



“A Starting Point and a Crutch”: Student and Faculty Perceptions of Generative AI

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Abstract

The advent of ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence systems has rekindled debates in higher education about ethical uses of technology. Through focus groups, this study explores how college students ($n = 22$) and faculty members ($n = 13$) from journalism and mass communication (JMC) programs view the role of AI in education. Specifically, we examine perceived opportunities and threats, and views on ethical AI use. Participants generally agreed that AI is a good starting point for conducting research, studying, or preparing lessons but can easily become a crutch. The main areas of disagreement were whether students should be consulted before AI policies are finalized and what constitutes plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. We discuss implications for students and educators in JMC programs.

Introduction

The recent interest in artificial intelligence is largely due to the widespread availability of systems such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude. Generative AI is of growing relevance for journalism and media education (Pavlik, 2023). Professors increasingly use it to help with tasks like planning instruction, creating materials, and facilitating assessments (“The 2023 Educator AI Report,” 2023). Students have found many use cases for studying, conducting research, and receiving real-time feedback (Bala & Colvin, 2023). The sophistication of generative AI has rekindled debates on college campuses about ethical uses of technology. Concerns have surfaced about academic dishonesty and its impact on student critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities (Heaven, 2023). In response, universities have created AI guidelines with suggested language for professors to adopt (“The Learning Network,” 2023).

Yet some institutions have yet to weigh in, and many students and professors disagree about what constitutes acceptable AI use (Barrett & Pack, 2023). Few studies have explored AI’s role in JMC education (Demmar & Neff, 2023). Researchers have interviewed and surveyed professors (Biswas & Bland, 2024; Okela, 2024) and administrators (Wenger, Hossain, & Senseman, 2024), but students’ voices have largely been missing. This study helps to fill that gap through focus groups with college students ($n = 22$) and faculty members ($n = 13$) from JMC programs. We examine perceived opportunities and threats, and views on ethical AI use.

Literature Review

Threats and Opportunities Framework

The threats and opportunities framework has been used in a range of fields to explore complex and consequential decisions (Ardelean *et al.*, 2015; Benzaghta

et al., 2021; Brooks *et al.*, 2014; Dyson, 2004). This approach is also known as the SWOT analysis, which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Leiber *et al.*, 2020; Sabbaghi & Vaidyanathan, 2004). Because of the dramatic advancements in and adoption of learning technologies in higher education, many scholars have used SWOT analyses to address these issues and to conduct strategic planning (Benzaghta *et al.*, 2021).

Strengths refer to the internal elements of an organization that facilitate reaching its goals, while weaknesses are those internal elements that interfere with organizational success. Opportunities—external aspects that help an organization reach its goals—are not only positive environmental aspects but also opportunities to address gaps and initiate new activities. Threats, on the other hand, are aspects of the organization’s external environment that are barriers or potential barriers to reaching its goals (pp. 54-55).

This approach finds its underpinnings in the widely used cost-benefit analysis theory in economics and marketing disciplines (Drèze & Stern, 1987; Puyt *et al.*, 2020). The theory “offers clear guidelines for the evaluation of decisions” in varied fields (Drèze & Stern, 1987, p.909). The basic principle underlying the threats and opportunities framework is to assess whether the benefits derived from a particular action outweigh the costs incurred (Boardman *et al.*, 2017).

In this study, we focus on perceived threats and opportunities for AI use for a range of tasks (an external aspect) rather than the strengths and weaknesses (the internal elements) of the universities represented in our sample. We explore whether participants perceive the benefits derived from using AI to outweigh the costs incurred.

Generative AI in Higher Education: Opportunities and Threats

Market pressures, competitive dynamics, technological advancements, and a pervasive sense of hype and hope have prompted media organizations to adopt generative AI (Simon, 2024). Given AI’s potential to increase efficiency in content production, it is an alluring addition to the classroom as educators prepare students for the workforce (Demmar & Neff, 2023; Luttrell, Wallace, McCollough, & Lee, 2000). Journalism programs are proceeding with caution. Those included in a recent study had yet to develop a comprehensive AI instruction plan. Instead, program leaders largely left the decision of whether and how to

use AI to faculty members (Wenger, Hossain, & Senseman, 2024). Another study found that more than half of JMC professors had used AI in their teaching and more planned to do so in the near future (Biswas & Bland, 2024).

