GHENT UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF LAW AND CRIMINOLOGY

FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

5th International Press Freedom Seminar:

Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

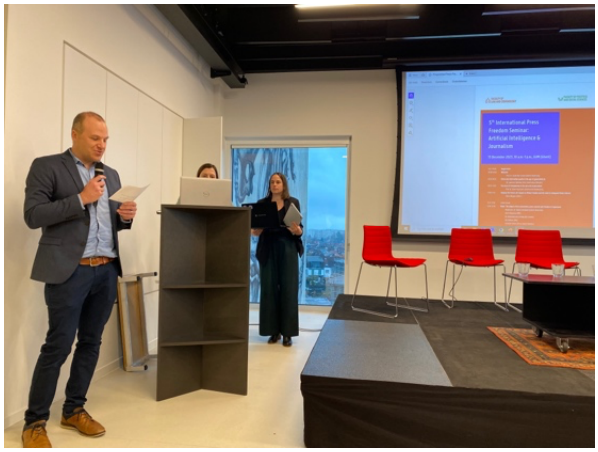
13 December 2023, Ghent, Belgium

REPORT

The annual Seminar on Press Freedom was, for the fifth time, organised by the Faculty of Law and Criminology and the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University, Belgium. The event brought together speakers from different backgrounds: journalists, academics, press councils and policy makers. Together, these experts delved into a range of topics such as the utilisation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by journalists, its impact on the journalism profession, public trust in the news media, the role of public broadcasters, and various other pertinent subjects.

Prof. Sarah van Leuven (Center for Journalism Studies, Ghent University), set the tone for the seminar, by underlining the enduring importance of a free press in a world of ceaseless information flows and a continuously evolving digital landscape. She underscored the press's role as a watchdog, holding power to account and serving as a bulwark against misinformation and manipulation. Despite this crucial role, various threats, censorship, and attacks on journalists persist, threatening the very essence of our democratic principles.

Prof. Van Leuven drew attention to the ongoing bombardments and invasion of the Gaza strip by the Israeli military forces, which are taking a very high toll on journalists. Shortly after the 7th of October, accusations surfaced of social media platforms engaging in AI-enabled shadowbanning, particularly reducing the reach of pro-Palestine content. Prof. Van Leuven stressed the crucial need to scrutinise AI's potential threats to freedom of expression, specifically press freedom, within the context of ongoing conflicts and contemporary challenges. The seminar's preparation also coincided with the EU's preparations and negotiations for the world's first AI Act, designed to provide a legal framework for the development and deployment of AI applications. Notably, the last stretch of negotiations began exactly one week before the seminar, and only days before the seminar the EU institutions announced their political agreement on the text. The seminar aimed to delve into these matters, exploring the multifaceted impact of AI on journalism and its implications for preserving democratic values.



Following the opening remarks, **Bart Vanhaelewyn** (Center for Journalism Studies, Ghent University) proceeded to introduce the keynote speakers.

The first keynote speaker, **dr. Laurence Dierickx** (Université Libre de Bruxelles, University of Bergen) talked about how over five decades, computers have played an integral role in the field of journalism, evolving to become essential tools for understanding and interpreting societal dynamics. The innovative methods employed by elite practitioners in journalism have driven the industry forward, with a notable surge in data journalism and its demand for specialised skills. Despite these advancements, many journalism students remain hesitant to engage with numerical data, harbouring a fear that obscures the recognition of the human narratives behind the statistics. At the same time, such skills are now needed to develop robust AI literacy among journalists, insofar as AI-based systems rely on data. Dr. Dierickx underscored that the relationship between journalism and AI is marked by ambiguity: while the integration of AI brings undeniable benefits to uphold professional standards, it is not without risks, as practitioners grapple with the apprehension of being under constant pressure and the looming fear of job identity loss. Striking a delicate balance between embracing the potential of AI and navigating its challenges is essential for the continued evolution of journalism in the digital age.

Dr. Dierickx continued by discussing what AI currently means for journalism. AI finds application across various stages of the news process, particularly in data processing and mathematical operations, empowering machines to learn, adapt, and execute functions. A significant percentage of news journalists already incorporate AI into their work. This includes search engines relying on AI, machine translations, spell checkers, and automated transcription services for their interview. In addition, generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, are swiftly gaining traction in the journalistic landscape. The accessibility and usability of generative AI enables even small newsrooms to automate aspects of their processes. At the same time, the widespread adoption of AI in journalism also poses threats to information quality. AI systems can be used for the creation of manipulated content and the rapid dissemination of propaganda and false information, and the efficacy of AI detectors still remains questionable. In addition, generative AI systems are known for their “artificial hallucinations”. Such features could lead to distrust among audiences.

