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Constructing the Role of AI in News Production: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Journalists' Perceptions in Reporting Higher Education News in Malaysia and China

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ABSTRACT

Implementing artificial intelligence in news publishing implies criticism of the professional status and editorial control of journalists. This study comparatively analyses how news professionals at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia and China view the role of AI in news production, grounded in social constructivist and university social responsibility perspectives. The study reports a semi-passive pattern of AI incorporation exemplified by selective professional strategic prominence and professional boundary control through semi-structured, designed interviews of 16 journalists in The Star and China Daily. The results indicate that journalists across cultures share a professional identity as powerful players in AI use. In the context of university social responsibility, journalists in HEIs portray a more imposing AI boundary than mainstream media because of accuracy and multi-stakeholder requirements. These lessons have informed sustainable AI integration plans that will ensure that journalism maintains a high degree of integrity while ensuring efficiency.

Keywords: journalism, technology integration, social constructivist perspective, cross-cultural understanding, university social responsibility theory

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1.0 Introduction

The journalism sector has certainly been experiencing the loud boom of AI contributions to the world in terms of the industry, as AI solutions have found their way to implement them into diverse areas of the journalism value chain over a very short period of time (Ali & Ferrucci, 2025). Through scholarly observation and reflection on the industry, the most significant discourse surrounding this integration and application has centered on the news production process (Ayyad et al., 2025). As the core operational workflow of media organisations, news production directly impacts their competitiveness and credibility through its efficiency and quality (Hong et al., 2025; Munoriyarwa et al., 2023). From the Associated Press's pioneering use of automated technology for financial reporting in 2016 to *The Washington Post*'s integration of AI writing assistants in 2025, AI applications in news production have rapidly evolved from simple data processing to comprehensive embedding in complex content creation processes (Miller, 2015; Roth, 2025). Currently, AI applications in news production span the entire workflow, from information gathering and fact-checking to content generation and editorial proofreading (AlAshry & Al-Saqaf, 2024). Recent industry surveys indicate that 73% of global news organisations have adopted AI technology (Sonni, 2025). In Malaysia, the government has initiated AI

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training for media practitioners as part of its AI Sandbox 2024 program (Lachkar & Siswoyo, 2024), and in China, 65.21% of newsroom staff had already used large-model AI in their work (Xu et al., 2025).

From a humanistic perspective, this AI wave led by American tech giants such as OpenAI represents what could be characterised as a "reactive-adaptive embrace" for the news industry (Simon, 2024). Instead of being the promoters of this change, news organisations are trying to adapt and survive in the maelstrom of technological growth. This adaptation poses practical challenges at various levels.

The management of media actively plans the training of AI skills and popularises the use of technology to increase efficiency and competitive advantage (Cools & de Vreese, 2025). Meanwhile, the situation is more complicated for frontline journalists, as they have to address the organisational needs regarding the use of technology on the one hand and inevitably come across and utilize numerous AI tools in their everyday lives on the other hand (Guenther et al., 2025). This workplace promotion and lifestyle penetration create conflicts between the expectations of better efficiency and the anxiety of keeping traditional journalistic professionalism and independence (Munoriyarwa et al., 2023).

The potential alterations of AI to the profession of journalists are by all means more profound than the simple update in technology or what some scholars refer to as a shift in the role of being a traditional information collector and storyteller to an AI accompanist and content planner (Thäsler-Kordonouri, 2024). Rather, it is a radical reconsideration of both professional identity and the sense of the nature of work in the context of AI (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024). This is further reflected at the level of perception: the way information is perceived, the criterion to perceive the news value, and the way one perceives his/her role and importance in the news production. This is the more subtle and deep-rooted change at the perceptual level that affects the work philosophy of journalists, professional identity, and understanding of the very meaning of journalism (Dandurand et al., 2023).

However, integrating AI into journalism is deeply embedded within distinct regional contexts that shape how this technology is perceived, adopted, and implemented (Drula, 2025). China and Malaysia offer comparative and informative examples of how AI is used to generate news in different socio-political and cultural contexts (Levy-Landesberg & Cao, 2025). The Chinese policy style is marked by robust state strategies in AI development, where government policies are used to drive the so-called media intelligentisation by investing heavily in AI infrastructure and platforms such as Tencent Yuanbao or DeepSeek. This top-down approach has led to the rapid adoption of AI in news organisations and under a techno-optimistic cultural context of shared recognition (Xi & Latif, 2022). By contrast, Malaysia is more reserved, step-by-step approach to AI integration, with the policy framework still developing and media companies being resource-strapped to deploy AI on a wide scale (Verma, 2024). The Malaysian situation is also fraught with ethical issues in the use of AI and job security, where both government bodies and journalist unions are trying to develop guidelines to implement that respect the role of human agency (Motlagh, 2013). Nevertheless, the integration of AI into social media use is evident to be advantageous for media practitioners in Malaysia (Kumar & Ahmad, 2025). These different paths indicate that the ways journalists perceive and use AI are not only technical issues but are also strongly influenced by their political economies, cultural traditions, and media systems (Asmarantika et al., 2024; Tahara, 2024).

