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Voices from the Field: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of AI's Transformative Impact on Digital Media and Communication Professionals

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with ten digital media, journalism, and corporate communication professionals, conducted as part of a doctoral study on the transformative effects of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on digital media. Participants included journalists, content creators, software engineers, and communication and partnerships professionals. Using a six-phase thematic analysis approach, five major themes were identified:

(1) AI as an efficiency and workflow multiplier; (2) the double-edged relationship between AI and creativity; (3) erosion of authenticity, credibility, and trust; (4) audience personalisation and the surveillance undertone of engagement; and (5) ethical and regulatory anxiety around misinformation, deepfakes, privacy, and job displacement. Across all

themes, participants consistently positioned AI as a 'force multiplier for human judgement, not a replacement for it,' emphasising that responsibility for accuracy, editorial judgement, and accountability must remain with human professionals even as routine tasks become increasingly automated. The findings complement a parallel quantitative survey of 300 digital media consumers conducted for the same doctoral project, offering an inside-the-industry perspective on patterns the survey data reveal at the level of public perception.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Digital Media; Journalism; Thematic Analysis; Qualitative Research; Media Ethics; Content Authenticity; AI in the Workplace

Introduction

While large-scale surveys can measure the breadth of public perception toward Artificial Intelligence (AI) in digital media, they are less well suited to capturing the depth, nuance, and lived experience of professionals whose day-to-day work has been directly reshaped by AI tools. This paper addresses that gap through a qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with ten professionals working across journalism, content creation, corporate communication, and software engineering — all fields directly implicated in the digital media value chain.

This paper forms the qualitative strand of a larger doctoral research project, "Analysing the Transformative Effects of AI on Digital Media," and is intended to be read alongside a companion quantitative paper that surveys 300 digital media consumers. Where the survey paper asks how the public perceives AI in digital media, this paper asks how those who build, use, and are professionally responsible for digital media content experience and reason about that same transformation.

Research Objectives

- To explore how digital media and communication professionals describe AI's influence on their day-to-day creative and professional workflows.
- To identify recurring themes in professional attitudes toward AI-generated content, authenticity, and trust.
- To understand professionals' views on the ethical risks associated with AI in digital media, including misinformation, deepfakes, privacy, and bias.
- To capture professional expectations about the future trajectory of AI in journalism, corporate communication, and digital media over the next 5–10 years.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How do digital media professionals describe the practical, day-to-day impact of AI tools on their work?
- RQ2: What tensions do professionals identify between AI-driven efficiency and human creativity, authenticity, and originality?
- RQ3: What ethical and regulatory concerns are most salient to professionals working directly with AI-influenced content?
- RQ4: How do professionals envision the evolving division of labour between AI systems and human judgement?

Literature Review

AI as a Professional Tool: Efficiency and the Changing Newsroom

Scholarship on AI in journalism and digital media has increasingly moved from questions of technical capability toward questions of professional identity, editorial judgement, and trust. Diakopoulos (2019), in *Automating the News*, argues that algorithmic tools have become embedded across the news production chain — from story discovery to drafting to distribution — without displacing the human editorial functions of verification and accountability that define

journalistic authority. A systematized review of 185 automated-journalism studies published between 2012 and 2024 confirms this picture at scale, identifying human-machine collaboration, rather than replacement, as one of the field's dominant and most durable themes, alongside newsroom adoption, institutional logics, and credibility (Bartleman, Schapals, & Dubois, 2026). This professional pattern — AI for speed, humans for judgement — is directly echoed by participants in the present study.

Authenticity, Credibility, and the Trust Deficit

A parallel body of work has examined how generative AI affects audience and professional trust in content. The Reuters Institute's ongoing cross-national tracking finds that audiences consistently rate AI-influenced news as less transparent and less trustworthy than human-produced news, even while expecting it to be cheaper and faster to produce (Simon, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2025). Diakopoulos's (2019) framing of algorithmic accountability — the idea that automation can scale production without automatically scaling the checks that sustain credibility — provides a useful lens for understanding why professionals in the present study so consistently paired enthusiasm for AI's speed with insistence on human fact-checking and editorial sign-off.

Creativity, Originality, and the Risk of Homogenisation

Experimental research on generative AI and creativity offers a more granular account of the 'double-edged sword' professionals describe qualitatively. In a large-scale writing experiment, Doshi and Hauser (2024) found that access to generative AI ideas improved individual story quality and perceived

creativity — particularly for less experienced writers — but simultaneously made AI-assisted stories more similar to one another, reducing the collective diversity and originality of creative output. This tension between individual augmentation and collective homogenisation maps closely onto participants' own descriptions in this study of AI as valuable for overcoming the 'blank page' while risking generic, interchangeable content when used without sufficient human refinement.