Building onto these risks, Dr. Dierickx then discussed the need for clear frameworks regulating AI. Press councils in Europe advocate for ethical codes emphasising transparency, clear disclosures, and the responsibility of editors for editorial choices. Furthermore, transparency is a crucial requirement and the audience should be aware of the collection and use of data. However, Dr. Dierickx also stressed that while transparency helps navigate the intricacies of AI decision-making processes, the inherent complexity and bias of AI

systems raise questions about its sufficiency—prompting a call for greater explainability. For example, the Catalan press council has advocated for the involvement of journalists in the design of AI systems during implementation, an often overlooked but crucial aspect. There also appears to be a gap in communication between data and computer scientists, linguists not trained in journalism, and the journalistic community, emphasising the need for a shared understanding and fine-tuning of language and inclusive polities. A notable example is the BBC, who developed AI guidelines for developers to ensure machine learning in the public interest. Additionally, tackling AI systems from an ethical perspective should consider a risk-based approach, she said, in line with the European AI Act. Such an approach is already developed by the French press council, which considers low risks applications that have no incidence on information quality to high risks applications, which are likely to cause harm and should be avoided, such as realistic content that is likely to mislead.

The second keynote speaker, **Deniz Wagner (**Adviser to the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media**)** addressed the impact of AI on media freedom. She first shared her thoughts on how AI is impacting the media landscape and the main challenges thereof. AI can be used for fact-checking, and its scale and speed has great potential to support the more tenuous work that happens behind the scene in news organisations. However, concerns were underscored by Ms. Wagner, particularly regarding the erosion of trust in information. The use of AI has raised doubts, leading to questions about the authenticity of information and whether it was developed by a human. The lack of transparency and opacity of such systems have also emerged as a significant challenge.

Ms. Wagner talked about how the OSCE, since 2016, has undertaken an important project putting the spotlight on AI and the freedom of expression. Recognising that media freedom and pluralism is central to democracy and security, the OSCE remains committed to adapting to the evolving landscape of media. In the face of rapid technological advancements and the overwhelming scale of online content, AI has emerged as the primary tool for content moderation and curation. This technological shift has a deep impact on individual rights, such as the right to freedom of expression and access to information. The transformative impact of AI is also deemed disruptive and potentially detrimental to democratic and peaceful societies. In response to these challenges, the OSCE has been working on evidence-based recommendations and guidance for stakeholders.

With regards to the use of AI in content moderation, Ms. Wagner pointed to significant challenges. A first challenge relates to the design of Machine Learning (ML) algorithms. These algorithms are constructed based on rules set by humans for annotating the training data used in the ML model. It is crucial to recognise that AI systems learn what humans teach them, and any biases present in the human contributors or embedded in the data will inevitably replicate throughout the entire lifecycle of the AI system and across national borders, giving rise to what is commonly known as algorithmic bias. Other risks include downgrading content from minority voices, and failing to remove illegal or harmful content (such as vicious threats against women journalists). AI lacks the contextual

understanding necessary to comprehend the actual harm certain content can inflict on an individual. This also poses risks to over-removal (e.g. of legitimate content).

With regards to the use of AI in content curation, Ms. Wagner noted that the core democratic principles of diversity and media pluralism are challenged by the large dominant platforms. The platforms use AI to power their content recommender systems, which are used to decide which content should be prioritised, what should remain hidden, and to whom. This ranking of content impacts their freedom to seek and impart information, and impacts the overall information landscape. The current business models of these platforms are not at all encouraging AI systems to be employed to develop public interest content, which has profound impacts on the right to be informed and on our democratic engagement. It has the inadvertent effect of reinforcing users' existing views rather than exposing them to a more pluralistic media environment. This curated exposure leads to an information asymmetry, where users remain oblivious to the absence of diverse perspectives and where they are not incentivised to check the accuracy of the information they consume. This in turn potentially has a big impact on our right to decision-making and to information.