Higher education institution (HEIs) news reporting is one of the many dedicated news coverage areas with unique complexity features that can be considered an optimal starting point for exploring the dynamic interaction between journalists and AI technology applications (Henke, 2024). In terms of content, HEIs news represents various subjects, such as the interpretation of the national education policy, the elucidation of academic research findings, and cultural developments on campus, as journalists working in this area must have not only a stable professional knowledge base but also qualitative analytical skills and the ability to think critically to process the information received (Carreon & Balinas, 2023). Such reporting can include quantitative content of the information (the number of enrolments and ranking positions) combined with the abundant humanistic content (student-faculty narratives and the campus culture) in a distinctive format where standardised data is mixed with individual accents. This is exactly the property that creates unique difficulties in the application of AI in the practice of HEIs journalism: journalists need to find a happy median between efficiency with the help of technology and their professional decision-making in order to effectively apply AI to optimise

the process of information processing, but not replace professionalism and humanistic concern with technological reasoning (Liu, 2015). Thus, through the perception and application of AI in news production by journalists in HEIs, the role and limits of AI technology in complex news content may be brought forth.

RQ1. How do frontline HEIs journalists perceive AI's specific functions and boundaries in writing and editing processes under "semi-passive" implementation?

RQ2. What are the commonalities and differences between Malaysian and Chinese HEI journalists' perceptions of AI's role in news production?

RQ3. Compared to mainstream media reporting, what unique production characteristics and professional challenges do HEIs' news present under AI assistance?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Journalists' Perceptions of AI in News Production: A Critical Determinant of Technology Integration

Multiple cross-regional studies have demonstrated that journalists' perceptions of AI in the technology adoption process are complex and play a decisive role. The complexity of perception is primarily manifested in the following ways: First, the differentiation of functional cognition. Journalists' perceptions of AI functionality exhibit multiple divergences: German science journalists view AI as a "colleague" that enhances efficiency, yet insist that it cannot operate without human oversight (Guenther et al., 2025); Romanian journalists acknowledge AI's value in pre- and post-production while emphasizing that human analysis remains irreplaceable (Drula, 2025). As African journalists have argued, AI tools should be understood through a layered framework of "optimism, pessimism, and pragmatism," which cannot be generalized (Umejei et al., 2025). Meanwhile, professional backgrounds also shape cognitive differences: Danish research shows that journalists who self-identify as "technologists" hold realistic attitudes toward AI, while "editors" or "journalists" tend to overestimate AI capabilities (Cools & de Vreese, 2025). Second, the hierarchical nature of contextual adaptation is explored. The same AI technology presents distinctly different perceptual patterns across different regions: South African journalists' skepticism stems from concerns about post-apartheid democracy (Munoriyarwa et al., 2023), while Pakistani journalists' Human-Machine Communication cognition is constrained by the technological realities of low-income countries (Jamil, 2021).

The decisive role of perception is manifested in the following ways: Perception directly drives usage strategies. Netherlands and Denmark journalists rely entirely on "journalistic intuitions and gut feeling" to determine specific AI application ranges, making perception the core criterion for technology use (Morosoli et al., 2025). It reshapes the organisational structure. AI perception differences among different departments in Dutch newsrooms directly lead to the "knowledge silos" phenomenon, hindering the organization-wide implementation of responsible AI practices. Furthermore, it redefines professional boundaries (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2024). Danish journalists emphasize uniquely human qualities such as "human touch," nuanced judgment, and empathy, reshaping their professional value by perceiving AI's limitations (Cools & de Vreese, 2025). Swiss research further demonstrates that journalists develop coping strategies to maintain their occupational authority by perceiving AI's impact on journalism authority (Amigo & Porlezza, 2025).

2.2 Cross-Cultural Understanding of AI Roles: A Social Constructivist Perspective

According to social constructivism theory, AI's functions in journalism have "interpretive flexibility" (Asmarantika et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2025; Spyridou & Ioannou, 2025). Technology does not automatically determine its usage. (Spyridou & Ioannou, 2025) Instead, journalists' professional beliefs, editorial policies, and social media norms shape AI's role in news workflows (Asmarantika et al., 2024). The same automated writing technology may be seen as a productivity tool in media environments, emphasising speed and volume while being treated cautiously in cultures prioritising investigative quality, and used only for verification tasks (Olanipekun, 2025).

In European and American contexts, AI meaning-making in journalism is more diverse (Porlezza, 2023). Due to relatively open media ecosystems, journalists and news organisations focus on improving productivity and personalised services while maintaining editorial autonomy and professional standards (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019). Western media prefer "human-AI collaboration" models, where AI handles mechanical tasks while humans retain control over news judgment (Porlezza, 2023).

As a multicultural Southeast Asian nation, Malaysia's media ecology shows unique social construction characteristics (Imran, 2022). Cultural diversity requires journalists to balance different ethnic groups' information needs and cultural sensitivities when perceiving AI (Yaghoubi-Notash & Karafkan, 2012). AI technology is expected to play a role in multilingual content production and cross-cultural communication (Jindal et al., 2024; Tahara, 2024).

National technology strategies and media regulatory systems have become major factors in adopting AI in journalism in China (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022; Kuai et al., 2022). Teachings equip the trained models with caution over political issues, which are adjusted to align with social stabilisation and mainstream considerations (Yu & Huang, 2021). In this context, journalists would consider AI more as a means to implement the policy and scale up content production, and they could expect stricter control and predictability (Sun et al., 2024).

