

Exploring the Challenges of Generative AI on Public Sector Communication in Europe

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Abstract

This study investigates how emerging digital technologies, particularly generative AI tools, are transforming public sector communication in Europe, highlighting the profound intersection between public organizations, AI, and human interactions. In particular, it explores the opportunities and risks that public sector communicators face as they deal with and integrate digital platforms and AI-driven tools into their strategies and practices in a contemporary scenario characterized by the spread of disinformation and a growing distrust toward institutions. The article gathers insights from in-depth interviews with leading public sector communicators working for European governments and EU institutions. Findings reveal that generative AI is seen as a transformative tool for governments and public institutions, with communicators emphasizing both benefits and risks, as well as the importance of adopting ethical practices and new responsibilities toward citizens, institutions, and mass media. From the interviews, generative AI tools emerged as game-changers in message delivery and content production, demanding greater professionalism and new competencies and skills to integrate these technologies into public sector communication strategies and to counteract the threats posed by disinformation campaigns and platformization. The study provides valuable insights into the evolving role of generative AI in public-sector communication, addressing the scarcity of research in this field. As the adoption of generative AI becomes inevitable, and policy frameworks like the EU AI Act develop, communicators must ensure transparency and trust to align public sector communication with democratic values and foster meaningful dialogue in new digital-media arenas. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords

communicators; disinformation; ethics; generative AI; public communication; public sector communication; trust

1. Introduction

In the post-Covid-19 era, the role of public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018) has undergone profound transformations due to the turbulence of socio-political scenarios, the spread of disinformation and misinformation, the rapid technological advancements, and the increasing influence of digital platforms and AI on private and public organizations (OECD, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2024; Zerfass et al., 2023). In the European context, social media platforms are increasingly considered the primary sources for news consumption by many citizens. A Eurobarometer (2023) survey reveals that 37% of European citizens stay informed regularly by checking their newsfeeds on social media, an 11% increase compared to the 2022 edition of the report. At the same time, 42% of respondents read news on online media websites and apps (European Parliament, 2023b). These trends span all age groups and most of the EU member states, highlighting a broad shift towards online information and digital media arenas (Badham et al., 2024) that also impacts governments and public sector organizations (PSOs) as well as their communication staff.

Furthermore, the growing relevance and penetration of generative AI (GenAI) tools have the potential to become a game-changer also in the public sector (van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022). This technology is a double-edged sword (Zerfass et al., 2024; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021): On the one hand, these tools can offer new opportunities for improving public services and enhancing public communication efforts (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Larsen & Følstad, 2024) but, on the other hand, it can also pose unprecedented ethical challenges and risks of amplifying disinformation potentially threatening the foundation of informed public debate and democratic decision-making globally (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024).

In this context, within the theoretical framework of public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020), this study aims to investigate the impact of GenAI tools through the voices of prominent EU institutions and governments' communicators in order to identify new responsibilities, challenges, risks, and ethical considerations in the relationship with citizens and the media. In a field constantly reshaped by rapid technological innovation, this research explores issues at the intersection of institutions, AI, and human interaction. Through in-depth interviews, the article recognizes these actors as strategic players in the development of public communication strategies at national and European levels, shaping the international landscape in public communication.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, numerous scholars worldwide have emphasized that public sector communication has regained significant importance, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Lovari et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). This renewed centrality was particularly evident in public institutions and governments where communication was strategically planned and delivered to diverse publics through a multichannel and multilevel approach, with digital platforms playing a crucial role in both ordinary and crisis situations (Coombs, 2020; Lovari & Belluati, 2023). These communication flows enabled institutions not only to inform citizens and the media swiftly but also to actively listen and respond with reliable information, thereby upholding public values and safeguarding common goods. This process has become more visible in contemporary media ecologies, characterized by hybrid media systems and the growing power of digital platforms (Chadwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The OECD (2021) highlighted that when public sector communication is strategically managed, it becomes foundational for enhancing democratic processes, promoting citizen participation, public decision-making, and building trust in institutions. This perspective underscores the idea that public sector communication should not be viewed merely as a function of message transmission, but rather as a vital mechanism for public policy development and civic engagement (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018). Consequently, governments and public institutions are encouraged to invest in communication as a means of building relationships with stakeholders and a strategic leverage for fostering mutual understanding and collaboration, especially in times of global threats (OECD, 2021). Indeed, PSOs face exceptional challenges due to a complex interplay of factors. First of all, societies across the globe are experiencing an increasing level of skepticism toward public institutions. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), governments are far less trusted than private companies worldwide. The report reveals a significant trust disparity between governments and private companies, showing companies leading with a 62% trust level, 11 points higher than the government at 51%. Distrust in government is notable across 16 of 28 surveyed countries, with trust in media and governments ranked low due to perceived unethical behavior and incompetence (Edelman, 2023). Furthermore, the report shows that 46% of citizens see governments as a source of misleading rather than trustworthy information. This perception directly impacts the effectiveness of public communication strategies, emphasizing the necessity for transparency, accuracy, and public trust building as central themes in the evolving role of public communicators (OECD, 2021).

The current landscape is further complicated by the polarization of public opinion and the spread of disinformation on digital platforms, requiring public communication professionals to manage a delicate balance of maintaining public trust while effectively communicating in an increasingly skeptical and polarized society (World Economic Forum, 2024). Indeed, disinformation and misinformation can significantly influence and distort the public debate, leading to misinformed opinions, polarized discussions, and eroded trust in the public sphere (Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Lovari, 2020). This trend is part of a larger phenomenon, the so-called information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While the historical effects of rumors and false content are well-known, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p. 4) argue that:

We are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these ‘polluted’ messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic marked a turning point in how disinformation is perceived in the public discourse. Once considered a marginal issue or a topic for a limited group of experts (i.e., journalists, fact-checkers), it has now become a public problem (Gusfield, 1981) and a key item on the agendas of governments at the international level. Information disorder and the diffusion of polluted messages are particularly prevalent in the context of digital media. In fact, the algorithms and the inherent characteristics of digital platforms can amplify these harmful narratives (Benesch, 2023; UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2020). Overall, the World Economic Forum has highlighted the growing disinformation on digital media as a major global threat. According to the report, this phenomenon “is emerging as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years, foreign and domestic actors alike will leverage misinformation and disinformation to further widen societal and political divides” (World Economic Forum, 2024, p. 7).

