

Exploring the Impact of Generative AI on Public Engagement and Information Dynamics

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Abstract

The rapid diffusion of generative AI is transforming the conditions under which public communication and knowledge production take place. As prompt-based systems increasingly operate as communicative actors that generate, translate, and contextualize information, they reconfigure established processes of mediation, the distribution of epistemic authority, and the infrastructures of the public sphere. This editorial situates the thematic issue within communication research on public understanding of science, digital intermediaries, and trust and credibility, and proposes to conceptualize generative AI as a general-purpose technology embedded in evolving knowledge infrastructures. From this perspective, generative AI enables the delegation of core epistemic practices—such as information retrieval, relevance evaluation, and interpretation—to automated systems, thereby reshaping how publics engage with complex and socially consequential knowledge. The contributions to the issue are organized along three analytical dimensions: the socio-cognitive and affective drivers of generative AI use in everyday information practices; the epistemic and cognitive consequences of AI-mediated engagement with complex information; and the transformation of communicative institutions, professional authority, and opinion formation in AI-mediated public discourse. Across diverse theoretical approaches and empirical contexts, the issue advances a multi-level understanding of how generative AI reconfigures relationships between individuals, institutions, and publics. Taken together, the articles position generative AI as a central site for renegotiating expertise, trust, and participation in digital knowledge societies and highlight the need for integrative and comparative research to enable cumulative theorizing about communication under conditions of AI-mediated mediation of complex information.

Keywords

AI; complex information; critical thinking; generative AI; knowledge infrastructures; public engagement

1. Introduction: Generative AI and Public Engagement With Complex Information

Since late 2022, generative AI has rapidly become a prominent feature of contemporary information environments, generating texts, images, code, and other content in response to natural-language prompts (Greussing, Guenther, et al., 2025; Greussing, Jonas, & Taddicken, 2025). This thematic issue focuses on text-based generative AI chatbots as emerging popular alternatives to traditional search engines, that offer users synthesized responses at comparatively low cognitive and technical costs (Kaiser et al., 2025; Zhou & Li, 2026). These systems occupy a distinctive position within public communication, as they simultaneously function as tools and channels for accessing and producing information (Klein-Avraham et al., 2024) and increasingly participate in communication processes themselves by selecting, framing, and generating information in ways that shape how issues are understood (Hepp et al., 2023). In this sense, generative AI can be conceptualized as an active intermediary in public communication, or as a communicative AI (see Guzman & Lewis, 2020), simultaneously being perceived as an interlocutor (see also Weidmüller & Engesser, 2025; Weidmüller et al., 2022).

These developments are particularly significant for public engagement with complex information. Complex information refers to knowledge domains characterized by high levels of uncertainty, abstraction, specialization, and social relevance, such as science, health, politics, or sustainability (Duan et al., 2023; Klein-Avraham, Jonas, et al., 2026; Zhang & Sreepada, 2026). Information complexity affects comprehension and knowledge acquisition with more complex texts placing greater demands on recipients and potentially hindering understanding (Schmitt et al., 2019). Complexity also arises when information requires the integration of diverse, heterogeneous, and sometimes ambiguous knowledge elements and when it involves scientific uncertainty, which is inherent in scientific inquiry and the tentative nature of knowledge (Gustafson & Rice, 2019; Jensen, 2008; Kuhn, 1962). Information complexity is both unavoidable and constitutive of modern knowledge societies, challenging public understanding and participation. However, mitigating information complexity can foster more informed engagement with science-related debates and policy decisions (Kerr et al., 2023; Retzbach & Maier, 2015; van der Bles et al., 2019).

Against this background, generative AI introduces new dynamics into how complex information is accessed, interpreted, and evaluated. By translating, summarizing, and contextualizing information, generative AI may lower barriers to engagement with complex information (Markowitz, 2024). Simultaneously, its opacity, probabilistic nature, and reliance on partially unreliable training data raise concerns regarding accuracy, bias, credibility, and accountability (Shin et al., 2025). These tensions are particularly consequential in democratic contexts where informed publics and trusted knowledge infrastructures are central.

The aim of this thematic issue is to advance understanding of how generative AI affects public engagement with complex information. Specifically, the issue seeks to (a) examine how and why people use generative AI for engaging with complex information, (b) assess the benefits and risks associated with these practices, and (c) explore broader implications for democratic discourse.

2. Recent Developments in Generative AI and Information (Inter)Mediation

The rapid diffusion of generative AI constitutes a central motivation for this thematic issue. Within several months, adoption rates of these systems worldwide skyrocketed, surpassing those of earlier digital technologies. This dramatic rise, accompanied by an expanding proliferation of generative AI applications, signals their swift normalization in everyday information practices (Liu & Wang, 2024; Sidoti & McClain, 2025; Zhou & Li, 2026). Generative AI is increasingly used for information seeking, learning support, content production, and decision-making assistance, and survey data show growing uptake across age groups, particularly among younger users, suggesting that it will become a routine component of future information repertoires (Bick et al., 2026; Nakagomi et al., 2026). Importantly, this normalization is not confined to entertainment or low-stakes uses but increasingly encompasses engagement with socially relevant and complex topics (Greussing, Guenther, et al., 2025).