This comparison reveals the core insight of social constructivism: the decisive role of institutional environments (Wang et al., 2024). Malaysia's federalism and multicultural society place AI as an instrument to coordinate complicated social relations (Yusof et al., 2024), whereas the centralised system in China constructs AI as a national strategic option (Kuai et al., 2022). The level of development also establishes a specific expectation: Malaysian media focus on the practicality and flexibility of the application to various community needs (Mahusin et al., 2024), whereas Chinese media emphasise high-tech applications and scale effects (Kuai et al., 2022). Cultural norms have even more profound effects: the pluralistic traditions of Malaysia assume that AI should be used to facilitate inter-group communication and understanding (Nor Ashikin Mohamed Yusof et al., 2024), whereas the Chinese focus on collective interests imposes on AI the mission of preserving social cohesion and the dominant discourse (Yu & Huang, 2021).

This cross-cultural comparison does not consider AI as a one-way street that determines journalism (Spyridou & Ioannou, 2025; Verma, 2024). This underlines that the process of media technology development is a product of social negotiation (Deuze & Beckett, 2022). Learning about the different cultural contexts in which technology meanings are made will enable us to predict and better explain the differentiated adoption and application priorities of AI technology in various journalistic practices with greater accuracy (Jindal et al., 2024).

2.3 Research Value of HEIs News

News in HEIs is a significant process that enables universities to contribute to social responsibility in various ways (Fürst et al., 2021). Universities also utilise news channels to spread scientific knowledge and authoritative information to the masses, boosting scientific literacy and culture across society. Moreover, HEIs' news allows a university to take part in the country's social life and steer positive discussion, or it makes an academic institution an authoritative source of information that can shape a rational knowledge-based opinion of the people (Shine, 2020).

As an essential part of news at HEIs, science reporting requires urgent AI integration. The difficulty of scientific texts, the complexity of the technical language, and the effectiveness of informing people about research results open AI to great opportunities in simplifying language, summarising information, and creating videos and other media (Guenther et al., 2025). Especially in fast-growing areas, AI can assist journalists in grasping and translating new research in a short time, fulfilling the public's need for up-to-date, quality scientific information. Yet, such a level of technological reliance challenges scientists in new ways: how to scientifically prove the credibility of AI-generated information and maintain a balance between efficiency and professionalism in communication. This makes HEI news a perfect platform for exploring the issues of integrating AI into journalism. Integration strategies must

be designed to take advantage of highly technological features and adhere to professional standards, which can only be achieved by profoundly studying journalists' AI perception patterns.

2.4 University Social Responsibility Theory

The theory of university social responsibility (USR) provides a powerful guide for analysing HEIs' news as an exemplary environment to study the perceptions of journalists about AI. Based on the ideas of corporate social responsibility, USR places universities in the role of institutions that are required to contribute to the evolution of society beyond teaching and research, which is called the third mission of social outreach (Ali et al., 2021).

2.5 Research Gaps

Although the number of studies concerning the implementation of AI in journalism continues to increase, there is currently still a lack of insight into the cultural and institutional differences regarding how AI is used and perceived by journalists in different countries and various news categories (Caswell & Fang, 2024; Møller et al., 2024; Oh & Jung, 2025). The literature is weak in the area of Western media settings, or looking at the use of AI through the lens of technology without considering how cultural values and professional identities are reflected in the use of AI technologies by journalists (Lewis et al., 2025; Radcliffe, 2025; Simon, 2024; Zhaxylykbayeva et al., 2025). This constraint is especially acute concerning the compound nature of human agency and technological capability in news production processes that demand analytical and cultural sensitivity.

A comparative analysis of the overall perceptions of journalists regarding AI in Malaysia and China presents a unique opportunity to discuss this research gap. The two nations are associated with different methods of creating AI and regulating the media, but encounter similar issues related to the interdependence of technology and journalistic principles (Jodie, 2024; Kuai, 2025). Nonetheless, what is not well understood here is how journalists in such situations, in fact, view and bargain their roles relative to AI and, in particular, where they are tasked with creating content that requires well-developed professional judgement and cultural sensitivity.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by exploring how Malaysian and Chinese media practitioners of understand the role of AI in their professional practice. With an emphasis on the news topic that reflects the conflict between standardisable information and interpretive mastery, this study will shed light on the cultural and situational forces shaping AI adoption in the perception of journalists and ultimately lead to insights into human-AI cooperation within the context of various media scenes.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a semi-structured approach of in-depth interviews, where two open questions are formulated to capture the perceptions and experiences of journalists producing HEI news in Malaysia and China of the role of AI in the news production process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Kallio et al., 2016). All the participants conducted the interviews between April 21 and May 21, 2025, which allowed them to be placed in the same technological application and industrial environment conditions.

3.2 Research Participants

In this study, a purposive sampling approach was used to identify the research participants based on a specific criterion that applied to the research aims. Purposive sampling is especially suitable for qualitative research focused on a narrow professional setting because the study team can identify people who can offer pertinent knowledge and experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Selection criteria were based on: (1) at least five years of experience working in the media industry, (2) direct experience working on coverage of HEIs, (3) working on a mainstream English-language newspaper in the education news department, and (4) age at least 25 years to ensure professional maturity. Respondents from *the Star* were labelled T1…T8, while *China Daily's* respondents were labelled C1…C8.