Among the ways that AI can help educators: lesson planning, customizing learning experiences, compiling handouts and other learning materials, creating rubrics and grading quizzes, giving instantaneous feedback, and streamlining communication with students outside of class (Alasadin & Baiz, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Finley, 2023; Okela, 2024; Timms, 2016). AI can help students generate ideas for projects, conduct initial research, take notes and create outlines, have concepts explained in a variety of ways, and get feedback on writing and editing (Bala & Colvin, 2023). Some have described AI as an after-hours tutor (Roose, 2023), which may benefit students with different learning styles and be especially useful for students with learning disabilities or language barriers (Bala & Colvin, 2023).

Concerns about AI use often center on academic dishonesty and shortcuts taken to circumvent the learning process (Bala & Colvin, 2023). Many JMC professors have addressed cheating in their course policies (Biswas & Bland, 2024). Educators have expressed concern about a loss of critical thinking and writing skills, uncritical adoption of biased citation practices, and blurring of authorship (Bala & Colvin, 2023). Educational technology experts encourage instructors to check AI-produced information for accuracy and usefulness before it reaches students (Finley, 2023). They advise educators to consider the data AI tools draw upon, which may vary in quality or be outdated. Algorithmic bias is another concern because it can occur without discriminatory intent (Zeide, 2019).

Others have expressed concern that overreliance on AI risks atrophying students’ ability and willingness to interact with instructors and peers (Bala & Colvin, 2023) and “threatens key ideals of schools being pedagogically oriented, physically co-present and bounded institutions” (Johannessen, Rasmussen, & Haldar, 2023, p. 1). Some have observed that the relationship between students and faculty has become increasingly adversarial as faculty are on high alert for cases of cheating and students feel they are not trusted to act ethically (Roose, 2023).

Keywords: Generative AI, Journalism Education, Ethical AI Use

Ethical Considerations and Recommendations

Despite these legitimate concerns, education experts conclude that banning AI is “naïve and misguided” given its widespread availability and use in the workforce (Hodges & Ocak, 2023). Educators must carefully consider ethical implications of adopting AI (Timms, 2016) and ensure that its use aligns with course learning outcomes (Demmar & Neff, 2023). Journalism school administrators unanimously agreed that an ethical foundation for AI use is essential but were unsure of the path to achieving that goal (Wenger, Hossain, & Senseman, 2024).

Experts recommend that educators discuss with students what constitutes appropriate uses and applications of AI and help them think critically about the limitations of these tools (Bala & Colvin, 2023). One report advises educators to prohibit use of AI when it interferes with students’ ability to develop foundational skills and to allow its use with attribution so long as students verify the accuracy of AI-generated content (Bala & Colvin, 2023).

This study builds on existing research on opportunities and threats, and ethical uses of AI in higher education by asking:

RQ1: What do JMC students and faculty perceive as the most significant opportunities presented by generative AI for teaching and learning?

RQ2: What do students and faculty perceive as the most significant concerns or threats presented by generative AI for teaching and learning?

RQ3: How do students and faculty envision policies that address ethical uses of generative AI in the academic environment?

Method

Members of the research team conducted seven focus groups: four with college students (*n* = 22) studying JMC and three with faculty members (*n* = 13) who teach in that field. Students attended an East Coast university; faculty members represented that institution and eight other U.S. universities. To recruit student participants, we posted fliers in academic buildings. E-mails were sent to faculty members at that university and to those in researchers’ networks.

The student sample included 15 women and seven men, all sophomores, juniors, or seniors who have taken a range of JMC courses. Among faculty members, seven were female and six were male. They rep-

resent a variety of ranks: lecturer, assistant teaching professor, assistant professor, and associate professor. Several taught in journalism schools; others in departments of communication or mass communication. Their courses included journalism history, ethics, and philosophy; news writing and reporting; data analysis; introduction to journalism and mass communication; introduction to public relations; international communication; research methods; and feminist media theory.