Moreover, digital platforms today represent the connective tissue of contemporary society, and their impact is also clearly visible in public sector and public sector communication (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). The expansion of digital connectivity underscores the evolving landscape of public communication and the critical role of digital proficiency for public information professionals. In fact, digital platforms offer governments and institutions new communicative environments for informing citizens directly, for enhancing citizens' participation and policy development, and for being more transparent and accountable to public opinion and mass media (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Lovari & Valentini, 2020; Silva et al., 2019). Therefore, they play an important role in redefining relationships, power dynamics, and communication strategies involving PSOs and their stakeholders.

However, several scholars have highlighted that PSOs are increasingly dependent on digital platforms and social media logic (Olsson & Eriksson, 2016; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Indeed, the influence of these platforms on the visibility of public sector communication, combined with the non-transparent management of data and the opacity of associated algorithms, favors processes of datafication and platformization (Helmond, 2015; Reutter, 2022). Platformization refers to the process and effects of digital platforms' impact on contemporary society. In particular, van Dijck (2020) stressed how this process can pose challenges for the public sector, with the risk of treating common goods, such as health or education, as privatized assets encapsulated within the platform ecosystem that operates on market logics, following the principles of digital capitalism. All these factors directly impact public sector communication practices and citizens' consumption patterns. In this regard, digital platforms can also create inequalities and pose vulnerabilities for public communication when communicators fail to comprehend the complexities and potential issues associated with their superficial application or inaccurate use (Ducci & Lovari, 2021).

In this context, the rapid penetration of GenAI can pose both novel and traditional challenges for the public sector and public sector professionals.

2.1. AI in the Public Sector and the Impact on Communication Management

AI is defined as systems that display intelligent behavior by analyzing their environment and taking actions—with some degree of autonomy—to achieve specific goals (European Commission, 2025). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2024, p. 317) define AI as “the tangible real-world capability of non-human machines or artificial entities to perform, task solve, communicate, interact, and act logically as it occurs with biological humans.” This definition addresses the strong influence of AI on communication research, as well as its impact on their sectors and informative practices (Ertem-Eray & Cheng, 2025). Indeed, the topic of AI is currently experiencing significant hype and rapid technological advancements across various social domains (Audétat, 2022), spanning from health to education, cultural practices, science, and financial services (Kennedy et al., 2023). The so-called “AI spring,” characterized by high expectations for these technologies, seems to have bloomed into “AI summer,” in which AI tools are widely used, meeting the expectations of different stakeholders (Toll et al., 2020).

AI has also become a salient issue at the policy level, with initiatives emerging at transnational, international, and national levels (European Commission, 2023a; OECD, 2024). It is increasingly recognized as a promising technology (Konrad et al., 2016), incorporating and translating diverse narratives and storytelling approaches by heterogeneous actors. These narratives frame AI in various ways, ranging from apocalyptic visions to sustainability-focused perspectives and its role as a “service” for humanity. For instance, Tzachor et al.

(2020) pointed out the importance of using AI tools for pandemic prevention and response, as well as to counteract online disinformation surrounding Covid-19.

The rapid success and adoption of AI tools are closely tied to the development of GenAI, a technology that generates new content in response to prompts. Indeed, GenAI is a category of AI that can create new content, such as texts, images, and videos, through text-to-image generators and Large Language Models. These systems are “developing fresh, human-like material that can be engaged with and consumed, rather than just numerical forecasts or internal rules” (García-Peñalvo & Vázquez-Ingelmo, 2023, p. 7).

The increased visibility and media coverage of GenAI tools have spotlighted AI's capabilities, leading to significant academic and public debate (Lorenz et al., 2023). Indeed, this technology is revolutionizing various sectors, including education, healthcare, journalism, and communication (Esposito, 2021; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2024). The use of AI tools and technologies has also expanded in PSOs and governments, although its adoption has been slower than in the private sector (Bowen, 2024; Desouza et al., 2020; Madan & Ashok, 2023) due to the presence of specific organizational and legal barriers (Selten & Klievink, 2024). In fact, the adoption of AI in the public sector follows a different pace, driven by the specific challenges, objectives, and stakeholders' priorities inherent to PSOs (Kuziemski & Misuraca, 2020; van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022). This might be due to the fact that public sector entities prioritize values such as transparency, and equity, embedding these principles into the design and implementation of AI systems (Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, AI implementation demands accountability while navigating ethical and social barriers, particularly those linked to trust in AI technologies (Desouza et al., 2020; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding this assumption, some authors have argued that in the present day, traditional public sector policy-making, service provision, and governance procedures can be rapidly transformed with the introduction of GenAI technologies (Bright et al., 2024; Salah et al., 2023).

Moreover, GenAI-based platforms are transforming how governments and PSOs inform and engage with citizens, enabling more personalized interactions that allow citizens to express concerns, provide feedback, and even participate in policy development (Pislaru et al., 2024). Indeed, digital tools such as chatbots, conversational agents, and AI-enabled forums can enhance government responsiveness, enhancing a dialogue that is more calibrated to diverse communities' needs and fostering citizens' trust (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In terms of implementation, conversational agents have struggled to establish a foothold within public sector contexts (Androutsopoulou et al., 2019; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). Their adoption brings unique challenges, including the complexity of GenAI projects and the imperative to ensure transparency, fairness, and public value (Larsen & Følstad, 2024). Furthermore, large language model-enabled chatbots can mimic authoritative sources, generating voices and anthropomorphic imitations of humans, hallucinations and misleading answers that can intoxicate the public arena (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023).

The impact of GenAI tools poses challenges for institutions, society, and individuals, underscoring the need to balance opportunities against potential risks (Dwivedi et al., 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). In addition, the integration of these tools in the public sector's governance can optimize administrative workflows, minimizing inefficiencies, and allowing public officials and civil servants to focus on strategic and citizen-centered initiatives, increasing public value (Hjaltalin & Sigurdarson, 2024). However, this technological advancement also introduces potential risks such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, ethical and

legal issues, and accountability for technology misuse (Dwivedi et al., 2023; OECD, 2024). Interactive governance, therefore, requires not only active participation but also a balanced approach that integrates GenAI within ethical and cooperative frameworks, ensuring effective and transparent communication between government entities and citizens (Bowen, 2024). Recent research into these “AI tensions” aims to deepen understanding of the waves of adoption and diffusion of AI tools in PSOs (Madan & Ashok, 2023).

