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Between Bits and News: Portuguese Journalists' Uses and Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into journalism is reshaping professional routines while raising ethical, organisational, and normative challenges. Despite the growing presence of AI tools in newsrooms, empirical knowledge of how journalists perceive and negotiate their use remains limited, particularly in specific national contexts such as Portugal. This study explores how Portuguese journalists use and perceive AI in their professional practice, examining motivations for adoption, perceived benefits and risks, and the negotiation between human judgment and AI-generated content. Drawing on uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and the communicative AI paradigm, the study adopts a qualitative method based on semi-structured online interviews with 19 journalists from diverse media sectors, roles, age groups, and career stages. Data were analysed using framework analysis. Findings indicate that journalists primarily frame AI as a technical support tool that enhances efficiency and facilitates routine tasks such as transcription, translation, and information processing. At the same time, strong concerns emerge regarding transparency, algorithmic bias, professional autonomy, credibility, and editorial responsibility. Although AI is widely perceived as inevitable, its legitimacy is seen as dependent on ethical frameworks, organisational regulation, and sustained human oversight. The study contributes to research on AI and journalism by integrating motivational and normative perspectives, highlighting how instrumental uses of AI coexist with deeper reconfigurations of professional authority and journalistic values. It further recommends the development of ethical guidelines, transparency mechanisms, organisational policies, and targeted training to support responsible and informed AI adoption in journalism.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; communicative AI; journalism; perceptions; Portugal

1. Introduction

Journalism has long evolved alongside technological change. Artificial intelligence (AI) currently represents one of the most transformative developments, reshaping news production, distribution, and consumption (Broussard et al., 2019; Pavlik, 2023). Beyond its instrumental dimension, AI embeds values and operational logics that intersect with journalism's normative foundations. In this article, AI is understood as computational systems capable of performing tasks associated with human cognitive and communicative functions (Broussard et al., 2019; Guzman & Lewis, 2020). Empirically, the focus lies primarily on generative AI systems, particularly large language models currently integrated into journalistic routines.

Since the automation of sports reporting by the Associated Press in 2013 (Noain-Sánchez, 2022), AI adoption in newsrooms has expanded significantly. The rise of generative systems such as ChatGPT in 2022 intensified debates regarding authorship, credibility, and professional authority (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024). In Portugal, a notable case was the April 2023 edition of *Jornal I*, reportedly produced entirely using ChatGPT (Ascensão, 2023), highlighting the symbolic and practical implications of communicative AI.

This study examines how Portuguese journalists use and perceive AI in their professional routines. Based on 19 semi-structured online interviews with journalists of diverse roles, ages, and career stages, the research analyses motivations, perceived benefits and risks, and the negotiation between human judgment and AI-generated content.

UGT was selected to account for journalists' active and purposive adoption of AI technologies in professional contexts. Originating in audience research, the theory conceptualises media use as goal-oriented and motivated by the satisfaction of specific needs (Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 2010). Over time, this framework has been successfully extended to professional and organisational media practices, particularly to analyse how journalists appropriate digital tools under conditions of time pressure, economic constraint, and increasing productivity demands (Domingo et al., 2015; Ruggiero, 2000; Westlund & Lewis, 2014).

In the context of AI, UGT provides a robust lens to explain why journalists adopt automated systems not out of technological enthusiasm but as pragmatic responses to everyday professional needs such as speed, efficiency, task simplification, and workload management. This perspective is particularly relevant given empirical evidence showing that AI in newsrooms is predominantly used for routine and technical tasks, including transcription, translation, data processing, and information management (Caswell, 2023; Pavlik, 2023; Sun et al., 2022). By foregrounding journalists' agency, the framework allows this study to analyse AI adoption as a selective and situational process shaped by perceived gratifications rather than by technological determinism. It therefore directly informs the analysis of journalists' reported uses and motivations, as addressed in RQ1.

However, while UGT is effective in explaining *why* AI is adopted, it is insufficient to capture the broader communicative, ethical, and normative transformations introduced by AI in journalism. For this reason, this study also draws on the communicative AI paradigm (Baptista & Belim, 2024; Guzman & Lewis, 2020), which conceptualises AI not merely as a neutral tool but as a communicative agent whose outputs acquire meaning within social and professional contexts. This paradigm builds on research in human–machine

communication which shows that AI systems increasingly participate in processes of mediation, authorship, and meaning-making (Nass & Moon, 2000; Sundar, 2020).

