

Gen AI means more reputation risk

Tony Burgess-Webb

Generative AI, the latest and most accessible iteration of AI technologies, is not only accelerating the process of mainstream media disintermediation but also amplifying the impact of synthetic media content. For corporate communications professionals tasked with managing brand reputation and narratives, this presents a formidable challenge.

After a breakthrough year in 2023, AI is now everywhere. Politicians and police, Governments and Big Tech, consumer groups and conspiracy theorists are all going nuts about the new tech mega-celebrity in town. And, depending on who you talk to, it's either the key to a no-work paradise or an extinction event for humankind – or a bit of both - and no one's quite sure when either might arrive.

But for communications professionals, AI - and specifically generative AI - is right here, right now and it poses big issues for how we manage corporate reputation.

Too early to tell?

In the 1970s, then Chinese leader Zhou Enlai was asked, now that nearly two hundred years had passed, what he thought about the impact of the 1789 French Revolution and famously replied: "It's too early to tell". At the time, this did much to improve the Western image of Chinese Communist wit and long-term world view.



Zhou Enlai, Chinese statesman and diplomat

But in truth it begged the question because there were many obvious and early consequences: witness Madame Guillotine and both Napoleon's wars and his Code.

So too with all the broader societal revolutions, from 'Agrarian' to 'Industrial' to 'Information': each has had its evangelists and its doubters – as well as both early and longer-term winners and losers. And each revolution has enabled the next and accelerated its reach and speed of impact.



The AI revolution

What makes *this* revolution fundamentally different is while previous revolutions have sought to enhance manual or intellectual human productivity, the logical conclusion of this one is to replace humans entirely.

Since the invention of the modern computer, 'artificial general intelligence' (AGI) has been a perennial topic of academic and then increasingly practical endeavour. Some commentators believe we are already there. Others claim we are less than a year away - most say the meteor may not hit for years to come. But the immediate impact of AI is not about replacing *being* human, rather about being autonomously better than humans at specific tasks. This will certainly mean disruption and job loss, especially to 'knowledge workers', including PR people.

Gen AI is the gamechanger

There can be few communications professionals who haven't been all over generative AI in the last year. Whether your preference is for ChatGPT or Claude or Mixtral 8X7B or Dall.E or AI.N.Other, I'm sure, like me, you're impressed. And after fun experiments with generating limericks for friends and cool images for your PowerPoints you've probably been thinking a good deal about what it means for your job and the role of communications in your organisation. You're not alone.

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
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187     <div style={styles.footerSubText} data-cs={1} data-kind="parent" style={{width: 40%; margin-bottom: 10px 0 0 0}}>
188       <p style={styles.footerSubText} data-cs={1} data-kind="parent" style={{margin: 0 0 0 0}}>© 2024 All rights reserved.
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Fake news?

This has become a household phrase but what does it really mean? Clearly it *can* mean straightforward political lies. Or maybe just a different point of view on a social media thread. Or a photo-shopped Royal family pic? Perhaps also now deliberate and skilful misinformation or disinformation, sometimes from criminals and sometimes from state actors.

A recent report from EU crime agency Europol¹ looked at the impact of deepfakes on policework, the legal system and elections. It also references business.



Businesses are also at risk of being targets of disinformation... For example, a threat actor could create a deepfake that makes it appear that a company's executive engaged in a controversial or illegal act. Certain deepfakes could be used for false advertising and disinformation, which could lead to bad publicity for a targeted company. Such applications of deepfakes could impact areas like stock market and company value as the public ... may believe the deepfake and start selling their stocks or boycotting the company.



Synthetic media content

A good 2023² article by USA cyber-security firm Silent Quadrant points out:

