CNTI CENTER for NEWS, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION.

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AI Applications in Investigative Journalism

Find the full briefing online here
https://cnti.org/briefing/ai-applications-in-investigative-journalism/

About

This is the fourth in a series of reports from the AI and Journalism Research Working Group convened by the Center for News, Technology & Innovation (CNTI). The working group currently consists of 21 cross-industry members from around the world, bringing research, journalism and technology expertise to the discussions.

Research we reviewed suggests

- AI tools are transforming investigative journalism foremost by expanding its capacity to handle large-scale data and investigate complex systems. They also redefine what counts as evidence, what is investigable and how journalistic knowledge is produced.
- AI tools do not replace core journalistic functions, which remain deeply human and context-dependent.
- Adoption of AI tools is shaped by economic constraints, skill gaps, language barriers and global inequalities, as well as by newsroom hierarchies, organizational culture, digital divides and external infrastructures. Each investigation is somewhat idiosyncratic, which means that customized AI tools provide more value than off-the-shelf solutions.
- Using AI tools in investigative journalism requires collaborative efforts that bring together people from diverse backgrounds and different areas of expertise.
- AI itself opens a major new area of investigative journalism around holding institutions accountable for decisions made by AI systems.

AI applications in investigative journalism

1 **"Finding needles in haystacks"**

Machine learning techniques can reduce massive datasets into actionable leads. For example, Swiss broadcaster SRF trained a supervised classifier on labeled data of authentic and fraudulent Instagram profiles to expose how influencers frequently buy fake engagement.

2 **Algorithmic accountability**

Journalists can use AI tools to test opaque systems and platforms at scale. For example, this report found that Spain's social security agency used opaque AI systems to make high-stakes sick-leave decisions affecting millions of people despite poor accuracy, limited transparency, and little public accountability of the so-called "AI Doctors."

3 **Reconstruction & network mapping**

AI tools can also support modeling and reconstruction in transnational investigations. For example, AI systems have been used to align ship-tracking data with distress signals and survivor testimony to reconstruct migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.

4 **Subterfuge and source protection**

In regions with limited press freedom, the use of generative AI becomes closely tied to practices of subterfuge and source protection. For example, Venezuelan news anchors use AI avatars to avoid being identified.

5 **Innovative storytelling**

Finally, AI tools offer new storytelling formats. For example, Clarín offers a versioning tool that allows readers to access any story in six additional formats: summary, timeline, a comparison of numerical figures, a list of quotations, an index of proper names and an FAQ format.

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Constraints on AI applications in investigative journalism

Data availability & quality

Investigations may rely on data that is not structured or not publicly available, limiting the value of automation.

Professional identity and dependence on external actors

Relying on external technology companies, NGOs and universities for AI tools and infrastructure can raise concerns about influence, information security, copyright, privacy and data protection.

Technical and epistemic limitations

Using new tools responsibly still requires technical expertise that journalists may not have. In some cases, organizational power dynamics may shape adoption in ways that are not fully strategic; in others, there may be an AI or data literacy gap. The opacity of AI tools can also complicate the accountability and traceability of evidence.

Linguistic & cultural barriers

Natural-language technologies continue to perform best in English and in Euro-American cultural contexts. These dynamics may reinforce professional hierarchies globally rather than leveling them.

Economic factors

Investigations are highly individual, which limits productivity gains and economies of scale.

Where more research would be helpful

Cross-industry comparison: More research is needed to compare how AI tools are adopted across journalistic subfields to better understand their unique applications and limitations in investigative contexts.

Generalizable global research with investigative reporters: Much of the literature analyzed in this briefing used practice-based research techniques, bringing together investigative journalists, academics, data journalists and data scientists, to achieve a deeper understanding of investigative journalism as it is practiced today. While these provide deep insights, there is a clear opportunity for future studies to adopt broader quantitative approaches, such as large-scale surveys, to capture a more comprehensive global outlook on how investigative journalists use and perceive AI systems in their professional practice.

Global South and context-sensitive AI: Most existing research on AI applications for investigative journalism focuses on the United States and Europe. Future work should focus more on developing and evaluating AI tools that are tailored to non-Western, non-English and culturally specific contexts in investigative journalism.

Emerging and evolving nature of AI: Given the rapid evolution of AI technologies and the limited number of existing studies, ongoing empirical research is needed to track their long-term impacts on investigative journalism.

Local newsrooms: More research should examine how under-resourced newsrooms adopt, adapt to or are excluded from AI-driven investigative practices.

Sustainable funding models: Future studies should explore viable and independent funding models that support AI innovation in investigative journalism without increasing reliance on external actors or compromising editorial autonomy.