Applied to journalism, the communicative AI paradigm is particularly pertinent because it foregrounds questions of authority, responsibility, transparency, and ethical accountability—core normative pillars of the profession (Broussard et al., 2019; Carlson, 2015; Diakopoulos, 2019). As AI systems contribute to content generation, framing, and distribution, they challenge established boundaries between human judgment and automated decision-making, raising concerns about credibility, bias, and professional autonomy (Amigo & Porlezza, 2025; Forja-Pena et al., 2024; Henestrosa et al., 2023). This framework, therefore, underpins the analysis of journalists' perceptions of risks, ethical implications, and the negotiation of human–machine roles, as addressed in RQ2 and RQ3.

The combination of these two theoretical lenses is analytically productive and conceptually coherent. UGT captures the instrumental and motivational dimensions of AI adoption, while the communicative AI paradigm addresses its symbolic, ethical, and normative consequences. Together, they allow this study to analyse AI-assisted journalism as both a set of practical routines and a deeper process of professional reconfiguration.

2. Journalism and AI: Reconfiguring the Field of Study

The integration of AI in journalism must be understood within broader structural transformations linking media systems and computational technologies. Broussard et al. (2019, p. 679) define AI as "a new medium through which journalists can express and exercise their ethical and normative values through the code they implement," highlighting that technological systems embed values and operational logics that shape professional practice. Therefore, AI exceeds a purely instrumental function and directly intersects with journalism's normative foundations.

Diakopoulos (2019) argues that journalism remains fundamentally human, suggesting that AI's future lies less in substitution and more in hybridisation. Rather than eliminating journalists, automation reshapes roles and demands new competencies, reinforcing human–machine collaboration as a central analytical issue. This transformation unfolds within a broader digital environment characterised by algorithmic mediation, platformisation, and alternative information flows which challenge established business models and professional boundaries (Broussard et al., 2019).

Empirical research shows that AI-based tools already support automated content production, large-scale data analysis, and audience personalisation (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2024; Almakaty, 2024; Dinçer, 2024; Husnain et al., 2024; Kumar, 2024; Salgado, 2022). These developments affect multiple dimensions of journalistic activity, including content creation, audience engagement, and newsroom organisation. However, such integration simultaneously raises concerns aligned with this structural reconfiguration.

A first major risk concerns the amplification of disinformation when AI systems are deployed without adequate oversight (Ademola & Somorin, 2024; Almakaty, 2024; Túñez-López et al., 2021). A second relates to job displacement and increasing dependence on algorithmic systems for narrative construction, which may weaken critical judgment and editorial autonomy (Moran & Shaikh, 2022; Ndlovu, 2024). A third

involves the reproduction of pre-existing biases embedded in training data, potentially distorting news coverage and reinforcing inequalities (Atkinson & Barker, 2023; Túñez-López et al., 2021). These risks underscore that AI integration is not technologically neutral but normatively consequential.

The reconfiguration of journalism extends beyond professional routines to educational structures. The growing presence of AI requires curricular adaptation, including the development of competencies in data journalism and algorithmic literacy (Dinçer, 2024; Hossain & Wenger, 2024). In emerging contexts, emphasis has been placed on preparing students to engage critically and responsibly with AI systems (Iyinolakan, 2023). Ensuring that future journalists combine traditional ethical foundations with digital expertise becomes essential in an evolving media ecosystem.

3. Uses of AI in Journalism

AI systems are currently integrated into multiple domains of journalistic practice, including automated news writing, image generation, transcription, machine translation, fact-checking, audience analytics, and content distribution (Caswell, 2023; Sun et al., 2022). These applications position AI primarily as operational and logistical support within newsroom routines.

One of the most visible developments is robot journalism. Systems based on natural language processing are capable of autonomously producing routine content, particularly in areas such as sports reporting, financial updates, and breaking news alerts (Kim & Kim, 2020). Research indicates that such automation can enhance productivity and allow journalists to allocate more time to investigative and analytical tasks (Heim & Chan-Olmsted, 2023; Zhang & Lin, 2023).

Beyond content generation, AI plays an expanding role in audience-oriented functions. Algorithms analyse user behaviour and preferences to enable content personalisation and recommendation strategies, supporting engagement and retention in highly competitive information environments (Heim & Chan-Olmsted, 2023; Zhang & Lin, 2023). At the same time, AI-driven systems are increasingly used to process large datasets, identify patterns, and assist in editorial decision-making (Caswell, 2023; Sun et al., 2022).

AI is also being deployed in the detection of disinformation and misleading content. Through machine learning techniques, systems can identify patterns of language use, framing, and source credibility, signalling potential risks associated with false or manipulated information (Kim et al., 2024; Nanabala et al., 2024). In contexts characterised by accelerated news cycles and resource constraints, such tools are considered particularly valuable for maintaining workflow efficiency (Pavlik, 2023).