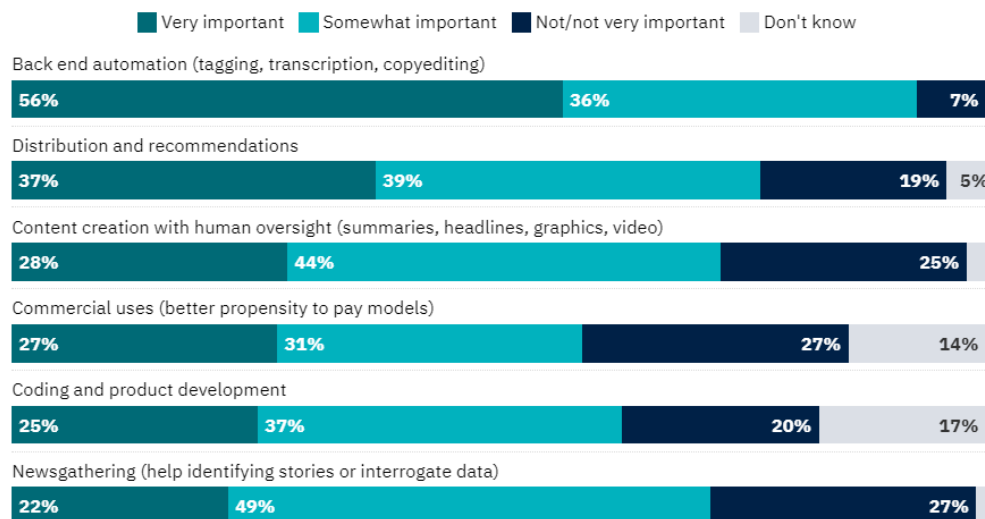
‘... AI-generated content has created a landscape where the line between reality and fabrication is becoming increasingly blurred.’

Our trusted media are all over it. An excellent and detailed report from Nic Newman at the Reuters Institute of Journalism³ based on a recent survey shows that newsrooms have been coming to terms with the implications of advances in AI – and generative AI in particular. They are using AI for back-end automation tasks such as transcription and copyediting, for content creation, and for newsgathering as well as fact-checking and verification.

So where does content creation fit in? More than 70% of the Reuters Institute survey’s respondents said it would be *Very Important* or *Somewhat Important* in 2024. Already Le Monde uses AI to translate articles. Other publications reported using tools like Midjourney to generate graphics. A German tabloid has created a ‘virtual journalist’ called Klara Indernach (or KI, for *Künstliche Intelligenz*) who already writes more than 5% of its stories. Radio stations in Slovakia and the UK use synthetic voice to cover out-of-hours news bulletins. In March 2024, the BBC used AI to ‘voice’ an actor in a documentary. Meanwhile NewsGPT offers ‘news without human biases’ via BOTH synthetic voice and video presenters. Synthetic has become simulated – is that real news or is that fake news?

AI uses which will be key for news publishers in 2024

Back end automation and content creation are now much more important than two years ago. Data from a survey of 314 media leaders in 56 countries for ‘Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions 2024’.



To what extent will the following uses of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative AI be important to your company in 2024? Base: 296. Source: [Reuters Institute](#).



