2026 Emerging Scholar Projects

Two Emerging Scholar projects were awarded grants.

Project 1
Chalise Macklin, Memphis
"From Classroom to Newsroom: University of Memphis–Marion Dual Enrollment Bridge Program"
Macklin is receiving a grant of $3,500

Chalise Macklin (Ph.D., University of Alabama) is an assistant professor of journalism who teaches broadcast journalism and other undergraduate and graduate-level journalism courses. She is a former digital and print news reporter and broadcast news producer and has worked in several newsrooms in the Mid-South and New York City. Her research focuses on diversity and inclusivity in newsrooms and news coverage with a focus on cultural influence and potential risks to the public.

Abstract: High school students in the out-of-state counties bordering Memphis often lack the same access to college-level journalism programs as students within the city. This proposal seeks to address that gap by extending opportunities for engagement with university-level journalism to students in Crittenden County, Arkansas. The University of Memphis is uniquely positioned to serve these students. Its campus is geographically closer to Crittenden County than in-state institutions such as the University of Arkansas (Fayetteville) and Arkansas State University (Jonesboro), and it already offers a border county tuition reduction rate to eligible students.

This grant will support the development of a case study and the launch of a summer program designed to prepare students for a dual-enrollment pathway in journalism. By creating these opportunities, the program will help high school students in Crittenden County gain early exposure to journalism education, strengthen their preparation for a college degree, and broaden access to professional pathways in the media industry.

Project 2
Won-Ki Moon, Florida
"Smarter or Just More Confident? Investigating Generative AI's Impact on Fact-Checking, the Illusion of Expertise, and Interventions for Digital Literacy"
Moon is receiving a grant of $3,500

Won-Ki Moon (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising at the University of Florida. His research examines how AI and algorithmic communication shape information processing and decision-making in digital media environments, with a focus on sociotechnical legitimacy and misinformation. This work aims to foster conditions for less polarized and more informed public judgment over time. He also develops communication-based frameworks and strategic guidelines to support responsible and trustworthy applications of emerging technologies.

Abstract: Generative AI systems are rapidly becoming default gateways for information seeking, offering fluent summaries and clickable references, but also producing hallucinations and biases. While these tools lower barriers to access, they may simultaneously undermine digital media literacy by encouraging vertical reading and discouraging multi-source verification. Users often experience inflated confidence and diminished respect for expertise; a dynamic Moon describes as the AI-enabled lay expertise illusion. This project investigates how AI reshapes fact-checking behaviors, why users come to over trust its authority, and what interventions can recalibrate responsible information seeking.

The research will proceed in three stages. Study 1 employs field observation in Moon's AI in Science Communication course to capture how students integrate AI into their assignments and whether verification practices are bypassed. Study 2 uses survey and experimental designs with student and general-population samples to measure the psychological drivers of overreliance – trust, perceived knowledge, and expert dismissal – while testing the generalizability of behaviors observed in the classroom. Study 3 evaluates interventions, comparing generic AI disclaimers with proactive strategies such as guided verification prompts, reliability scores, and efficacy recalibration cues.

Together, the studies provide a cumulative design that moves from diagnosis (observation) to explanation (psychological mechanisms) to solution (intervention testing). The project contributes theoretically by extending Dunning–Kruger and digital literacy frameworks to AI mediated contexts; methodologically by integrating field, survey, and experimental approaches; and practically by offering evidence-based recommendations for both AI literacy curricula and interface design. By clarifying how AI both facilitates and hinders literacy, this research advances communication scholarship and addresses urgent challenges for media, education, and democratic information environments.