A defining characteristic of generative AI in this context is its intermediary role between expert knowledge and lay publics as it translates specialized content into more accessible forms (Biyela et al., 2024; Markowitz, 2024). In educational and academic settings, such systems are often valued for their potential to support understanding and productivity (Chan & Lee, 2023). At the same time, generative AI mediates between institutions, such as research organizations, media outlets, or public authorities, and individuals, reshaping how institutional knowledge is accessed and interpreted (Gervacio, 2024; Manthena, 2023; Zhou & Li, 2026).

Generative AI signals a shift from information retrieval to information generation and interpretation, as it produces synthesized responses that blend information from multiple inputs and contextualize it according to perceived user needs in a human-like way (Greussing, Guenther, et al., 2025; Schäfer, 2023). While enhancing accessibility and reducing information overload, this shift also complicates established notions of authorship, source transparency, and credibility or trustworthiness (e.g., Jonas et al., 2025). Users are often presented with fluent and authoritative-sounding outputs without clear indicators of provenance or uncertainty, challenging traditional gatekeeping mechanisms that have historically structured public communication, such as journalistic verification, peer review, or institutional authority (Bartsch et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how generative AI reshapes public engagement with complex information.

3. Status Quo of Research: What We Know—and What We Do Not

Research on generative AI and public engagement with complex information spans several established fields, yet remains fragmented. Long-standing work on public understanding of science and complex information has examined how individuals comprehend and evaluate specialized knowledge, while more recent scholarship on digital intermediaries, algorithms, and platforms highlights how technological systems structure information environments. In parallel, extensive research addresses trust, credibility, misinformation, and bias in digital communication, alongside growing interest in media and information literacy (e.g., Bucchi, 2017; Bucchi & Trench, 2014; Kessler et al., 2025).

Within this broader landscape, research on generative AI has expanded rapidly but unevenly. Existing studies often focus on single systems, most prominently ChatGPT, and are largely situated in Western or Global North contexts. Empirical work frequently examines perceptions or short-term evaluations rather than everyday

usage practices, motivations, and longer-term consequences for information behavior. Theoretically, much research adapts frameworks developed for search engines or social media rather than fully accounting for the distinctive communicative role of generative AI.

Several research gaps remain salient. Empirical evidence on how people integrate generative AI into everyday engagement with complex information remains limited, as are systematic links between generative AI use and information literacy practices. Moreover, despite frequent claims of global relevance, research continues to privilege specific cultural and linguistic contexts. This thematic issue aims to respond to this need by bringing together contributions that illuminate how generative AI reshapes public engagement with complex information across perspectives and settings.

4. Contribution of This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue advances communication studies on generative AI by examining its role in public engagement with complex information. Rather than treating generative AI primarily as a technological innovation, the issue foregrounds its communicative and societal relevance, conceptualizing generative AI as an intermediary that reshapes how individuals, institutions, and publics engage with complex, socially relevant information.

The contributions are organized along three analytically connected dimensions: (a) understanding how and why people use generative AI when engaging with complex information, (b) assessing benefits and risks associated with generative AI use, and (c) exploring implications for democratic discourse.

Across all three dimensions, the thematic issue is characterized by methodological diversity, encompassing online surveys, experiments, qualitative studies, and mixed-methods designs, as well as by theoretical plurality, including uses and gratifications, trust and credibility research, information foraging, and persuasion theory. While not all contributions are explicitly comparative, the issue reflects substantial cultural and national diversity with studies situated in contexts such as the Australia, China, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Portugal, and the United States.

4.1. Understanding How and Why People Use Generative AI

The first set of contributions focuses on the antecedents of generative AI use as an information intermediary. Zhang and Sreepada (2026) highlight the role of affective dimensions as a relatively underexplored area in this regard. Drawing on a national survey in the United States, they show that emotional attachment to generative AI is closely linked to trust, which in turn predicts reliance on generative AI for information seeking across domains. These effects are particularly pronounced among users with lower AI literacy and higher perceived risk, highlighting the importance of affective dynamics for understanding the use of generative AI for information purposes.

Complementing this perspective, Agergaard et al. (2026) analyze public engagement with generative AI in Denmark, a context characterized by high institutional and scientific trust. Using a nationally representative survey and a probabilistic graphical model, they identify trust as a central construct, mediating between individuals' technical understanding of how generative AI functions and their epistemic beliefs regarding the

reliability and truthfulness of its outputs. The findings underscore the multidimensional and context-sensitive nature of trust and literacy in shaping how individuals engage with science-related content in AI-mediated environments.

Klein-Avraham, Jonas, et al. (2026) adopt a comparative perspective to investigate information-seeking practices with generative AI in Germany and Israel. Guided by information foraging theory and based on representative surveys and latent class analyses, the study identifies distinct user profiles and cross-cultural patterns in how perceived benefits, epistemic costs, and user attributes shape engagement with complex and science-related information. The findings point to the selective use of generative AI, mainly among users who perceive high benefits but possess limited epistemic knowledge.

