



GUIDELINES FOR MEDIA ORGANISATIONS USING GENERATIVE AI



TABLE OF CONTENTS

• Overview	-----	1
• Core Principles	-----	2
• Links to existing Journalistic Principles	-----	2
• Transparency	-----	2
• Human oversight	-----	3
• Allowed and prohibited uses	-----	3
• Privacy and confidentiality	-----	3
• Algorithmic bias	-----	3
• Cooperation and dependency	-----	4
• Enforcement		
• Media diversity	-----	4
• Tailoring to fit different organisations	-----	4
	-----	5
• Open questions	-----	6

OVERVIEW

Generative artificial intelligence systems are being used in newsrooms across the world, augmenting all stages of the news production cycle – newsgathering, news production, and news distribution. (1)

In response, major media organisations and associations have been publishing statements to explain both their general approach to generative AI, and the specific principles that will guide their usage of the technology.

Examples include:

- [Associated Press](#) – ‘Standards around generative AI’
- [Thomson Reuters](#) – ‘Data and AI ethics principles’
- [BBC](#) – ‘Generative AI at the BBC’
- [Financial Times](#) – ‘Letter from the editor on generative AI and the FT’ (paywalled)
- [The Guardian](#) – ‘The Guardian’s approach to generative AI’
- [The South African Press Council](#) – ‘A brief for journalists on Artificial Intelligence’

Academics and other researchers have begun identifying common themes from these statements of principles, which – although drawing primarily from examples in the Global North – offer useful insight for South African media organisations.(23) It emerges from this research that:



*Publishers across national media systems and organisational categories respond to the rise of AI in **broadly similar ways**. However, there are indications that **national idiosyncrasies and organisational categories continue to matter** as important moderating factors. **Funding models**, in particular, seem to lead to different priorities, with commercial publishers often more detailed and with a stronger focus on allowed and prohibited uses as well as data protection.(4)*

1. See for example Charlie Beckett and Mira Yaseen 'Generating change: a global survey of what news organisations are doing with AI' (2023) *Polis Journalism at LSE* (accessible [here](#)).

2. NiemanLab, 'Writing guidelines for the role of AI in your newsroom? Here are some, er, guidelines for that' (2023) (accessible [here](#)).

3. Oxford Internet Institute, 'Policies in Parallel? A Comparative Study of Journalistic AI Policies in 52 Global News Organisations' (2023) (accessible [here](#)).

4. Id. at page 3.

The best statements of principle will be tailored to the media organisations that employ them. Journalism typically relies on self-regulation to define the appropriate bounds of the field. This often takes the form of both non-governmental and/or self-regulatory press councils that issue broad guidelines, and more specific guidelines developed by publishers themselves. In the present case, both forms of self-regulation are appropriate.

Accordingly, this document outlines the core principles that media organisations and press associations in South Africa should address in drafting their own statements of principles and provides further guidance on how media organisations can tailor these principles to their specific needs. It closes by considering some open questions on the function of these guidelines for the future.

CORE PRINCIPLES

1 LINKS TO EXISTING JOURNALISTIC PRINCIPLES

It is common for media organisations to link AI-specific guidelines to any pre-existing principles or codes of ethical conduct which they may have. Such codes often emphasise the importance of trustworthiness and accuracy, among other values core to ethical journalism. Linking AI guidelines to broader statements of ethics is good practice; showing that they are continuous with the fundamental values of journalism.

2 TRANSPARENCY

Almost all existing guidelines emphasise the importance of transparency on the part of media organisations in how they make use of AI. However, many are vague on exactly how this transparency should be communicated – for example, whether a single statement noting that the organisation makes use of AI is sufficient, or whether it is necessary to disclose in each article or piece of content how and which AI has been used. In the interest of fostering public trust, this latter practice of disclosing as much detail on the use of AI across the journalistic process is advisable – including where AI is used to generate or narrate content.

3 HUMAN OVERSIGHT

Most guidelines also reference the need for human oversight where AI systems are used. This is indeed vital for maintaining accuracy and public trust. Different organisations should specify exactly who within them is responsible for overseeing the different AI systems being used.