Personalisation, Surveillance, and Audience Engagement

Professionals' descriptions of AI-driven personalisation as simultaneously powerful and unsettling resonate with Pariser's (2011) concept of the filter bubble, in which recommendation algorithms narrow the range of content and viewpoints a user encounters based on inferred preferences and behaviour. Large-scale simulation work confirms that conventional recommendation algorithms reduce diversity between users even without necessarily narrowing any single individual's feed (Anwar, Schoenebeck, & Dhillon, 2024), while more recent research suggests that increasing users' awareness of how personalisation works can itself reduce filter-bubble formation (Jiang, 2025) — a finding that lends support to participants' own instinct that transparency, not just restraint, is the more durable fix.

Ethical Risk: Misinformation, Deepfakes and Regulatory Lag

The ethical concerns professionals raised — misinformation, deepfakes, privacy, bias, and the pace of regulation relative to technology — are well documented in the literature.

Research on audience responses to political deepfakes shows that manipulated content measurably affects viewer judgement, with a majority of viewers in one study believing a fabricated video was genuine and adjusting their stated political preferences accordingly (Momeni, 2025), lending empirical weight to participants' concerns about audiences' declining ability to distinguish real from synthetic media. Policy has begun to respond directly to this concern in the jurisdiction most participants in this study work within: India's Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 were amended to introduce the category of 'synthetically generated information' and mandatory labelling requirements, taking effect in November 2025 and revised further in early 2026 (Law.asia, 2026; Freshfields, 2026) — a regulatory direction that several participants, including P7, explicitly anticipated or referenced.

Synthesis and Positioning of the Present Study

Collectively, this literature supports a picture of AI as a genuine productivity transformation for digital media professionals that simultaneously strains the trust, originality, and accountability structures the industry depends on. Much of the empirical base, however, comes from large-scale surveys, controlled experiments, or Western newsroom case studies. This paper contributes a small but information-rich qualitative account from Indian digital media, journalism, and communication

professionals, offering first-person texture to patterns that quantitative and experimental literature has so far mostly described from the outside — and providing a direct professional counterpart to the consumer-facing survey data reported in the companion quantitative paper from this same doctoral project.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative, interview-based design analysed through thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely used six-phase framework: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach was selected for its suitability in identifying patterned meaning across a modest, information-rich sample of professional interviews, and for its flexibility across theoretical frameworks, which allowed themes to be developed inductively from participants' own language rather than imposed from a predetermined coding scheme.

Participants

Ten professionals were interviewed, spanning journalism (print and digital), content creation, corporate partnerships, strategic communication, and software engineering — the latter included to capture the perspective of those building the AI-enabled systems that digital media professionals increasingly rely upon. Participant identities have been anonymised

using participant codes (P1–P10) to preserve confidentiality; role, age group, gender, and education level are retained as they are analytically relevant.

Code	Profession	Age Group	Gender	Education
P1	Journalist (freelance, print/digital)	35–44	Male	Postgraduate or higher
P2	Software Engineer	35–44	Female	Undergraduate
P3	Content Creator	25–34	Male	Postgraduate or higher
P4	Partnerships Manager	35–44	Male	Postgraduate or higher
P5	Strategic Communication Professional	35–44	Male	Postgraduate or higher
P6	Journalist	35–44	Female	Postgraduate or higher
P7	Journalist (print media)	35–44	Male	Postgraduate or higher
P8	Journalist	35–44	Male	Undergraduate
P9	Software Engineer	25–34	Male	Undergraduate
P10	Content Creator	25–34	Female	Postgraduate or higher

Instrument

Interviews were structured around eight open-ended questions covering:

- (1) AI's influence on professional content creation, consumption, and management;
- (2) specific AI tools used and their day-to-day function;
- (3) AI's transformation of workflow and industry efficiency;
- (4) changes in audience engagement and personalisation;
- (5) impact on authenticity, credibility, and trust;
- (6) AI's effect on creativity and originality;
- (7) associated ethical concerns
- (8) expectations for the next 5–10 years.

Analytical Approach

Transcripts were read and re-read for familiarisation, after which responses were open-coded for recurring concepts (e.g., 'time-saving,' 'verification burden,' 'homogenisation of content,' 'privacy risk'). Codes were then grouped into candidate

themes, reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, and refined into the five major themes reported in Section 4. Direct quotations are used throughout to preserve participants' own framing, in line with standard qualitative research practice.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: AI as an Efficiency and Workflow Multiplier

Every participant, across professions, described AI's primary and most immediate benefit as time saved on repetitive or structurally demanding

tasks — research, drafting, summarisation, transcription, and data organisation — freeing capacity for higher-value work such as investigation, strategy, and relationship management.