Another challenge and possible threat related to GenAI is the spread of disinformation. These tools can significantly strengthen the effectiveness of viral disinformation campaigns, making it easier to produce and disseminate highly tailored and convincing false information (Pérez Dasilva et al., 2021), targeting specific groups and sparking societal and political tensions (Ferrari et al., 2023). In fact, the 2024 World Economic Forum report finds that GenAI’s role in creating realistic yet fabricated content, such as campaign videos, could lead to severe consequences, ranging from protests to radicalization, challenging the integrity of democratic processes (Formosa et al., 2024) and the stability of societies globally (World Economic Forum, 2024).

In January 2024, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasized these challenges posed by GenAI in spreading disinformation, underscoring the necessity of upholding responsibilities by large internet platforms to manage the content they disseminate. These concerns have also been included in specific legislation related to AI platforms. The EU was the first supranational organization to develop a regulatory framework for AI “to make sure that AI systems used in the EU are safe, transparent, traceable, non-discriminatory and environmentally friendly” (European Parliament, 2023a). The European Commission’s initial proposal, developed in 2021, did not specifically address GenAI systems. However, the emergence of AI tools such as ChatGPT has prompted a revision to include such technologies (Ferrari et al., 2023). The legislation reached a political agreement on 8 December 2023 and approached the final approval stages in 2024 (Chee, 2024). Thus, the EU has positioned itself as a pioneer, understanding the importance of its role as global standard-setter (European Commission, 2023a). The “AI Act” aims to be a worldwide model for leveraging AI’s advantages while mitigating its risks, such as job automation, the spread of online misinformation, and threats to national security, imposing new transparency obligations on major AI systems (Council of the EU, 2024; European Commission, 2025).

Society, organizations, and the job market will be radically transformed by the GenAI revolution, and these changes will need communicators to help adjust to these new realities (Haefner et al., 2020; Smillie & Scharfbillig, 2024; Zeffass et al., 2024). Despite the current hype surrounding GenAI, limited attention has been devoted to the relationship between AI and public sector communication at the international level. A systematic literature review by Ertem-Eray and Cheng (2025, p. 4) highlights this oversight, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive and multidisciplinary studies to clarify its applications to the communication field: “Analyzing research topics provides information about common and underrepresented topics that require further investigation.” Indeed, even though communication represents a promising topic in scholars’ research agenda related to AI and public sector ecologies (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021), only limited insights can be found in studies dedicated to public relations and strategic communication, where GenAI has sparked lively debate within the profession (McCorkindale, 2024; Panda et al., 2019; Smith & Waddington, 2023; Zeffass et al., 2024). Furthermore, initial insights have been presented in the field of communication professionals (Zeffass et al., 2020). For instance, Zeffass et al. (2019), in a survey involving 2,700 practitioners across Europe, found that three-quarters of communication

professionals believe that AI will change the communication profession as a whole. Communicator leaders forecast greater changes in the field of communication due to AI compared to their unit leaders or team members. The main challenges that emerged from the survey included securing the competencies of communication practitioners (56%), followed by addressing barriers related to various aspects of organizational infrastructure, such as ICT, budget, and responsibilities (54%). Interestingly, data showed that professionals working in governmental organizations rate competencies and organizational challenges for implementing AI higher than professionals working for private companies or agencies.

In this context, this article seeks to overcome the scarcity of studies specifically addressing the perception of the impact of GenAI tools in public sector communication, an under-researched topic in scholarly strategic communication, and contribute to addressing the “lack of understanding of the AI phenomenon within the public administration” (Madan & Ashok, 2023, p. 12). In particular, the study investigates how leading European communication professionals are navigating the contemporary digital communication ecologies and examines the main challenges and tensions posed by the increasing reliance on and influence of GenAI-driven communication. Thus, it responds to the recommendation to analyze how communication professionals in different media and communication sectors “can best realign their roles and relationships between the publics and technology in their work” (Ertem-Eray & Cheng, 2025, p. 14).

In particular, the research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1: Which challenges do professionals identify regarding the implementation of GenAI in public communication management?

RQ1a: How are communicators perceiving the impact of these digital technologies in their work?

RQ2: What competencies should communicators develop in order to strategically manage public sector communication in the face of AI-driven technological advancements and socio-political turbulence?

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to examine the emerging practices related to the use of AI in European governments and supranational organizations. Indeed, qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring new or multifaceted phenomena where variables are not easily quantifiable (Bryman, 2012), allowing for a deep understanding of perspectives, experiences, and contexts, which is essential when exploring a dynamic field such as GenAI in public sector communication.

In particular, the study was carried out using in-depth semi-structured interviews (Johnson, 2001) with elite publics (Hertz & Imber, 1995). These qualitative techniques were adopted to gather detailed data while allowing flexibility in the conversation to explore unexpected insights or themes that may arise. This approach is particularly suited to exploring the nuances and complexities inherent in the evolving role of public communicators amidst rapid contemporary social changes and technological disruptions, facilitating an in-depth exploration of professionals’ perspectives. According to Hertz and Imber (1995), elite professionals, due to their positions, experiences, and insights, can provide a depth and richness of

information that is often unattainable from other sources. Their insights are not merely opinions but are grounded in their extensive experience and professional expertise, making them extremely relevant for understanding the current and future landscape of public sector communication, a field where understanding the strategic drivers and institutional frameworks is critical.

Elite publics were chosen using a snowball sampling technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) from the Club of Venice forum, founded in 1986 under the Italian Presidency of the Council of the EU. In particular, the Club of Venice is the “informal gathering of the Directors-General, Directors, and Heads of the information and communication services of the EU Member States and the EU Institutions” (Club of Venice, 2013). These high-level professionals are at the forefront of public sector communication in Europe. They have a deep understanding of the challenges and dynamics within this field due to their experience at the national and European levels, and they hold significant roles in communication and media relations within EU institutions and national governments.

These professionals were invited to participate in the study during the Club of Venice conference held in Venice in November 2023. They were contacted via email in January 2024; a second round of messages was sent if the first email was not replied to; other potential participants were recruited to enlarge the panel of experts using Club of Venice members who had already taken part in the study. In October 2024, a total number of 14 professionals were interviewed in English using Microsoft Teams. Participants include directors of communication in ministries, heads of communication units for national departments, heads of communication at EU institutions, and former heads of public information for governments and ministries of European countries. Interviewees reside in 13 different countries, with a good balance between Northern, Central, and Southern Europe and a wide range of cultural and professional perspectives (see Table 1).

