

WSIS panel—The Future of News Media: AI, Revenue Models, and Democracy

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Remarks by Noah Giansiracusa

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this timely topic. I believe it helps to break the impact of AI on the news ecosystem into a few categories.

First, creation of news content.

Generative AI, through text generation and image generation (and soon to be video generation as well) allows anyone to quickly produce news-like content, whether truthful or misinformative. This raises an obvious concern that bad actors, motivated either by political interests or financial ones, could use generative AI to produce mis- or disinformation. Generative AI threatens to massively increase the scale and quality of such content while decreasing the cost of producing it.

On the positive side, generative AI can help journalists produce their news content more quickly and cheaply. Importantly, the technology, for now, is incapable of conducting genuine journalism—AI systems are not investigating stories, contacting sources, following leads, etc. But once information is gathered, generative AI tools can expedite the production process of turning this information into consumable news content. This could be particularly relevant and helpful for newsrooms with declining budgets that no longer have the staff to perform the important work they used to. But even here danger lurks: as many newsrooms adopt generative AI tools to increase efficiency and decrease costs, there will be economic pressure on other newsrooms to do so too—even though these tools have significant flaws, notably so-called hallucinations. I worry that media outlets across the industry, particularly ones owned by hedge funds and venture capitalists, will use AI to lower costs of production even while doing so lowers the quality—and factuality—of their product.

Second, dissemination of news content.

A large percentage of people consume their news primarily through social media. For over a decade, social media platforms have been using AI to power their algorithms, particularly the feeds on platforms like Facebook and Twitter and the up-next and for-you videos on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, so AI is not particularly new in that setting. But traditional news outlets are likely to soon experiment with personalization of news content powered by generative AI. This could potentially make news more appealing to some individuals who don't currently consume much news, but it could also bring many of the well-known problems from social media into traditional news settings, problems like filter bubbles. Imagine if you and your next-door neighbor go to BBC's homepage and see completely different headlines and even different presentations of the same stories.

Third, fact-checking.

I do not believe AI is presently capable of fully-automated fact-checking, nor do I expect this to be possible in the foreseeable future. But AI is already helping to expedite the labor of human

fact-checkers, for instance by identifying small variations of a single claim to reduce the number of claims that need to be checked. It should also be noted that search engines like Google use AI to attempt to elevate quality sources in search rankings—reducing the amount of misinformation that rises to the top of searches. There will be a continued arms-race in which the search engines gain more powerful AI methods for doing this, while bad actors gain more powerful AI methods for gaming these search rankings.

Fourth, the economics of the media landscape.

I have already noted that newsrooms will likely feel financial pressure to adopt flawed AI tools in order to keep up with the competition, but the economic impact of AI on the journalism industry runs deeper than this. Many news outlets are funded by digital advertising, which means to get money they need to get clicks and views on their articles. Generative AI threatens to significantly reduce the amount of web traffic news sites receive as people increasingly interact with chatbots to get information and as search engines like Google use AI to provide summaries of news articles rather than driving users to click through to the actual articles. The extent of the financial harm this causes the news industry will largely depend on the legal and business negotiations that transpire between tech companies and news outlets as society unravels the legality and economics of training data—namely, what counts as fair use and how should AI companies pay content creators for the data they use to train their AI systems.