However, the expansion of AI applications is not normatively neutral. A systematic review of 358 academic articles published between 2015 and 2020 identified automated news writing and fact-checking as the most frequently studied areas, reflecting persistent concerns regarding authenticity, reliability, and professional accountability (Parratt-Fernández et al., 2021). More broadly, journalistic production, distribution, and consumption have been profoundly influenced by the integration of AI across different stages of the communication process (Biswal & Gouda, 2020).

4. Perceptions, Gratifications, and Risks of AI Use in Journalism

The literature points to an ambivalent perception of AI among journalists and scholars. For Túñez-López et al. (2021), who interviewed representatives of technology companies and researchers, the adoption of AI can facilitate the creation of audio and video content, enhance interaction with audiences, and support the distribution of media products. This positive view resonates with part of the profession which sees AI as a tool to increase efficiency and expand audience engagement.

Several recent studies confirm this perception that AI adds value to journalistic work, especially in the automation of routine tasks and the analysis of large datasets. As highlighted by Sultan et al. (2024) and Gbaden et al. (2024), by taking on repetitive operations such as data analysis or the generation of basic content, AI frees journalists to invest more time in investigative reporting and in-depth storytelling. Furthermore, by identifying trends and relevant facts that might otherwise go unnoticed, the technology can contribute to raising the quality of journalistic coverage. These advantages explain why many professionals regard AI as a resource that enhances efficiency and creativity, enabling them to build stronger news narratives (e.g., Ademola & Somorin, 2024; Dinçer, 2024).

On the other hand, clear concerns persist regarding the integration of AI in journalism. Pavlik (2023) warns that the benefits can only be realised if its use is conceived as a collaborative effort between humans and machines. Otherwise, technology may become a threat to journalistic work, especially when instrumentalised by financial efficiency pressures that justify cuts in human resources. Other authors highlight ethical concerns linked to algorithmic bias, which may generate distorted representations of reality or reinforce preexisting prejudices (Ademola & Somorin, 2024). There are also fears that the hasty adoption of AI systems may compromise core journalistic values such as accuracy, transparency, and accountability, reducing human scrutiny over news production processes and eroding public trust in the media (Forja-Pena et al., 2024; Henestrosa et al., 2023).

Aissani et al. (2023) confirm that many newsrooms have already adopted AI tools but highlight serious risks such as the proliferation of false news (deepfakes), job displacement, and insufficient transparency of processes. These findings reinforce the centrality of ethics and regulation, aspects that emerge not only in academic research but also in the discourse of journalists themselves who associate the value of journalism with its credibility and with clarity about the methods employed.

It is also important to note that perceptions of AI in journalism are not homogeneous. As Yiğitcanlar et al. (2022) show, journalists with higher technological literacy tend to adopt a more favourable view, while those less familiar with these innovations express greater scepticism. Dinçer (2024) adds that this discrepancy underscores the need to invest in continuous training and algorithmic literacy to ensure that professionals can take advantage of the potential of AI without abandoning fundamental ethical principles.

Based on the reviewed literature and the adopted theoretical framework, this study examines how AI is integrated into journalistic practice through a set of interrelated analytical dimensions. These include the uses and gratifications associated with AI adoption in professional routines, journalists' perceptions of the benefits, risks, and ethical concerns related to AI, and their assessments of the quality of AI-generated content. These dimensions are articulated in the following research questions:

RQ1: (a) How do Portuguese journalists use AI in their professional routines?; and (b) what motivations are associated with these uses?

RQ2: How do Portuguese journalists perceive the gratifications, risks, and ethical implications of AI in journalism, particularly in relation to content quality, credibility, and professional responsibility?

RQ3: How do journalists negotiate the relationship between human judgment and AI-generated content in journalistic practice?

5. Method

A qualitative method was adopted, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This technique allowed for an in-depth exploration of perceptions (Bryman, 2016) and uses associated with the integration of AI in journalism. The interviews were conducted online in two phases: the first in October 2023 ($n = 7$) and the second in June 2025 ($n = 12$). The online format was chosen to overcome geographical and time constraints (Bryman, 2016).

The interview guide was designed to be completed, on average, within 60 to 90 minutes and was structured around three main analytical axes: the concrete uses of AI in journalistic routines and motivations associated; journalists' perceptions of the gratifications, risks, and ethical implications associated with AI; and the relationship between human judgment and AI-generated content in journalistic practice. Although the analysis focused on specific thematic axes, these were not treated as isolated sections during data collection. Instead, they were integrated into a comprehensive interview guide (see Table S1 in the Supplementary File) that also covered journalists' conceptual definitions of AI, broader professional concerns, and forward-looking reflections such as recommendations for the future of journalism. This approach allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives, avoiding the premature stabilisation or reification of analytical categories during the interview process.