With regards to the use of AI for content creation, Ms. Wagner mentioned that the exponential growth of technology, including the emergence of the metaverse and generative AI, introduces a new set of challenges that need to be considered. AI-generated disinformation (e.g. deepfakes) is becoming more and more sophisticated. An additional concern is the phenomenon known as Large Language Model (LLM) poisoning, where malicious actors inject substantial amounts of data into systems like ChatGPT, causing shifts in the model. Moreover, within the metaverse, the experience with information transcends mere observation; individuals actively engage with content. In this context, disinformation is not just an alternative narrative but an alternative reality.

Ms. Wagner then posed the critical question: how do we effectively regulate this dynamic space? While there is a lot of discussion about the future AI Act, the Digital Services Act (DSA) is even more important as it shapes our information spaces. The DSA places the onus on companies to quantify and actively mitigate the harms arising from their platforms. The OSCE has also developed a policy manual on AI and freedom of expression, providing guidance to OSCE participating States on how to fulfil their positive obligation to protect human rights of individuals when creating regulatory responses to the new challenges facing the use of AI. The key recommendations include transparency across different layers, data access frameworks, human rights safeguards, etc. Finally, Ms. Wagner addressed the question how do we go beyond the current situation and foster public interest content? AI tools – if developed and used in the right way – can play a constructive role in upholding the democratic function of the media. The OSCE is currently exploring a public interest framework, seeking not merely high-level guidance on what the internet should look like, but a tangible operationalisation of the concept of AI for good. Recognising that a one-size-fits-all solution does not exist, the OSCE proposes a number of key elements: regulation of not just the use but the entire lifecycle of AI, demanding constant review (e.g. through fundamental rights impact assessments); education of journalists and consumers about AI; and the development by public service media of an information infrastructure to adapt and benefit from AI, in which public interest content is visible and accessible.

The second part of the international seminar was **a panel discussion** on the challenges and opportunities of AI for journalism. The panel was moderated by **Dr. Valerie Verdoodt** (Law and Technology, Ghent University).

Tom Van de Weghe, an accomplished journalist and documentary maker for the Flemish public broadcaster, VRT, and a visiting research fellow at Stanford University where he studied AI's role in combating disinformation, shared insightful perspectives during the discussion. Mr. Van de Weghe highlighted the pervasive presence of AI and drew attention to the escalating challenge of misinformation and disinformation. Expressing apprehension, he raised concerns about journalists potentially undermining themselves by veering away from content created by humans, whereas such content tends to resonate more effectively with audiences. Additionally, Mr. Van de Weghe highlighted the necessity to be able to distinguish articles and videos created by AI, advocating for guidelines that prioritise transparency and human control. While acknowledging AI's potential to complement journalism, he stressed the crucial importance of never letting the final product be created solely by AI. Education also emerged as an important theme in his discourse, emphasising the need to equip journalists with a nuanced understanding of AI to enable effective public education on the subject. Mr. Van de Weghe acknowledged the pioneering role of public service broadcasters (PSBs) in innovation and inspiring practices in journalism. Recognising that trust is the most valuable asset for PSBs, he raised a critical question: **h**ow much of that trust can we put in machines? Within VRT, various initiatives, including the in-house development of a Smart News Assistant, are underway. Looking ahead, Mr. Van de Weghe predicted an increased reliance on AI in the media landscape, considering its potential to augment content and provide support to journalists.

Pol Deltour, serving as the Director of VVJ Academy, the educational unit of the Flemish Association of Journalists (Vlaamse Verening voor Journalisten), discussed the Academy's recent establishment and its choice to highlight the impact of AI on journalism as a first important focal point. Mr. Deltour discussed how more and more journalists are using translation tools, transcription tools and personalisation, often provided by big tech companies. Recognising the strategic importance for Belgium and Flanders to master these tools, the Academy is actively organising training sessions and developing an AI toolbox tailored for journalists. While Mr. Deltour emphasised that news companies bear the responsibility of providing training for their employees, he acknowledged the specific challenges faced by smaller organisations and in particular freelance journalists. In this context, the VVJ Academy plays a crucial role in bridging the gap. Additionally, Mr. Deltour shared recent survey results, revealing diverse sentiments about the future of journalism with AI. Among 50 respondents, one-third expressed genuine optimism, envisioning a positive collaboration between journalists and AI. Another third, however, displayed skepticism and pessimism, fearing potential job displacement by AI and concerns that publishers might view journalists as replaceable. The remaining third expressed uncertainty about the evolving relationship between journalism and AI.