The researchers conducted the research using 16 professionals in the news field, eight Malaysians and eight Chinese, who were part of mainstream news institutions that affect HEIs' news coverage—*The Star* and *China Daily*. These two media represent the most influential newspapers in Malaysia and China in English-speaking environments, respectively (Latif & Ying, 2020; Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). As both are members of the Asia News Network, the two news sources are similar in that they have established education news sections and prioritize their education coverage, with a focus on all levels of education, thus ensuring consistency in the sources of data and increased comparability between them (Gong & Firdaus, 2022; Hu, 2021a; Wu et al., 2022).

3.3 Interview Guide and Instruments

The semi-structured interview guidelines focused on two open-ended questions, separated into fundamental themes, such as the functionality of AI in the production process, starting with story selection and progressing through writing, editing, and layout, and the dual experience of organisational promotion and adaptation on a personal level. In the absence of any formal interviews, the research team conducted two pilot interviews prior to the main one to test the wording and structure of questions regarding the answers and responses to questions to make the interview guide clearer and coherent (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.4 Data Collection Process

The interviews were done individually in calm, secluded settings where the respondents could express themselves freely. The appropriate language arrangements were made to accommodate the preferences of the participants, where Mandarin-speaking interviewees were interviewed in Mandarin, Malay, and Indian journalists, along with some Malaysian Chinese journalists, were interviewed in English to better communicate in English and avoid misunderstanding due to language. All interviews took between 30 and 50 minutes and were initiated by a short background about the purpose of the research, followed by written informed consent. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with the participants' consent, paying close attention to subtle differences in multilingual expressions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The adequacy of the sample size was determined by data saturation (i.e., when no new themes or insights were obtained during the successive interviews), thus confirming its sufficiency for this study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

Thematic analysis was used in the analysis, with systematic coding and categorisation applied to determine codes and themes in the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The multilingual transcripts were ordered and preliminarily coded with the help of NVivo 14 software; further work in code clustering and generation of themes was done using the transcripts. The six stages of the analytical process were as follows: getting acquainted with the data (reading the transcripts of the interviews a number of times), preliminary open coding, the establishment of groupings of similar codes and naming them, and a report of the analysis (Edhlund & McDougall, 2018). Trustworthiness of the study. To increase the credibility of the research, the researcher kept reflective journals throughout the process of the research interview and analysis to make the audit trails of the research more transparent and credible (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of JEPeM/Universiti Sains Malaysia. Before interviews, all participants received written informed consent forms explaining their right to withdraw at any time and assuring strict confidentiality and anonymisation of data. Audio recordings and transcripts were encrypted and stored with access limited to the research team to ensure data security and confidentiality.

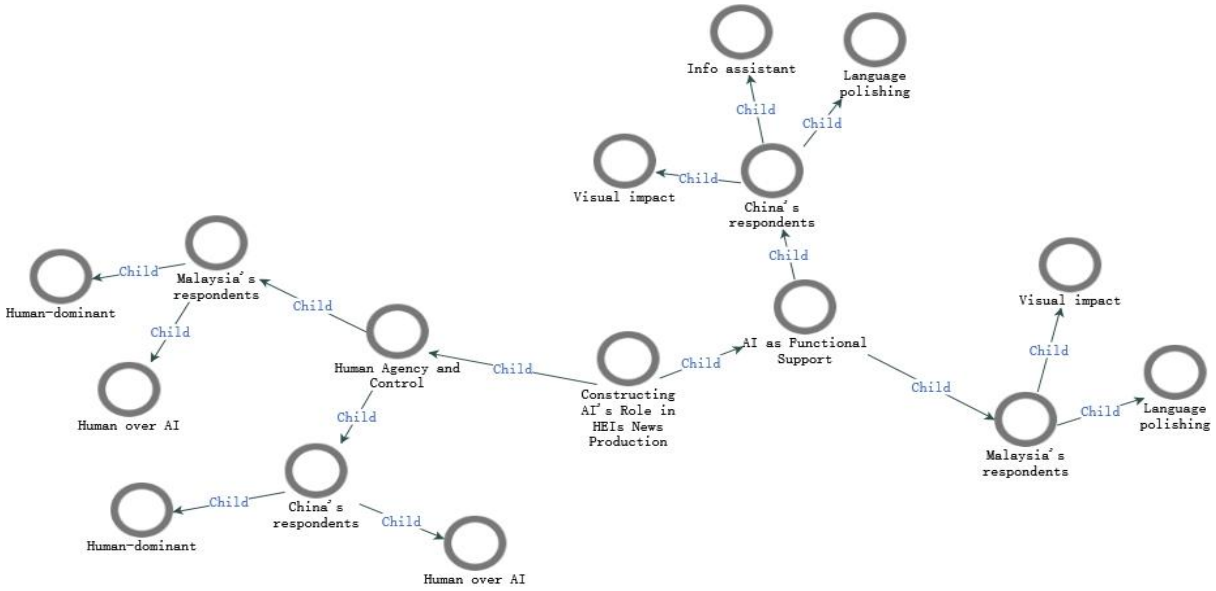
4.0 Results and Findings

Through systematic thematic analysis of interview data collected from 16 journalists specialising in HEIs coverage across Malaysia and China, five distinct conceptual codes emerged from participants'

articulations of AI's role in their professional practice: Human over AI, Language Polishing, Visual Impact, Human-dominant, and Info Assistant. These codes were subsequently consolidated into two overarching themes that capture how journalists conceptualised AI's role in their professional practice: Human Agency and Control, and AI as Functional Support (see Figure 1). Each theme reflects different dimensions of the human-AI relationship in journalism, revealing the opportunities and tensions characterising contemporary news production.