The substance of the guide was informed by UGT (e.g., Domingo et al., 2015; Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000; Westlund & Lewis, 2014) which helps explain professional motivations related to efficiency, task simplification, and productivity, and by the communicative AI paradigm which conceptualises AI systems as communicative agents whose outputs acquire meaning through human interpretation and professional judgment (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). While these theoretical perspectives informed the research design, data analysis followed a primarily inductive logic, allowing themes to emerge from the empirical material before being interpreted through these lenses.

Participant recruitment followed a convenience and snowball sampling strategy, initiated through professional and academic networks and expanded via referrals. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new insights relevant to the study's aims (Bryman, 2016). In total, 19 journalists were interviewed, working across different areas of the profession.

The panel included 11 women and eight men (Table 1), representing a wide range of age groups, educational backgrounds, professional roles, and career stages, from early-career journalists to senior professionals with

more than four decades of experience. This heterogeneity strengthened the analytical depth of the study by enabling the comparison of perspectives across different professional trajectories and levels of experience.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, ensuring the full preservation of participants' wording, expressions, and meanings. Data were analysed using framework analysis, combining systematic coding with the construction of analytical matrices to identify patterns across cases (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). To ensure qualitative rigour, partial double-coding was conducted, discrepancies were resolved through peer verification, and reflexivity was maintained through systematic documentation of analytical decisions. The study complied with established ethical standards for qualitative research involving adult participants. All interviewees provided informed consent prior to participation. The participation was voluntary and full anonymisation procedures were applied to protect confidentiality. No sensitive personal data were collected. In accordance with widely accepted ethical guidelines for social research, formal ethical approval is not required for non-invasive qualitative studies of this nature (The British Psychological Society, 2021).

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the panel of interviewees.

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Educational background	Years of career	Position
1	Male	65 or more	Bachelor's degree	42	Journalist
2	Male	45–54	Doctorate/PhD	32	Editorial director
3	Female	45–54	Undergraduate degree	24	Journalist and editor
4	Female	45–54	Technical course	30	Journalist
5	Female	25–34	Undergraduate degree	6	Journalist
6	Female	55–64	Undergraduate degree	38	Journalist
7	Male	65 or more	Master's degree	49	Photojournalist and professor of communication sciences
8	Female	45–54	Undergraduate degree	30	Editor
9	Female	55–64	Master's degree	33	Journalist
10	Male	25–34	Undergraduate degree	5	Journalist
11	Male	55–64	Secondary education/high school	37	Director
12	Female	45–54	Undergraduate degree	20	Journalist
13	Female	25–34	Master's degree	9	Deputy editor
14	Female	25–34	Master's degree	7	Journalist
15	Female	25–34	Undergraduate degree	5	Journalist
16	Male	25–34	Master's degree	10	Journalist
17	Male	25–34	Undergraduate degree	6	Journalist
18	Male	25–34	Undergraduate degree	8	Deputy editor
19	Female	25–34	Undergraduate degree	7	Journalist

All interview data were organised in a spreadsheet hosted on Google Drive to support systematic management and traceability of the material. Data analysis was conducted using the framework analysis technique, which is particularly suited to qualitative studies combining theoretical guidance with inductive exploration (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The analytical process followed six stages: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, development of an analytical framework, indexing, charting, and interpretation.

The codebook was developed through a combined deductive–inductive approach. Initial categories were defined deductively, drawing on the study's theoretical framework namely UGT and the communicative AI paradigm. These categories corresponded to the main analytical dimensions of the study, including journalists' uses and motivations, perceived gratifications, risks, and ethical challenges, and perceptions of content quality. The coding scheme (see Table S2 in the Supplementary File) was subsequently refined through inductive analysis, allowing subthemes to emerge directly from the empirical material.

To enhance analytical rigour, two researchers, both members of the author team, independently coded a sub-corpus of interviews in each phase of data collection. In each phase, this sub-corpus represented approximately one-third of the interviews conducted. Coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, ensuring consistency and reliability in the coding process. Themes were identified based on their recurrence, conceptual relevance, and salience across participants with different professional roles and levels of experience. Data analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, understood as the point at which no substantively new analytical insights emerged from additional coding (Bryman, 2016). Data organisation and analysis were carried out using analytical matrices developed in Microsoft Excel without the use of dedicated qualitative analysis software.

Throughout the analytical process, researcher reflexivity was maintained through the systematic recording of analytical decisions and assumptions, complemented by a documented audit trail within the analysis files. All participants had provided informed consent prior to data collection, and the data were fully anonymised to ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of the journalists involved.