The interview grid was developed from a literature review on public sector communication and PSO culture (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018; OECD, 2021), and was structured in four sections (trends in public sector communication; digital platforms and GenAI challenges; strategies for fighting disinformation; communicators' identity and future landscapes). The interviews' average length was 42 minutes, a sufficient duration to address the complexities of the topic while being respectful of the interviewees' time constraints due to their professional roles. A thematic analysis was applied to interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining manual and computer-assisted techniques using NVivo 14 software. The interviews were analyzed starting with automatic transcription. Afterward, the interviews were reviewed again by listening to the audio and integrating missing parts manually. Finally, they were imported into NVivo for coding and analysis. The codes and subcodes were identified after careful discussion among the authors of this study, based on both manifest meanings and recurring patterns in the interviews. The coding scheme adopted for the interview analysis is: (a) Social media impact on public communication; (b) Trust; (c) Disinformation and misinformation; (d) GenAI views (Opportunity; Risk; AI ethical considerations and standards; Adoption of GenAI in the organization); (e) Communicator' role (Competencies and skills; International and national co-operation; Impact on intangible assets). Subcodes are specified only for the part of the study reported in this manuscript. Authors independently coded the same set of transcripts, compared their coding, and resolved discrepancies through consensus.

Using NVivo software, it was also possible to find connections between items by comparing codes, which were further supplemented by manual analysis from the researchers to understand the qualitative nature of

Table 1. Participants information.

Interviewee	Gender	EU Country	Position	Institution	Years of experience in public sector communication
1	Female	Ireland	Communications Manager	Government	10+
2	Female	Germany	Head of Communication Unit	Government	20+
3	Male	Portugal	Head of Communication Unit	Government	20+
4	Male	The Netherlands	Director of Communication	Government	20+
5	Male	Romania	Senior Communication Expert	Government	20+
6	Male	France	Head of Communication	International Organization	20+
7	Female	Croatia	Head of Public Information and Relations	Government	20+
8	Female	Slovenia	Former Head of Public Information	Government	20+
9	Male	Sweden	Director of Communication	Government	20+
10	Male	Italy	Head of Communication	EU Institution	20+
11	Male	Latvia	Deputy-Head of Communication	Government	10+
12	Male	The Netherlands	Former Head of Public Information	Government	20+
13	Male	Malta	Director of Communication	Government	15+
14	Male	Belgium	Head of Communication	EU Institution	20+

the links. Moreover, NVivo allowed for the identification of word trees from the interviews, facilitating the identification of thematic associations and repeated contexts in which specific words appeared.

4. Results and Discussions

All interviews showed a strong awareness of the technological revolution and the impact of digital technologies within governments and EU institutions. Participants underscored how digital platforms and GenAI tools are not only technologies but also communicative and social environments (Zerfass et al., 2024) that must be deeply understood and used with a critical approach. The interviewees highlighted that the use of AI tools should be approached carefully, avoiding both techno-enthusiastic perspectives—as seen during the first phase of social media adoption (Lovari & Valentini, 2020)—or catastrophic ones that predict significant job losses, as reported in the early debate on the use of GenAI (Council of the EU, 2023).

All the interviewees agreed that GenAI represents a game-changer for their profession in terms of message delivery and communication campaign productions, requiring a new sense of responsibility and an ethical approach, thus introducing new challenges at the organizational level and in relations with citizens and media, as can be seen from the following word tree (Figure 1).



I think the basic challenge of using AI is how much we can trust...the Artificial Intelligence and the products made by AI. In this sense, it is not, like, 100% sure; you know ChatGPT and similar platforms....So I believe we cannot completely rely on it or rather we should define to what extent AI can be, you know, actively involved in our work as public communicators. (Interviewee 5)

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increasingly sophisticated, with it being seen not only as a communicative partner (Esposito, 2021) but also as a genuine competitor to human intellect.

Analyzing the AI perception code (GenAI view) and its related subcodes (AI opportunity, AI risk, AI ethical considerations), interviewees expressed a limited skepticism about these tools' impact on public sector communication, maintaining a cautious, sometimes critical, approach. Out of 14 interviews, "AI opportunity" was cited more frequently than "AI risk" in the majority of interviews.

On the one hand, there is a consensus on the opportunities presented by the impact of GenAI on public communication. For instance, these included: enhancing efficiency in communication management; faster data analysis; creating communication plans; engaging different publics; monitoring social media sentiment; stimulating creativity in the production of visuals, videos, and messages; preparing internal staff training; and assisting in strategic and complex tasks that these professionals undertake regularly in their jobs (Ertem-Eray & Cheng, 2025). These potential applications and examples showcase what these elite professionals are already doing or plan to do with this emerging technology, suggesting trends that might become standard practices in European institutions, as reported in the following sentences:

I have read and learned a lot about AI. I think that we are going to use more and more of these kinds of tools that artificial intelligence is going to provide us....You can generate texts, you can generate images and you can put that information on your websites, on your social media. (Interviewee 3)

Bureaucracy creates a lot of information, data, and issues. Public communicators, most of the time, are spending their energy trying to understand, sort out, select, and process the information that the public bodies they work for produce on a daily basis. If artificial intelligence is used for this, let's say for a mechanical purpose, then I am pretty sure that the smart algorithms will help public communicators to quickly understand the key information. (Interviewee 5).

With AI, I think the aim of public information would be to reach out to record numbers of people. You might reach a lot of people, but then the message would not get across. That is why I think it is very interesting to use AI in this field because it can target people. In the future, public information will be on this data, so AI will focus on gathering people's data. I imagine it is like the fingers of an octopus reaching out. Far, far, far, far across everywhere. (Interviewee 13).

The last excerpt highlights the process of "ultra-targetization" of citizens enabled by AI tools, representing a significant potential advancement of public sector communication in crafting tailored messages to publics. Indeed, the "octopus," with its many tentacles reaching out in various directions, symbolizes the extensive reach and precision targeting capabilities that AI brings to communication. Each tentacle represents a channel or a demographic segment, allowing for tailored communication strategies that effectively engage diverse publics.