Focus group sessions included four to eight participants and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. Faculty focus groups were virtual; students were in person. Questions were split into several categories: familiarity with and use of AI, opportunities for AI in teaching and learning, challenges and threats, and ethical considerations.

Focus group transcripts were uploaded to NVivo. We used an inductive approach to data analysis rather than relying on a pre-existing coding framework. Following the phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we read through transcripts multiple times, noting initial ideas and generating initial codes. We then collated codes into potential themes and generated a thematic map of the analysis. Finally, we defined and refined themes, placing conceptually similar responses into categories. Categories and themes are shown in Table 1.

Results

Participants had mixed feelings about AI use for teaching and learning. Representative is a student’s comment that, “On the positive side it’s a good starting point, but on the negative side, if you use it too often it can become a crutch.” We begin by examining perceived opportunities and threats.

Perceived Opportunities

RQ1 asked what participants perceived as the most significant opportunities presented by AI. Most commonly mentioned were opportunities to get inspiration for lessons or assignments, help with the early stages of projects, and outsource routine tasks. We explore faculty and student responses separately.

Faculty Member Uses

A majority of faculty participants had either used or planned to use AI in their courses. They observed that AI could help them lesson plan and explain concepts, develop course materials, create and grade assess-

Table 1: Categories and Themes

Category	Theme	Definition
Opportunities	Inspiration	Using AI as a starting point to brainstorm and generate ideas
	Explanation	Using AI to explain concepts
	Assessment	Using AI to grade student work
	Analysis	Using AI to analyze large datasets
	Critical Thinking	Teaching lessons about critically evaluating AI-generated content
	Copy Editing	Using AI to check for grammar, punctuation, style, etc.
Threats/Concerns	Outsourcing	Using AI to complete routine tasks
	Academic dishonesty	Using AI to cheat, plagiarize, and/or fabricate/falsify information
	Distrust	Skepticism and doubt about students’ academic integrity
	Uncritical Thinking	Using AI as a crutch in ways that damage students’ critical thinking capacity/skills
Policies/Ethics	Lack of Preparation	AI overreliance leading students to cheat themselves and be unprepared for work
	Transparency	Clear expectations about appropriate AI use; disclosing when AI has been used
	Consistency	Following one’s own AI policy; standardization of policies across an academic institution
	Input	Seeking student feedback on AI policies
	Preparedness	Helping students understand how to use AI ethically so they are career ready
	Originality of Thought	Questions regarding what constitutes one’s own thinking and wording when using AI
	Writing Structure	Questions regarding how much AI should be used to organize one’s ideas on the page

ments, teach data analysis and critical thinking skills, and handle routine tasks.

Inspiration and explanation. Professors agreed that AI can be useful for lesson planning and explaining concepts. Several used it to generate case studies for in-class exercises and to get inspiration for other learning activities. Others used it to help teach concepts in new ways. Said a professor, “I’ve developed habits over the years about how I teach a particular technique or approach, and sometimes students conceptually don’t get it. I’ve begun to ask AI, ‘Explain this concept to me in 10 different ways, using different frames, or stories, or background.’ I’ve asked it to explain it using characters from Dr. Seuss.”

Students had mixed views on whether faculty members should use AI for lesson planning and to explain concepts. Some had no issue with it, but others felt it “cheapens the value of the degree.” One commented that, “Instead of having a person with authority and experience coming up with materials, I would just be learning from AI.” Another said, “I feel like it’s professors’ job to make the material learnable. I think [using AI] is kind of like doing the job for them.” **Assessments.** Views were mixed about AI and assessments. Several professors who taught lecture courses used AI to create exam questions and evaluate students’ discussion board contributions. A professor who uses it to assess online posts also has a teaching

assistant verify student contributions. Using AI has “freed us up to be able to focus on productive, useful feedback rather than having to quantify every post,” the professor said. Others said they would consider using AI to grade multiple choice test answers. Students were open to this if it meant getting back grades quicker. Professors who taught journalism and public relations skills courses that emphasize writing felt that all feedback should come from them. “I take a real interest in how students are putting their thoughts together; I wouldn’t want to rely on AI for [assessing writing],” a journalism professor said. Students agreed that AI should not be used to grade writing, with one commenting that “I want professors to read my work themselves—AI shouldn’t be used to grade essays, but everything else is fair game.”