6. Findings

The analysis of the interviews provides insights into how journalists view the use of AI and the dominant perceptions regarding its role in professional routines. Almost unanimously, participants considered that professions connected to communication should invest in the use of AI tools, albeit always with rules, caution, and transparency. For many, it is seen as inevitable. As one professional emphasised, "Concerning. Unstoppable. With profound impacts on the profession. AI tools are already present. There are areas of usefulness, such as workflow management or support for repetitive tasks" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). In several responses, the notion emerged that this is not a matter of choice but a necessary adaptation, although conditioned by the preservation of ethical criteria and credibility. As one interviewee stated, "Yes, but with rules. It must be clearly stated when content is produced using AI" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience).

6.1. AI Uses Among Portuguese Journalists

The following findings address RQ1, which examines how Portuguese journalists use AI in their professional routines and the motivations underlying these uses. In practice, most participants reported already using AI tools in their routines. The most frequently mentioned reasons were task simplification, speed of execution, and support for technical or mechanical work. One interviewee summarised: "Because it allows me to analyse more information more quickly" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience). Another, older participant emphasised convenience: "Ease and simplification of work" (male, 65 or older, journalist, 42 years of experience). This pattern confirms that AI adoption is not restricted to younger generations but cuts

across different age groups and levels of experience. A greater use is observed among interviewees whose interviews were conducted more recently compared with earlier interviews in which respondents stated, for example, "I do not yet feel the need and, to be honest, it would cause me some confusion if I were to use it frequently" (female, 25-34, deputy editor, nine years of experience).

The tools mentioned include ChatGPT, automatic translators such as DeepL, specialised search engines, voice transcription tools, subtitling software, and emerging platforms. One interviewee reported using several systems simultaneously: "ChatGPT, claude.ai, turboscribe, canva" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). Another referred to national platforms: "Evaristo [a recent Portuguese platform]; perplexity" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). This diversity shows that AI is conceived not only as a text generator but also as a multipurpose resource for translation, research, transcription, organisation, and information distribution.

Regarding usage types, professionals described varied practices. Some rely mainly on AI for content creation and distribution while others use it for consumption and aggregation. One journalist was straightforward: "Creation and distribution" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). Another emphasised multiplicity: "Consumption, aggregation, transcription, and data aggregation" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). The range of responses shows that AI integrates practically all phases of the journalistic value chain, from information gathering and transcription to publication and content circulation.

6.2. Gratifications, Risks, and Ethical Implications of AI Use Among Portuguese Journalists

When asked about the main gratifications or benefits, speed and time savings stood out. One interviewee explained: "Saving time, ability to focus on more relevant issues" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience). Another highlighted gains in productivity and economic efficiency: "Speed. Cost reduction. Increased workload" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). Others valued the possibility of devoting more attention to the creative dimension of the profession: "More free time to find new angles, look for new stories" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). The discourse suggests that AI is seen as a tool capable of relieving repetitive tasks, freeing resources for investigation and analysis. Concrete cases confirm this instrumental function: "Transcription of interviews" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience) or "facilitating mechanical tasks" (female, 55–64, journalist, 38 years of experience). AI is thus perceived as a logistical and technical resource with a positive impact on operational efficiency.

Among the consequences noted, the increase in production pace was, without doubt, the most consensual aspect. One journalist summarised the "ability to analyse more information in less time" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience), and another reinforced: "Speed" (male, 65 or older, journalist, 42 years of experience). This perception of greater efficiency is widespread, though accompanied by reservations. A more experienced journalist left a warning: "Loss of authority. Abdication of the role of arbiter of journalistic content. Loss of critical mass in newsrooms. Reduction in staff" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). Another expressed similar concerns: "There is a constant danger of disinformation and loss of rigour" (male, 65 or older, photojournalist and professor, 49 years of experience). The ambivalence is evident: AI accelerates and simplifies processes, but at the same time threatens the journalist's professional identity as a credible mediator of reality.

In broader opinions about the presence of AI in communication professions, a field divided between cautious enthusiasm and incisive criticism emerges. Some see potential: "It can be positive if used appropriately" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience). But negative views also appear: "Very dangerous. The risks outweigh the benefits," stated one interviewee (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). Some classified the use of AI as "very risky" (male, 65 or older, journalist, 42 years of experience) and warned that "it is necessary to exercise caution and some restraint" (male, 25–34, journalist in the politics section, 10 years of experience). Despite these hesitations, there seems to be agreement on a key idea: the irreversibility of the process. As one professional declared, "It is impossible to stop it, but it can only be accepted with rules" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). One journalist confided:

> I was slow to start using AI until a colleague told me that I must be the only journalist who does not use AI in my work. I see it as just another complementary tool, which should be used in balance and with moderation, to preserve creativity, originality, and professional integrity. (female, 45–54, journalist, 30 years of experience)

Technology is perceived as inevitable and must be regulated, framed, and supervised.