Caroline Locher, serving as the Secretary General of the Quebec Press Council, delved into the ethical challenges and the role of self-regulation in trying to grapple with the transformative impact of new

technologies on journalism. Reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the press council, Ms. Locher marveled at the breath-taking evolution of journalism over the past five decades. In her insightful perspective, Ms. Locher drew a parallel between the transformative influence of AI in journalism and the arrival of the internet two decades ago, when there was more time for the profession to adapt. Recognising the urgency of the present scenario, she emphasised the imperative for self-regulators to adapt, while adhering to the core fundamental values underpinning ethical journalism. For instance, the protection of journalistic sources and data are already integrated into codes of ethics, which can be applied to AI as well. A key question relates to when journalists need to be transparent to their public when it comes to the use of AI? Drawing from real-world examples such as the Panama and Pandora Papers, she highlighted the significant utility and opportunities arising from the use of AI in investigative journalism (e.g. for translation, transcription purposes). Ms. Locher acknowledged the arrival of generative AI as a true game-changer and contemplated the necessary adaptations in guidelines, yet the core fundamental values will remain the same. She further delved into a critical dimension that often goes unaddressed, the origin of information within AI systems. For journalists, knowing the source of your information is crucial, prompting the need to develop custom data pools that are developed internally where you know the origin of the information. However, she also highlighted a substantial challenge with this: the media industry faces significant resource constraints, and as such increased government funding is urgently needed. She suggested that media organisations should think about coming together in fora (e.g. press councils or journalist associations) and explore ways of pooling journalism resources. This collaborative effort could extend to the development of their own generative AI models based on reliable and known sources.

Lidia Dutkiewicz is a doctoral researcher at the Centre for IT and IP Law at KU Leuven, specialised in the platformisation of news and the impact of algorithmic content moderation on media freedom, media pluralism and editorial independence. During the discussion, Ms. Dutkiewicz touched upon transparency as a legal requirement, with the future AI Act requiring that users are informed when they are interacting with an AI system, and the DSA imposing transparency obligations regarding the main parameters of recommender systems. Within the frame of her current project - the AI4Media Project which focuses on developing legally and ethically compliant AI tools for the media sector, workshops for journalists, media stakeholders and computer scientist were organised. In one, asking a question as whether the use of AI should be disclosed, most participants said no, because it would just become another cookie banner. Labelling everything only because it is generated by AI will make these disclosures less meaningful. She also pointed to a study examining how users perceive articles written with the assistance of generative AI. The findings indicated a decrease in trust when articles were perceived as AI-assisted. Ms. Dutkiewicz also explored the nuanced aspects of responsibility and liability within the AI chain, delving into the implications of the future AI Act. She noted that while EU policy makers have reached an agreement the final text will only published in early 2024. Describing it as a market-oriented instrument, she clarified that responsibility primarily lies with providers of AI systems, but users also carry their own legal or ethical obligations. Importantly, she emphasised that the core

principles such as those related to liability for defamation and misinformation remain unaltered by the AI Act. The accountability of journalists, therefore, is not substantially transformed. In other words, the triggers for accountability persist irrespective of the involvement of AI. Looking forward to the future, Ms. Dutkiewicz offered insights into the regulatory landscape, particularly the relationship between media freedom and platforms. She also mentioned other relevant initiatives such as the Council of Europe guidelines on the responsible implementation of AI in journalism, offering guidance to news organisations and journalists on what to pay attention to when acquiring AI tools.

After the panel discussion, **prof. Eva Lievens** (Law and Technology, Ghent University) provided concluding remarks on the international seminar. She addressed the profound societal importance of AI, a topic that has dominated headlines, research, and policymaking over the past year. Acknowledging the immense opportunities and real risks associated with AI, prof. Lievens underlined its relevance to the media and the press, as emerged clearly from the insights shared by the various participants in the discussion. She emphasised the task of academics to closely monitor AI developments, identifying and advocating for necessary safeguards to guarantee fundamental values such as the right to freedom of expression, press freedom and the right to receive information. Moreover, she extended a call to students, encouraging them to engage in critical reflections on the impact of technology on democratic values and playing an active role in raising awareness on these issues among their fellow students and friends. Finally, prof. Lievens thanked all speakers, panel members, members of the organising committee and the audience.

Rapporteurs: Valerie Verdoodt, Eva Lievens, Ingrida Milkaite, Sarah Van Leuven, 21 December 2023.

Organising Committee: Eva Lievens, Bart Vanhaelewyn, Sarah Van Leuven, Valerie Verdoodt

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