Figure 1

Thematic Network Analysis of AI Perception Codes in HEIs Journalism



Authenticity as a Core Journalistic Value. Participants consistently emphasised authenticity as a domain where AI fell short of professional standards. This concern manifested particularly in visual journalism, where two Malaysian and Chinese journalists from China stated:

> *When you need the image to tell the story, you need a real photographer. The authenticity can't be replaced. [T5 for the fifth interviewee from The Star]*

> *I know how to use DeepSeek, but this doesn't mean I can have DeepSeek help me write articles. I once tried having it help me write a piece, and its biggest drawback in writing is that it creates chaotic splicing. The content does have details and descriptions, but you'll find that all the information is fake and jumbled—it feels like something written by a mentally confused patient, not real at all. Although the writing style seems elegant, with details and vivid descriptions that can even write emotionally moving content, it's all fabricated [C8].*

Similarly, while acknowledging AI's utility in creating supplementary graphics, another participant noted that the following preference reflects journalists' belief that authentic documentation requires human presence and judgment:

> *AI is very good at creating visuals, for example, turning numbers into graphics to accompany written reports. But we still mostly use real photos. For news in newspapers, we still use photos taken by reporters themselves [T6]*

> *The "Human Touch" in Narrative Construction.* Beyond factual accuracy, participants identified qualitative storytelling elements as being uniquely human. One journalist articulated this distinction clearly:

> *But for something more in-depth, nuanced, you've got to write it yourself. I think people can identify when AI writes a long passage. They can tell 'this is not like human writing.' The human touch is still essential for quality journalism [T5].*

This perspective positions narrative authenticity as both detectable by audiences and essential to credible journalism.

Human Connection in News Gathering. Participants highlighted interpersonal engagement as an irreplaceable aspect of journalism, particularly in contexts requiring empathy and trust-building. As one Chinese journalist noted, "…for in-depth interviews, which still require humans to complete, AI cannot replace this" [C2]. This reflects journalists' understanding that meaningful news gathering depends on human-to-human dynamics that AI cannot facilitate.

Linguistic Naturalness and Communication Patterns. The fourth-dimension concerns AI's inability to replicate natural human expression. This linguistic unnaturalness was seen as rendering AI unsuitable for authentic journalistic communication that must resonate with human audience.

> *Even if you provide it with leads to help you write, it's completely impossible. What it writes is unwatchable—its discourse system differs from how ordinary people speak [C1].*

4.1.2 Human-dominant

Journalists are active controllers and decision-makers in AI integration rather than passive recipients of technological change. This perspective emphasises human agency in determining when, how, and to what extent AI should be employed in newsroom workflows. Participants consistently framed their relationship with AI through metaphors of control and mastery. One Chinese journalist articulated this perspective clearly as follows:

> *Although we now have artificial intelligence, we still need to learn how to master AI. Without some foundation, you cannot control it [C3].*

This notion of "mastering" and "controlling" AI positions journalists as the dominant party in the human-AI relationship, suggesting that successful AI integration requires human expertise and oversight rather than simple adoption. Strategic selectivity appears to be the focus of human sovereignty, and journalists have attached meaning to their specific decisions regarding the use of AI.

> *We encourage reasonable and appropriate use of AI. You cannot hand over all the work to it, but now that technology is very advanced, we need to know how to utilize it [C7].*

The selective nature also shows how journalists claim a decisive role in the use of AI applications, introducing the technology as a tool that can be strategically used, but not as a substitute for judgment. Quality control was another aspect of human control over technology, as respondents framed themselves as gatekeepers who should filter AI output according to professional norms.

> *You cannot just pick what it produces and use it as such, because it will be very clear... It is usable, but you have to use it well [C4].*

This emphasis on human intervention and refinement reinforces the notion that journalists see themselves as the final arbiters of content quality, with AI serving merely as a preliminary tool requiring human oversight. Malaysian participants echoed similar sentiments regarding the need to maintain human authority over AI integration.

> *AI is a good tool, but we cannot fully depend on it... AI cannot judge a person, but as a journalist, I can assess the feelings [T3]*

> *Regarding AI supporting news writing, I have personally trained my journalists to use it [T5]*

These perspectives collectively illustrate how journalists in both countries conceptualise AI integration as a process they manage and control, maintaining their professional authority while selectively incorporating technological assistance.

4.2 AI as Functional Support

4.2.1 Language Polishing

This emerged as participants described AI's utility in refining linguistic elements of their work, particularly in two key areas: translation assistance and sentence optimisation. This application represents a pragmatic adoption of AI technology, where journalists acknowledge its capabilities and limitations in language-related tasks.

Translation Assistance with Human Correction. Translation emerged as one of the most frequently utilised AI functions among participants, particularly for journalists working in multilingual environments.

> *It can translate, not just simple translation, but it writes it into reasonable English, and then we revise it on that basis. But human revision is necessary because many of its word choices are inaccurate [C5].*

This process reveals how journalists view AI translation as a valuable starting point that requires human intervention to achieve professional standards. The necessity of human correction was consistently emphasised by the participants.