"As a freelance journalist with limited resources at my disposal, AI has also proved resourceful with data crunching, research, and fact-checking. This has greatly helped me with turnaround time and ensured I stick to deadlines." — **P1, Journalist**

"AI has changed the way I work with digital content, not because it has replaced my judgement, but because it has reduced the amount of time I spend on avoidable, repetitive effort... It gives me more time to focus on decisions, relationships, and problems that require human judgement." — **P4, Partnerships Manager**

"AI has been revolutionary in my work life... it has increased the efficiency and reduced the turn around time." — **P9, Software Engineer**

Tool usage was concentrated around a small set of platforms — ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Canva AI, and Runway — mirroring the tool-awareness pattern also found in the quantitative survey. Participants uniformly described these tools as assistive rather than autonomous, framing AI's role as augmenting rather than performing their professional judgement.

Theme 2: The Double-Edged Sword of Creativity

Participants consistently held a dual view of AI's effect on creativity: it can broaden ideation and reduce the friction of getting started, but overreliance risks homogenising output and eroding original voice.

"The integration presents a complex dichotomy for creative fields... an over-reliance on AI might inadvertently lead to a homogenization of ideas and a decline in truly novel approaches. Striking a balance between AI assistance and human ingenuity will be crucial for preserving originality." —

P1, Journalist

"It does enhance the creativity but its also putting us at risk of plagiarism, repetitive content and a lot more which we aren't even ready for." —

P3, Content Creator

"AI can absolutely enhance human creativity, but only when it is used as a tool, not a replacement for original thought... Originality will depend on perspective and lived experience and I don't think AI can replicate that." —

P10, Content Creator

This theme closely parallels the quantitative finding that 81.0% of survey respondents believe AI improves creativity while 91.0% simultaneously fear excessive dependence could reduce it professionals and the broader public appear to hold the same nuanced, non-contradictory position. It also echoes experimental evidence that generative AI assistance can raise individual-level creative output while narrowing the diversity of what is collectively produced (Doshi & Hauser, 2024), suggesting P1's and P3's concerns reflect a documented, not merely anecdotal, effect.

Theme 3: Erosion of Authenticity, Credibility, and Trust

Authenticity and trust emerged as the most emotionally charged theme across interviews, with several participants describing a widening 'grey area' between human and AI-generated content that complicates verification and audience trust.

"Maintaining authenticity becomes increasingly difficult as the distinguishing line between human-created work and AI output is consistently getting blurred." —

P1, Journalist

"Trust is definitely reduced a lot. It has become difficult to trust online available content." — **P2, Software Engineer**

"This is sort of a gray area, where there is so much content available as of now which [is] generated by AI and there is no way a person can understand whether the content [is] based on facts or not... even credible sources sometimes slip off, because they didn't verify that piece of content." — **P9, Software Engineer**

"Credibility must remain a human obligation. The organisations that retain trust will be those that use AI for efficiency without compromising accuracy, disclosure, editorial judgement, or accountability." — **P5, Strategic Communication Professional**

This theme directly mirrors the survey finding that only 8.0% of the public would fully trust an AI-generated news article, and that 75.0% have at some point been unable to identify whether

content was AI-generated — professionals appear acutely aware of, and actively working to manage, precisely the trust deficit the public reports experiencing.

Theme 4: Personalisation, Engagement, and the Surveillance Undertone

Several participants described AI-driven personalisation as transformative for audience engagement, but also flagged an unsettling surveillance dimension to how deeply platforms now track and anticipate user behaviour.

"I've noticed a huge shift in how brands connect with us online! It's scary how I discuss a product over the phone with a friend, and the next thing on my Facebook timeline is the exact same product in the ad recommendation... somebody is always eavesdropping." — **P1, Journalist**

"Now that most of our data is being fed to AI models, it's easier for companies to have a very targeted approach... Privacy is just a myth in the digital world." — **P9, Software Engineer**

"The biggest shift has been from mass distribution to individualised delivery... However, personalisation has limits. If driven too aggressively by engagement metrics, it can create repetitive experiences, narrow the range of viewpoints users see, and prioritise content that performs well over content that is genuinely useful or important." — **P5, Strategic Communication Professional**

This theme corresponds closely to survey findings that 85.0% of respondents believe AI algorithms affect what content they see, 85.0% believe AI affects public opinion, and 89.3% report privacy concern — professionals confirm from the production side what audiences report experiencing from the reception side.