Thematic analysis of the interviews also reported several risks and potential threats related to the use of GenAI for society and public sector communication. The majority of the interviewees emphasized the risks stemming from GenAI, particularly in relation to the issue of disinformation, as illustrated in Figure 2.

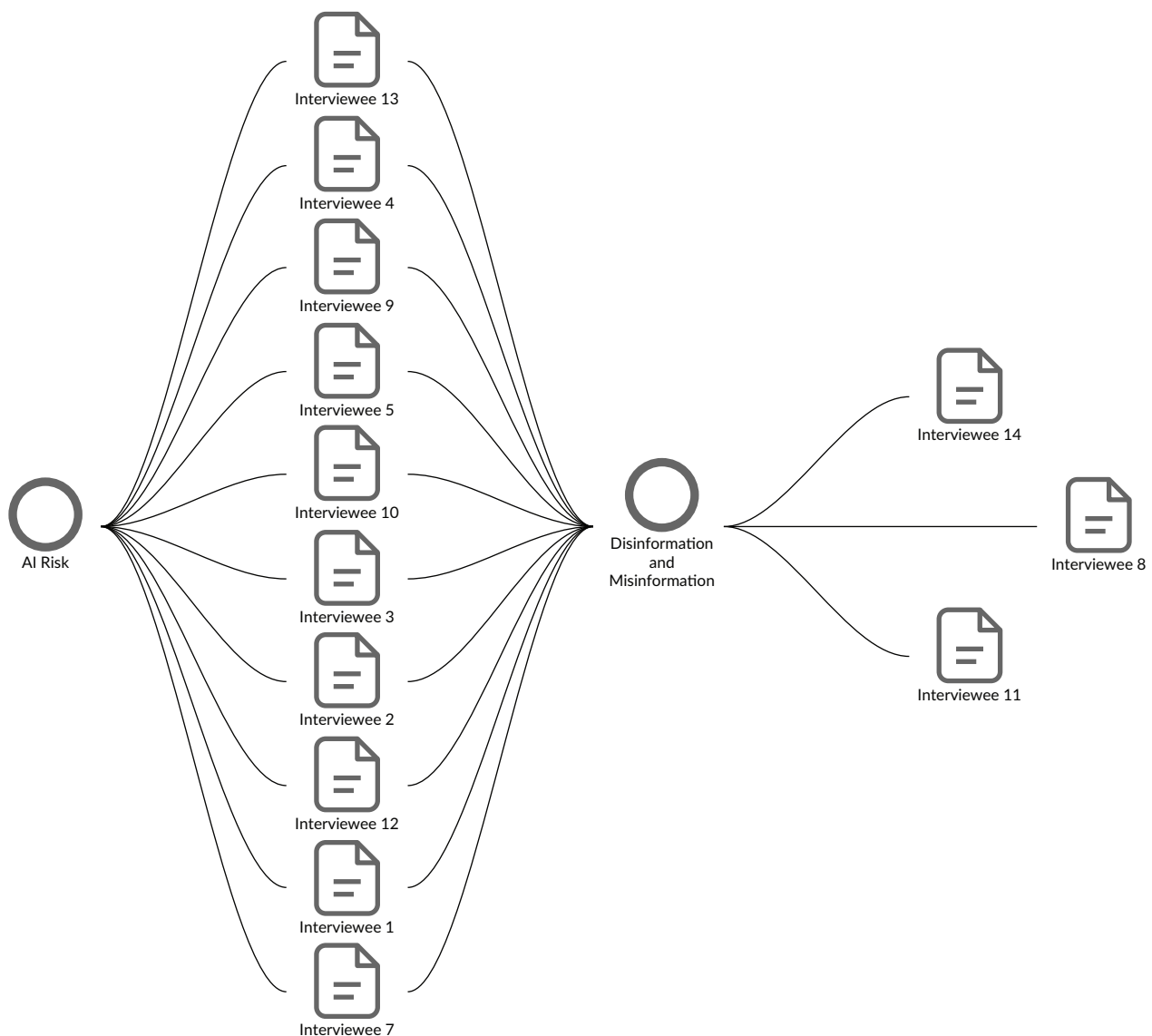


Figure 2. Comparison of codes between “AI Risk” and “Disinformation and Misinformation” from qualitative interview analysis using NVivo 14.

Specifically, the interviews highlighted risks associated with the creation of deepfakes, hallucinations, misleading content, and incorrect information that AI could generate, ultimately leading to the spread of disinformation in digital platforms (Pérez Dasilva et al., 2021; World Economic Forum, 2024). According to some interviewees, GenAI platforms could automate the generation of false content, accelerating its dissemination and multiplying the volume of misleading information online (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023), as reported in these excerpts:

Disinformation will be a huge challenge. AI is making it. It’s so easy and so cheap and so possible for everyone with a computer to alter the truth in millions of possible ways and to spread this through millions of channels. And it costs nothing. This is not happening all the time, but it will eventually. There’s a risk that AI will transform the core of the public discourse, so we will never know if what we are seeing is real or not. How will I be able to trust that you are human, and not a bot? (Interviewee 9)

For example, today, you need troll farms to spread disinformation, but soon AI could do this without any human intervention, which could significantly increase the spread of disinformation. This will likely make it harder for us to deliver our own messages, as others will be able to use AI to distribute even more disinformation with greater impact. (Interviewee 2)

Additionally, another insight from the interviewees' responses concerns the transparency of the sources used by GenAI tools in content creation. Respondents underlined that digital platforms should disclose their sources to allow users to recognize whether the content is false or not. Moreover, human oversight should always be present to verify sources and information. From this perspective, many professionals highlighted the important role of public communicators in fulfilling this key function to guarantee transparency and accountability in the government's message production and sharing. This approach ensures that GenAI serves as an aid rather than a substitute for human expertise in public sector communication, due to the strategic role this function plays in the democratic debate (Formosa et al., 2024).