On the ethical level, perceptions are more fragmented. Several professionals emphasised that legitimacy depends on how the tool is used: "If it is used for technical processes, I do not consider it cheating" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience). Others stressed the importance of certification and transparency: "The system used must be certified and controlled" (male, 65 or older, journalist, 42 years of experience). One journalist noted: "It is necessary to make clear who does what with AI and why" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). However, critical voices also emerged. One interviewee stated that "it is unethical. Cheating is a euphemism" (male, 65 or older, photojournalist and professor, 49 years of experience), expressing distrust toward the use of machines in content production. Ethics is understood as a structural dimension of professional credibility, meaning that the risk lies not only in the outcome but also in the transparency of the process.

6.3. Human Judgment vs. AI-Generated Content in Portuguese Journalistic Practice

Regarding the reading of AI-generated content, most participants reported having had such an experience. Evaluations, however, were heterogeneous. Some responses were optimistic: "Increasingly closer to content produced by humans" (female, 25–34, journalist, seven years of experience). Others revealed scepticism: "Generally excessively lacking character, without emotion" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). One journalist assessed it negatively: "Weak, cliché-ridden, lacking personality" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). Another highlighted the importance of professional curation: "As long as they have curation by a journalist, they are not problematic" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). The picture that emerges is one of recognised technological evolution, but still insufficient to replace human work regarding authenticity, originality, and contextual depth.

The discussion about the so-called "human touch" illustrates this perception. For some, AI-produced content is not necessarily worse: "Currently, no" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience). Another interviewee shared the belief that the difference will eventually disappear: "AI is dynamic; the trend is for it

to get better and better" (male, 65 or older, journalist, 42 years of experience). However, many stressed the absence of key elements. One professional stated that "creativity, emotion, and the personality of the writer are missing" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience), and another summarised: "The human touch is flexibility" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). The human continues to be associated with creativity, emotion, empathy, and the ability to contextualise—characteristics that are still unmatched by artificial systems.

On the inverse question, about the "machine touch" that might be missing from human content, responses pointed mainly to technical and accuracy-related aspects. One journalist mentioned the "reduction of spelling errors" (female, 25–34, journalist, six years of experience) and another highlighted "the exhaustive nature of a search. AI can, in seconds, check thousands of sources" (male, 45–54, editorial director, 32 years of experience). But others rejected the comparison, recalling that information verification is the journalist's duty:

> It is the journalist's duty to be rigorous. Information verification is not something that can be delegated to any machine "touch." The margin of error in news rewritten by AI is considerable, and there are recent studies—one of them from the United Kingdom—demonstrating this. (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience)

For some, complementarity between humans and machines is inevitable: "It is important that humans and machines are complementary, not competitors" (male, 65 or older, photojournalist and professor, 49 years of experience). The view of collaboration, not substitution, emerges as central in several responses.

7. Discussion

The results show that AI is perceived by Portuguese journalists as an unavoidable presence in their professional routines. Based on interviews with Swiss journalists, Amigo and Porlezza (2025) show that while AI is perceived as inevitable, professional authority is still strongly associated with human oversight, ethical responsibility, and emotional agency. This perception of inevitability can be interpreted through UGT, insofar as journalists do not frame AI adoption as technological enthusiasm but rather as a pragmatic response to concrete professional needs such as speed, efficiency, and workload management. The notion of inevitability appears across the board, expressed in the idea that the adoption of these tools is not a matter of choice but a necessary adaptation to maintain the relevance of the profession. This perception confirms the argument of Broussard et al. (2019) according to which AI should be understood as part of a broader structural transformation of journalism, not only as a technology but as a new medium that carries its own values, norms, and logics. Thus, the professionals' discourses reinforce the idea that the integration of AI is not neutral: While it simplifies processes and increases efficiency, it also requires a redefinition of the journalist's role in the media ecosystem. In this sense, the collected testimonies illustrate what Guzman and Lewis (2020) describe as the communicative AI paradigm: Journalists recognise technology not only as an instrumental resource but also as an actor that interferes with the normative balances of the profession and redefines the role of the journalist in the media ecosystem.

The discussion is structured around the three analytical rings identified in the analysis, and these are explicitly interpreted through the two theoretical frameworks guiding the study. UGT helps explain journalists' instrumental adoption of AI in response to concrete professional needs, while the communicative

AI paradigm provides a lens to understand the ethical, normative, and authority-related tensions emerging from AI integration. Together, these frameworks allow the findings to be interpreted not only in terms of what journalists do with AI but also how they negotiate its meaning and legitimacy within journalistic practice. This interpretation is consistent with recent conceptual work arguing that generative AI represents a qualitative shift in journalism, insofar as it intervenes directly in core creative processes and challenges established norms of authorship, originality, and professional identity (Lewis et al., 2025).