4 ALLOWED AND PROHIBITED USES

Several guidelines explicitly flag in which instances they will and will not use AI systems. This level of detail is valuable – where the boundaries of acceptable use lie ought to be determined by individual organisations, in line with their broader values and cultures.

5 PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

It is often recognised that, in using AI systems, organisations must be careful with providing sensitive information to third-party platforms that operate AI systems, in order to ensure that sources are adequately protected.

6 ALGORITHMIC BIAS

Given the well-established challenges of AI systems reproducing biases latent in their data sets, and the fact that the most advanced of these AI systems are currently being developed by companies in the Global North, many guidelines single out the importance of taking specific steps to guard against algorithmic bias in AI-generated content. This can be thought of as a subset of the broader need for human oversight of these systems. As part of efforts to counter algorithmic bias, consideration should be given to training or making use of AI systems that have been fine-tuned on local contexts, and which can parse local languages.

7 TRAINING AND LITERACY

To make the most of this technology, and to understand how to use it responsibly, it is useful for media organisations to explicitly plan for how they can educate their workforce on how to best make use of AI systems in the course of their work. They should also consider how best to help their audiences understand and engage with AI systems.

8 COOPERATION AND DEPENDENCY

There is a need for both internal collaboration (collaboration within a media organisation, across its various departments) and external collaboration (collaboration with media organisations and other organisations such as tech companies, governments, and research institutes) to ensure that AI systems are used ethically in the production of journalistic content. Indeed, most media organisations that make use of AI systems have not developed them in-house, and so are implicitly collaborating with external parties by making use of their systems. The terms of such collaborations ought to be clarified for the public. Further, given that reliance on third party systems can create dependence on those systems, plans should be made for how such dependencies will be managed. Where there is capacity, organisations should also explore how they might develop or customise systems over which they can have more control.

9 ENFORCEMENT

Very few existing guidelines discuss their own enforceability. Bearing in mind that some organisations have crafted more fine-grained versions of their AI use policies for internal reference, which are not publicly available, it is an open question whether mechanisms of enforcement or oversight of the implementation of AI guidelines should be disclosed. But when crafting broad principles, thought ought to be given to what actions may follow from their violation, such as being sanctioned by the relevant media association or press council.

10 MEDIA DIVERSITY

Finally, the question of how media diversity will be fostered – or at least not actively undermined – while AI tools are being used must be considered, particularly in the South African context. Media organisations ought to be mindful of their audience, and of retaining their distinct editorial voices, to avoid the risk that using AI tools will homogenise their outputs.

TAILORING TO FIT DIFFERENT ORGANISATIONS

It emerges from the above that while there is consensus on the broad principles of relevance to regulating the use of AI by media organisations, many specific details ought to be determined by individual organisations, as they see fit.

These include:

- **The appropriate level and form of transparency in disclosing the use of AI.**
- **The institutional structures that embed human oversight over AI systems.**
- **The form that training and literacy programs might take.**
- **An organisation's approach to managing the collaborations and dependencies attendant to making use of AI technology.**
- **The mechanisms by which any set of guidelines will be enforced.**

To address these specifics, media organisations should establish a diverse group of relevant stakeholders – both across the organisation and involving readership and other actors, to the extent appropriate. They should also take a personalised approach, asking which risks from AI are most relevant to the particular context in which they operate.

In the best case, AI guidelines can be a meaningful form of AI regulation, supporting the flourishing of a healthy public discourse in the era of AI, rather than just acting as PR statements masquerading as serious policy.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Many of the existing guidelines are narrowly concerned with regulating the use of AI in the generation of content. But as systems improve, they may be able to automate and appropriate more and more of the process of journalism – for example, one can imagine a fully automated journalist, that can reach out to a source, have a virtual audio conversation with them, and then write up the results. This is speculation – but as AI technology becomes more capable, it will present both new opportunities and new challenges. **It is therefore recommended that media organisations form advisory groups comprising experts and other relevant stakeholders to advise the media either collectively or individually on emerging threats, developments, and opportunities.**

It is vital that media organisations do not view the adoption of AI guidelines as a ‘one-and-done’ exercise. Given the pace of change in this field, continuous revision and evaluation of existing guidelines and policies will be essential to ensuring that media organisations are able to maintain their credibility, and accuracy while keeping pace with technological innovation.