Furthermore, interviewees emphasized the importance of media and digital literacy and the need for governments and EU institutions to provide citizens with the knowledge and tools to detect and combat disinformation:

You should be careful when using AI, especially with sensitive topics. You must tell people when you are using AI. If you use AI as a discovery tool, in five years, no one will be concerned about where the information is coming from. You'll go to ChatGPT, type in a question, and get an answer without really thinking about how that information was generated or what the sources are. That's something we need to pay attention to. AI should tell you where it's getting that information. (Interviewee 3)

That's a huge challenge for everybody, especially for government institutions. As you know, government institutions are always very slow and not so quick to adapt to all these changes. Everything is moving too fast, and I'm afraid that we might have situations where we would have problems to deal with. It's very dangerous to receive information and not know if it's disinformation, if it's true, or if it's not true, and you don't know the source of where the information is coming from. (Interviewee 7)

Another subcode was related to the ethical impact and implications of GenAI for public sector communication. The six interviews revealed a direct relation (Figure 3) and a wide set of different views, ethical considerations, and professional standards stemming from the use and integration of GenAI technologies into public information practices toward citizens and the media.

These professionals highlighted that the capability of these tools in processing vast amounts of personal data for targeted messaging raises privacy and ethical dilemmas (Bowen, 2024), not only limited to the field of public communication:

If I used AI tools for public communication purposes, my main ethical dilemma would be data protection....You already know how target marketing and algorithms work, and when they are powered by AI, it will be much, much bigger than that. (Interviewee 13)

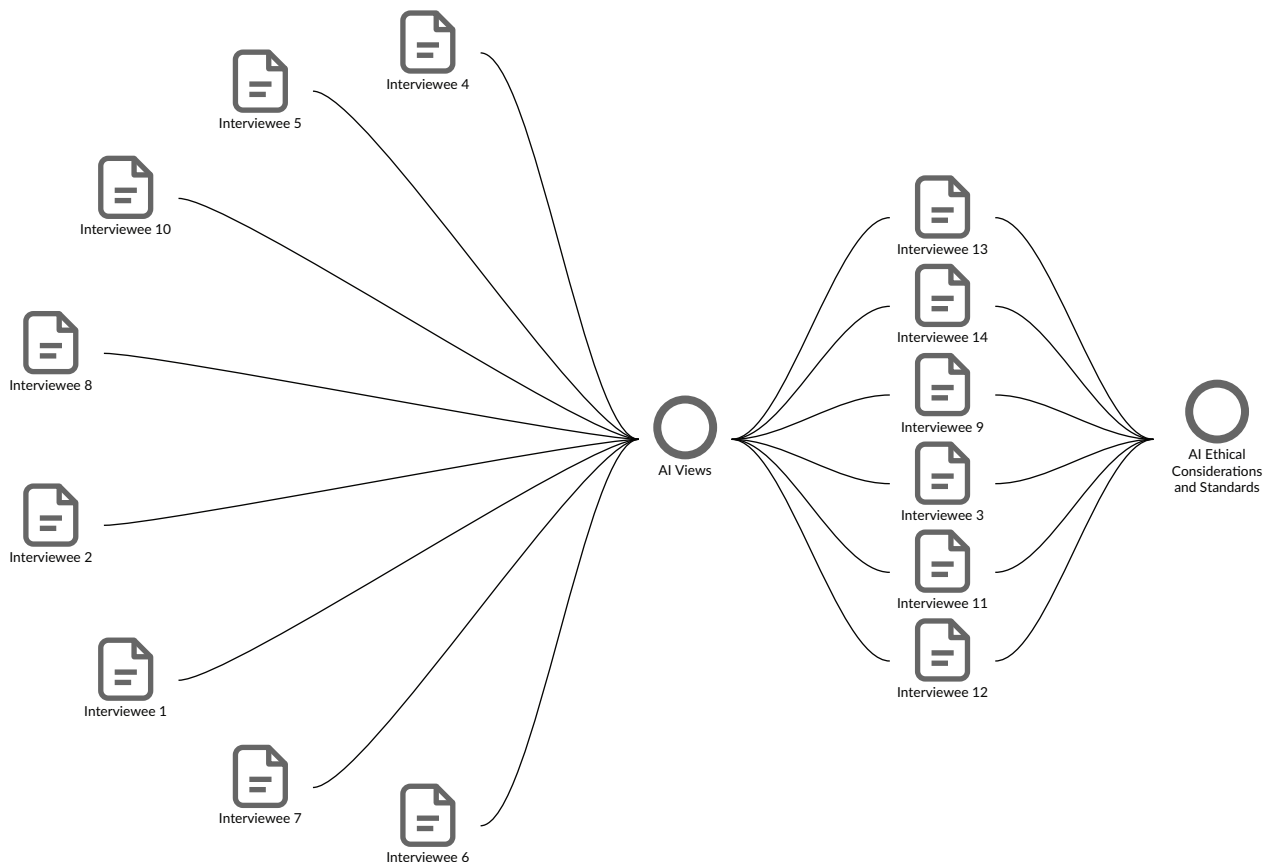


Figure 3. Comparison of codes between “AI Views” and “AI Ethical Considerations and Standards” from qualitative interview analysis using NVivo 14.

You have to consider ethics. The high risks that come with AI are not just about technology; there are ethical considerations, and institutions, including governments and the EU, have been discussing these challenges for years. (Interviewee 14)

Some interviewees, moreover, do not currently perceive greater ethical risk for communication management, particularly due to the role played by the European Commission in AI regulation (Ferrari et al., 2023), and a greater sense of responsibility that these professionals experience while performing their strategic roles. For instance:

The major issue is whether, when using AI, especially in relation to visuals, and if we are moving towards AI-generated interpretations in videos, etc...we are actually presenting these things as facts or if we are using this tool to make information more accessible to people. That would be the ethical issue. (Interviewee 11)

I don't see a major ethical conflict with this because we are using it mainly for inspiration. The end product is always controlled and further developed by a desk officer. For instance, if we use an AI-generated image, we review it carefully; we never just take anything AI produces and send it out without oversight. We still take full responsibility for everything we do, and we don't have any unfiltered AI-generated content going out. (Interviewee 9)

According to most of the interviewees, ensuring the accuracy, transparency, and authenticity of AI-generated communication is crucial for maintaining public trust (Bowen, 2024). This requires verifying the information developed by AI tools in communication management (UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2020) and safeguarding that messages and campaigns align with the essential key principles of public communication (Bowen & Lovari, 2021; OECD, 2021) before publishing or sharing them.

Regarding RQ2, respondents collectively underscore the need to possess a balanced skill set, blending traditional communication expertise with digital literacy, and an adaptive approach to emerging technologies such as GenAI. The interviewees stated that to address contemporary socio-technological challenges and the rampant impact of GenAI platforms, public sector communicators should have a set of fundamental competencies and skills to navigate the modern communication landscape (Figure 4).