Theme 5: Ethical and Regulatory Anxiety — Misinformation, Deepfakes, Privacy, and Displacement

All participants raised ethical concerns, most commonly misinformation and deepfakes, privacy and data security, algorithmic bias,

and — distinctively among professionals rather than the general survey sample — anxiety about job displacement and the devaluation of specialised skill.

"One primary concern revolves around the potential for AI-generated content to amplify misinformation and disinformation campaigns... the algorithms powering these platforms can inadvertently create echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives." — **P1, Journalist,**

"It also poses a big risk to privacy and is being used in generating deepfakes, that has prompted India to propose a separate law to regulate AI like some EU countries." — **P7, Journalist**

"There will be layoff especially in the content writing and software engineering fields but, there will be

new types of jobs that'll be available... The privacy risks would be huge, because these AI agents would have all our data and if someone gets access to that, it'll be a nightmare for anyone." — **P9, Software Engineer**

"AI is moving much faster than regulation, media literacy and public awareness. That gap is the biggest concern." — **P10, Content Creator**

This theme aligns with the strong survey-level demand for regulation (88.3% support stricter regulation; 81.0% want AI content labelled), suggesting that professional and public anxiety around governance gaps are mutually reinforcing rather than divergent.

Outlook: A Converging Vision of Human–AI Collaboration

Despite the concerns raised across all five themes, participants converged on a

broadly similar vision for the next 5–10 years: AI will become further embedded in routine tasks, while human judgement, credibility, and original perspective become comparatively more — not less — valuable.

"The professionals who thrive will not be those who compete with AI in producing content, but those who know how to use it intelligently while offering something AI cannot: judgment, curiosity, credibility, empathy, and original insight." — **P5, Strategic Communication Professional**

"I think human qualities like judgement, credibility, taste etc. will become a lot more valuable." — **P10, Content Creator**

"AI will be increasingly integrated into newsrooms. But like any technology, it will never fully replace human beings. The existing workforce will need to learn to stay relevant." — **P6, Journalist**

Theme	Core Tension	Convergent Quantitative Finding
Efficiency multiplier	Speed gained vs. review burden added	88.3% agree AI reduced production time
Creativity	Augmentation vs. homogenisation	81.0% agree AI improves creativity; 91.0% fear overdependence
Authenticity & trust	Scale vs. credibility	Only 8.0% fully trust AI-generated news
Personalisation	Relevance vs. surveillance	89.3% concerned about AI privacy issues
Ethics & regulation	Innovation vs. accountability gap	88.3% support stricter regulation

Cross-Theme Synthesis

The recurring pattern across all five themes is captured well by P4's description of AI as 'a force multiplier for human judgement, not a replacement for it' — a framing echoed, in substance if not in exact words, by nearly every participant. This professional consensus provides a plausible explanation for the adoption-anxiety paradox identified in the companion quantitative paper: professionals who build and use these tools daily do not experience enthusiasm and caution as contradictory, but as two sides of a single, considered stance toward a still-maturing technology.

6. Discussion

These findings suggest that the digital media and communication workforce has already developed a fairly mature, self-regulating professional ethic around AI use — one centred on treating AI output as a draft requiring human verification, not a finished product. This mirrors long-standing professional norms in journalism around source verification, extended now to AI-generated material itself.

At the same time, participants' concerns about job displacement, echo chambers, and the pace of regulation relative to technological change point to structural risks that individual professional diligence cannot fully address. The convergence between this qualitative dataset and the companion quantitative survey — on trust, personalisation, and demand for regulation in particular — strengthens confidence that these are genuine, cross-cutting phenomena in the digital media ecosystem rather than artefacts of either method alone.

Limitations

- The sample of ten participants, while information-rich, is small and skewed toward the 25–44 age range and postgraduate education; it does not capture the perspectives of, for example, senior editors, media executives, or regulators.
- Participants were largely drawn from a similar professional and geographic network as the survey sample, which may limit the independence of the two datasets as fully separate validation sources.
- As with all self-reported interview data, responses reflect participants' own perceptions and framing rather than observed behaviour.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis of ten in-depth interviews with digital media and communication professionals reveals a workforce that has rapidly integrated AI into daily practice while maintaining — and in some cases sharpening — its commitment to human editorial judgement, verification, and accountability. Five themes captured this dynamic: AI as an efficiency multiplier, the double-edged relationship between AI and creativity, the erosion and active management of authenticity and trust, the double-edged nature of AI-driven personalisation, and persistent ethical and regulatory anxiety. Read alongside the companion quantitative survey of digital media

consumers, this study suggests that the tension between enthusiasm and caution toward AI is not a public misunderstanding to be corrected, but a shared, reasoned response — held by both audiences and industry professionals — to a genuinely transformative and still-unsettled technology.

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