4.2. Assessing Benefits and Risks Associated With Generative AI Use

A second group of contributions critically examines the opportunities and risks associated with the use of generative AI, particularly in relation to epistemic quality, cognitive effort, and authority. FitzGerald et al. (2026) assess how generative AI chatbots respond to conspiratorial questions through a platform policy implementation audit of seven leading AI tools, focusing on the United States' cultural context. Their analysis reveals substantial variation across models and topics, showing that safety guardrails are selectively implemented and unevenly effective, thereby exposing epistemic risks and governance challenges.

Unkelos-Shpigel et al. (2026) turn to educational contexts to examine the cognitive implications of integrating generative AI into design thinking practices. Drawing on two mixed-methods case studies in Israel, the study reveals a tension between perceived gains in self-efficacy and the risk of reduced critical engagement. While participants report positive effects of generative AI, such as improved capabilities and self-efficacy, qualitative analyses uncover patterns of limited prompting and uncritical adoption of AI outputs, conceptualized as metacognitive laziness. The authors propose a framework for cognitively sustainable generative AI-supported learning.

Yuan et al. (2026) address high-stakes health communication by examining how generative AI reshapes medical authority in patient–physician interactions in China. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, the study introduces the concept of algorithm-mediated negotiated authority, showing how trust in AI emerges from perceived technical competence and socially conferred legitimacy, moderated by cognitive load, health literacy, and technology anxiety. The findings illustrate how generative AI can both empower and disadvantage patients, reinforcing existing inequalities in complex information contexts.

4.3. Exploring Implications for Democratic Discourse

The third set of contributions explores broader implications for democratic discourse and shifts the focus to institutional and societal implications of generative AI, particularly for journalism, science communication, and opinion formation. Baptista et al. (2026) explore how Portuguese journalists perceive and negotiate the use of AI in their professional routines. Based on qualitative interviews, the study shows that AI is largely framed as a technical support tool enhancing efficiency, while simultaneously raising concerns about transparency, bias, professional autonomy, and editorial responsibility. The findings highlight how AI adoption reconfigures journalistic authority and values within national media contexts.

Xi et al. (2026) investigate the persuasive potential of personalized conversational AI in the context of genetically modified foods in China. Using a factorial experiment, the study demonstrates that conversational AI can improve attitudes and behavioral intentions, but that personalization effects are conditional. Only combined demographic- and risk-based personalization yields additional persuasive gains, primarily among users with positive risk perceptions. The findings illuminate how conversational AI can shape opinion formation in contested science domains.

Finally, Silva Luna et al. (2026) analyze how framing and identity cues influence public evaluations of AI as a science communicator. Based on two preregistered experiments in Germany, the study shows that framing and design cues exert modest but systematic effects that vary by communicative format. While progress framing and machine-like cues enhance trust in article-based contexts, human-like cues increase social presence and indirect trust in interactive settings. The findings highlight the importance of communicative design for trust and engagement in AI-mediated science communication.

5. Conclusion

Generative AI fundamentally reshapes how publics engage with complex information. By acting as both a tool and an information intermediary, generative AI alters established dynamics of information access, interpretation, and evaluation. The contributions assembled in this thematic issue provide a critical snapshot of this ongoing transformation, highlighting both its promise and its perils.

Taken together, the articles demonstrate that generative AI is neither a neutral intermediary nor a deterministic force. Its societal impact depends on how it is designed, implemented, and used, as well as on the institutional and cultural contexts in which it operates. By advancing a multi-perspective and empirically grounded understanding of these dynamics, this thematic issue contributes to scholarly debates on public engagement, knowledge production, and democratic discourse.

The contributions to this thematic issue collectively underscore several challenges for research on generative AI and public engagement with complex information. One key challenge is methodological, lying in studying the use and implications of these rapidly evolving and often opaque AI systems, as they are rapidly and extensively integrated into everyday life across fields and disciplines. This complicates not only efforts to generate cumulative and comparable knowledge but also the sustainability of research.

Beyond methodological considerations, this thematic issue highlights broader societal challenges associated with the rise of generative AI. Information literacy must be rethought to account for AI-mediated information practices, including skills related to prompt formulation, critical evaluation of AI outputs, and awareness of system limitations. Institutions such as science, journalism, and education face new responsibilities in fostering transparent, accountable, and trustworthy uses of generative AI. At the same time, there are risks associated with over-reliance on generative AI for complex and high-stakes information, particularly when uncertainty and value judgments are involved.

As generative AI continues to evolve, sustained scholarly reflection and dialogue will be essential. This thematic issue aims to serve as a foundation for such efforts, inviting continued research into how societies can navigate the opportunities and challenges of generative AI in engaging with complex information.

Future research would benefit from greater interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing together perspectives from communication studies, computer science, education, and ethics. Expanding comparative and global perspectives remains an important goal, as does developing longitudinal designs that capture changes over time. Such efforts are essential for understanding how generative AI becomes embedded in public engagement with complex information.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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