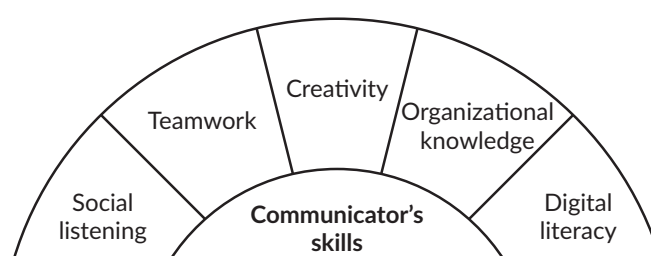


Figure 4. Diagram of the communicator's skills based on recurring words from the interviews.

First, social listening is a crucial skill. Listening is a central theme in public communication research (Macnamara, 2016), but it gains new meaning with the development of digital platforms and AI-generated communication. By understanding citizens' needs and concerns while leveraging digital tools, public communication can become more user-centered and effective (Smillie & Scharfbillig, 2024). Indeed:

What we really need are people who understand and can bridge the gap between technical aspects on the one hand and citizens on the other, understanding their needs and the kind of information they seek. (Interviewee 4)

We need people able to cross the gap to understand what citizens need to hear, to focus on the citizens, not on the institution. (Interviewee 5)

Teamwork is equally important, as communication is often the result of collaborative efforts with other professionals inside the organization but also in an inter-institutional perspective, as shown during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus having an impact on policy-making (Lovari, 2020; OECD, 2021). This skill is particularly highlighted by those professionals who have already started collaborating with other practitioners to integrate digital technologies into their activities. For instance:

In my country, we are trying to promote co-operation between communicators and policymakers. First of all, communication is seen as a strategic role, not as a supporting role. On the one hand, you can already build communication in your policies. On the other hand, being a part of the development of a policy makes it easier for you to understand the audience, the solutions presented, the opposition, etc. So that's a very important future role to be more present in policy process, not just receive a package, a product that you have to sell. (Interviewee 11)

I wouldn't forget to mention the importance of teamwork. Nowadays, there's no place anymore for solo work or single players. That's not possible; work is done in a team, and the solid skill of working in a team, which is not always easy, is critical at the international level. (Interviewee 6)

Then, creativity will be strategic since it enables the innovation needed to find original solutions to inform and engage the public, and it relies not only on choosing the effective prompts for GenAI tools or integrating other online solutions. It is also connected to the capacity of professionals to assemble and integrate traditional and innovative communication practices, including data management and multimedia content production (Zerfass et al., 2024):

We need people to be innovative and to think about new ways of communicating with people. We also need people who are developing new methods of communication, so you know, people who are literally writing the code and coming up with whatever algorithms and apps and things are. So we find that there's an expansion of the need for communications. (Interviewee 1)

This approach is essential for crafting effective campaigns and messages for the evolving informative needs of citizens, collaborators, and mass media, thus synchronizing public sector communication with society.

Moreover, digital skills (mostly related to social media and GenAI) are becoming increasingly relevant for public communicators who need to stay updated not only on the technological evolution of digital platforms but also on their communicative implications and uses, as highlighted in this interview's excerpt.

Given that AI is an essential tool for the future, I believe it should be a fundamental part of every communicator's training, covering different aspects of AI and how to use it effectively. (Interviewee 9)

Digital literacy is important not only for strategically managing platforms and communication automation (Zerfass et al., 2023) but also for detecting potential online crises and disinformation practices that could harm PSOs or the general population (Coombs, 2020; Lovari & Valentini, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Finally, a thorough understanding of PSOs' functioning and organizational culture (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018), is considered by the interviewees both fundamental and strategic for enhancing the quality of public communication in these turbulent and challenging times. Indeed:

It's important to engage with today's platforms and social media, but the most crucial aspect is a solid academic background—knowledge of international relations, political sciences, and the global context. This includes understanding crises, which are international in nature, and acquiring a strong foundation in public diplomacy. (Interviewee 14)

I think someone who is able to walk the line and understand what is happening within institutions and governments, while also having a strong sense of how to connect with and reach the other side: the people. (Interviewee 2)

If that person will not understand how the public institutions are operating in regard to the citizen's needs, then they will not be able to catch.. to present the empathy necessary to help pass the message to the audience. (Interviewee 5)

All these skills and competencies require a constant process of training by public sector communicators that, according to most of the respondents, necessitate a proactive approach by professionals, as well as playing an active role in different networks at the international and national levels.

Lastly, the majority of respondents highlighted the important role played by public sector communication in nurturing intangible assets to improve the relationships with citizens and the media (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018). In particular, communicators will play an important role in enhancing and maintaining trust in government and institutions in a current scenario characterized by polarization and disinformation fueled by digital platforms and GenAI tools (OECD, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2024).