The first analytical ring (RQ1), centred on journalists' uses of AI, aligns closely with UGT. The findings show that AI is adopted primarily to satisfy pragmatic needs such as speed, efficiency, task simplification, and workload management, confirming that adoption is purposive and driven by perceived utility rather than technological determinism.

The second (RQ2) and third (RQ3) analytical rings—focused respectively on perceptions of benefits and risks and on the negotiation between human judgment and AI-generated content—are best interpreted through the communicative AI paradigm. Journalists' concerns about transparency, credibility, and professional responsibility indicate that AI is perceived as a communicative agent that intervenes in meaning-making processes and challenges core normative foundations of journalism. At the same time, the clear differentiation between machine-supported tasks and human judgment reflects an active boundary-setting process aimed at preserving professional authority and ethical accountability.

The results also reveal the use of a significant variety of AI tools, including widely known international platforms such as ChatGPT and emerging national solutions such as Evaristo. This variety shows that AI is not perceived merely as a text generator but as a multifunctional resource that supports translation, research, transcription, subtitling, organisation, and information distribution. This finding aligns with Caswell (2023) and Sun et al. (2022), who identify the growing ubiquity of AI across different stages of news production, from data collection to content dissemination. In the Portuguese context, the breadth of uses reveals that newsrooms are pragmatically incorporating technology, exploring diverse solutions to meet specific daily needs. From a uses and gratifications perspective, this multiplicity of uses reinforces the instrumental nature of AI appropriation as journalists selectively adopt different systems according to the specific gratifications they provide in everyday professional routines.

A particularly relevant finding is the generational breadth of adoption. Although the literature points to a correlation between youth and greater technological openness (Yiğitcanlar et al., 2022), in this study both early-career journalists and professionals with decades of experience reported frequent use of AI. The difference lies in how they describe the benefits: Younger participants emphasised speed and the ability to handle large volumes of information, while senior professionals highlighted convenience and task simplification. This evidence suggests that age alone is not decisive for AI acceptance. Instead, practical utility and immediate gains seem to be the more relevant factors for the integration of these tools.

The perception of productivity gains is consensual. Interviewees acknowledged that AI enables faster work rhythms, time savings, and cost reductions, freeing resources for creative and investigative tasks. These accounts reinforce studies such as Sultan et al. (2024) and Pavlik (2023), which highlight AI as a solution to address the time and resource pressures that affect contemporary journalism. Efficiency, however, is not seen in isolation. Many journalists warned of the risk of losing professional authority and of the erosion of the journalist's role as arbiter of truth. This concern echoes the warnings of Túñez-López et al. (2021) and

Forja-Pena et al. (2024), who emphasise the dangers of delegating processes that require critical judgment and human scrutiny to algorithms. These concerns become analytically meaningful when interpreted through the communicative AI paradigm as they reflect journalists' resistance to delegating communicative authority and normative responsibility to artificial systems.

The ethical dimension emerges as a central point in the discussion. Among interviewees, some defended the legitimacy of using AI for technical tasks, provided there is transparency and certification, while others adopted a more critical stance, describing such use as unethical or even as "cheating." The controversy confirms that the acceptance of AI does not depend solely on its utility but also on the normative framework attached to it. Aissani et al. (2023) had already warned about risks such as opacity, the proliferation of fake news, and job displacement. Henestrosa et al. (2023) add that regulation and certification of systems are indispensable conditions for ensuring trust. A large-scale survey of journalists shows that the vast majority perceive AI as significantly increasing the risks of disinformation, particularly through difficulties in detecting false content and deepfakes (Peña-Alonso et al., 2025). The testimonies of Portuguese journalists reflect precisely this tension between the pursuit of efficiency and the need to safeguard fundamental ethical principles such as transparency and accountability. Also, experimental evidence shows that news outlets using AI-generated content tend to be trusted less by audiences, particularly in political journalism contexts (Nanz et al., 2025). These findings suggest that fears regarding declining credibility are not merely professional perceptions but correspond to measurable audience responses, reinforcing the importance of transparency and human accountability in AI-assisted journalism. Within the communicative AI framework, this ethical tension reflects a negotiated understanding of AI as a communicative agent whose outputs require human accountability, transparency, and normative framing to be considered legitimate.