> *We often use Chinese content and have it translated. AI can only do preliminary translation. Its translation has some bias and is somewhat stiff, so I must reorganise it myself [C8].*

These observations demonstrate that while journalists find AI translation useful for efficiency, they maintain clear awareness of its limitations and the continued need for human linguistic expertise.

Sentence Optimisation and Expression Enhancement. Beyond translation, participants identified AI's capacity to improve sentence structure and expression quality.

> *AI can't help us with interviews… but can help us modify sentences [T6].*

This functional distinction illustrates how journalists differentiate between research-intensive tasks that require human judgment and mechanical language improvement tasks where AI can assist. The concept of making content more engaging also emerged.

> *Reporters can use AI to make sentences catchier and attractive [T7].*

This application suggests that journalists view AI as capable of enhancing the stylistic appeal of their writing while maintaining human control over the content. Interestingly, one Chinese journalist observed the adaptive nature of this process as said below: Journalists perceive AI's language polishing capabilities as improvable through continued interaction.

> *I've been using it for a while and found it grows quickly. The more we work together, the more familiar it becomes with me [C1].*

4.2.2 Visual Impact

This indicates a complicated conflict between AI innovations and journalistic integrity, wherein participants struggle with the potentially unique abilities of AI to make stories more visual while retaining professional credibility. This axis of AI adoption illustrates the journalists' experimentation with conflicting pressures of interest in visual appeal and genuine documentation.

Authenticity-Innovation Paradox. Participants articulated a fundamental tension between AI's visual capabilities and journalism's authenticity requirements.

> *It's okay to use AI graphics as decorations for simple news, but readers don't like it... First, the image is not real. Readers will immediately realise it is not real. Second, the photograph is sometimes even more important than the story itself. You still need that authenticity [T2]*

This perspective illustrates how journalists differentiate between supplementary visual elements, where AI may be acceptable, and primary documentary imagery, where authenticity remains paramount. The observation that readers can detect and reject AI-generated content suggests that journalists are aware of audience expectations and the reputational risks of compromising visual credibility.

Dynamic Visual Innovation and Multimedia Enhancement. Despite concerns about authenticity, participants recognised AI's potential for creating engaging multimedia content.

> *The newsroom applies AI technology when producing audio and video... using AI technology to turn pictures into more vivid, dynamic images or short videos [C7].*

This application represents a creative expansion of traditional journalism into more dynamic visual formats, suggesting that AI's value lies not in replacing authentic photography but in enhancing existing content through animation and multimedia integration.

Reader Engagement and Visual Appeal. The strategic use of AI for visual enhancement emerged as participants considered audience engagement.

> *AI helps to create better imaging for stories. This attracts readers because when people open a newspaper, especially a printed newspaper, they're always drawn to the pictures first [T7]*

This perspective reveals how journalists view AI as a tool for competing in an increasingly visual media landscape, where capturing reader attention has become paramount. However, this instrumental approach is tempered by professional caution regarding the maintenance of editorial standards.

Professional Transparency and Ethical Boundaries. Participants demonstrated commitment to transparency when employing AI-generated visuals, with one noting:

> *When we use AI to create images, we use the byline 'AI-created' or 'This image was created using AI [T3].*

This practice is the adaptation of being a professional involving new technology while ensuring that ethical considerations are met. In a similar manner, an ethical boundary was described, and one respondent stressed that:

> *AI use is acceptable as long as we're not altering someone's face or taking one person's face and putting someone else's face there [T7]*

These approaches suggest that journalists are establishing subtle principles of AI usage that strike a balance between innovation and professional integrity.

4.2.3 Info Assistant

This reflects the intentional use of AI as a discovery platform, a kind of brainstorming companion, by the journalists, around which it is framed as a smart assistant that can and should supplement existing information-collection capacities, complementary to, but not alternative to, human judgment. The app is an efficient example of an AI application that absorbs its computational advantages but does not give up journalistic control.

Background preparation and Preliminary Research. Respondents repeatedly referred to the efficient use of AI as a starting point on virgin subject matter, which can be akin to what one journalist called a small assistant job [C6]. This is a good metaphor that can best describe the submissive yet useful role of AI in the research hierarchy.

> *For example, if I suddenly need to report on intangible cultural heritage, or a culture, or a university policy, I might directly ask AI what this thing is first, let it do preliminary and detailed material searches, then tell me what this thing is, and then I go deeper to see how to proceed [C3]*

This workflow demonstrates how journalists use AI to rapidly acquire foundational knowledge before conducting more sophisticated analysis. The efficiency gains from AI assistance represent a significant evolution in journalistic practices.

> *As a newspaper journalist, when I started over 20 years ago, we didn't have extensive search engines, relying entirely on basic materials provided by media institutions for learning. Now I don't need institutions to provide materials—I just need to ask DeepSeek for relevant information, and I can grasp things more comprehensively [C8]*

This historical perspective highlights how AI is an advanced evolution of search capabilities, enabling journalists to achieve a broader contextual understanding more efficiently than traditional methods.

Strategic Planning and Framework Development. Beyond basic research, participants utilised AI for more sophisticated planning tasks.