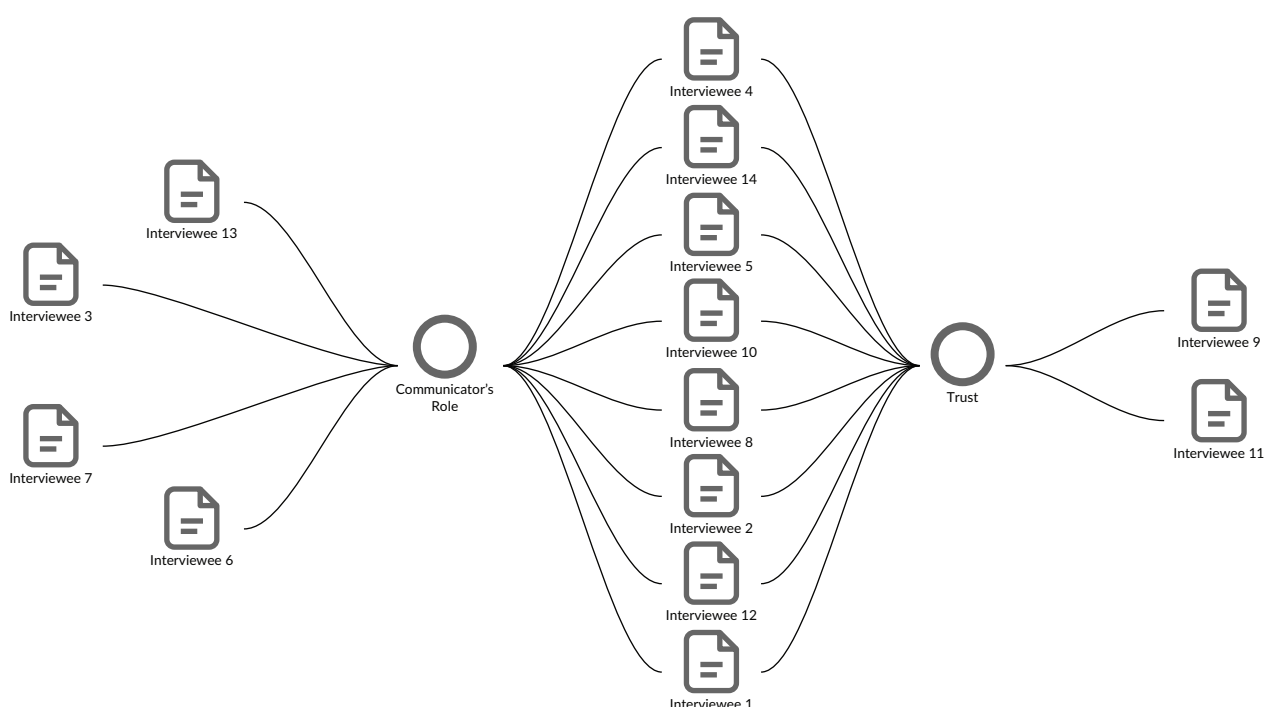


Figure 5. Comparison of codes between “Communicator’s Role” and “Trust” from qualitative interview analysis using NVivo 14.

Communicators must be able to build and maintain a relationship of trust and credibility with the different publics inside and outside the organizations (citizens, media, employees, etc.), improving the quality and authenticity of their communication flows:

We should be the trusted voice of the government. The means...will change. We have far more means than we have in the past, but these means should not distract us from where we are (positioned) in the world of communication....We really should be the trusted voice of the government. So that's not evolving. That will be the same. We should always stay people of flesh and blood. (Interviewee 4)

5. Conclusions

This article aimed to investigate the impact of GenAI tools in European public sector communication through in-depth interviews with elite communicators working for EU Institutions and European Governments.

Despite some limitations, such as the limited number of interviewees and the fact that interviewing elites provides valuable insights and trends but sometimes fails to reveal organizational issues or diverse organizational cultures, this article represents one of the first studies focusing on the impact of GenAI tools on communication management in governments and public organizations at the European level. It focuses on the perspective of communication professionals, allowing us to deeply understand how these professionals are increasingly compelled to strategically realign their intricate communication practices in response to the rapid and transformative evolution of technologies, particularly in their dynamic interactions with the turbulent external environment.

This study has interesting implications for strategic communication. First, it responds to the need to extend the research on AI to explore the implication of GenAI across different communication sectors and various industries (Ertem-Eray & Cheng, 2025), investigating the challenges these tools provide to governments and public sector communication, shedding light on their institutional, organizational, and cultural specificities. Also, the empirical evidence from this research can add a valuable contribution to public communication scholarship, particularly regarding the diffusion and adoption of GenAI technologies in the transformation of organizational cultures within the public sector (Canel & Luoma-Aho, 2018) under the pressure of internal and external factors, such as information crisis (Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), citizen's expectations, media coverage, and international regulations (Ferrari et al., 2023). Lastly, this study contributes to increasing the knowledge of the digital media-arena framework (Badham et al., 2024) and how these online communicative spaces, in particular the artificial digital media-arena, can be strategically managed by public sector communicators in order to relate and communicate with citizens, media, and other strategic stakeholders.

The manuscript also presents practical implications for professionals working in government and PSOs. The Shakespearean question "AI or not AI" is no longer relevant since AI and its integration into institutional communication have become inevitable and are also fueled by intensive international media coverage. Today, the crucial question is how, when, and where GenAI solutions are affecting PSOs. This trend will impact communications and relationships with citizens and the media, particularly in light of the approval of the EU AI Act (Council of the EU, 2024) and the evolving nature of these technologies. Interviews conducted in this study explored how these leading professionals perceive and experience the changing landscape of public sector communication influenced by the disruptive impact of these digital platforms. In addition, the findings highlighted the essential competencies and skills for rethinking the role of public communicators. Thus, GenAI's ability to aggregate and analyze data can redefine the activities of public communicators, shifting informative content production towards more data-driven approaches (OECD, 2021). However, this shift also requires that these professionals develop a new set of skills to interpret AI-generated insights accurately and apply them responsively and effectively in their communication and media relations strategies.

Nowadays, public communicators are evolving into centaur communicators, hybrid figures competent at navigating between analog and digital environments. They combine the practices and logics of legacy media with those characterizing social media (van Dijck et al., 2018) and digital media arenas where chatbots and AI solutions will be predominant also for public sector communication (Badham et al., 2024). This hybrid role underscores the necessity for communicators to adapt and integrate diverse communication tools and platforms, maintaining the essence of traditional media while embracing the new possibilities offered by digital advancements (Ducci & Lovari, 2021). Such evolution requires communicators to undergo a paradigm

shift towards a new level of professionalism, a more fluid and dynamic role, and a new sense of ethics and responsibility toward their organizations and society at large (Bowen, 2024; Smillie & Scharfbillig, 2024). Indeed, some of the established practices and skills that have been solidified over the years now appear obsolete due to societal risks, the rapid pace of digital innovation, and the activism of connected citizens and algorithmic media routines. It seems increasingly evident that recent machine learning and big data-based algorithms are able to participate in communication. Today, algorithms can act as communicative partners (Esposito, 2021). What matters is “how” communicators will partner and strategically engage with them to enhance public sector communications in ordinary and emergency situations. In fact, leveraging AI-generative tools for public communication requires committed human oversight, responsible application, and rigorous fact-checking while continuously evaluating potential risks through the lens of professional ethics and accountability (OECD, 2024). Finally, public sector communicators must act as a “steady rock” in a rapidly evolving digital information landscape, polluted by fake content, deepfakes (Pérez Dasilva et al., 2021), and disinformation. In an era increasingly reshaped by GenAI, their role is critical in maintaining integrity and trust within democratic societies, while enabling meaningful conversations in the public sphere for the benefit of all.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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