias Doepfner, CEO of German publisher Axel Springer, suggesting that journalists could be replaced by AI, exacerbate concerns about job security and layoffs. The future use of AI by news media organizations remains uncertain, with economic profit being a significant driving factor (Beckett 2019a).

At the same time, journalists are aware of its disruptive potential, leading them to value AI as a technology that needs to be “kept under control” both by human oversight and a governance approach. Like any technological innovation, the integration of new systems in newsrooms may change workflows and even the nature of journalism (Lewis, Guzman, and Schmidt 2019), to which media professionals resist and seek to adapt (Witschge et al. 2016) in a negotiation between maintaining journalistic deontology and embracing technological advancements. In this context, journalists emphasize the importance of self-regulatory measures like guidelines regarding the use of AI. According to the interviewed journalists, guidelines are a central means in order to ensure a responsible use of AI. However, some journalists see guidelines as a “*conditio sine qua non*” for the introduction of AI technology, due to their concerns about the potentially dysfunctional impact both on news production but especially also on the perception of the editorial output by the audience. Other instead would like to have guidelines because they have already started to use the technology. Once again, this shows the extent to which a responsible use depends on the specific organizational view and the actual use cases. Along with guidelines, transparency (in terms of labeling content primarily produced by AI) and human oversight of the content generated by the machine, appear as key measures to govern AI and foster media accountability in an age where journalism faces increasing menaces, demands for justification and legitimization.

This is in line with the main points addressed by existing AI guidelines in Switzerland (Porlezza, Amigo, and Pranteddu 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Also on a global level, Becker, Simon, and Crum (2025) as well as Cools and Diakopoulos (2023) show that guidelines underscore the critical role of human supervision in overseeing AI adoption in news work. They point out the importance of transparency in reference to labeling AI-generated content and responsibility regarding the accuracy and fairness of content. Overall, being transparent about the use of AI in newsrooms could help manage expectations and show good faith. At the same time, simply knowing that AI is being used could impact journalism’s trust and authority: “This tension means that news organizations will want to think carefully about when disclosure is necessary and how to communicate it” (Arguedas 2024).

It remains therefore crucial to understand how guidelines and specific norms such as transparency are realized and enforced. Stating for instance that AI assisted news production does not offer any meaningful insights into the news-making process. Transparency often appears to remain a symbolic resource rather than a normative standard, in what Allen (2008) describes as “an instrumental value enlisted to protect institutional legitimacy and stave off criticism” (324). The vagueness of many AI guidelines, and the lack of information about how they are enforced also raises the risk of *ethicswashing*, where ethics itself is used “as a smokescreen to embellish corporate AI ethics” and to enhance consumer trust, minimizing the focus on mitigating AI-related risks or addressing environmental concerns (Schultz, Conti, and Seele 2024). Additionally, *ethicswashing* may serve as a strategy to preempt further regulation of the news industry, particularly as



institutions like the European Union, the Council of Europe, and national governments are intensifying AI governance (Porlezza 2023).

As AI becomes more prevalent in newsrooms, interviewees perceive increasing pressure on journalism's authority. However, this authority may be (re)established by rethinking journalism's professional identity. This involves reinforcing the normative foundations and practices of the profession that enhance credibility through journalists' abilities to verify, fact-check, and provide orientation, while countering the spread of misinformation, to which AI is also seen to contribute (Vogler et al. 2023). Additionally, journalism's authority seems to depend on journalists' emotional capacity, which influences news gathering and storytelling. Emotions become therefore a strategic asset, providing journalists with an advantage over AI by emphasizing a distinctly human attribute. This can be seen as an answer to Lindén's call "to think harder at defining their core human capabilities such as developing emotional and social intelligence, curiosity, authenticity, humility, empathy and the ability to become better listeners, collaborators and learners" (2017, 71).

As such, AI might well contribute to the further growth of emotional storytelling (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), confirming therefore the importance of emotion in the context of evolving digital technologies, which have contributed to audiences' more personal engagement with news (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti 2021). However, emotions have rarely been claimed as a crucial characteristic vis-à-vis objectivity, impartiality, or detachment—which have often been claimed as fundamental principles in Western journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti 2021). Reclaiming emotional capacity and creative agency in crafting news to some extent contradicts Western normative principles, which tend to conceal emotions from the audience in the name of impartial and objective quality journalism. The challenge then seems to strike a balance between emotions and more traditional journalistic criteria. As Beckett (2019b) suggested "Authenticity is as important as authority: we want accuracy but unless it is grounded in experience it is just data".

## Conclusion

This article examines the challenges posed by the adoption of AI-based technologies in Swiss newsrooms and their implications for journalism's authority. The findings indicate that while the authority of journalism is perceived as threatened by the use of AI, the disruptive potential of AI is (still) considered limited. Respondents suggest that the risk of AI's dysfunctional impact can be mitigated through regulation, ensuring the responsible use of AI while upholding journalistic values of accuracy, pluralism, impartiality, fairness, and transparency. Furthermore, journalists emphasize emotional agency as a distinctive human capability that differentiates them from machines, enabling them to reconstruct their authority amidst the pervasive use of AI in the news cycle. However, the implications of increased emotionalization in journalism remain uncertain: will it make journalism more diverse, inclusive, and relevant, or will it contribute to the further platformization of journalism, where the loudest voices dominate? Additionally, the impact on the dissemination of "boring but important information" (Orgeret 2020, 295) is unclear.

Future research could explore the relationship between increased automation in news work and the promotion of the human element in newsmaking. It should also consider

the role and necessity of AI literacy both within and outside news organizations, enabling critical evaluation of AI systems and recognition of their potential and pitfalls. This includes journalists' ability to conduct risk evaluations and advocate for mitigation strategies, not only regarding AI use but also in its design, to ensure that AI supports and enhances journalism's contribution to democracy.

As with all research, this study has its limitations. First, although we reached interview saturation, the number of interviewees was relatively low. A broader range of perspectives could provide more comprehensive insights into the impact of AI on journalism's authority, in particular when it comes to the different language regions in Switzerland. Second, the use of both focus groups and individual interviews, while beneficial for gathering diverse viewpoints, might introduce variability in responses. This mixed-method approach could potentially influence the consistency of the results, as the group dynamics in focus discussions may differ significantly from the setting in individual interviews. Moreover, the rapidly evolving nature of AI technology presents another limitation. Journalists' perceptions of AI are likely to change as the technology advances and its applications in newsrooms expand. This temporal factor means that some findings might become less relevant over time, necessitating ongoing research to keep pace with technological developments.

## Note

1. The discussion about AI guidelines has recently moved from the organizational to the professional level, too. In March 2024, the Swiss Press Council published (short) guidelines relating to the use of AI. See: [https://presserat.ch/journalistenkodex/ki\\_leitfaden/](https://presserat.ch/journalistenkodex/ki_leitfaden/) (in German).

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