Critical thinking. Several professors integrated AI into lessons to teach students to think critically about AI-generated content. A public relations professor asked students to compare a press release they wrote with an AI-generated press release. A journalism professor assigned students to fact check a ChatGPT-produced news story and identify inaccuracies. **Analysis.** Other professors assigned students to use AI to analyze data. Those who taught data analysis courses generally felt that AI had the most promise. A professor who teaches data journalism said, “I originally thought, ‘this is probably going to present challenges for my colleagues who teach writing, but it’s going to be useful for me in my teaching,’ and it’s played out that way.” That professor covers how to ask AI questions that produce useful results and help problem solve. “Previously, I’d have students who would just hit a wall [with coding] and spend hours staring at a screen, but AI has helped give them the tools to avoid that.”

Outsourcing. Faculty participants used AI to automate tasks like creating templates, sending mass e-mails, and transcribing interviews. Some said that while AI could be used to write boilerplate language on syllabi and other course materials, it likely wouldn’t be a time saver. Students generally did not see a problem with this use of AI so long as the main ideas included in course materials came from faculty members. Professors did not use AI chatbots to outsource communication with students. Some were open to doing so, but others said they did not trust AI for that purpose. Most students were OK with professors using AI to send announcements but did not like the idea TA-like chatbots. “That defeats the

whole purpose of their job,” one said. “It reminds me of when you call customer service and there’s a robot trying to help but they aren’t and you’re just trying to get to a real person.”

Student Uses

Students viewed AI as useful in the early stages of writing assignments but felt that overreliance on it was a problem. Said one, “I feel like it can be a shortcut, but if the technology is available why wouldn’t you make it easier on yourself and be more efficient?” **Inspiration.** AI helped students generate ideas and angles for stories, avoid writer’s block, and overcome procrastination. One said, “If I don’t understand how to start a writing prompt, AI will give me ideas and help me brainstorm.” Another commented, “In my PR writing class, we had to write a press release, which I’d never done, so I asked [AI] to write me a press release and it gave me the breakdown of what goes where.” **Explanation.** Most students felt AI is useful to create study guides and comprehend course material. One said, “I can ask it a question from my homework, and it will give me a quick answer. Then I go back to my notes.” Many used it when they needed an explanation of a concept. Yet several said they did not use AI for this purpose because they felt it would make them lazy. “I feel like anything I could look up [on ChatGPT] could be found by looking at other resources or talking to peers or a tutor.” Professors had no problem with students using AI as a study aide so long as they verify information and didn’t view it as a replacement for office hours.

Copy editing. Students generally saw no issue with using AI-powered editing and proofreading tools. “I can just use Grammarly or ChatGPT grammar check and it comes back and it’s as if I went to the writing center,” one said. Yet some felt that overreliance on these tools—particularly in skills courses that list editing and proofreading as learning outcomes—is one of the main ways that AI becomes a crutch. Professors shared this concern, but several thought these tools could be useful for students who need extra help.

Outsourcing. Students saw no issue with using AI to format cover letters, resumes, and other internship/job application materials. While some acknowledged that AI is unreliable for creating a bibliography or making sure an article adheres to APA or AP style, they still used it for this because it was a time saver.

Perceived Threats

RQ2 asked what participants perceived as the most significant concerns or threats. Concerns about academic integrity violations were widespread. Faculty members felt assessing student work had become more difficult, and students worried that faculty distrust might negatively impact them.