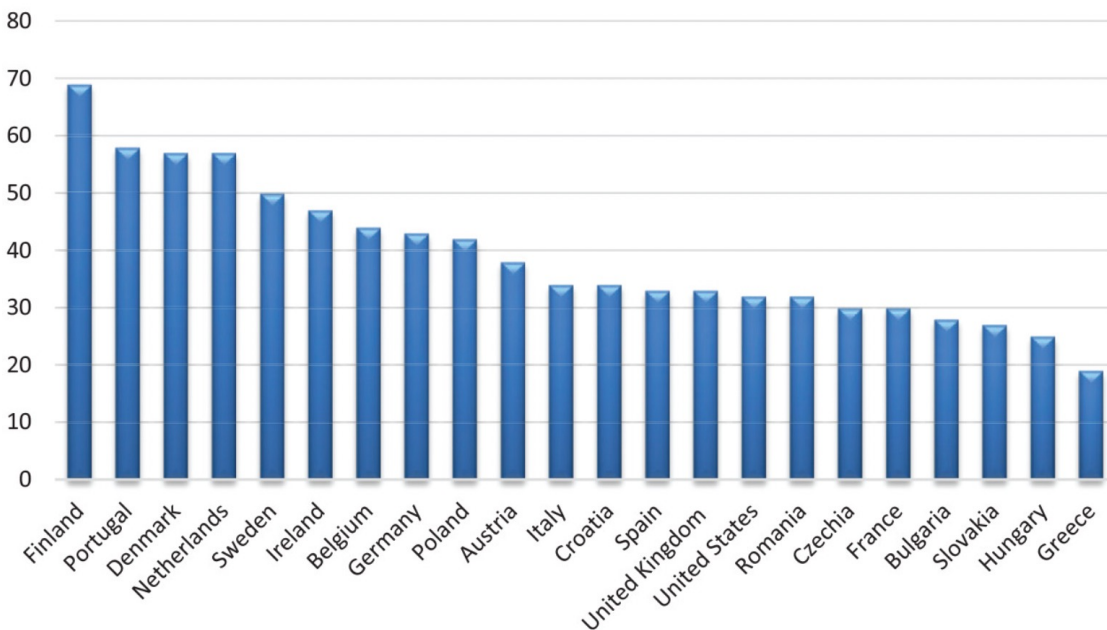
Trust in MSM

The decline of mainstream media (MSM) whether print or online will also accelerate the decline in trust, already low outside mainly Nordic countries⁴.

MSM are more likely to employ dedicated fact checkers or have rules about multiple sources for stories. While other media may call out untruths after the fact they do not stop the misinformation from circulating in the first place. And, as the article points out:



In a time where information can be distributed almost instantaneously, the mad dash to be first can result in errors, exaggerations, and outright lies making their way into the media ecosystem.



Percentage of adults who trust news media most of the time in selected countries worldwide (February 2023).
Source: [Statista \(2023\)](#).



Perfect PR storm

For corporate communicators it's a double whammy right now. The economics of online, the impact of social platforms and now AI mean a cratering of trusted mainstream media - the bedrock of effective media relations. At the same time, generative AI means a proliferation of new global content sources - unaccountable, unregulated, in many cases unknown and, increasingly, inhuman.

Generative AI is thus both amplifying and accelerating the collapse of verified, trusted media and its replacement with synthetic content.

Meanwhile, the nature of sharing and engagement algos on social media platforms mean negative content often spreads more rapidly – because negative information tends to capture more attention and attention is commercially valuable.

And what starts local can reach a global audience quickly, magnifying the potential consequences for transnational brands.

The management of reputation risk (aka issues management) is therefore certain to become increasingly difficult and controlling the brand narrative more challenging.





Positive actions

‘Risk targeted’ media analysis may help in a number of ways.

1 Planning

Learning from previous business event impacts can help with mitigation planning for all types of business risk event. For example, analysis of share price movements connected with these events can provide a measure of impact while frequency can provide a guide to likelihood of a specific event occurring. Much (but not all) of this analysis will be sector focused.

2 Early Warning

The reality for many companies - especially those in primary industries or with a large geographic footprint - is that reputationally adverse events are simply a fact of life. What matters is how they are handled operationally and how well corporate communications performs. Early warning, even a day or two, can make a huge difference, allowing busy executives to clear their desks and focus on both mitigation and communications.

3 Support for C-Suite functions

Risk event focused media analysis can also allow the communications department to provide valuable support for other C-Suite functions. Examples include:

- for Sales, competitor risk analysis
- for Finance, share impact prediction
- for Operations, supplier risk assessment

What the full impact of AI will be on corporate communications in the coming years is anybody’s guess. But what is certain is that, right now, inaction is not a neutral policy.

About the author

Tony Burgess-Webb is a co-founder and non-executive director of media analytics firm Commetric. He was previously global CMO of communications consultancy Hill & Knowlton.



References

- 1 https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol_Innovation_Lab_Facing_Reality_Law_Enforcement_And_The_Challenge_Of_Deepfakes.pdf
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17816858231204738>
- 2 <https://silentquadrant.com/thought-leadership/the-coming-storm-how-synthetic-media-threatens-democracy>
- 3 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2024>
- 4 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17816858231204738>

Useful reading/viewing

1. <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/intelligence/global-ai/>
2. <https://journalistsresource.org/media/covering-america-journalism-professor-christopher-daly/>
3. <https://medium.com/lantern-theater-company-searchlight/the-ones-that-are-left-the-decline-of-traditional-media-b1758b595948>
4. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2024-02-20-romanes-lecture-godfather-ai-speaks-about-risks-artificial-intelligence>

The logo consists of a white circle on the left, partially overlapping a white square on the right. The circle and square are positioned such that they appear to be part of a larger, unified shape.

Commetric