Another particularly relevant aspect is the perception of the quality of AI-produced content. Opinions were divided between those who believe that generated texts are increasingly close to those produced by humans and those who criticise them for lacking emotion, creativity, and originality. Albizu-Rivas et al. (2024) show that journalists involved in long-form and slow journalism perceive AI as having little relevance for core journalistic tasks requiring creativity, moral responsibility, and emotional depth. Furthermore, this heterogeneity confirms the analysis of Atkinson and Barker (2023), who emphasise the difficulties AI faces in reproducing creative and contextual processes. The presence of voices advocating professional curation—that is, the need for human supervision and editing of machine-produced content—reveals a path of reconciliation. As Heim and Chan-Olmsted (2023) argue, audience trust depends precisely on collaborative models where humans and machines share responsibilities in the news production process.

The discussion surrounding the "human touch" and the "machine touch" clearly illustrates this complementarity. For the interviewed journalists, the human contribution continues to be associated with creativity, emotion, empathy, and contextualization. By contrast, AI is attributed with advantages such as speed, exhaustiveness, and the reduction of technical errors. This functional division corresponds to Diakopoulos's (2019) interpretation of AI not as a substitute for human labour but as a partner in a hybridisation model. The perception that humans and machines should be complementary rather than competitors shows that Portuguese journalists view technology as support while maintaining the conviction that certain essential dimensions of the profession remain irreplaceable. While UGT explains why journalists value AI for its speed, exhaustiveness, and technical accuracy, the communicative AI paradigm clarifies why human judgment remains indispensable for interpretation, ethical responsibility, and narrative authority.

Overall, the results of this study align with international literature in confirming the ambivalence of perceptions about AI. The technology is seen simultaneously as an opportunity to increase efficiency and as a risk to journalistic credibility. This duality translates into a pragmatic position: Most professionals admit that AI is inevitable but demand rules, transparency, and ethical frameworks, and the discourse further reveals that AI is not only transforming workflows but also reshaping the professional identity of journalists. As Oh and Jung (2025) suggest, AI is simultaneously perceived as a tool for efficiency gains and as a potential threat to core journalistic values such as autonomy, ethics, and professional identity. Additionally, it is possible to observe that AI operates simultaneously as a source of functional gratification (through speed, simplification, and efficiency) and as an agent of communicative reconfiguration, requiring professional redefinition.

8. Conclusions

The results of this study confirm that AI is already an integral part of journalistic routines, present across multiple stages of the news process from information gathering and processing to editing and dissemination. For most of the interviewed journalists, AI integration is irreversible, reinforcing the urgency of clear regulatory mechanisms.

Although valued for streamlining workflows and freeing time for in-depth investigative work, AI does not replace core dimensions of journalism. As several professionals emphasised, human contribution remains tied to creativity, emotional depth, empathy, and contextualization, qualities AI cannot fully reproduce. The central challenge lies in balancing technical efficiency with the preservation of the "human touch."

The ethical dimension emerges as structural: journalistic credibility depends not only on outcomes but also on transparent processes. As one interviewee noted, "It must be clearly stated when content is produced using AI" (female, 45–54, journalist and editor, 24 years of experience). Ethics is thus understood as constitutive of professional legitimacy.

Human–machine hybridisation thus redefines professional boundaries and compels a rethinking of the journalist's role as mediator of social realities. In a media ecosystem marked by speed, ethical dilemmas become even more pressing: It is essential to ensure that AI does not weaken journalism's fundamental mission of information verification, but rather complements it.

In sum, AI is perceived by Portuguese journalists as inevitable and, in many respects, useful. However, its added value will only be fully realised if it is accompanied by transparency, regulation, and a continuous commitment to the ethical principles that underpin public trust in journalism.

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the size of the panel (19 journalists) does not allow for statistical generalisations, although it does ensure analytical depth and a diversity of perspectives. Second, the methodological choice of semi-structured interviews conducted online limited the possibility of observing practical contexts within newsroom environments. Furthermore, the predominance of journalists with significant professional experience may have biased the results by giving greater weight to more consolidated views and less to emerging perspectives from early-career professionals. Finally, the rapid technological evolution in this field implies that perceptions collected at a given moment may change within a short period of time, requiring longitudinal research to follow this transformation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides relevant contributions to understanding the impact of AI on journalism in Portugal. On a scientific level, it highlights the perception of the irreversibility of AI adoption, confirming that it is already an integral part of daily routines and not merely a trend, while also mapping the coexistence of benefits and risks. Thus, it broadens academic understanding of the field of tensions shaping technological integration. On a practical level, it reinforces the centrality of ethics and transparency, showing that journalistic credibility depends as much on the process as on the outcome, and offers useful guidance for editorial policies, certification mechanisms, and professional curation practices. Finally, on a social level, it situates the Portuguese case within a context of high technological adoption and public policies favourable to digital innovation. It contributes to the international debate and provides comparative insights for future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The interview data generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical restrictions, as they contain information that could compromise participant privacy. Anonymised excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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