Faculty Member Concerns

Academic dishonesty. Since ChatGPT launched, professors spent considerably more time trying to identify cases of cheating, plagiarism, and falsification. A professor who runs students’ reflective writing assignments through generative AI checkers commented that “there are so many that you can’t depend on one to figure it out, which is time consuming.” Another said, “I already had worked hard to develop assignments and projects where students couldn’t cheat, and then [with AI] I thought, ‘Oh, great, now here’s something else I have to think about.’” A professor who assigns a lot of homework worried that “once [students] get overloaded, they’re going to start using AI as an easy way to get the work done.” A faculty member who teaches journalism shared a related concern: “I can imagine a student who’s stuck saying, ‘Why don’t I put all my quotes into ChatGPT and see if it can write a lead.’”

Uncritical thinking. Professors worried that students would become so reliant on AI that they would not develop critical thinking skills or that their skills would atrophy, resulting in an inability to assess information sources, make original arguments, and identify issues in their writing. A professor put it bluntly: “My concern is that AI is going to make people stupid. The more tools we get, the less thinking we do.” Another commented, “If you start by throwing stuff into ChatGPT, it’s going to spit stuff out and you’ll miss out on early steps [of the writing process], which require critical thinking.” AI “can be a detriment in certain circumstances and a positive in others,” a different professor said. “For a coding class, it’s useful, but for a writing class, it’s a crutch that we don’t want students using when they’re supposed to be learning to write in a journalistic style.”

Student Concerns

Distrust/false accusations. Students’ primary concern was being falsely accused of AI misuse. While faculty participants didn’t think their relationship with students had changed since the release of ChatGPT,

students sensed that faculty had grown more distrustful of them. A student commented, “I think teachers have this mindset where nothing students turn in is their original work.” Another said that when he first heard about ChatGPT, he assumed professors would “get paranoid that people are cheating on essays, and it turns out I was right.” A different student said that after a professor caught a cheater, she converted assignments from virtual to in person because “she no longer trusts students.” These experiences made some students swear off AI altogether, with one saying, “I’m petrified of using it because I don’t want to fail.” **Lack of preparation.** Participants worried that overreliance on AI would leave students ill-prepared for their careers. “I’m concerned that a lot of my classmates don’t know what they’re doing because they’re using AI and won’t be equipped to do these jobs,” a student said. Several described getting instantaneous answers from AI as an addiction. “I use it to see if I have a good idea or if I am thinking about something the right way, and it’s easy to get carried away.”

Policies on AI Use

RQ3 asked about views on AI ethics policies. Many felt that professors should be transparent about their expectations and be consistent in upholding policies. There was disagreement about who should be consulted before creating guidelines, and what constitutes ethical use of AI on writing assignments.

Transparency and Consistency

Most faculty members included AI policies in their syllabi. Several wished they had received more guidance from their institutions about what to include in these policies, with one professor saying, “I feel like we’re on our own. I don’t think that works well because students come back and say, ‘There’s no [institution-wide] policy, what should we do?’”

Students felt that professors should be transparent about their policies, particularly about what constitutes plagiarism and how students should cite AI-generated content. Some observed that their professors had vastly different policies, which led to confusion. A professor heard such feedback from students. “At the institution level, we don’t have a clear AI policy. Students do assignments using ChatGPT in some classes because it’s not banned, and in others they are told it’s cheating.” Many students wanted professors to abide by the same rules they set for students. For instance, if professors ask students not to

use AI to generate content for class assignments, they should do the same, otherwise “that’s hypocritical,” a student said.

Input

One area of disagreement was whether and how students should be included in conversations about appropriate AI use. Students wanted a seat at the table, arguing that these policies directly affect them. One commented, “I feel like when it’s just teachers and deans in a room talking about issues, that echo chamber is a problem.” Another said it’s important for faculty members and administrators to hear directly from students because “they automatically think copy-and-paste cheating is rampant, but that’s not what most of us [students] use AI for. Someone needs to be there to defend our case before decisions are made.”

Yet few professors had included students in such conversations. Views were mixed on whether doing so would be constructive. “We’re teaching them how to use these tools that make their life easier and more efficient,” one professor argued. “So, I think keeping them out of the conversation is hypocritical.” Another said she could imagine asking graduate students for feedback because class size is small and students are advanced. But in her large undergraduate class, she felt she needed a clear-cut policy before the semester began to avoid confusion. Several professors thought that asking for any student feedback could backfire, with one saying, “You’re inviting trouble” if you let undergraduates help dictate policy.