> *Tell AI what kind of topic I want to do now, roughly what I have in hand, let DeepSeek or ChatGPT... first make a planning proposal and interview outline, then I make some modifications [C7]*

This application reveals how journalists view AI as capable of synthesising available information into structured frameworks, providing a foundation for human refinement and customization of the generated content

Divergent Thinking and Perspective Generation. Perhaps most intriguingly, participants recognised AI's capacity to stimulate creative thinking and offer alternative perspectives.

> *In terms of divergent thinking, sources, webpage links, AI can read enough and fast, and it can provide some interview perspectives that inspire me [C2]*

This observation suggests that journalists value AI not merely for its speed and comprehensiveness, but for its ability to process vast amounts of information and generate unexpected connections or angles that might not occur to human researchers operating within their existing knowledge frameworks.

5.0 Discussion & Implications

5.1 Perceived Functions and Boundaries: The "Semi-Passive" AI Integration

5.1.1 Hierarchical Function Recognition

This hierarchical perception resonates with the literature, indicating functional cognition differentiation among journalists, with professional backgrounds and contextual details providing distinct levels of AI acceptance (Kostarella et al., 2025). The understanding of AI usefulness by journalists can be described as a dominant stratification of peripheral to central journalistic practices. When the most favourable level is considered, the implementation of Language Polishing and Info Assistant roles is adopted openly because they are instrumental and do not pose a significant danger to journalistic freedom (Møller et al., 2024). Such applications make any workplace more efficient, but they do not question basic approaches to the work of professionals, and they make AI a complex tool instead of a team member. Visual Impact finds more of a middle ground, whereby journalists show hesitant enthusiasm within the context of authentic concern and ethics. Such gradualism is a characteristic of the strains between innovation pressures and professional standards, which define semi-passive integration into the digital environment.

The superior position is occupied by the human over AI and human-dominant views as a hedging of essential journalism principles (Perreault et al., 2025). Such codes are defined as an inviolable professional space for journalists, in which AI is firmly denied or sequentially subordinated to human opinion. Similar to one study, journalists use a defensive mental plan, which surrenders the frontier where the protective professional identity is least important and the knots tighten the boundaries where it is most vital (Lee et al., 2025).

5.1.2 Boundary Setting Through Professional Logic

The process of boundary setting indicates advanced professional judgment, which is not restricted to technological constraints (Perreault et al., 2025). Journalists do not specify boundaries in terms of technical specifications, but in terms of journalistic values, especially authenticity, human connection, narrative quality, and naturalness of language. As filtering mechanisms, these criteria establish whether AI can be used in a manner that does not distinguish between professional and technological rationality (Kalfeli & Angeli, 2025).

The value-driven creation of boundaries illustrate the semi-passive nature of AI integration, as journalists are still active agents in their process of defining the terms of technological use and adoption. As opposed to the paradigm of simply accepting the capabilities of AI, journalists reassemble the latter into the context of current professional practices and form hybrid practices that maintain human control over the situation and reap the benefits of efficiency (Gherhes et al., 2025). The rhetoric of control and mastery of AI reveals that even in a situation where external pressure is exerted by implementing AI, journalists are bound to be in the driver's seat of the integration process.

5.1.3 Professional Identity Preservation

These results indicate that identity preservation mechanisms through perceived boundaries occur during technological transitions. By defining specific areas where AI will not be able to work, journalists will enhance the relevance and knowledge of their professional activities (Munoriyarwa et al., 2023). This boundary maintenance is of special importance in a semi-passive integration environment, where technological adoption experience can be more of a force rather than a choice. The persistence of the focus on human superiority in the main journalistic roles is a kind of professional resistance helping not to lose identity by becoming technologically adjusted (Scheffauer et al., 2024). The existing literature supports the complexity and definitive nature of journalists' perceptions of AI in the semi-passive integration trend that is present in this study. The subjects in this research exhibited advanced perceptual tactics that not only maximised the satisfaction of efficiencies but also maintained professional identities. This hierarchical characteristic of perception directly affects practical implementation strategies.

5.2 Cross-Cultural Technology Construction: Divergent Priorities in AI Integration

5.2.1 Convergent Professional Identity Construction

Both Malaysian and Chinese journalists demonstrate remarkable consistency in constructing AI's role through Human over AI and Human-dominant frameworks, suggesting that journalistic professional identity transcends cultural boundaries (Geetha et al., 2024; Gondwe, 2023; Kuai et al., 2022). From a social constructionist perspective, this convergence reveals that professional identity is not inherently given, but collectively "negotiated" through practitioners' repeated discourse, demonstration, and boundary-setting in daily practice (Hu, 2021b). The shared acceptance of "Human over AI" and "Human-dominant" principles across both Malaysian and Chinese contexts indicates that, regardless of institutional and cultural differences, HEI journalists within their respective networks are reproducing the same discourse of "we are the quality gatekeepers." (Parratt-Fernández et al., 2024).

Each time journalists declare that "AI cannot write in-depth stories," "interviews must be conducted by humans," or "machine writing lacks authenticity," they highlight their irreplaceable professional status by negating AI's capabilities (Albizu-Rivas et al., 2024; Nemr, 2024). This is not an individual or coincidental statement, but a collective process, in which the entire professional community—journalists, editorial teams, training programs, and industry standards—continuously reinforces this key aspect of their identity (Stephanie Grubenmann & Miriam Meckel, 2017).