Preparedness

Professors and students overwhelmingly were against AI bans, which they felt were neither realistic nor sensible. “The danger is that we overact and go into crackdown mode, which won’t serve anyone well,” a professor said. “The harder and more necessary conversation is how we’re going to change our assignments and the way we grade.” Several professors noted that students need to learn how to use AI ethically to be career ready. One said that “in the PR industry people are using [AI] so it’s kind of stupid for us to ban it in the classroom.” A journalism professor shared that belief. “Students will be using this professionally in newsrooms so they might as well know how to use it.” Students overwhelmingly agreed with this sentiment.

For instance, most felt that they should be allowed to use AI editing and proofreading tools be-

cause these are commonly used in their industries.

Views on AI Policies

There were notable areas of overlap in faculty members’ AI policies. Several adopted a rule that students cannot use AI unless it is explicitly part of an assignment. Others asked students to disclose how they used AI. Some told students that AI is like Wikipedia: “a good place to start but a bad place to end.” Using AI to start exploring a topic is OK, but then more credible sources are necessary. A public relations professor has a “ChatGPT yes, sometimes, and no policy,” which others in the focus group said aligned with theirs. According to this policy, ChatGPT is fine to use in conducting client research so long as students vet that information. It’s sometimes OK to use in the beginning stage when brainstorming campaign ideas. It’s a hard no for producing campaign content.

Writing structure. Professors were against students using AI for high-level writing tasks but were more open to them using it to help them structure their ideas. As a journalism professor noted, “I don’t want them using [AI] to write the rough draft. But if it somehow could clarify their thinking in terms of organizing a story, I wouldn’t be nearly as opposed to that.”

Originality of thought. Students generally agreed with professors that AI should be allowed to conduct initial research, identify potential sources, and help with outlines. One said, “If you’re using AI to brainstorm, it’s not bad, but if you’re just copying and pasting, that’s not OK.” Students acknowledged that using AI-generated text verbatim without citation is plagiarism. Especially egregious is lifting full passages. There was disagreement, however, about whether using short AI-generated passages without citation is unethical. Said a student, “It’s fine if AI helps you come up with an idea, but the second you start stealing sentences, you’re done.” Some students said a good workaround is to change a few words or rearrange a sentence. Others felt that was a gray area. “It’s definitely a shortcut,” a student commented, “but I’m not sure I consider it fully cheating.” Others called that practice “fancy plagiarism.” Said a student, “You’re just using the same framework but tweaking it, which is basically copying and pasting.”

Discussion

Many findings in this study are relevant to educators across disciplines. Professors and students identified a

range of opportunities and threats, with many believing that generative AI tools are a good starting point but can easily become a crutch. Consistent with prior research, professors felt that AI could help them with lesson planning, compiling learning materials, and creating/grading assessments. Students saw opportunities to generate ideas, outline their work, and find explanations of concepts. There was some disagreement about whether references/citations and proofreading/following style guides were tasks that should be outsourced, or whether students should do these themselves.

Concerns about academic dishonesty and loss of critical thinking skills were widespread. Educators found it cumbersome to detect improper AI use, but still felt it was necessary to do so given the stakes. Students expressed concerns about being falsely accused of cheating and felt they were being unfairly punished because their classmates had been caught using AI. While some students observed that their relationship with faculty members had become more adversarial, most professors did not perceive that to be the case, saying that it is too early to tell how AI will change the student-faculty dynamic.

Students and professors agreed with education technology experts that banning AI is misguided (Hodges & Ocak, 2023) given that students will find ways to use it and will be expected to use it in their careers to work more efficiently. Instead, participants thought students should learn how to ethically use AI. Participants often agreed about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate AI use. Both groups thought that faculty members should use AI sparingly, particularly when creating assignments, grading, and responding to students. All felt that professors should be responsible for the creative parts of lesson planning and should grade writing themselves. Many agreed that faculty use of AI for non-creative tasks such as formatting or generating boilerplate language in syllabi, or grading multiple-choice quizzes, is appropriate. Students felt that professors should abide by the same policies they set for their students, and faculty members acknowledged that it would be hypocritical for them to use AI in ways they told students not to in their work.