Therefore, when journalists position AI in an auxiliary role, they are essentially carving out an inviolable professional territory for themselves (Mellado & Hermida, 2022). This boundary-setting strategy of "I decide what to delegate to machines" rather than "machines decide what to leave for me" represents the core mechanism of professional identity maintenance (Candrian & Scherer, 2022).

Through this process, journalists actively construct and preserve their professional autonomy while appearing to embrace technological advancements (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019).

5.2.2 Divergent Technological Prioritisation

The pronounced differences in AI function emphasis culturally specific constructions of technological value. Chinese journalists' stronger emphasis on Info Assistant functionality reflects the construction of journalism that prioritises information comprehensiveness and research efficiency (Kuai et al., 2022). Conversely, Malaysian journalists' greater attention to Visual Impact suggests a cultural construction that values visual communication and reader engagement strategies (Othman, 2014).

This distinction reflects the basic argument of social constructionism that technology is inherently neutral and its meaning and interpretation are socially and culturally constructed (Asmarantika et al., 2024). The fact that Chinese people pay more attention to information efficiency and Malaysians to visual communication does not imply an objective reflection of all the possibilities of AI (Geetha et al., 2024; Kuai et al., 2022). Both are culturally rational constructions instead, shifting the neutral technology functions into ones of meaningful professional equipment in specific journalistic situations, and with which the cultural values are aligned (Tahara, 2024). The innovativeness of technology is influenced by social construction, as individuals make it what each culture requires (Wenger et al., 2025).

5.3 HEIs News Production through University Social Responsibility: Unique Characteristics and Challenges

5.3.1 Knowledge Dissemination Responsibility and AI Boundaries

As institutions devoted to knowledge production and dissemination, HEIs have a social responsibility to educate people and share scientific knowledge in their news reports (Collini, 2012). Such responsibility requires an increase in the accuracy and credibility of HEIs' news, and such an insistence on humans over AI is not only a professional matter but rather a prerequisite to meeting social responsibility (Sánchez-Hernández & Mainardes, 2016). The findings reveal that HEI journalists construct stricter boundaries around AI applications, particularly in content creation and verification processes, because any compromise in accuracy could undermine their fundamental mission of reliable knowledge transmission to the audience. AI assistance must therefore serve rather than weaken this social responsibility, positioning technology as a supportive tool that enhances rather than replaces human expertise in knowledge communication (Utami & Prastya, 2024).

5.3.2 Multi-stakeholder Balance Requirements

USR highlights the fact that universities are required to consider the various requirements of various stakeholders, such as academia, students, the general population, and the government (Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019). The HEIs news AI tool should consider the balance between the need to meet both scholarly standards and the ability to be understood by a lay audience, generating a distinctive production requirement that does not exist in popular media (Gojani et al., 2020). This is why language polishing and visual impact become especially significant within the frames of HEIs' news contexts, as they contribute to carrying out social responsibility via cross-boundary communication. HEIs' journalists must balance stakeholder expectations and make the complex world of academia more accessible to popular audiences by relying on AI tools to preserve scholarly integrity.

5.3.3 Sustainable Development and Long-term Impact Considerations

Sustainable development and long-term social influence are central to USR; therefore, HEI journalists show less interest in the speed benefits of AI than their mainstream media peers (Sadeghi Moghadam et al., 2021). They are more quality and credibility conscious than immediacy capture, and the same is reflected in the philosophy of beer production, which is in line with the sustainable development concept of universities and their longer-term social contribution. The resultant production attributes of this temporal orientation are a high level of verification, educational value, and long-term impact over time

(Vallaeys, 2014). The use of AI should only be in line with these sustainable development goals and in the interest of the institution of long-term social good rather than temporary competition.

6.0 Conclusion

This study shows that there is a convergence in the strategies that journalists in HEIs in China and Malaysia use to preserve their professional identities, but there is a divergence in the pattern that they use to prioritise technologies. Despite the emergence of institutional and cultural differences, the basic framework of both groups is that of humans over AI and human dominance, indicating some universality in journalistic reactions to technological upheaval.

The research also shows that AI perception is culturally constructed: Chinese journalists focus more on information completeness using Info Assistant functions, whereas Malaysian journalists emphasize Visual Impact to reach the multicultural world.

The USR system introduces a distinct set of production requirements that draws a line between HEIs' journalism and generic media, especially in terms of knowledge and scientific communications, where the faculty must guard the AI boundaries more closely to uphold their institutional integrity (Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019). The results indicate that the effective integration of AI should consider the preservation of journalistic identities and not lose sight of local cultural and institutional specifics (Asmarantika et al., 2024).

The study is also limited by the fact that it targets only two news organizations and HEIs' journalism, and may not be fully representative of newsroom experiences with the adoption of AI across media types and coverage areas. The next research direction should examine how these perception dynamics develop and are transferred to different cultural settings to help us better understand how and why humans work together with AI in various journalistic cultures. With the ongoing technological revolution in journalism, this study highlights that journalists' perceptions are a defining factor in integrating AI. As opposed to theories that claim that adoption is dependent on technological capabilities alone, cultural and professional perceptions, based on the background context and informed by journalists, ultimately determine how AI will be received, embraced, and adopted in an institutional environment.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

HY: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. NNNH: Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing; Methodology, Validation, Supervision.

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