Participants generally saw no problem with students using AI to help organize their thinking and find explanations of concepts. In other words, most agreed that AI is a fine place to start. Many drew a line when it came to writing. All agreed that students

should not copy-paste passages generated by AI, because this constitutes plagiarism. Professors generally felt that students should not outsource any part of the writing process to AI. Some students agreed with professors’ positions while others thought using AI to get inspiration for news leads or topic sentences was OK. Students also had mixed views on whether paraphrasing from AI is ethical. There was no consensus about how much of an essay or term paper should be written in students’ own words, and how much can be used from AI without it being plagiarism.

Findings indicate that both students and professors would benefit from increased institutional guidance on ethical AI use. Students wanted to be involved in this process, but faculty members were mixed on whether this was appropriate. Even if faculty members do not consult with students before finalizing their AI policies, they should explain their rationale to students and give them a chance to respond. Students felt that professors’ policies were too varied and wanted more uniformity to avoid confusion. Universities should suggest common language for professors to use and faculty members should discuss agreed-upon principles. Yet given academic freedom, it is inappropriate to mandate that faculty adopt uniform guidelines.

This study’s results have specific implications for students and educators in JMC programs. Students going into newsrooms, public relations agencies, and other media workplaces need a firm understanding of when using AI is appropriate and when it is considered unnecessary or unethical. Educators cannot be expected to offer universal guidelines given the range of employer policies and evolving professional norms, but they should help JMC students think through the implications of using AI for tasks (e.g., researching, analyzing, writing, editing, presenting) that will be required of them depending on their industry and role (e.g., news reporter or editor, copy writer, PR account manager).

Students felt that professors were overly fixated on how AI can be used to cheat and on finding student offenders. Professors in writing-intensive courses felt their concerns and actions were warranted. JMC educators should emphasize the importance of making ethical decisions and the consequences of not doing so. They should hold students accountable when they don’t follow course AI policies. Adopting some version of the aforementioned ChatGPT yes, sometimes, and no policy may help reduce uncertain-

ty students expressed about professors' expectations. This requires educators to revisit their learning outcomes and think through questions like: Is finding a story angle and brainstorming interview questions on one's own critical, or can a student journalist use AI to help? Is reading background material from start to finish necessary when writing a client report, or can a public relations student rely on AI summaries—and if so, how much paraphrasing and citing is needed to avoid plagiarism?

JMC educators *could* spend all of their devoted time to AI discussing policies and ethical gray areas, and warning students about ways AI can become a crutch, but they should not. Participants who teach data analysis courses understood the importance of stressing the benefits of AI and teaching students relevant skills. Those who teach media production courses should do the same. Students can benefit from learning how to use to AI for routine tasks such as transcription and content scheduling so they can spend more time on cognitively challenging work. Some participants were already teaching students to write effective prompts and fact check AI-generated content—lessons that should become widespread throughout the JMC curriculum.

Students cannot rely solely on their professors to prepare them for how to use AI in the workplace. Learning about how AI is changing work in their industry and what skills are in high demand is in part their responsibility. Nor should students base their decisions on whether to use AI for a specific task solely on whether they *can* get away with it in their JMC courses. They are also responsible for policing themselves. Students were rightly concerned that overreliance on AI could leave them and their peers unprepared for their careers. Given how difficult it has become to secure a decent-paying entry-level job in a media field, students recognized that taking shortcuts in JMC courses only meant cheating themselves.

Limitations & Future Research

This study's relatively small sample size and reliance on students from one academic institution limits generalizability of findings. Focus group questions focused primarily on how AI *can* be used for teaching and learning; researchers did not attempt to verify whether and how participants used such tools. Furthermore, this study was exploratory in nature and did not focus on testing theory. Rather, its findings might contribute to generate theoretical foundations

for future research. Future studies should compare other institutions in the United States to get a better sense of how students view AI use in other settings. Additionally, more research is needed to understand changes to the student-faculty dynamic and whether distrust has increased.

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